

Fronto and Favorinus On Roman Color Cognition

What can an intersex Gallic sophist and a Berber orator of the second century AD tell us about the way the Romans conceived basic color categories? The informants in question are Favorinus of Arles and Marcus Cornelius Fronto, and their conversation on Greek and Latin color terms is recorded by Aulus Gellius in book 2, chapter 26 of his *Attic Nights*.

The scholarly consensus is that their observations on the meanings of Latin color terms are not particularly informative except perhaps to tell us that Roman color cognition is irremediably foreign and incomprehensible to us (Eco 1985), or that their color descriptions are merely risible (Goldman 2013), or that their conversation demonstrates that color language could serve as a site of contestation for Greco-Roman cultural competition (Bradley 2009), or that their observations are simply bizarre (Oniga 2007).

I will argue all these assessments, to a greater or lesser extent, fall short, and that Fronto and Favorinus provide crucial insights into Roman color cognition and categorization. My argument is this: we moderns find their analysis of color categories incoherent because it's difficult for us to imagine our way out of the Basic Color Terms and Basic Color Categories (Berlin and Kay 1969, Kay et al. 2009) that are common to the modern European languages.

Thus, Fronto and Favorinus's assertions that the terms *flavus*, *fulvus*, *igneus*, and *aureus* express *rufus color*, and that the terms *caeruleus*, *glaucus*, and *caesius* express *viridis color* seems nonsensical to us. It is analogous to someone saying that *yellow* is a kind of *red* and that *blue* is a kind of *green*.

But it is nonsensical to us only because, as speakers of modern languages in the industrialized West, *red*, *yellow*, *green*, and *blue* are conceived as separate color categories. And

this is true for all Stage V languages in the Universals and Evolution model described in the World Color Survey (Kay et al. 2009).

But these color categories are not normative for speakers of many languages around the world. For speakers of Stage III languages, the colors we call *red* and *yellow* belong to a single, composite category, and the colors we call *blue* and *green* belong to another single, composite category. Even more: such languages sometimes have more specific terms for *yellow* and *blue* that are not considered to name separate, non-overlapping color categories, but are instead felt to be hyponyms of the larger categories in the same way that, for us, *scarlet* is a hyponym of *red* and *olive* is a hyponym of *green* (Kay et al. 2009)

Seen in this light, Fronto and Favorinus's dialogue is for the most part a pretty straightforward description of Latin as a Stage III color language. And, looking beyond their testimony, we find robust philological evidence that supports a Stage III interpretation of Latin in the usages of other authors including Celsus, Hyginus, Juvenal, Manilius, Martial, Valerius Flaccus, Virgil, and Vitruvius.

The apparent paradox here lies in the fact that Latin has a huge and sophisticated color lexicon capable of making very fine-grained color distinctions. Why, then, was it so "primitive" in its evolution of Basic Color Terms? This raises the broader question of what social needs are fulfilled by Basic Color Terms such that modern languages need eleven or twelve of them, but Latin needed only four. While the evidence for Latin generally supports the Universals and Evolution hypothesis, at the same time it cuts against a tacit assumption that a language with rich, varied, and highly specific color vocabularies in medicine, textiles, painting, architecture, botany, minerals, and gems (Fruyt 2006, Wharton 2016, 2020) would naturally evolve eleven or twelve Basic Color Terms. But Latin never did.

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