

## WHAT DO COLOUR NAMES TELL US? THE CASE OF KAZAKH

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The linguistic research of colour names is a popular topic. It contributes to a better understanding of the history and development of languages and the culture of native speakers. This study deals with Kazakh colour names from the aspect of historical linguistics. First, the paper introduces the symbolic interpretation of Kazakh colours, then the categories and the functions of words derived from colour names are dealt with. Compounds that contain colour names are also in the focus of the present research. In the case of compounds, a specific usage of the colour names forming a particular meaning comes into view, which is a very interesting semantic field in Kazakh.

*Key words:* colour names, basic colour names, symbolism, additional meaning, derivation, suffixes, compounds.

### Introduction

The present study deals with the colour names of the Kazakh language from the aspect of semantics and word formation. This topic is a very popular field of linguistic studies, since the research of colour names yields much information about the cultural, social and historical background of a community. In the case of Kazakh, the investigation of the colour names could bring to surface interesting facts regarding language contacts and typological features. Although a number of studies have been written on the subject of colour names in the Turkic languages, no work providing a detailed study of the colour names in Kazakh exists. Colour names could be classified on the strength of several viewpoints. During the demonstration of the colour system of the Kazakh language, I mainly focused on the cultural and semantic characteristics. The data were collected from different Kazakh dictionaries (Bektaev 1999;

Kenesbaev 1977; Koç 2003) and grammars (Balakaev–Baskakov–Kenesbaev 1962; Žanpejisoŭ–Žusajin et al. 2002). My sources contain approximately 500 items.

### Research on Colour Names

The research of colour names is a widely investigated topic of linguistics. Here only those theories will be reviewed and summarised which are relevant with respect to the Kazakh colour names. In doing so, it becomes obvious that each theory basically follows either the relativist or the universalist approach. The relativist theory (or known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) focuses on the specific semantic fields of different languages. The purpose of this research is to compare and demonstrate these specific characteristics of every single language. This theory is based on the assumption that each language has its own special system for the colour names (Sipőcz 1994, pp. 10–11). However, the principle of the universalist theory is the opposite. This conception was created by Berlin and Kay (also known as the Berlin–Kay theory), who have had the view that the formation of the colour names is universal in every language, since the colour perception is an innate, psychological process. In order to prove their argument, they have studied colour names in twenty different languages from various languages families. Therefore, they have created the term ‘basic colour names’ and have established a progressive pattern with seven stages on the score of the basic colour names. They consider a colour name as basic only when its usage is not limited to an external characteristic of an animal or an object, it cannot be separated into other elements and was not borrowed from another language. Furthermore, a basic colour name must not denote the tone of another colour and its application must be definite and frequent for the native speakers. The universalist theory can be adapted to Kazakh as well (Berlin–Kay 1968, pp. 1–23)

With regard to Turkology, researchers engage in colour names from linguistic, cultural and historical points of view. From the side of linguistics, the work by Laude-Cirtatuas (1961) has to be mentioned who has collected the different colour names from different Turkic languages and has also included several Kazakh items. Another important study was written by Stachowski (2010) about the colours in Yakut. He deals with Yakut colour names mainly from the semantic aspect and gives some comments regarding their etymology. Taking into account the Turkic colour names from the aspect of symbolism, Küçük (2010) examines the cultural signification of colour names among historical Turkic peoples in his article. In the discipline of colour symbolism, few works can be found about the Kazakh language. For instance, the phraseological dictionary of Kazakh language published by Kenesbaev (1977) gives much information about the symbolic interpretation of colour names. Kadaşeva (1996) analyses the symbolic usage of colour names interpreting their basic meaning.

## Colour Names in Kazakh

For a suitable classification of the Kazakh colour names, word-formation could be a very useful instrument. In this regard, the colour names are divided into three different groups:

- basic colour names;
- colour names formed by suffixes;
- compounds which consist of at least one colour name.

Applying the criteria of the universalist theory to the Kazakh language, nine colours can be regarded as a basic term:

- aq* 'white';
- ala* 'spotted, multi-coloured';
- boz* 'grey';
- kök* 'blue, green';
- qara* 'black';
- qizil* 'red';
- qoñır* 'brown';
- sari* 'yellow';
- žasil* 'green'.

Although the universalists do not take notice of the etymology, to my mind it is a very important part in the case of Kazakh colour names. Taking a stock of the original usage of colours in Old Turkic, it turns out that some of them were originally applied only to the fur or hair colour of animals:

- aq* 'white' ~ Old Turkic *āq* 'white coat of an animal' (Clauson 1972, pp. 75);
- boz* 'grey' ~ Old Turkic *boz* 'grey coat of an animal' (Clauson 1972, pp. 388–389);
- qoñır* 'brown' ~ Old Turkic *qoñur* 'brown hair of an animal' (Clauson 1972, pp. 639).

Moreover, according to Clauson's argument (1972, pp. 681, 683–684), the colour name *qizil* 'red' is a derived form from the word *qiz-* 'to be red with anger, shame' added the deverbal nomen suffix *-Xl*. Clauson's argument is partially accepted<sup>1</sup> by Erdal (1991, pp. 99–100) as well.

Likewise, *yāšıl* 'green, colour of the fresh vegetation' (which is represented as *žasil* in Kazakh) can be segmented into the adjective *yāš* 'fresh, moist' and the denominal adjective suffix *+sXl* (Clauson 1972, pp. 975, 978). Besides, the Old Turkic item *kök* (Kazakh *kök*) originally had the meaning 'sky' (Clauson 1972, pp. 708–709).

So if the etymology is taken into consideration as a criterium as well, only three of the colour names can be taken as basic:

- ala* 'parti-coloured, dappled, mottled', cf. Old Turkic *āla* 'dappled, mottled';
- qara* 'black', cf. Old Turkic *qara* 'black';
- sari* 'yellow', cf. Old Turkic *sariğ* 'yellow'.

<sup>1</sup> Erdal claims that this colour name might be derived from the word *qiz* 'fervour, ignition'. At first, the verb *qizsı-* 'to glow' was formed by the denominal verbal suffix *+sX-*, and later it was connected to the deverbal adjective suffix *-Xl*. So Erdal reconstructs form *\*qizsıl*.

The usage of colour names in a secondary meaning is a widespread phenomenon in the Kazakh language. This can be connected to the symbolic interpretation of the colour names. For example, *aq* ('white') tipifies 'good, guiltlessness, innocence', but in some cases it appears as the sign of mourning. Hence, *aq* can denote 'fact, truth, reality, milk products'. Colour black *qara*, apart from 'sinfulness', is the symbol of mourning, moreover has a secondary meaning 'shadow, oil'. The word *qizil* 'red' can signify mourning as well, but in several expressions and proverbs it turns up as a metaphor of happiness and richness. The word *kök* 'blue', besides its secondary meanings 'grass, vegetables, fruit', expresses the hues of green, and for that reason symbolises 'freshness, youth, freedom'. The colour *sarı* 'yellow' also has an important role in Kazakh culture representing impatience, expectation and illness, which proves its denotation 'jaundice'. Benevolence can be detected in some expressions involving *qoñır* 'brown'. In Kazakh, the plant 'maidenhair' is worded by the colour *boz* related to its external characteristic (Kadaşeva 1996, p. 95; Küçük 2010, pp. 185–190).

The colour *ala* 'multi-coloured, parti-coloured, spotted' has the most varied application in Kazakh. Originally, it must have expressed variegation with the connotation of 'non-monochrome', but nowadays this phrase is connected to the word *teñbil*<sup>2</sup>. On the basis of symbolism, *ala* can mark tumble and confusion, but in its secondary medical sense it means 'Iris'.

## Colour Names and Their Suffixes

Due to the typological properties of Kazakh, it could be suspected that the formation of tincture of different colours is effected by suffixes. In the collected corpus, there are only few suffixes which form new tones or intensification.

1. *+şıl*: According to Erdal (1991, pp. 98–99), it is attested in Old Turkic as *+sıl*. In general, it denotes intensification, but adding to colour names it creates tinctures. It can be demonstrated with the words *aqşıl* 'whitish' and *kökşıl* 'bluish, navy bluish'. A very interesting form is the word *köksıl* 'hunting eagle, brave', which is probably a borrowing from another Turkic language, because the suffix *+sıl* does not exist in Kazakh.
2. *+Gilt*: This suffix signifies colour tones as well, like in the case of *bozğılt* 'greyish', *sargilt* 'beige, muddy' and *qizğılt* 'pink, reddish'. Hypotetically, it can be separated into two suffixes, namely two denominal adjectives: *+Gilt* and *+t*. Umber reddish has the parallel variant *qizğıltım* in Kazakh. Laude-Cirtautas (1961, pp. 50–51) claims that the original form must have been *+GiltIm*, which

<sup>2</sup> Supposedly, this word is of Turkic origin. It is found in Kirghiz as *temgil* ~ *tengil* (Judahin 1965, pp. 722b; 724b). It might be related to the Old Turkic word *tamga* 'brand or a mark of ownership placed on animals' (Clauson 1972, p. 504), which was suffixed by the denominal adjective *+Gilt*. In Kazakh, it was probably borrowed from Kirghiz as *\*temggil* ~ *tengil*, and it was changed to *\*teñmil* by metathesis, and later *-m-* shifted to *-b-*.

verifies the *qizgiltim* 'reddish' word from the Teleut dialect of Altay Turkic. This version is found in some other Siberian Turkic varieties, too. In this manner, Laude-Cirtatutas divides this suffix into +*GIl* and +*tIm*, and later it shortened in Kazakh.

3. +*GIl*: Similarly, this denominal adjective forms colour tones, such as *bozǵıl* 'greyish' and *qizǵıl* 'reddish'. This suffix might verify Laude-Cirtatutas' argument. It was used in Old Turkic, too, in the same function (Erdal 1991, pp. 98–99).

There are two other denominal adjectives which can be relevant from the aspect of colour names:

4. +*šA*: this suffix has a comparative usage and sometimes forms a new semantic variant. For instance, *qizılša* 'beet' lost its original reddish meaning, as the word *aqša* can denote 'money' and 'whitish' as well. But in the case of *qonjırša* 'brownish', there are no special significations.
5. +*Daw*: It has a comparative function, too, but a secondary meaning was not formed in the case of this suffix, which is demonstrated by the items *qonjırlaw* 'brownish', *köktew* 'bluish' and *qizıldaw* 'reddish'.

Besides the suffixes forming tones, two colour names come into view in Kazakh, which are borrowings and considered to be basic colour names in other languages:

1. *külgin* expresses 'purple, ashen, grey' in Kazakh, which is a derived form of *kül* 'ash'. The denominal adjective suffix +*GIn* is probably of Turkic origin. It is probably related to the Old Turkic denominal nomen suffix +*GAn* conjoined to colour names, like *kökän* 'plump' (Erdal 1991, pp. 85–86).

In connection with *boz* and *külgin*, another colour name has to be mentioned which can signify the hues of the grey colour:

2. *sur* 'grey' is of unknown origin in Kazakh. It might be connected to Written Mongolian *sayaral* 'grey as a colour of horse-coat', and it could have been borrowed<sup>3</sup> as \**sağur*. Later the intervocalic -*ğ*- might have been dropped, but it is quite problematic, since in the Turkic languages after the dropping of the intervocalic -*ğ*- the first vowel regularly lengthens assimilating the second (ĖSTJa 2003, pp. 336–337).
3. The other special loanword which signs a colour name is undoubtedly of Mongolic origin. *Kögildir* 'navy blue, sky blue' is a reborrowing of the originally Turkic *kök* 'blue' from Mongolic. In Mongolic, it was suffixed with the denominal adjective +*btUr*/+*ltUr* forming colour tones (Khabtagaeva 2001, pp. 146–147). Having a look at the derived colour names in Kazakh, this is seemingly not a very frequent and productive way for the formation of colour names and tinctures.

<sup>3</sup> It might verify the Yakut *sur* 'grey horse coat', because in Yakut the original Turkic initial *s*- drops regularly, like Old Turkic *sūt* 'milk' < Yakut *ūt* id. and Old Turkic *sän* 'you' < *en* id. (Johanson 1998, p. 103). Therefore, it could be a borrowing.

## Colour-compounding in Kazakh

The largest group of the Kazakh colour system is made up of compounds. Because of the large number of the items in this category, it can be divided into several subgroups from the aspect of structural characteristics. In this sense, two subgroups can be distinguished: (1) compounds consisting of solely colour names and (2) compounds containing only one colour name. The former subgroup, i.e. colour-compounds, have a special function, since they might express intensification or colour-tinctures, thus the colour-suffixes can be substituted by these constructions. For instance, the tones of brightness and darkness are formed by the colour names *aq* 'white' and *qara* 'black'. In addition, these two colour names can create other colour hues, too, in conjunction with other colour names:

*aq sur* 'light grey' < *aq* 'white' + *sur* 'grey';  
*qara burıl* 'dark brown' < *qara* 'black' + *burıl* 'brown';  
*aq sari* 'blonde, fair' < *aq* 'white' + *sari* 'yellow';  
*qara tori* 'chestnut' < *qara* 'black' + *tori* 'bay'.

The fusion of other colour names in Kazakh shows a variegated system. The curiosity of these compounds is that the newly formed colours are sometimes not connected to the original tinctures of the constituents:

*qizil-žasil* 'reddish, rusty' < *qizil* 'red' + *žasil* 'green';  
*sari-qoñır* 'tawny' < *sari* 'yellow' + *qoñır* 'brown'.

The horse coat colours are a specific part of this subgroup. The cult of the horse has always played a great role in Kazakh culture, therefore many colour tones can be found which are used only for the designation of horse-colour. It is conspicuous that a remarkable part of the horse coat colours is of Mongolic origin in Kazakh. It is proved by the compound *ala šubar* 'party-coloured', where the second constituent is the borrowing of the Mongolian *čooqur* 'variegated, dappled' (Lessing 1960, p. 199). Similarly, the Mongolic colour *küreng*<sup>4</sup> 'dark brown, maroon, deep violet' (Lessing 1960, p. 505) can be found in Kazakh in the form *küreñ*. However, besides its original meaning, it designates the tone of grey as well. It creates compounds, like *alküreñ*<sup>5</sup> which designates 'a kind of light greyish horse'.

Another peculiar part of the colour-compounds are the totally reduplicated constructions. Generally, this mode of reduplication expresses intensification, although it is not a frequent phenomenon in colour names. In Kazakh, two items can be highlighted, *sur-sur* 'very green, pale' and *teñbil-teñbil* 'totally spotted, stained'.

The second subgroup, namely compounds which consist of only one colour name, can be uncountably detected in the Kazakh lexicon. Taking stock semantically of the colour-compounds, this category might be separated into numerous categories:

<sup>4</sup> As a hypothesis, it might be a reborrowing. According to Clauson (1972, p. 761), the Mongolic word is connected to the Old Turkic *küzen* 'polecat' which was later reborrowed by Kazakh as a colour name.

<sup>5</sup> The first constituent of this compound, *al*, has several usage, like 'crimson', but in compounds it might express the light tone of a colour, too.

**animal names:**

*aqtorǵay* ‘whitefly’ (Latin *Aleyrodida*) < *aq* ‘white’ + *torǵay* ‘sparrow’;  
*kökžal* ‘grey wolf’ (Latin *Canis lupus*) < *kök* ‘blue’ + *žal* ‘mane’;  
*sariköbelek* ‘lackey moth’ (Latin *Malacosoma neustria*) < *sarī* ‘yellow’ + *köbelek* ‘butterfly’;

**plant names:**

*bozqaraǵan* ‘Chinese wolfberry’ (Latin *Lycium barborum*) < *boz* ‘grey’ + *qaraǵan* ‘acacia’;  
*kökšegül* ‘Jacob’s ladder’ (Latin *Polemonium*) < *kök* ‘blue’ + *šA* {Denominal Adjective} + *gül* ‘flower’;  
*qaraqulaq* ‘Ugly Milk-cap’ (Latin *Lactarius turpis*) < *qara* ‘black’ + *qulaq* ‘ear’;

**mineral names:**

*köktas* ‘lazurite’ < *kök* ‘blue’ + *tas* ‘stone’;  
*qaraširik* ‘mould’ < *qara* ‘black’ + *širik* ‘putrid, doze’;  
*qizil topıraq* ‘red soil’ < *qizil* ‘red’ + *topıraq* ‘ground’;

**food names:**

*aq žügeri* ‘maize grits’ < *aq* ‘white’ + *žügeri* ‘corn’;  
*qara kesek et* ‘fatless meat’ < *qara* ‘black’ + *kesek* ‘piece’ + *et* ‘meat’;  
*qizil balıq* ‘fish fillet’ < *qizil* ‘red’ + *balıq* ‘fish’;

**disease names:**

*aq qandilıq* ‘Leukemia’ < *aq* ‘white’ + *qan* ‘blood’ + *DI* {Denominal Nomen} + *LIK* {Denominal Nomen};  
*qara šešek* ‘chickenpox’ < *qara* ‘black’ + *šešek* ‘smallpox; flower’;  
*sarī awru* ‘Jaundice’ < *sarī* ‘yellow’ + *awru* ‘disease’;

**phenomena of nature:**

*aq timiq* ‘doldrums’ < *aq* ‘white’ + *timiq* ‘calm’;  
*kökmüz* ‘ice crust’ < *kök* ‘blue’ + *müz* ‘ice’;  
*qaraköleñke* ‘twilight’ < *qara* ‘black’ + *köleñke* ‘shadow’;

**internal human characteristics:**

*ala köñil* ‘disingenuous’ < *ala* ‘dappled, variegated’ + *köñil* ‘spirit, sentiment’;  
*bozbas* ‘verdant’ < *boz* ‘grey’ + *bas* ‘head’;  
*qara žürek* ‘cruel’ < *qara* ‘black’ + *žürek* ‘heart’;

**external human characteristics:**

*aqqūba* ‘blond’ < *aq* ‘white’ + *qūba* ‘whitish’;  
*qara nāsıl* ‘negroid’ < *qara* ‘black’ + *nāsıl* ‘race’;  
*kök köz* ‘blue eye’ < *kök* ‘blue’ + *köz* ‘eye’.

In this process, almost every Kazakh colour name comes into view. Nevertheless, for a right and obvious semantic classification of colour-compounds, this point of view is not sufficient, because many times the concrete meaning of the compound is not clear. Therefore, the compounds should be classified according to the interpreted meaning of the constituents. As far as it can be interpreted, the compound is regarded as compositional, otherwise as non-compositional (Fabb 1998, p. 6). The question of the compositional compounds has already been demonstrated through former examples.

As for the non-compositional constructions, they cannot be explained without a deeper knowledge of Kazakh colour names. In most cases, the denotation is related to the symbolic or secondary meaning of the colour name.

The symbolic usage of the colours *aq* 'white' and *qara* 'black' is quite abundant in compounds like the image of guiltlessness and sinfulness, and they might have special symbolic interpretations as well, based on the 'external characteristics':

*aqpeyil* 'sinless, innocuous' < *aq* 'white' + *peyil* 'intention';

*qarabet* 'dishonest, infamous' < *qara* 'black' + *bet* 'face';

*aq tamaq* 'female beauty' < *aq* 'white' + *tamaq* 'throat';

*qara šañıraq* 'homeland, the youngest child in the family' < *qara* 'black' + *šañıraq* 'blow-hole at the upper part of the yurt'.

The colour *kök* 'blue, green' forms compounds representing virility and the vegetation of nature. Moreover, it sometimes appears as the tone of grey or black:

*kökbalausa* 'fresh, spring grass' < *kök* 'blue, green' + *balausa* 'verdant fruit, young';

*kökželik* 'the shedding of domestic animals in the springs' < *kök* 'blue, green' + *želik* 'abandon, fervour';

*kök at* signifies 'grey horse' < *kök* 'blue, green' + *at* 'horse';

*kökžydek* is applied to the appellation of 'black currant' (Latin *Vaccinia uliginosum*) < *kök* 'blue, green' + *žydek* 'fruit'.

In some cases the tinctures of the tawny and white colours are substituted by the word *sarı* 'yellow':

*sargış žüнди* 'reddish, tawny hairy' < *sarı* 'yellow' + *GIš* {Denominal Adjective} + *žün* 'hair, fur' + *DI* {Denominal Adjective};

*sarısoyaw* 'lactic acid' < *sarı* 'yellow' + *soyaw* 'thorn, prickle'.

The basic colour name *boz* 'grey' is presented as the synonym of youth. In addition, this colour is connected to serenity as well:

*bozbalalıq* 'young, youngster' < *boz* 'grey' + *bala* 'child' + *LIK* {Denominal Adjective};

*bozökpe* 'speechless, calm' < *boz* 'grey' + *ökpe* 'lungs'.

Colour brown *qoñır* symbolises coolness in Kazakh:

*qoñıržay* 'cool, moist' < *qoñır* 'brown' + *žay* 'place'.

Beside the colours *boz* and *kök*, grey might also be expressed by *ala* 'variegated, spotted', and it is used figuratively as calamity and insincerity:

*ala köleñke* 'twilight' < *ala* 'variegated, spotted, multi-coloured' + *köleñke* 'shadow';

*ala topalañ* 'fear, panic' < *ala* 'variegated, spotted, multi-coloured' + *topalañ* 'panic, excitement';

*ala köñil* 'disingenious' < *ala* 'variegated, spotted, multi-coloured' + *köñil* 'desire, mind'.

## Conclusion

Having reviewed the colour names of the Kazakh language, it becomes evident that this system is very diversified and complex. On the basis of Kazakh word formation, there are many ways of creating colour names and tones. It is remarkable that the formation of colour names by making compounds is a frequent process, similarly to suffixation. In addition, the symbolic and secondary meaning of the colour names often come into being only through compounding. So colour-compounding is an important and useful process to gain a deeper insight into the historical and cultural background of the Kazakh language. It would also be important to compare the Kazakh colour names to other Turkic systems.

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