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Bachelor's thesis

COLOR ADJECTIVES IN THE US MASS MEDIA DISCOURSE



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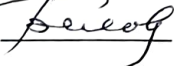
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ABSTRACT

This Bachelor's thesis examines the functional, semantic and pragmatic characteristics of color adjectives in contemporary US mass media discourse and aims to determine their role in shaping audience perception and conveying evaluative and ideological meanings. The research highlights the value of color adjectives as multifunctional linguistic units that reflect cultural symbolism, psychological associations and the persuasive strategies of media communication. The material for the study comprises color adjectives which were selected from articles published by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *CNN*. The research methodology combines descriptive, semantic and contextual analysis. Based on the analysis, the study identifies five overlapping functions of color adjectives in media texts. The semantic analysis reveals that color adjectives realize literal, metaphorical, metonymic and phraseological meanings, while polysemy serves as a mechanism for creating multiple layers of interpretation. The pragmatic investigation demonstrates that the choice of a color adjective is never neutral: the same term can evoke empathy, persuade, trigger or divide the audience depending on the communicative situation. The findings confirm that color adjectives function as compact, multifunctional tools that enable journalists to simultaneously describe reality, express evaluation, evoke emotions and signal ideological positions while maintaining the surface appearance of objective reporting. The conclusions support the deep interconnection between language, culture and media influence and contribute to the fields of semantics, discourse analysis and intercultural communication.

Keywords: color adjectives, mass media, discourse, semantics, pragmatics, symbolism.

АНОТАЦІЯ

Ця бакалаврська робота досліджує функціональні, семантичні та прагматичні характеристики прикметників кольору у сучасному американському мас-медіа дискурсі з метою визначення їхньої ролі у формуванні сприйняття аудиторії та передачі оціночних й ідеологічних значень. У дослідженні підкреслюється цінність прикметників кольору як багатофункціональних мовних одиниць, що відображають культурну символіку, психологічні асоціації та переконливі стратегії медійної комунікації. Матеріалом для дослідження стали прикметники кольору, відібрані зі статей, опублікованих у *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* та *CNN*. На основі аналізу дослідження визначає п'ять функцій кольорових прикметників у медіатекстах. Семантичний аналіз показує, що прикметники кольору реалізують буквальні, метафоричні, метонімічні та фразеологічні значення, тоді як полісемія служить механізмом для створення кількох рівнів інтерпретації. Прагматичний аналіз демонструє, що вибір прикметника кольору ніколи не є нейтральним: той самий термін здатен викликати емпатію, переконувати, спонукати або розділяти аудиторію залежно від комунікативної ситуації. Результати дослідження підтверджують, що прикметники кольору є компактними, багатофункціональними інструментами, що дозволяють журналістам одночасно описувати дійсність, виражати оцінку, викликати емоції та сигналізувати про ідеологічні позиції, зберігаючи видимість об'єктивного висвітлення подій. Висновки підтверджують глибокий взаємозв'язок між мовою, культурою та впливом ЗМІ і роблять внесок у розвиток семантики, дискурс-аналізу та міжкультурної комунікації.

Ключові слова: прикметники кольору, мас-медіа, дискурс, семантика, прагматика, символіка.

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INTRODUCTION

An adjective is a part of speech in the English language and functions to describe or modify a noun or pronoun. The class of adjectives consists of different types that are used in everyday communication for various purposes such as describing or showing emotions or attitudes. Adjectives are utilized to make the daily speech more informative, vivid, detailed and dynamic. Through their use, the listeners visualize the places, objects or people and understand better what the speakers intend to say.

Color adjectives describe the appearance of an object, however they are also capable of conveying symbolic or cultural meaning beyond the literal designation of color. For instance, the color *red* is conventionally associated with love and passion though simultaneously it conveys absolutely opposite associations such as anger and danger. Thus, color adjectives expand their meaning apart from their literal meanings. In mass media discourse, color adjectives perform different functions. For example, to express emotions and to influence interpretation and emotional response of the readers or listeners.

Mass media discourse is written, spoken or visual communication that can be found in mass media such as television, newspapers, films, the Internet and social media (Instagram, TikTok). It is one of the most influential communicative spheres in modern society as it reaches a large audience and shapes public opinion, influences beliefs and actions.

US mass media texts are characterized by expressive vocabulary, evaluative language and the frequent use of stylistic devices to attract attention and influence interpretation. Color adjectives are actively utilized in American media discourse to attract attention, intensify descriptions and convey implicit evaluations of events, individuals and social phenomena.

The topic of color adjectives has been studied extensively by Western scholars such as B. Berlin and P. Kay(1969), C.K. McDaniel(1978), A. Wierzbicka(2008), W. Merrifield(1991), E. Rosch(1973), J.R. Taylor(1995), R. E. MacLaury(1997), G. Lakoff and M. Johnson(1980).

The **relevance** of the paper lies in the growing interest to the ability of linguistic units to serve as powerful tools for framing political narratives, reinforcing social stereotypes, and influencing consumer behavior. In a media landscape colour adjectives function as cognitive shortcuts that shape the audience's emotional and ideological perception of reality. Consequently, analyzing these lexical units reveals the subtle interplay between language, power, and cultural identity in contemporary American society.

The **purpose** of the present research is to explore semantic, functional and pragmatic features of color adjectives in the US mass media discourse and analyze their linguistic characteristics, cultural and symbolic meanings.

The **objectives** of the study are the following:

1. to describe the main characteristics of mass media discourse, especially the US media communication;
2. to explore the semantic structure and word-formation patterns of color adjectives;
3. to examine the concept of color and its cultural and symbolic connotations;
4. to identify the functional role of color adjectives in the US media texts;
5. to analyze the semantic and pragmatic functions of color adjectives in influencing audience perception in media discourse.

The **object** of the paper is color adjectives in the English language as lexical units that function within the US mass media discourse.

The **subject** of the research is semantic, functional and pragmatic characteristics of color adjectives in US mass media texts, as well as their word-formation patterns.

The study is based on a combination of different **research methods**. The descriptive analysis was used to characterize color adjectives as a lexical-semantic group in English; semantic analysis to determine their meanings; contextual analysis to interpret color adjectives in media headlines and newspaper articles; discourse analysis to identify their functional and pragmatic role in influencing readers.

Research material: color adjectives collected from more than 100 headlines and articles from American newspapers and online news platforms such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *CNN*.

Structure of the work: the work consists of an introduction, two chapters, conclusions and the list of references.

The results of the scientific research were published and presented at the conference at the 5th International Scientific and Practical Conference “Applied Linguistics-3D: Language, IT, ELT”.

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY OF COLOR ADJECTIVES IN MASS MEDIA DISCOURSE

1.1. Mass media discourse as an object of linguistic studies

The process of communication is one of the most dynamic phenomena in the contemporary world, as it defines every aspect of human interaction and social evolution. Communication involves the exchange of knowledge, experiences, ideas and is conducted through language. However, language is far more than a set of grammatical rules, it operates as a living process. In a way, the study of language use in all its aspects can be regarded as the study of discourse.

The term “discourse” has been examined by general linguists, sociolinguistics, anthropologists, sociologists, communication scientists, psychologists, scholars in artificial intelligence and rhetoricians [Fasold 1990, p. 65]. Each discipline naturally interprets discourse through their own unique frameworks. This diversity of perspectives often leads to a wide array of theoretical approaches.

Modern linguistics has seen a major shift in how we look at language. Initially, they viewed language as a closed, formal system that focused on how words form sentences. Nowadays, scholars are interested in how language works in real-life situations, therefore the concept of “discourse” has become crucial. However, as the field developed, it became evident that language is inseparable from the people who speak it and the society they belong to. This shift led to the development of functional linguistics, where the focus is on “language in action.”

Discourse has many definitions, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, it is “the use of language to communicate in speech or writing” [Cambridge Dictionary]. In order to understand the complexity of discourse, it is necessary to determine how various scholars have defined the term.

One of the earliest perspectives was the structuralist approach. According to Zellig Harris, discourse is a structural unit which can be studied by analogy with the sentence [Harris 1951]. Additionally, Raphael Salkie suggested that while “grammar

is basically about how words combine to form sentences, text and discourse analysis is about how sentences combine to form texts” [Salkie 1995, p. 9].

However, as linguistics became more interested in real-life communication, the functionalist approach emerged. A key figure is Guy Cook, who moved the focus from the structure of a text to its purpose. He defined discourse as “language in use, for communication” [Cook 1989, p. 6]. He argued that a text only becomes “discourse” when it is used by a real person in a real context to achieve a certain goal. Similarly, the influential work by Ralph Fasold was based on the view that “the study of discourse is the study of any aspect of language use” [Fasold 1990, p. 65].

A socio-cognitive approach was introduced by Teun van Dijk. He stated that we cannot understand discourse without taking into account the human mind. Van Dijk suggested that “discourse studies are about text and talk in context” and context is “the other characteristics of the social situation or the communicative event that may systematically influence text or talk” [Van Dijk 1997, p. 3]. In addition, he popularized the division of discourse into two primary modes: “text” (the product of writing) and “talk” (the product of speaking or interaction).

Discourse types can be categorized into two primary forms based on their medium of communication: spoken discourse includes interactive or oral acts such as *a chat, conversation, speech, lecture, toast, song, consultation, joke*, whereas written discourse encompasses documented texts like *a recipe, menu, letter, advertisement, message, novel, biography, essay, article, prescription, newspaper* [Cook 1989, pp. 95-98].

Finally, the critical, power-oriented approach led by Michel Foucault, looked at discourse as an instrument of social control. Foucault defined discourse as “at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” [Foucault 1970, p. 52]. In this view, institutions like the media employ discourse to establish authority and regulate social behavior.

One more important scholar in this field is Norman Fairclough. In his famous book *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), he states that discourse is much more than just a speech or a piece of writing, rather it is a form of social practice [Fairclough 1992, pp. 62-64].

To operationalize this process, Fairclough proposed a three-dimensional model [Fairclough 1992, pp. 72-96]:

1. text (description): it is a “micro” dimension and it examines linguistic features such as sentence structure, semantics, vocabulary and how these elements work together to create meaning in a text;
2. discursive practice (interpretation): this level focuses on how a text is produced by institutions (like media) and consumed by the audience. It emphasizes that a news story is a “product” made by an editor for a specific audience. This level highlights the distinction between “text” (the result) and “discourse” (the whole process of communication);
3. social practice (explanation): it is a “macro” dimension and it explores how a text relates to a wider context in which the text exists like the specific situation and the role that media plays within a given society or political system.

Another key figure in the field of discourse studies is Ruth Wodak. In her work *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (2001), she viewed discourse as a social practice that expresses and reproduces power relations, ideas and ideologies in society. Wodak emphasized that discourse cannot be analyzed separately from its historical, social and political context. She is also known for developing the discourse-historical approach (DHA), which studies discourse by combining linguistic analysis with an examination of the historical and social conditions in which it emerges [Wodak and Meyer 2001, pp. 63-93].

It is essential to understand these general theories of discourse but to apply them effectively, we must look at the mass media where language has the greatest influence today. The transition from general discourse to mass media discourse requires a clear understanding of what “mass media” means. According to the

Cambridge Dictionary, mass media is “newspapers, television, radio, and the internet” or “the different methods of giving information to lots of people, for example, through newspapers, television, and radio” [Cambridge Dictionary].

The traditional formats like newspapers and magazines rely heavily on the printed word, as well as auditory and audio-visual channels such as radio and television depend on the tone of voice and moving images since they create a feeling of immediate presence. However, the media landscape has been fundamentally reshaped by modern digital platforms. These encompass not only official news portals and professional blogs but also social media networks like X (Twitter), Facebook and Instagram.

Unlike older, one-way media, these digital platforms are characterized by interactivity and speed, so the information can be updated in real-time. This shift has blurred the traditional lines between professional journalism and user-generated content. As a result, the audience is not just passive consumers, but active participants who can comment and share instantly, making the media's influence more complex and widespread than ever before.

However, mass media is not just a channel for information, but it is a social institution that shapes our perception of reality through specific communicative strategies.

According to Niklas Luhmann, mass media creates a “constructed reality” for society. He stated that whatever we know about our society, or even about the world we live in, we know through the mass media. In *The Reality of the Mass Media* (2000), he explained how the media functions as an independent social system. He argued that the media does not simply report facts, it follows its own internal logic to decide what is “newsworthy” and what is not [Luhmann 2000].

Beyond its role in constructing reality, mass media discourse performs several social functions that define its linguistic character. In his fundamental work, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (2010), Denis McQuail identified five core functions of mass media in society:

1. information: it is the most basic function, it provides a continuous flow of data about events and power relations in the world;
2. correlation: it explains, interprets and comments on the meaning of events, it is basically a persuasive function that helps build consensus by suggesting how the public should react to the news;
3. continuity: it focuses on expressing the dominant culture and recognizing new social developments;
4. entertainment: it ensures audience engagement by providing enjoyment, a diversion from daily life and the means of relaxation;
5. mobilization: it is used for campaigning for societal objectives, especially in politics or times of crisis [McQuail 2010, p. 87].

These overlapping roles prove that media discourse is a powerful tool for social management.

While these primary goals are essential, researchers like O'Keeffe suggested that the functions of media language are actually much broader, involving the establishment and maintenance of a strategic relationship with the audience. She further explains that media discourse often creates a sense of “pseudo-intimacy.” Journalists use informal language and inclusive words such as “we” or “us,” to make the audience feel like they are part of a private, friendly conversation. This familiar tone builds trust, making the persuasive function much more effective [O'Keeffe 2006, p. 90-103].

This persuasive role is immediately visible in the news headlines. A headline is not just a title, it is a specialized communicative tool designed to perform two main tasks: to summarize the story and to persuade the reader to continue reading. According to Reah, headlines use a specific “telegraphic” style, often omitting determiners and auxiliary verbs to convey the main details as space is limited. Additionally, the use of loaded words, alliteration, homophones, ambiguity or wordplay in headlines is a strategic linguistic choice intended to evoke an emotional response or to catch reader's attention with a single, memorable phrase [Reah 2002].

Furthermore, in the age of the Internet, media discourse has become increasingly multimodal. This means that the meaning is no longer carried by text alone, but by a combination of words, images, sounds and layouts. As Kress and van Leeuwen pointed out, the visual grammar of a news website (the colors used, the size of a photograph, its placement on the screen) interacts together with the written word to create a unified message. This multimodal nature makes media discourse more immersive and, consequently, more powerful in its ability to shape social consciousness [Kress and van Leeuwen 2006].

In summary, the understanding of discourse has evolved significantly, moving from basic grammatical study to an analysis of how language actively shapes our society. While linguists once focused on isolating sentences, we now view texts as a dynamic process where every word carries its own purpose and context. This is particularly evident in the mass media. Here, discourse is no longer just information, it has become a tool of influence, using specific strategies to construct a particular ideological picture of the world. The shift to digital formats and social networks has only intensified this effect as the audience no longer just consumes news but directly participates in its creation. Thus, media discourse today is not merely a text, but the primary platform where our modern social reality is constructed.

1.2. Color adjectives as a lexical-semantic group

Adjectives play a vital role in the English language as they are a part of speech that “will typically modify the meaning of a noun” [Dixon 2005, p. 86]. Following this definition, it is useful to outline the semantic types that are characteristically associated with the grammatical class Adjective.

As Dixon demonstrates, adjectives in English can be grouped into a number of semantic categories based on the kind of property they denote: dimension: *large, small, long, high, narrow, deep, thick*; physical property: *attractive, ugly, healthy, dead, alive, loud, expensive, bitter, dirty, soft, wet*; speed: *slow, rapid, fast, sudden*; age: *young, obsolete, contemporary, new*; color: *blue, yellow, green, crimson*; value: *wonderful, weird, unusual, good, interesting, boring, bad, essential, critical, vital*;

difficulty: *simple, complex, hard, tricky*; volition: *accidental, intentional, purposeful*; qualification, which has several subtypes (sure; possible; likely; definite; correct; usual); human propensity, which includes numerous subtypes (angry; eager; busy; happy; fond; clever; unsure; honest); similarity: *similar, like, different, unlike, separate, equal, independent, identical* [Dixon 2005, pp. 84-85]. These semantic categories illustrate the wide variety of meanings that English adjectives can express.

Furthermore, according to Quirk et al., adjectives can be described using three semantic distinctions: stative vs dynamic, gradable vs nongradable and inherent vs noninherent. The stative/dynamic distinction: most adjectives are stative, but many can be used dynamically. Examples of dynamic adjectives include *brave, funny, noisy, tidy, etc.* The gradable/nongradable distinction: most adjectives are gradable, shown through comparison and modification by intensifiers like *very* or *extremely*. Non-gradable adjectives refer to absolute states and typically resist comparison such as *atomic, dead*. The inherent/noninherent distinction: inherent adjectives directly characterize the referent of the noun - a wooden table is a wooden object. Noninherent adjectives apply indirectly, extending the basic sense of the noun - a wooden dancer is not a wooden man. Other examples: a firm handshake (inherent) vs a firm friend (noninherent). Inherent adjectives often allow noun derivation (*the firmness of the handshake*), while noninherent ones do not [Quirk et al. 1985, pp. 434-436].

Alongside these semantic properties, prototypical English adjectives can be recognised by three characteristic syntactic properties, as described by Huddleston and Pullum. The first property concerns function: adjectives have attributive and predicative uses. The second property is grade: adjectives can show different degrees of the quality they describe. The third property is modification: adjectives can be modified, usually by adverbs, for example, *quite difficult, rather unusual, very intelligent* [Huddleston and Pullum 2005, p. 112]. These three syntactic features serve as reliable formal criteria for identifying central adjectives in English. While these properties are characteristic of adjectives, none is confined exclusively to them.

Moreover, a significant number of adjectives do not display all of the properties described.

In Modern English, adjectives have a very simple morphological system. Unlike many other European languages, English adjectives no longer change their form to agree with nouns in gender, number, or case. The only inflectional category that English adjectives still express is degree of comparison, realised through the suffixes *-er* and *-est* [Biber et al. 2021, p. 66, p. 503].

English adjectives have three degrees: positive, comparative and superlative. The positive degree simply names a property without any comparison (*young, comfortable*). The comparative degree expresses a higher (or lower) degree of the property relative to another entity (*younger, more comfortable, less comfortable*). The superlative degree expresses the highest (or lowest) degree among three or more entities (*youngest, most comfortable, least comfortable*) [Crystal 2008, pp. 11-12].

There are two ways to form the comparative and superlative. The first is synthetic - using suffixes: *easier, easiest*. The second is analytic - using the words *more* and *most*: *more effective, most effective*. The choice depends mainly on the length of the adjective. One-syllable adjectives almost always take the synthetic form: *strong - stronger - strongest*. Adjectives with three or more syllables take the analytic form: *generous - more generous - most generous*. Two-syllable adjectives may take either synthetic or analytic comparative forms, though some patterns are more common than others. As Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik note, “most adjectives that are inflected for their comparison can also take the periphrastic forms with *more* and *most*. Periphrastic forms are, however, uncommon with a number of monosyllabic adjectives: *big, clean, fast*”. Moreover, some adjectives form their degrees through suppletion - a complete change of the root instead of adding a suffix. Common examples are *bad - worse - worst* and *good - better - best* [Quirk et al. 1985, pp. 402-403, pp. 458-463].

Not all adjectives can be compared. The ability to be compared depends on gradability, but a crucial semantic distinction exists between relative and absolute gradable adjectives. Relative gradable adjectives, such as *short* or *big*, are vague

because what counts as “*short*” or “*big*” changes depending on the context. However, Kennedy then introduces a challenge to this analysis from the class of absolute gradable adjectives. He defines these as “adjectives that are demonstrably gradable, but which have positive forms that relate objects to maximal or minimal degrees, and do not give rise to vagueness” [Kennedy 2007, p. 1]. In other words, absolute adjectives describe properties that have a clear endpoint - either a maximum (*completely straight*) or a minimum (*completely dry*). Because their positive form already refers to that endpoint, they do not normally form comparatives like *straighter* or *drier* in their literal sense and they are not usually modified by *very*. This is why adjectives like *dead* or *empty* are rarely used as *more dead* or *very empty* in standard English [Kennedy 2007; Toledo and Sassoon 2011].

Morphologically, adjectives fall into three groups depending on their structure: simple, derived and compound. Simple adjectives have no additional affixes, they consist of a single root. As such words have no special endings, it is often impossible to tell from their form alone that they function as adjectives. Examples include *old*, *bad*, *long*, *dark*, *deep*. Derived adjectives are built from a root plus one or more affixes (suffixes or prefixes). Their structure makes them easier to recognise. Typical adjective-forming suffixes are -ful (*careful*), -less (*hopeless*), -ish (*childish*), -ous (*curious*), -ive (*creative*), -ic (*energetic*), -al (*cultural*), -y (*happy*) and -able (*affordable*) [Quirk et al. 1985, p. 402]. Prefixes like *un-* and *in-* can also change the meaning, as in *unfair* or *incorrect*. Many derived adjectives come from nouns or verbs using these affixes. Compound adjectives consist of at least two bases. They follow several common patterns: adjective + adjective (*sour-sweet*), noun + adjective (*life-long*), adjective + noun (*front-row*), adverb + ed-participle/ing-participle (*new-born*, *constantly-changing*), adjective + ed-participle/ing-participle (*soft-textured*, *good-looking*), adverb + ed-participle/ing-participle (*family-oriented*, *eye-catching*), etc. While these morphological patterns often signal that a word is an adjective, not every adjective shows them [Biber et al. 2021, pp. 527-533].

Adjectives in the English language perform three principal syntactic functions: attributive, predicative and postpositive.

1. Attributive adjectives come before a noun inside a noun phrase. For example: *my busy day, a red car, the only choice*.
2. Predicative adjectives come after certain verbs, such as *be, seem, become, or find*. For example: *the weather is cold, he seems tired*.
3. Postpositive adjectives come immediately after the noun they describe. This is much less common. They often appear after words like *something, anyone, nothing*: e.g., *something strange, nobody famous*. In more formal English, they can also follow ordinary nouns: *the people responsible*.

Most adjectives can be used in all three ways. For instance, *comfortable*: *a comfortable chair* (attributive), *the chair is comfortable* (predicative), *something comfortable* (postpositive). However, some adjectives are limited. A few work only attributively, like *main, entire, principal*. Others cannot be used attributively, such as *asleep, alive, glad*. And a tiny number appears almost only postpositively, for example: *prize awarded* [Huddleston and Pullum 2002, pp. 528-529].

English requires that adjectives preceding a noun follow a fixed sequence based on meaning. This sequence runs from most subjective to most objective: opinion, then size, then age, then shape, then color, then origin, then material, then purpose, as illustrated by the phrase *an elegant tiny ancient square red Chinese silk embroidered pillow*. This order reflects semantic constraints and native English speakers find any deviation from it unnatural or awkward, even if the meaning remains understandable. Additional categories, such as number (*three, many*) and condition (*worn, full*) can also be inserted: number adjectives appear before all other adjectives, while condition adjectives are placed between shape and age. A slightly extended order, which includes a determiner (*a, the*) at the very beginning and a physical quality adjective (*warm, heavy*) between size and shape, has also been proposed. When two opinion adjectives occur together, they are usually separated by a comma or the conjunction “and”. Similarly, two color adjectives require “and” between them. While it is uncommon to use more than three adjectives before a noun in English, the order remains fixed regardless of how many categories are present [Al-Nuaymi and al-Dulaimi 2022, pp. 83-87].

Color adjectives form a distinct lexical-semantic group within the English adjective class. At a basic level, they denote visual properties related to hue, saturation and brightness. Berlin and Kay themselves acknowledged that restricting color terms to these dimensions is an etic process - an analytical abstraction rather than a culturally neutral description. In many languages, color lexemes may also convey additional information such as succulence, shape or surface texture [Berlin and Kay 1969, p. 32]. Nevertheless, this etic approach successfully revealed universal patterns in color vocabulary across languages.

Berlin and Kay demonstrated that languages acquire basic color terms in a predictable evolutionary sequence: 1.black, white, 2.red, 3.green, 4.yellow, 5.blue, 6.brown, 7.orange, purple, grey, pink. Languages with only two terms distinguish only black and white. Languages with three add red. Languages with four add green, etc. This progression persists until a maximum of 7 categories [Berlin and Kay 1969, pp. 2-4]. As Berlin and Kay state, “all languages share a universal system of basic colour categorization” and “the basic color-term inventories of most languages expand through time by lexicalizing these categories in a highly constrained, universal order” [Kay and McDaniel 1978, p. 610].

A basic color term must satisfy several criteria. It must be mono-lexemic status (a single word whose meaning cannot be guessed from its parts like *lemon-coloured*). It must not be a subset of another color (*crimson* is a subset of *red*). It must be psychologically salient for speakers and it must be applicable to a wide range of objects (unlike *blond* as it is for hair only). When the status of a color term was unclear, linguists applied additional criteria based on language structure to resolve the uncertainty. English has all eleven basic color terms: black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and grey [Berlin and Kay 1969, p. 5; Lindsey and Brown 2021, p. 609].

Anna Wierzbicka offers a complementary perspective on color semantics. She argues that “color concepts are anchored in certain ‘universals of human experience’, and that these universals can be identified, roughly speaking, as day and night, fire, the sun, vegetation, the sky, and the ground” [Wierzbicka 1990, p. 99]. In her later

work, “Why there are no ‘colour universals’ in language and thought”, she rejects the idea of universal color categories as proposed by Berlin and Kay, advocating instead for a natural semantic metalanguage approach to color terms [Wierzbicka 2008]. This debate reflects the ongoing scholarly discussion about the nature of color categorisation across languages.

Semantically, color adjectives are interesting because they can behave both as gradable and as non-gradable, depending on the context of use. Kennedy and McNally argue that “color adjectives are in fact ambiguous between gradable and nongradable interpretations” [Kennedy and McNally 2010, p. 1]. In their literal sense color adjectives are gradable, when describing the actual color of an object on a scale. For example, we can say *very red*, *quite blue* or *more green than yellow* because the speaker compares the object’s color to a contextually determined standard or to the degree of hue, saturation or brightness. In such uses, the adjective denotes a position on a scale without a fixed endpoint. However, color adjectives become non-gradable when they are used to assign an object to a categorical class. In this interpretation, the color term functions like an absolute adjective, referring to a maximal/minimal degree on a scale. A typical example is a *traffic light: the signal is either red or not red*. Thus, the same word *red* can be gradable in *a very red apple* but non-gradable in *the traffic light turned red*. This flexibility is a key linguistic feature that distinguishes color adjectives from many other semantic classes [Kennedy and McNally 2010].

Color adjectives in English can be divided into several structural types based on their morphological complexity. Simple color adjectives consist of a single root, all eleven basic color terms belong to this class. Derived color adjectives are formed by adding affixes to the base word. The suffix *-ish* can attach to basic color terms (*reddish*, *pinkish*) but is much less acceptable with hyponyms (*scarletish* is rare). Another suffix *-y*, combines with color terms (*pinky*, *yellowy*) but does not occur with *black* or *white* in modern English and like *-ish*, it is less productive with hyponyms [Dixon 1982, pp. 20-25]. Compound color adjectives are formed by combining two or more bases. Several compound patterns can be identified: noun + color adjective (*diamond-blue sky*); adjectives with the element colored (*cocoa-colored skin*); color

adjective + color adjective (*grey-blue eyes*); combinations where the second element is an adjective derived with -ed (*red-cheeked face*); word combinations with following words: *pale, dark, bright, light* (*light-purple dress*). Phrasal color words are multi-word expressions that convey a specific color, such as *blue as the ocean*. They often function as similes [Kemertelidze and Giorgadze 2023, pp. 3006-3007].

In English, color adjectives can appear in various syntactic positions. They are most commonly used attributively (before a noun): *brown chair, blue sky*. They are also frequent in a predicative position: *the chair is brown, the sky looks blue*. As with other adjectives, color adjectives appear in both positions freely, which makes them central members of the adjective class [Biber et al. 2021, pp. 508-516].

The basic color terms consistently rank highest in usage frequency across written and spoken English. The productivity of color adjectives is evident in the constant emergence of non-basic color terms. Many of these are borrowed from object names: *lime, lavender, lilac, coral, peach, olive, charcoal, rose, violet*. In contemporary English, new color names appear constantly, especially in digital and commercial contexts (*space grey*). While many of these terms are trademarked and may not become permanent additions to the basic color vocabulary, they demonstrate the ongoing creativity and productivity of color naming in English [Casson 1994].

1.3. Cultural and psychological symbolism of colors

Color is not simply a visual phenomenon. It is a complex system of meaning that operates on two distinct levels. The first level is psychological. This dimension is rooted in human biology and is largely universal across all populations. The second level is cultural. This level is shaped by upbringing, history, religion and traditions. Together, these two perspectives give us the background we need to understand how color words function in language and discourse. As James Fox observes, color possesses an extraordinary capacity to carry cultural significance [Fox 2022].

The psychological effects of color are grounded in human biology. Different wavelengths of light produce distinct physiological and emotional responses. In a foundational study, Valdez and Mehrabian used a model that measures pleasure,

arousal and dominance. Their results showed that long-wavelength colors such as *red* and *orange* produce higher arousal than short-wavelength colors such as *blue* and *green* and that brighter, more saturated colors evoke greater pleasure while darker, duller tones induce sadness or heaviness [Valdez and Mehrabian 1994, pp. 396-398].

This connection between color and affective state has also been examined through personality testing. The Lüscher Color Test, for example, assigns psychological meanings to colors based on preference: *dark-blue* means deep feeling, tranquility and tenderness; *blue-green* indicates strength of will, persistence and defensiveness; *orange-red* represents force of will, passion and aggressiveness; *bright yellow* signifies hope, spontaneity and originality [Lüscher 1969, pp. 25-26]. While the test's scientific validity has been debated, it remains a historically significant contribution to color psychology.

Beyond emotional arousal, color also affects cognitive processing. Mehta and Zhu studied the impact of red and blue on mental performance. They proved that color changes how we perform mental tasks. Red makes people more careful and better at tasks that require attention to detail. Blue makes people more relaxed and better at creative tasks that require new ideas [Mehta and Zhu 2009]. These findings are important for understanding how environmental color affects learning, productivity and decision-making in a wide range of contexts.

The major hues carry widely documented psychological associations, though individual responses may vary.

Red increases heart rate and blood pressure. It is associated with excitement, passion, energy, danger and urgency. *Blue* is psychologically calming. It is associated with tranquility, stability, devotion and sadness. *Green* is psychologically balancing. It is associated with nature, rest, growth and harmony. *Yellow* is associated with happiness, energy and mental stimulation. *Black* is psychologically heavy and authoritative. It is associated with power, mystery, evil, death and the unknown. It can also evoke feelings of sadness, emptiness, or finality. *White* is associated with purity, cleanliness and simplicity. *Purple* is associated with power, luxury, spirituality. *Violet*

is associated with nostalgia and memories. *Grey* is associated with neutrality, egoism, depression and apathy [Cirlot 2001; Elliot and Maier 2014].

These profiles are not fixed rules but general tendencies observed across populations. Nonetheless, they offer a dependable foundation for understanding color's impact on perception and emotion prior to cultural influence.

Physiological responses to color are automatic and occur within the individual brain. Communication about color, however, requires shared reference points. As Wierzbicka argues, color sensations are private, but to speak about them with others, humans must project them onto features of the common environment. These universal anchors include the rhythm of day, night, the sun, vegetation and the sky. *Red* is the color of blood and fire. *Blue* is the color of sky and water. *Green* is the color of leaves, grass and vegetation. *Yellow* is the color of sunlight. *Black* is the color of night and dark. *White* is the color of light, warm. These shared experiential referents form the bridge between private neural response and public cultural meaning, providing the foundation upon which diverse cultural color symbolisms are later built [Wierzbicka 1990].

The meaning assigned to color is a cultural construction. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, provides a useful vocabulary for understanding this distinction. In semiotic terms, the color functions as a signifier - the visible hue that carries meaning. The signified is the idea or value attached to that color. The relationship between signifier and signified is not natural or inevitable. It is arbitrary and established by social convention [Sahlins 1976]. *Red*, for example, is simply a wavelength of light. It does not inherently mean "stop," "love" or "danger." These meanings are created by human societies and transmitted through language, rituals, art and daily life.

The cultural relativity hypothesis in color studies holds that language and culture shape how people perceive and organize color. Research by Roberson, Davies and Davidoff gives strong evidence for this idea. Their study of the Himba, a semi-nomadic people in northern Namibia, found that speakers of this language, which has only five basic color terms and does not distinguish between *green* and

blue, and whose term for red covers a much broader range than English *red*, organize color space differently from English speakers. This difference remained even when groups with similar basic color words were compared. The study concluded that language and thinking are tightly connected when it comes to color [Roberson et al. 2005, p. 378]. This means that the color terms a language possesses and the cultural meanings attached to them, actively influence how speakers of that language perceive and think about color.

Cultures also differ in how much they rely on subtle color meanings. In Japan, communication depends a lot on shared background knowledge. Small differences in color shade carry a lot of meaning. For example, Japanese textile traditions have a very rich vocabulary for shades of indigo blue. However, in the United States, color meanings tend to be more straightforward and less dependent on subtle shades.

The meanings assigned to colors vary dramatically across cultures.

Red. In China, red is the color of happiness, luck and prosperity. It is used for festive decorations and given in the form of red envelopes during the Lunar New Year. In India, red is also associated with marriage, prosperity and fertility. Brides traditionally wear red dresses. In Western Europe and North America, red carries a more ambivalent set of meanings. It signifies romantic love and passion but also danger, prohibition and warning. For instance, stop signs, fire engines and warning labels are red.

White. In Western cultures, white symbolizes purity, innocence and new beginnings. The white wedding dress is a central tradition. White also signifies peace, as in the white dove or white flag of surrender. In much of East Asia, however, white is the primary color of death and mourning. White garments are worn at funerals and white is associated with the end of the life cycle and the spirit world.

Black. In Western societies, black is the color of death, mourning and solemnity. It is worn at funerals and during periods of grief. Although, black is also the color of elegance and formality. In ancient Egypt, black was the color of life and fertility.

Green. Green is strongly associated with nature and the environment across many cultures. In Islam, however, green holds a sacred status and represents fertility and paradise. In Western cultures, green symbolizes ecology and environmentalism, permission and progress, but also envy and jealousy.

Yellow. In China, yellow is the imperial color. The color signifies power, royalty and sacred authority. In Western Europe and North America, yellow is associated with optimism and joy. However, Latin America carries negative connotations such as cowardice, caution signs and illness.

Blue. Blue is widely associated with calm, trust and stability, but its cultural meanings extend further. Blue appears in sacred contexts worldwide: Egyptian gods and kings wore blue wigs and beards, the Hindu god Krishna is blue-skinned and in Christianity, blue robes adorn both the Virgin Mary and Jesus. It is associated with deep water, the feminine, truth and eternity, blue has enduringly symbolized divine immortality. In the Middle East, blue is used in mosques and amulets to protect against the evil eye. In Western cultures, blue signifies trust, authority and professionalism.

These variations demonstrate that no color has a fixed, universal meaning. Each society assigns meaning according to its own history, religion and social structure [Fox 2022; Saxena 2018; Pastoureau 2009; Yu 2014].

The two sides of color symbolism - the universal psychology and the specific culture - matter a lot for branding and design. Good visual communication has to consider both the universal effects of color on the mind and the specific meanings colors carry in a given culture. A basic design principle, the isolation effect, holds that a color which contrasts with its surroundings draws the eye first. Global brands often adjust their colors to fit different cultures. McDonald's uses red and yellow in the West to suggest fun and hunger, but has shifted toward green in parts of Europe to signal care for the environment and healthier food. The Coca-Cola and Pepsi rivalry offers another example. Coca-Cola is tied to red, which signals passion and tradition. Pepsi chose blue to stand apart, linking itself to trust and modernity. These examples

show that color meanings are not fixed. With thoughtful and consistent use, brands can reshape what colors signify [Mehta and Zhu 2009].

Conclusion to chapter 1

This chapter has provided the theoretical grounding for the study of color adjectives in mass media discourse. It brought together three areas of knowledge that are essential for the analysis that follows: the nature of media language, the linguistic behavior of color adjectives and the cultural and psychological meanings that colors carry.

The first part examined the nature of media language. Modern linguistics treats discourse not as a neutral reflection of facts but as a social practice that actively shapes reality. Media discourse constructs what is newsworthy, guides interpretation and builds a sense of closeness with the audience through informal tone and emotionally charged headlines. In digital environments, text works together with images and layout to produce meaning. These features are especially pronounced in US and UK journalism, where competitive pressures and the tradition of objective reporting coexist.

The second part focused on the linguistic properties of color adjectives. English possesses eleven basic color terms, but the vocabulary constantly expands through suffixation (*reddish*, *pinky*) and compounding (*diamond-blue*, *grey-green*, *cocoa-colored*). Color adjectives are semantically flexible: they can be gradable when describing intensity (*very green*) or non-gradable when assigning category (a *red* card). Syntactically, they appear freely before nouns, after linking verbs and occasionally after the noun itself. This combination of morphological productivity, semantic duality and syntactic mobility makes color adjectives versatile tools for writers.

The third part explored the cultural and psychological significance of color. At a physiological level, colors evoke automatic responses: *red* increases arousal and sharpens attention, while *blue* calms and encourages creative thinking. At a cultural level, however, meanings vary dramatically. *Red* signifies luck in China, danger in the

West and marriage in India. *White* represents purity in European weddings but mourning in East Asia. *Green* is sacred in Islam, tied to ecology in the West and associated with envy elsewhere. The relationship between a color and its meaning is not natural but socially constructed, as cross-cultural research on color perception has confirmed.

Together these three sections show a clear starting point. Media discourse is an arena where language is carefully chosen to shape how readers understand the world. Color adjectives bring to this arena a unique combination of linguistic flexibility, sensory power and cultural depth. They can describe, classify, evoke emotion and signal ideological positions, often simultaneously. The chapters that follow will put this theoretical framework to work. The following chapters will use this framework to examine how color adjectives operate in actual news, revealing their role in the daily construction of journalistic meaning.

II. SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF COLOR ADJECTIVES IN MASS MEDIA

2.1. The functional potential of color adjectives in media texts

Color adjectives rarely simply describe an object in a mass media text. This section explores the range of functions that color adjectives perform in a corpus of articles drawn from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *CNN*. In many cases a single color adjective performs several tasks at the same time. To capture this functional richness, five overlapping functions can be identified: denotative-descriptive, classifying-terminological, evaluative-axiological, symbolic-ideological and expressive-emotive. Each of these functions is discussed below with examples.

1. Denotative-descriptive function

The most straightforward function of a color adjective is to denote a perceivable chromatic property of an object. Here the word answers the simple question “what color is it?” and provides the reader with factual visual information. If the adjectives were removed, the text would lose concrete, often essential, details.

In hard news reporting, especially in stories about nature, science and events where visual accuracy matters, this function dominates the use of color terms. For example:

- “*white plumes of smoke*” - describing the plumes rising from Israeli airstrikes and artillery hitting the hinterland in Lebanon. The adjective *white* gives the reader an immediate visual image of the smoke, distinguishing it from darker smoke that might imply different materials burning [Goldbaum and Saad 2026].

- “*a bright yellow dress*” - worn by Savannah Guthrie on her return to the *Today* show, along with “*yellow flowers, yellow ties, yellow ribbons*”. The repetition of *yellow* serves to build a vivid, cheerful picture that is entirely denotative: the dress, flowers, ties and ribbons really were *yellow* [Poniewozik 2026].

- “*gray whales*” - in the headline “*More Gray Whales Are Visiting San Francisco Bay, and Many Die There*”. *Gray* identifies the species, functioning as a

factual descriptor that differentiates these whales from other cetaceans [Blumberg 2026].

- “*brown seaweed*” - referring to sargassum on South Florida beaches. The color specifies the type of seaweed and helps readers visualize the phenomenon [Perkel 2026].

- “*electric blue tarantula*” - the newly discovered species in Thailand. The compound *electric blue* is vivid but still denotative. It describes the actual *blue-violet* hue of the spider [Khalil 2023].

- “*bands of black, yellow and red - on a coral snake*”. This precise description is crucial for the article’s informational purpose, which is to teach readers how to identify snakes. The rhyme “*red touch yellow, kill a fellow*” relies entirely on accurate color denotation [Godwin 2026].

- “*green streaks of aurora*” - in a NASA picture of Earth showing aurora painting the atmosphere. The color is literal and scientifically verifiable [Wiseman 2026].

- “*Alaskan rivers are turning orange*” - describing a real environmental phenomenon where rivers change color due to chemical leaching. The denotation here is exact and the verb *turning* adds a temporal dimension [Kaur 2024].

- “*a split-colored lobster with one side a red-orange hue and the other dark brown*”. This description communicates the rarity and the visual fact of the creature [Khan 2026].

Beyond basic color terms, the corpus demonstrates a gradation of descriptive precision. Writers do not use *red* when *red-orange* or *reddish-purple* is more accurate. For instance, beetroot red is described as “*a reddish-purple liquid or powder*” [Rogers 2026]; a coral snake’s pattern requires distinguishing “*black, yellow and red*” in a specific order [Godwin 2026]; the Artem II Astronauts will wear “*International Orange*”, which is further glossed as “*a vivid reddish orange*” [Friedman 2026]. In the fashion and design articles, color descriptions are even more refined: “*a pale pink silk strapless gown*” [Robledo 2026], “*oceanic shades of teal, purple and silver*” [Moore 2026], “*murky blue with purple undertones*”

[O'Shea-Evans 2025], “*a deeper red with a slight purple or brownish tint*” [Ike 2024] for *burgundy*. These elaborations show that even within the denotative function, media texts can range from simple factual labeling to close to color-chart exactness, depending on the genre's demands.

2. Classifying-terminological function

A color adjective often operates not as a visual descriptor but as a marker of category membership. In this function, the color word forms part of a proper name, a technical designation, an institutional label or a recognized fixed term. The adjective cannot be replaced by a synonym without losing the referent's identity. It does not answer “what color is it?” but rather “which one is it?” or “what type is it?”

In political and governmental contexts, “*the White House*” appears repeatedly as the metonymic name of the U.S. presidency, not as the visual description of a building [Rizzo et al. 2026]. “*Black Friday*” names the shopping day after Thanksgiving. The adjective *black* has become a component of the event's title and carries no independent color meaning [Smith 2025]. Similarly, the “*Pink Moon*” denoted April's full moon. The article itself clarifies the terminological basis of the name: “*April's full moon is called the ‘Pink Moon’ not because of its color, which will in reality have more of a golden hue, but because of the pink flower*” [Gomez 2026]. “*Blue moon*” names a rare second full moon within a single calendar month, the word *blue* carries no chromatic meaning [Gomez 2026].

Scientific and technical nomenclature provides further examples. “*Red buckeye*” is the botanical name of a plant *Aesculus pavia*, *red* here classifies the species [Vaughn 2026]. “*International Orange*” is the official designation of a standardized color used for astronauts' launch and re-entry suits, defined by a federal standard rather than by casual perception [Friedman 2026]. The term “*green card*” denotes U.S. permanent residency, not a colored piece of paper that is literally green [O'Shea 2026]. “*Black-tie event*” signifies a formal dress code, not the color of anyone's neckwear [Rizzo et al. 2026].

Commercial and design fields generate their own terminological uses of color words. Paint manufacturers and design brands use color names as proprietary

identifiers, not as descriptive labels. The corpus includes *Gentleman's Gray* (a paint that is actually a deep blue) [Wallace-Wells 2019], *"Surfboard Yellow"* [Wallace-Wells 2019], *"Hague Blue"* [O'Shea-Evans 2025], *"Babouche"* [O'Shea-Evans 2025], *"Mizzle"* [Wallace-Wells 2019], *"Elephant's Breath"* [Wallace-Wells 2019] and *"Viva Magenta"* [Thompson 2021]. These are not descriptions but brand-specific identifiers.

What all these cases have in common is that the color adjective no longer serves a freely descriptive purpose. It has become a label whose main communicative job is to place the referent within an established category (political, commercial, botanical or astronomical) rather than to create a visual image in the reader's mind.

3. Evaluative-axiological function

Very often, color adjectives in media texts carry an evaluative weight. They do not merely say what color something is; they say whether that color and the thing itself are good or bad, desirable or repellent. This evaluation can be positive or negative and it is frequently intensified by modifiers.

On the positive side, the adjective *golden* consistently conveys high value, ideal conditions or prosperity. *Golden hour* [Hsu 2026] is the photographer's ideal time of day; a *golden future* [Hsu 2026] is a promise of success; *golden milk* [Koya 2025] is marketed as a healthy, cozy drink; *golden-yellow color* [Cooper 2026] in cheese comes from grass-fed cows and signals quality. The word *vibrant* combines with *red* in *"vibrant red gown"* [Moore 2026] to suggest energy, life and visual appeal. *"Radiant purple dye"* [Lescaze 2026] praises an ancient and sustainable craft. *"Rich, textured silver"* [Moore 2026] describes a sumptuous fabric. In wine writing, *"orange wines"* [McIntyre 2018] are presented as sophisticated and artisanal.

Negative evaluation is equally frequent. Descriptions of wildfire include *"lurid oranges and sickly grays"*, where the modifiers *lurid* and *sickly* channel disgust and alarm and guide the reader to see the fires not as a natural phenomenon but as a symptom of climate disaster [Von Drehle 2020]. *"Toxic black clouds"* over Tehran merges color with death and intensifies the sense of environmental catastrophe and warfare [Wallace-Wells 2026]. The phrase *"yellowing glass"* in an exposé about

factory farming describes a windshield smeared with liquefied feces [Millet 2025]. The color change from *clear* to *yellow* indicates dirt and neglect that repels the reader.

One of the most striking examples is the headline “*Australian Sky Turns an Apocalyptic Blood Red*” [Diaz 2026]. The compound *blood red* is heavily evaluative. It does not just describe the sky’s hue after a tropical cyclone, it evokes deep cultural associations of blood with injury, death and the end of the world, an interpretation emphasized by the word *apocalyptic*. Even without explicit modifiers, some color terms carry built-in evaluation through cultural convention. *Black* in “*black market*” means illegality; *white* as in “*white paper*” for official documents carries positive formality; *gray* applied to hair, for instance “*Should I Stop Dyeing My Gray Hair?*” [Friedman 2026], can evoke anxiety about aging, while the same color reframed as *silver* becomes positive. The evaluative function therefore demonstrates how media texts make use of the associative meanings of colors to influence how readers feel while maintaining a surface appearance of neutrality.

4. Symbolic-ideological function

Some of the most powerful work done by color adjectives in media discourse is symbolic and ideological. In this function, a color acts as a dense symbol for an entire political, social or cultural system. The color word does not describe a visual feature but instead triggers a set of shared beliefs, values and group identities. This function is essential to the economy of media language: complex ideological alignments are compressed into a single, instantly recognizable term.

One of the examples is the use of “*red carpet*” to symbolize the world of celebrity, prestige and high fashion. When a headline says “*If only the red carpet were cerulean!*” [France 2026], it does not describe a carpet’s color, it invokes the entire ritual of a film premiere or gala, with its associated glamour, press attention and social hierarchy. The color *red* here functions as a cultural symbol, not a visual descriptor. Likewise, the Christian Louboutin “*red-bottom heels*”, which do not simply refer to shoes with a red sole but symbolize luxury, wealth and fashion [Kirby 2026]. The red sole has become an ideological sign of status.

In political contexts outside the American *red/blue* divide, color symbolism remains potent. The corpus records the Vietnamese distinction between “*red music*” (state-sanctioned, revolutionary music) and “*yellow music*” (popular, Western-influenced songs) [Cave 2026]. In this case, *red* draws directly on the communist flag to symbolize political orthodoxy, while *yellow* - a color historically loaded with colonial and racial connotations - becomes a label for ideologically suspect culture. These adjectives do not describe musical sound, they mark ideological allegiance.

The symbolic use of color is also prominent in diplomatic and international imagery. When news reports note that Melania Trump and Queen Camilla “*matched in pink*” for a state dinner, the color *pink* is not a random fashion detail [Robledo 2026]. It symbolically communicates harmony, femininity and the intentional presentation of a united front. The color choice carries diplomatic weight.

In every case, the symbolic-ideological function operates pre-consciously. The moment a reader encounters “*red carpet*”, the brain activates the associated framework of celebrity and luxury. It makes color adjectives an exceptionally efficient tool for transmitting ideology or symbolism in mass media. Writers do not need to explain what they mean, they can rely on the color to do the work for them.

5. Expressive-emotive function

Color adjectives also serve to create atmosphere, evoke emotion and enrich the sensory texture of a text. This function is not about conveying information or marking categories but about making the reader feel something: tension, luxury, mystery, amazement or comfort.

In a concert review, the Bruce Springsteen performance is described with “*a bank of red lights augmenting the potency of the lyrics*” and the singer’s “*face shrouded in crimson lighting*” [Ruggieri 2026]. The *red* and *crimson* do not inform the reader of the lighting rig’s technical specifications, they express the drama, anger and political urgency of the song. Later, “*Steven Van Zandt, clad in hues of purple and black*”, is depicted dancing and the colors convey a mix of exuberance and rock-and-roll darkness.

Fashion and costume writing relies heavily on the emotive function. The description of costumes for the film *“Mother Mary”* includes *“one of the first shots in the film is a close-up of fabric — rich, textured silver that crinkles into peaks and valleys”* and *“a half-finished bodysuit in oceanic shades of teal, purple and silver”* [Moore 2026]. These color adjectives not just help the reader identify the garment but also they evoke a feeling of strange, lavish beauty mixed with creative tension. In an article about a Chinese artist’s installation, the canopy of *“red, pink, purple and orange garments”* stretched over a steel frame creates a strong sensory experience tied to saturation and remembrance [Adestina 2026].

Even in political or social writing, the emotive function can be present. For instance, the phrase *“apocalyptic blood red”* is also strongly emotive as it aims to make the reader feel fear [Diaz 2026].

In these instances, the color adjective works on the reader’s sensorium. Its primary job is not to be accurate but to be affecting.

Furthermore, it is clear that these five functions do not exist in isolation. On the contrary, the most effective media uses of color adjectives are those in which several functions come together. In a few syllables, they manage to convey description, evaluation and emotion. Such compactness is essential in a context where space and reader attention are limited.

2.2. The semantic function of color adjectives in mass media discourse

Semantic analysis is concerned with the relationship between a color term and the noun it modifies, specifically, what happens to the meaning of the noun when a color adjective is attached to it. It can keep its basic meaning or it can be pushed into a completely different area of meaning.

From the collected corpus of media texts, four principal types of semantic modification can be identified: literal meaning, metaphorical meaning, metonymic meaning and phraseological meaning. Each type is explained with examples below.

1. Literal meaning

The most basic semantic operation occurs when the color adjective adds a chromatic quality to the noun without altering the noun's fundamental conceptual content. In such cases, the noun continues to refer to the same category of object, person or phenomenon, the adjective simply narrows the reference by specifying a visual property and leaves the noun's core meaning unchanged.

One of the examples is the compound color term in the phrase “*a pale pink silk strapless gown*” [Robledo 2026]. The noun “*gown*” denotes a formal dress and the color adjectives “*pale pink*” specify its visual appearance. Nothing about the concept *gown* is altered, a gown can be any color and the adjectives simply select one chromatic variant. The same semantic relation appears in “*a navy blue tote bag*” [Perez 2026]. *Navy blue* names the actual color of a particular tote bag and it does not change the fundamental semantic operation. Similarly, “*a black work shirt and lived-in jeans*” - it is a literal description of stage clothes [Ruggieri 2026].

There are numerous literal color uses in product descriptions and inventories. A recall notice for youth ATVs lists the available colors: “*black, blue, silver, green, orange, pink, burgundy, spider black, spider blue, spider red, green camo, purple camo and pink camo*” [Del Rey 2026]. Here each color adjective picks out a specific color variant of the noun *ATVs* but the noun's meaning stays constant. In fashion and design contexts, highly specific color names operate the same way at the semantic level. A travel bag is offered in “*olive green and electric navy*” [Easto 2026]; a sweater comes in “*beige, Lichen green and mottled gray*” [Easto 2026]. The adjectives *olive*, *electric*, *Lichen* and *mottled* add nuance and marketing appeal but they do not metaphorically or metonymically transform the nouns bag and sweater.

Even highly specialised paint names can still work as literal color terms. Phrases like “*a dark gloss blue*”, “*a moody blue*”, “*a chalky powder blue*” and “*a muddy gray-blue*” do nothing more than name a particular shade for a wall or a room [O'Shea-Evans 2025]. The word *blue* keeps its basic color meaning and the extra words (*dark*, *chalky*, *muddy*, *gloss*) simply make the shade more precise. The noun modified in these cases is either the name of the paint or the surface it applies to and its core meaning is not altered.

In all these examples, the color adjective does not transform the concept expressed by the noun, it only adds a visual dimension to it. This is the function most people first think of when they consider color terms.

2. Metaphorical meaning

In many media texts, a color adjective does not describe a literal color at all. Instead, it moves the noun from the physical domain of color perception into an abstract conceptual domain. The color term carries a metaphorical meaning that transforms what the noun is about.

The most prominent example is the use of *green* to mean “environmentally friendly”. When a journalist writes “*green transition*” [Wallace-Wells 2026], “*green energy*” [Wallace-Wells 2026], “*green economy*” [Von Drehle 2020], “*Green New Deal*” [Johnson 2019] or “*green home*” [Bortz 2019], it does not suggest that these things are green in color. “*Green energy*” does not look green, it is energy produced from renewable, environmentally sustainable sources. “*Green transition*” does not refer to a journey across green fields, it means a shift toward a low-carbon economy. In all these cases the adjective rewrites the noun’s meaning by linking it to the concept of environmentalism.

Another example is “*blood red*.” In the headline “*Australian Sky Turns an Apocalyptic Blood Red*,” the color adjective does not merely name a shade of red [Diaz 2026]. It imposes the substance blood and its deep cultural associations with injury, violence and death directly onto the sky. The metaphor is *red* is blood and its effect is to transform a natural event into a sign of catastrophe.

A different metaphorical operation occurs in the phrase “*golden hour*” [Hsu 2026]. In photography and lifestyle journalism, this expression does not describe an hour that is literally *gold* in color. The adjective *golden* transfers the qualities of gold (preciousness, perfection, peak value) onto a time of day. The color adjective rewrites the noun “*hour*” from a neutral unit of time into a symbol of fleeting, optimal brilliance. The metaphor is *golden* is ideal and valuable.

In the medical context, “*gray zone*” refers to a state of uncertainty regarding an aneurysm - it is neither clearly safe nor clearly dangerous [Segarra 2026]. The

adjective *gray* metaphorically communicates a position between two clear points, just as *gray* is the color between *black* and *white*. The noun “*zone*” shifts from a spatial meaning to a conceptual state.

The expression “*white lie*” works through metaphor. The color white conventionally stands for purity and innocence. When it modifies “*lie*”, it transfers these meanings to an act of deception and produces a phrase that means a harmless or socially acceptable falsehood. This example shows precisely this semantic operation “*Even if such responses are socially acceptable as ‘white lies,’ I’m concerned they could be more harmful in the long run*” [Martin et al. 2025].

Metaphorical meaning is a powerful semantic tool because it allows media writers to borrow the association of a color and apply them to nouns that carry no literal color.

3. Metonymic meaning

A different way in which a color adjective can modify a noun is through metonymy. Here the color belongs to something closely associated with the noun, and the adjective comes to stand for that whole association.

The most culturally significant metonymic use involves the words “*black*” and “*white*” in reference to people. When news texts mention “*Every Black Republican Is Leaving the House*” [Karni 2026]; “*an angry white mob*” [Liptak 2026]; “*the black-white economic divide*” [Long and Van Dam 2020] or “*two Black Americas*” [Johnson 2025], the adjectives do not describe skin color in a literal, chromatic sense. They denote membership in socially constructed racial groups. The adjective moves from a physical attribute to a socio-political identity. The capitalisation of “*Black*” in many American publications strengthens the metonymic reading. It signals that the word is no longer an ordinary color term but a proper designation of a people.

A second major metonymical system is the political use of *red* and *blue*. In American media, “*red states*” are not states painted red, they are states where the Republican Party dominates. “*Blue states*” are states with mostly Democratic voters. There are numerous examples: “*Americans Have Fled to Red States. Blue States Can Win Them Back*” [Furman et al. 2026]; “*the red-state war against blue*

cities” [O’Shea 2026]; “*America has legislated itself into competing red, blue versions of education*” [Natanson et al. 2024]; “*there are reasons the government fails blue cities in red states again and again*” [O’Shea 2026]. In each case, the color adjectives shift the meaning of states and cities from geographical terms to political labels through metonymic reference. The term “*purple state*” is a logical extension of this metonymic code: a *purple* state is a politically mixed state, as if the colors *red* and *blue* were blended. For instance, “*Still, Missouri used to be a bellwether; a purple state*” [O’Shea 2026]. The color word creates a new political category that did not exist before.

Another clear example is the use of color to refer to professions through their uniforms. The phrase “*the blues*” in American English can mean the police, because many police uniforms are blue. For instance, “*my brothers and sisters in blue*” and “*a former woman in blue*” use the color of the clothing to refer to the officers who wear it [Demings 2020]. The adjective *blue* no longer describes a color, it names a group of people.

Other examples can be *blue-collar* and *white-collar*, which refer to types of work through the typical color of workers’ clothing. “*The city’s blue-collar work ethic*”, where *blue-collar* does not describe a literal shirt but metonymically stands for manual and industrial labour based on the durable blue work shirts historically worn by factory and trade workers [Gardner 2026]. The color of the garment represents the entire social class and its associated values of hard work and toughness. In the same way, an article lists professionals such as lawyers, accountants, bankers and consultants as “*white-collar workers*”, a term that evokes the white dress shirts of office environments [Von Drehle 2020]. Here white-collar metonymically designates professional and desk-based occupations. In both cases, the color adjective does not describe a visual feature of the workers but identifies a broad occupational category through the clothing conventionally associated with it.

The phrase “*scarlet A*” in “*No one would have demanded he paint a scarlet A on his Patriots pullover*” functions metonymically through a well-known literary reference [Armour 2026]. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*, the

letter “A” is a physical badge that stands for the word *Adultery* and, by extension, for the whole concept of sin and public condemnation. A part of the word, its initial letter, represents the entire moral judgment. Over time, “*scarlet A*” has acquired a culturally fixed meaning - “*a public mark of shame*”.

In metonymic meaning, the color adjective effectively replaces part of the noun’s meaning with a culturally established association. The color points away from itself toward something the audience is expected to recognise.

4. Phraseological meaning

The most extreme form of semantic modification occurs when the color adjective becomes part of a fixed idiomatic expression. In such cases, the meaning of the whole unit is not predictable from the meanings of its parts. The color word no longer makes an independent semantic contribution; rather, the whole phrase functions as a single lexical item with a conventionalised meaning.

There are several examples of this phenomenon. “*Red tape*” does not refer to adhesive tape of a red color, it means bureaucracy, excessive administrative procedure [Ashford 2026]. The origin of the phrase (red ribbons used to bind official documents in historical England) is no longer obvious to most speakers, and the color “red” is now entirely non-compositional.

“*Red-eye flights*” are overnight flights, so called because passengers often arrive with tired, red eyes [Sachs 2023]. Here a causal link still faintly motivates the phrase but “*red-eye*” functions as a fixed label for a type of flight, not a description of an actual eye.

The fixed expression “*silver lining*” appears in an opinion piece about the Iran war: “*a silver lining to the conflict*” [Wallace-Wells 2026]. The expression is not interpreted word by word: “*silver*” does not refer to the metal, and “*lining*” does not refer to an inner layer of fabric. Instead, the whole phrase conveys a single idiomatic meaning - a hopeful or positive aspect within an otherwise negative situation.

A further phraseological unit involving a color adjective is “*green thumb*”, for example in the sentence “*Don’t have a green thumb?*” [Bortz 2019]. Although the phrase contains the adjective green, it does not mean that someone’s thumb is literally

green, nor does it draw on the ecological or permissive senses of green. Instead, the whole unit “*green thumb*” is a fixed idiom that means “*a natural talent for gardening*.” The meaning cannot be derived by combining the color word with the body part, a non-native speaker who interpreted the phrase literally would misunderstand it.

In all these cases, trying to interpret the color adjective as a normal modifier would lead to misunderstanding. The semantic operation is not one of literal specification, metaphor or metonymy within the phrase itself. It functions as a single fixed expression whose meaning is stored in memory as a whole. Media texts rely heavily on such phraseological units because they carry cultural weight and allow complex ideas to be compressed into a familiar, ready-made form.

5. Polysemy

A further semantic feature of color adjectives in mass media is their polysemy: the fact that a single color adjective can carry multiple conventional meanings. The meaning that is activated in a given instance depends on the noun it modifies and the broader context. Sometimes, media texts deliberately use this polysemy and create layers of meaning.

The adjective *green* appears with distinct senses in the corpus. The literal color sense is found in “*green tea*” [Cave 2026] and “*green streaks of aurora*” [Wiseman 2026]. The environmental sense appears in “*green energy*” [Wallace-Wells 2026] and the permissive sense, drawn from the traffic light, is present in “*green-light harmful acts*” [Liptak 2026]. When an article uses “*green-light*” as a verb,, the reader understands because of the traffic-light meaning.

The adjective *black* is also highly polysemous in the corpus. The dark color sense appears in “*black sequined bodysuit*” [Moore 2026]. The racial identity sense is found in “*Black students*” [Liptak 2026]. The illegal or unofficial sense is present in “*black market*” [Jewett and Blum 2026] and the formal dress code sense appears in “*black-tie event*” [Rizzo et al. 2026]. In the right context, these senses can overlap. For instance, “*toxic black clouds*” refers to literal dark smoke from bombings but

toxic and *black* together also evoke the metaphorical sense of evil, danger and catastrophe.

The adjective *white* is similarly polysemous. The light color sense is found in “*white florals*” [Blumberg 2026]. The racial identity sense appears in “*white man*” [Liptak 2026] and “*White and Black Americans*” [Johnson 2025]. The purity, blankness or official status sense is present in “*white paper*” [Carreyrou and Freedman 2026] and “*billowy, balanced white*” [Ronald 2025].

Red has at least five senses in the corpus. The literal color sense appears in “*red meat*” [Pasricha 2025] and “*red and black pepper*” [Pasricha 2025]. The political affiliation sense is found in “*red states*” [Furman et al. 2026]. The revolutionary or ideological sense appears in “*red music*” [Cave 2026] and the warning or high alert sense is present in “*red flag*” [Wright 2026] and “*code red for humanity*” [Dennis 2021].

Blue is also very polysemous, with five senses found in the corpus. The literal color sense appears in “*bright blue planet*” [Wiseman 2026]. The political affiliation sense is found in “*blue cities*” [O’Shea 2026]. The police or law enforcement sense appears in “*my brothers and sisters in blue*” [Demings 2020] and the working-class occupation sense is present in “*blue-collar work ethic*” [Gardner 2026]. The water or ocean well-being sense appears in “*blue health*” [Hrustic 2025] and “*Blue New Deal*” [Johnson 2019].

The polysemy of color adjectives means that media writers have a rich palette of meanings to draw from. The same adjective can do different semantic work depending on the noun it is paired with. This flexibility is part of what makes color terms so pervasive and effective in media discourse: they are semantically compact, yet capable of carrying multiple layers of meaning that can be activated or muted as the context requires.

2.3. Pragmatic interpretation of color adjectives within media communication

Pragmatic interpretation asks not what a color adjective means in isolation but what a communicator achieves by using it in a particular context. The same color term can shift its force entirely depending on who is speaking, to whom, with what intention and with what anticipated effect on the reader. The sentences below are analysed to show exactly how the meaning of each color adjective is shaped by its surroundings and how it serves to influence the audience.

The *New York Times* headline “*Australian Sky Turns an Apocalyptic Blood Red*” chooses the compound “*blood red*” over a neutral “*deep red*.” The component *blood* imports associations of injury and death and in pair with *apocalyptic*, it frames a meteorological event as a scene of cosmic disaster. The journalist’s intention is not merely to describe a sky but to provoke awe and alarm. The color adjective here functions as an emotional intensifier, ensuring the article grabs the reader’s attention before any facts are given [Diaz 2026].

In a feature on a film costume, *The New York Times* notes that one of the first shots of the film is “*a close-up of fabric — rich, textured silver that crinkles into peaks and valleys*.” The shade *silver* could have been described simply as “grey” or “metallic” but *silver* carries associations of value and luxury. The modifier “*rich*” makes the *silver* feel more luxurious. The color adjective places us directly inside the film’s visual world, building a feeling of richness before a single character is introduced [Moore 2026].

A wedding report in *The New York Times* mentions that a bride held “*a flower ‘purse,’ embellished with faux burgundy calla lilies ... along with burgundy and green amaranthus*.” The shade *burgundy* (a deep, wine-like red) evokes warmth, sophistication and autumnal richness appropriate to a winter wedding. The writer uses it to frame the bouquet as tasteful and personal and guide the reader’s perception toward the bride’s refined aesthetic. The green *amaranthus* complements it, so the palette does not feel heavy [Blumberg 2026].

A news report from Lebanon in *The New York Times* notes: “*the highway leading into the city is decorated with yellow and green Hezbollah flags.*” The specific naming of *yellow* and *green* flags does more than describe, it conveys thorough territorial marking by a militant group. The colors serve as evidence of control and paint a visual picture of occupation without needing the journalist to say so directly [Goldbaum and Saad 2026].

A *New York Times* headline reads: “*Should I Stop Dyeing My Gray Hair? Besides, gray and silver and white are very elegant colors.*” The writer reframes *gray*, *silver* and *white* (all signs of aging) as *elegant*, fighting the idea that gray hair is something to hide. The color adjectives become tools of persuasion and encourage the reader to adopt a positive stance toward their own appearance [Friedman 2026].

A feature on spaceflight suits announces: “*Why the Artemis II Astronauts Will Be Wearing Orange. It’s not just any orange. It’s International Orange.*” The article explains that orange was chosen because “*it is perceived as the color of urgency, demanding to be seen.*” Previous suits had been *white* but *orange* was adopted for its visibility in rescue scenarios. The color is framed not as an aesthetic preference but as a life-saving technology. The writer’s pragmatic purpose is to persuade the reader that this orange represents institutional rationality and care, not whimsy [Friedman 2026].

A travel headline invites: “*The California City With Tiny Oranges and Pink Sunsets.*” The fruit *oranges*, with its strong color associations and the color adjective *pink* do not inform, they tempt. They promise sensory pleasure and frame the destination as a peaceful countryside retreat. The headline’s pragmatic function is to build a bond with the reader: it opens a channel of desire and curiosity by painting a warm, vivid mental snapshot that readers will want to enter [Riley-Adams 2026].

In a cheese guide, *The New York Times* instructs: “*‘A burnt orange color is aged Gouda’s giveaway’ ... an orange-tinted exterior and a creamy, pale yellow interior.*” The colors “*burnt orange*”, “*orange-tinted*” and “*pale yellow*” serve both identification and appetite. “*Burnt orange*” suggests caramelisation and depth, “*pale yellow*” implies creaminess. The writer uses color to bridge sight and taste and to influence the reader’s sensory expectations and stimulate appetite [Cooper 2026].

The Washington Post describes the political geography of St. Louis: “*The red-state war against blue cities ... residents live ... in the shadow of their century-old red brick home with a tarped-up roof.*” The political *red* and *blue* frame the bigger conflict but the “*red brick home*” introduces a literal, domestic red. This repetition ties the abstract politics to a real, damaged house, shifting the reader’s focus from political fighting to the real material consequences for families [O’Shea 2026].

An education analysis in *The Washington Post* states: “*America has legislated itself into competing red, blue versions of education.*” The colors again carry political meaning. By attaching them to “*versions of education*”, the writer suggests that even the school curriculum has split along party lines. The pragmatic force is alarm: the colors make the divide absolute, as if children now inhabit two separate educational worlds [Natanson et al. 2024].

In a dietary health article, *the Washington Post* asks: “*Does red meat cause cancer?*” The fixed term “*red meat*” carries a hidden danger association from the color *red* itself. While the term is standard nutritional language, its placement in a headline about cancer may subtly increase reader anxiety. The later mention of “*red and black pepper*” returns to literal description but the reader’s associative sense of red as warning has already been triggered [Pasricha 2025].

A news brief reports: “*Iran’s exiled crown prince Reza Pahlavi splattered with red liquid in Berlin.*” The “*red liquid*” is not named as blood, but any reader will understand that the substance is meant to symbolise blood or violence. The color adjective suggests aggression, while the journalist avoids making any direct claim. *Red*, in this context, stands for harm without stating it [Schreiber and Ciobanu 2026].

A book review in *The Washington Post* contrasts nostalgic and industrialised farming imagery: “*barns are rust-red and picturesque ... their windshield wipers scrape gobbets of waste off the yellowing glass; they watch brown, liquefied feces being sprinkled ... over croplands.*” The shift from warm “*rust-red*”: to “*sickly yellowing*” and visceral brown follows the reader’s emotional journey from farm nostalgia to disgust. The color adjectives are the vehicle for the writer’s negative

view on factory farming, moving the reader from comfort to loathing through nothing more than graduated color imagery [Millet 2025].

A climate podcast title from *The Washington Post* declares: “‘*A code red for humanity.*’” The phrase borrows the emergency coding system, where red signals maximum alert and frames climate change as an immediate crisis. The color adjective performs an act of warning. It cuts through deliberative language to demand a visceral, urgent response [Dennis 2021].

In a sports commentary, *USA Today* writes playfully: “*No one would have demanded he paint a scarlet A on his Patriots pullover.*” The “scarlet A” refers to Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, where a red letter marks public shame. The color *scarlet* is essential to the allusion. The writer uses it to frame the suggested punishment as archaic, moralistic and extreme. The color term performs an entire cultural argument by invoking a shared literary reference [Armour 2026].

An economic opinion piece in *The Washington Post* notes: “*the earnings gap between White and Black Americans.*” The capitalised racial color terms are used to frame a persistent structural inequality. They are not descriptions but social categories. The writer’s pragmatic intention is to signal that the subject is systemic racial unevenness and the colors help the reader immediately recognise the moral and political weight of the topic [Johnson 2025].

A wildlife story from *USA Today* reports: “*A ‘one in a million’ yellow cardinal is dazzling the Internet with its sunshiny feathers ... not the usual deep red of males but dazzlingly yellow.*” The expected “deep red” is replaced by “dazzlingly yellow”, which the article frames as miraculous. *Yellow* is not just a color here, it becomes a sign of rarity and wonder, designed to make the reader share the birdwatcher’s awe [Brulliard 2018].

A consumer feature in *The Washington Post* examines paint naming: “*Surfboard Yellow, Gentleman’s Gray, Mizzle: How do paint companies name their hues?*” The writer quotes a spokesperson saying they “*look for names that evoke positive associations, experiences, and are inspiring.*” “*Surfboard Yellow*” does not describe a color as much as it sells a California lifestyle; “*Gentleman’s Gray*”

suggests masculine elegance; “*Mizzle*” evokes an English drizzle. The pragmatic function of these color names is commercial: they transform a pigment into an identity the consumer wishes to inhabit [Wallace-Wells 2019].

CNN announces a vehicular innovation: “*Mercedes adds a new car light color: Blue for self-driving ... turquoise blue lights that indicate when a Mercedes car is driving itself.*” The specific shade *turquoise blue* was selected for visibility and distinctiveness. The color adjective functions pragmatically as a safety signal but its novelty also makes it a branding tool. The reader is invited to see the color as both innovation and corporate identity marker [Valdes-Dapena 2023].

A cultural trend article from CNN declares: “*A specific shade of retina-singeing chartreuse has become the defining color of summer 2024 ... the cultural influence of ‘Brat’ green knows no bounds.*” The color *chartreuse*, intensified by “*retina-singeing*”, is positioned as a social phenomenon. The writer frames it as an identity badge, something people wear to signal cultural allegiance. The article both reports on and amplifies the trend, inviting the reader to recognise the color’s social power and perhaps adopt it [Dolan 2024].

A nature discovery article on CNN quotes a researcher: “‘*a new species of tarantula that exhibits a mesmerizing blue-violet hue, reminiscent of electric blue sparks.*’” The compound “*electric blue*” suggests unnatural brilliance, even though it describes a living creature. The researcher’s word “*mesmerizing*” signals wonder and the article transmits that wonder to the reader. The color term is chosen to grab the public’s attention and turn a scientific label into something exciting to see [Khalil 2023].

The New York Times reports on an Indigenous tradition: “*Men like Mr. Avendaño have been sustainably ‘milking’ them for radiant purple dye for at least 1,500 years.*” The adjective “*radiant*” before *purple* imparts a glowing, almost spiritual quality. Purple, historically a color of royalty and rarity, elevates the craft. The writer intends to foster respect for the tradition and the color term guides the reader’s response toward admiration of both the beauty and the cultural continuity [Lescaze 2026].

In a marine biology article, *The New York Times* describes: “*the scientists saw the golden object on a rock, glistening alongside white sea sponges.*” The adjective *golden* suggests rarity, mystery and treasure rather than just pigmentation. The contrast with the ordinary *white* sponges makes the gold more dramatic. The color word does more than describe, it turns routine science into a moment of wonder and pulls the reader from simple facts into genuine amazement [Yoon 2026].

Reporting on anchor Savannah Guthrie’s return to television, *The New York Times* writes: “*Guthrie wore a bright yellow dress and a yellow heart necklace ... There were yellow flowers, yellow ties, yellow ribbons on her co-hosts and the fans gathered outside the Manhattan studio.*” The repetition of *yellow* transforms a color into a coordinated ritual of solidarity. The modifier “*bright*” signals optimism. The journalist frames the entire scene through this color, so that the reader understands the emotional unity of the moment without being told directly. *Yellow* becomes shorthand for shared hope [Johnson 2019].

In an article on Supreme Court decisions, *The New York Times* quotes a critic: “*we consistently green-light harmful acts that do real damage.*” To *green-light* is to give permission, an idiom that came from the green traffic signal. The speaker uses it to characterise judicial passivity as active endorsement of harm. The colour term, embedded in the verb, frames the court’s inaction as complicity, folding the accusation into a common, everyday metaphor [Liptak 2026].

A migration story in *The New York Times* notes: “*Milad pulled out his maroon-colored Iranian passport, saying that, in the past, when he showed it at border crossings, he was treated with disrespect.*” A passport is normally identified by nationality, not color. By specifying “*maroon-colored*”, the journalist draws attention to the object’s physical appearance and its role as an immediate visual trigger for discrimination. The color adjective personalises the political and makes the reader picture the document and empathise with its bearer. *Maroon* becomes a marker of unfair judgment [Torbaty 2026].

Finally, a home design piece from *CNN* proposes: “*Colorful Christmas table setting ideas that go beyond red + green. This blue + pink table setting is a merry*

match ...” By suggesting “*blue and pink*” as alternatives to traditional “*red and green*”, the writer grants the reader permission to break convention while retaining festivity. The color adjectives serve as a visual proposal, encouraging the reader to reimagine their own holiday rituals. The pragmatic function is to guide consumer choice, dressed up as inspiration [Smith 2023].

To choose a color adjective in mass media is never a neutral act. As the examples show, the same color term can alarm, persuade, identify or entice depending entirely on the context, the speaker's purpose and the intended effect on the reader.

Conclusion to chapter 2

This chapter has explored how color adjectives operate within contemporary US media texts, drawing on a corpus of articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *CNN*. The analysis showed that color terms have a range of functions and that their semantic and pragmatic behavior is central to how they shape audience perception.

The functional examination showed that even when a color word appears to be purely factual, it rarely operates in isolation from other communicative purposes. A “*yellow dress*” may primarily denote a hue, however in pair with “*bright*” *yellow* already nudges the reader toward cheerfulness. In political coverage, the same adjectives perform different work: “*red*” and “*blue*” do not describe color at all but metonymically stand for Republican and Democratic parties, allowing journalists to invoke an entire political landscape in a single word. Classifying-terminological uses such as “*White House*,” “*green card*” or “*Black Friday*” demonstrate that color words frequently function as fixed labels. Meanwhile, evaluative function is used by journalists to guide emotional response and implicit judgment. Symbolic-ideological uses complex value systems into immediate, recognizable signals.

Semantically, the chapter identified four principal ways in which color adjectives modify the nouns they accompany. Literal modification leaves the noun’s core meaning intact while adding visual specificity. Metaphorical uses, such as

“green energy” or *“gray zone,”* transfer the associations of a color onto an abstract domain, effectively rewriting what the noun is about. Metonymic shifts make a color stand for a whole social category, while phraseological units like *“red tape”* and *“silver lining”* function as fixed idioms where the color has no independent meaning.

Pragmatically, the analysis demonstrated that the same color adjective can persuade, unite or repel, according to the writer’s intentions and the surrounding text. A headline that frames a cyclone’s sky as *“blood red”* turns a natural event into a spectacle of fear; a feature that describes a bride’s *“burgundy”* bouquet constructs an atmosphere of refined taste; a political report that repeatedly contrasts *“red states”* and *“blue states”* entrenches a sense of division without overt commentary. In each case, the color word does not stand alone, it works together with modifiers, genre expectations and cultural knowledge to produce a particular effect on the reader.

Color adjectives are multifunctional linguistic tools that operate simultaneously on descriptive, cognitive and affective levels. They categorize, evaluate, symbolize and evoke emotion, often within a single occurrence. This interplay of semantic flexibility and pragmatic force gives color terms a distinctive capacity to shape audience perception while preserving the surface appearance of straightforward reporting.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how color adjectives work in contemporary US media discourse, using articles from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *CNN* as its material. Color terms do much more than describe what things look like. They carry grammatical flexibility, sensory power and a wide range of cultural meanings, all of which make them effective tools for journalists.

The first part of the study established the theoretical foundation across three areas. The discussion of mass media discourse showed that media language is not a neutral channel for facts. It actively constructs a version of reality by selecting what counts as newsworthy and framing it in particular ways. Scholars such as Fairclough, van Dijk and Luhmann have demonstrated that media texts are shaped by institutional routines and commercial pressures and that they perform multiple social functions at once: informing, interpreting, building consensus, entertaining and mobilizing. In the American context, these dynamics are especially visible. Journalists build a relationship with readers through informal, conversational tone and inclusive language that creates a feeling of closeness. Headlines are crafted as persuasive tools and use emotionally powerful words, wordplay and condensed grammar to catch attention and frame the story before a single paragraph is read. Digital platforms add another layer, where text combines with images, color, layout and sound to produce meaning. These characteristics mean that American media discourse is a carefully engineered form of communication, not a transparent window onto the world.

The linguistic profile of color adjectives was then explored. English has eleven basic color terms (black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and grey) identified by Berlin and Kay as the core of the system. However, the vocabulary of color is constantly expanding. Suffixes like *-ish* and *-y* produce forms such as *reddish* and *pinky*. Compounding is highly productive: patterns include noun plus color adjective (*diamond-blue*), color plus color (*grey-green*) and participial constructions (*cocoa-colored*). Phrasal expressions like *blue as the ocean* add further range. Semantically, color adjectives show a distinctive flexibility. They can be gradable when describing the intensity of a hue, as in *very blue* or *quite green*. They

can also be non-gradable when they assign something to a fixed category, as in a *red card* in sports, where the color does not name a shade but a penalty type. This dual behavior sets them apart from many other adjective classes. Syntactically, they move freely between attributive, predicative and postpositive positions. These formal properties make color adjectives unusually flexible tools for writers.

The cultural and psychological dimension of color was the third area of theoretical investigation. On the biological level, color stimuli produce automatic responses. Research has shown that long-wavelength colors like *red* increase arousal and sharpen attention to detail, while short-wavelength colors like *blue* calm the nervous system and encourage creative thinking. These physiological effects are largely shared across human populations. On the cultural level, however, meanings vary dramatically. *Red* signifies luck and celebration in China, danger and passion in the West, marriage and fertility in India. *White* stands for purity and new beginnings in European and American traditions, but for death and mourning in East Asia. *Green* is sacred in Islam, tied to environmentalism in the West and can signal envy elsewhere. Semiotic theory clarifies why this is so: the relationship between a color and its meaning is not natural but socially constructed. A hue is a signifier and what it signifies is learned through language, religion, history and daily practice. When a journalist uses a color adjective, the word can trigger both an immediate sensory reaction and a whole set of deep cultural associations at once.

The analysis of real media texts demonstrated a multifaceted usage. Color adjectives were found to perform several kinds of work at the same time. A single word can fix a visual detail, mark something as belonging to a known category, express a positive or negative judgment, stand for a larger idea or value system and evoke emotions. The word *red* in one article might describe a dress, in another it might signal political allegiance, in a third it might warn of danger and sometimes it does several of these things at once. This functional layering is not a rare phenomenon, it is the norm in effective journalism.

The study also showed how color adjectives shift meaning depending on the kind of noun they accompany. They can add straightforward visual information

without altering the noun's basic sense. They can work metaphorically, transferring a color's associations onto something abstract, so that a *green policy* is not literally green but environmentally oriented. They can work metonymically, where a color stands for an entire group or institution, as when *the White House* means the presidency or *blue* refers to the police. And they can be part of fixed idiomatic expressions like *red tape*, where the color contributes no independent meaning. The same color adjective often carries several accepted meanings and journalists exploit this polysemy to pack multiple layers into a short space.

Above all, the study demonstrated that choosing one color adjective over another is never a neutral decision. The same color term can frighten, reassure, invite or divide, all depending on the context, the surrounding words, and what the audience already knows. A sky described as *blood red* creates alarm. *Gray* hair reframed as *silver* is elegant. A *burgundy* bouquet feels refined. Repeated contrasts between *red states* and *blue states* deepen a sense of political division. In each case, the color word works below the surface, shaping how the reader feels before any direct argument is made.

This research has shown that color adjectives in US media are far more than decorative vocabulary. They are compact, multifunctional tools that enable journalists to describe the world, mark categories, express judgments, evoke feelings and signal ideological positions. Their semantic flexibility, their rich cultural associations and their ability to operate on both sensory and intellectual levels make them a subtle but powerful part of how news language shapes public perception. A clearer understanding of how these color adjectives operate sheds light on the broader strategies through which media discourse influences the way audiences see events, people and ideas, all while maintaining the surface of straightforward reporting.

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SUMMARY

Кваліфікаційна робота бакалавра присвячена дослідженню функціональних, семантичних та прагматичних властивостей прикметників кольору у сучасному американському мас-медійному дискурсі. Основною метою дослідження є виявлення ролі цих мовних одиниць у формуванні сприйняття аудиторії та передаванні оціночних й ідеологічних смислів у текстах новин. У роботі також поставлено за мету проаналізувати культурну та психологічну символіку кольорів, а також з'ясувати, як прикметники кольору сприяють формуванню медійної реальності.

Перший розділ присвячений теоретичним основам дослідження. У ньому розглянуто підходи до вивчення дискурсу, зокрема мас-медійного, що не просто відображає дійсність, а активно її формує (М. Фуко, Н. Феркляф, Т. ван Дейк, Р. Водак). Цей розділ також розглядає мовні особливості прикметників у сучасній англійській мові, зокрема прикметників кольору як лексико-семантичної групи: їхню структурну, здатність виражати ступені порівняння та синтаксичні позиції. Окрему увагу приділено універсальній теорії базових кольорових термінів Б. Берліна та П. Кея, а також семантичним підходам А. Вежбицької. Крім того, у розділі окреслено психологічні ефекти кольорів (емоційне збудження, когнітивний вплив) та проаналізовано культурну символіку основних кольорів у різних суспільствах, що дозволяє зрозуміти, яким чином прикметники кольору набувають оціночних та ідеологічних значень.

У другому розділі на основі корпусу прикметників кольору, відібраних зі статей з *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* та *CN*, було виокремлено п'ять взаємопов'язаних функцій у медіатекстах: денотативно-описову, класифікаційно-термінологічну, оціночно-аксіологічну, символічно-ідеологічну та експресивно-емотивну. Семантичний аналіз засвідчив, що прикметники кольору здатні реалізувати пряме, метафоричне, метонімічне та фразеологічне значення, причому полісемія відіграє ключову роль у створенні багатозначної інтерпретації в стислому медійному форматі. Прагматичний аналіз продемонстрував, що вибір прикметника кольору ніколи

не є нейтральним: залежно від комунікативної ситуації той самий колір може викликати тривогу, переконувати, об'єднувати, роз'єднувати, легітимізувати, викликати емпатію, ностальгію або ж надавати іронічного забарвлення. Результати дослідження підтверджують, що прикметники кольору функціонують як багатошаровий засіб, що дозволяє журналістам поєднувати опис реальності з вираженням оцінки, емоції та позиції, і все це в межах зовнішньо нейтрального викладу.

Матеріалом дослідження слугували прикметники кольору з більш ніж 100 статей провідних американських новинних платформ. Дослідження виконано із залученням описового, семантичного та контекстуального методів.

Робота складається зі вступу, двох розділів із висновками до кожного, загальних висновків, списку використаної літератури (43 теоретичні джерела), а також ілюстративних джерел (73 позиції) та анотації. Загальний обсяг роботи становить 62 сторінки.

Отримані результати підтверджують глибокий взаємозв'язок між мовою, культурою та медійним впливом, роблячи внесок у розвиток семантики, дискурс-аналізу та міжкультурної комунікації. Подальші дослідження можуть бути спрямовані на порівняльний аналіз вживання прикметників кольору у медіадискурсах різних країн та на те, як під впливом цифрових платформ оновлюється лексика кольорів.