

Color and Cognition in Imperial Rome

We know that the ancient Greeks' and Romans' color categories differed from ours (Gladstone 1858; Lyons 1997; Oniga 2007; Bradley 2009), and it is well established that around the modern world different languages divide the visible color space in very different ways (MacLaury 1997, Kay, Berlin, Maffi, et al. 2009). More controversial, however, is the contention that underlying these apparent differences is a universal sameness (Berlin and Kay 1969), founded on primary color sensations as identified by Ewald Hering, and on a universal color-opponent cognitive process (Hering 1964). Color opponency holds that the "Hering primaries" – Red, Yellow, Green, Blue, Black, and White – are perceptual primes, and that other colors are felt to be either intersections of these fuzzy cognitive sets (for example, English *purple* is the intersection of Red + Blue; *pink* is the intersection of Red + White, etc.) or unions of them (for example, in Bauzi, an Indonesian language, *gahana* names both Green and Blue, as well as their fuzzy intersection, blue-green or turquoise). But some such primary colors cannot be so combined: there is no color that is felt to be "reddish green" or "yellowish blue" because Red is cognitively opposed to Green, and Yellow to Blue.

I wish to argue that a short discourse on Greek and Latin color naming that appears in the second book of Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights* (2.26), and that is generally thought to be an inexplicable oddity, or the result of primitive or confused color perception, or both (Eco 1976, Oniga 2007, Bradley 2009, Goldman 2013), in fact provides important and coherent insights into ancient color cognition. The part of the discourse that seems oddest to us – the contention that *fulvus* and *flavus* should be understood as mixtures of *rufus* and *viridis* – and which seems to stand in direct contradiction to the color opponency theory, may in fact lend support to the universalist color hypothesis, but only if we accept that *rufus* and *viridis* refer to broader and

more ancient color categories than the modern English categories *red* and *green*. *Rufus* and *viridis* probably represent fuzzy unions of universal Red + Yellow, and of Green + Blue, respectively, categories which are quite common in the world's languages. *Fulvus* and *flavus* would then stand in the fuzzy boundary where these two categories intersect. In this understanding, Gellius's discourse maps out a color space partitioned by four basic categories (*rufus*, *viridis*, *albus*, *niger*), a color space that is very different from the modern English color space, which has eleven basic categories (Berlin and Kay 1969). The ancient mapping that Gellius describes is nevertheless complete, coherent, and explanatory on its own terms, and is largely congruent with the universalist theory of color naming and cognition.

Although it is impossible to say whether Gellius' discourse describes cognitive color categories that were widespread in antiquity, the fact that they were affirmed in the discourse as reasonable and intuitively acceptable by two different multilingual interlocutors (Marcus Fronto and Favorinus), and were also said to be a part of a larger discourse about color terms among learned men, lends them more weight than if they were merely an offhand set of observations offered by Gellius himself.

Bibliography

Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. *Basic Color Terms. Their Universality and Evolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

Bradley, Mark. *Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1976.

Gladstone, William Ewart. *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age*. Cambridge University Press, 2010 (reprint of 1858 edition).

Goldman, Rachael B. *Color-Terms in Social and Cultural Context in Ancient Rome*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013.

Hering, Ewald. *Outlines of a Theory of the Light Sense*. Translated by L. M. Hurvich and Dorothea Jameson. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964.

Kay, Paul, Brent Berlin, Luisa Maffi, William Merrifield, and Richard Cook. *The World Color Survey*. Stanford, California: CSLI, 2009.

Lyons, John. "The Vocabulary of Colour with Particular Reference to Ancient Greek and Classical Latin." In *The Language of Colour in the Mediterranean*, edited by Alexander Borg, 38–75. Otto Harrassowitz, 1997.

MacLaury, Robert E. *Color and Cognition in Mesoamerica: Constructing Categories as Vantages*. University of Texas Press, 1997.

Oniga, Renato. "La Terminologia Del Colore in Latino Tra Relativismo E Universalismo." *Aevum Antiquum* 7 (2007): 269–84.