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Phraseological Units with Color Components in the French Language: A Semantic and Cultural Analysis

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Abstract:

This article explores the linguistic, semantic, and cultural significance of color-based phraseological units (PUs) in the French language. Colors in French PUs serve as powerful linguistic tools, symbolizing emotions, societal norms, and historical narratives. Through a detailed analysis of common colors such as blue, red, black, and green, this study reveals how these elements function syntactically and convey complex cultural meanings. The challenges of translating French color PUs into other languages are examined, highlighting the difficulties in preserving symbolic meaning and cultural context. This article aims to deepen the understanding of color symbolism in French phraseology and its role in shaping linguistic expression.

Introduction

Phraseological units (PUs) represent a fundamental aspect of linguistic expression, encapsulating idiomatic meaning that often transcends the literal interpretations of individual words. In the French language, PUs are particularly significant due to their ability to convey cultural knowledge, emotions, and historical experiences in a concise manner (Chen, 2022). Among the various elements that contribute to the richness of French phraseology, color terms play a crucial role. These color components not only add vividness to expressions but also embody cultural and symbolic meanings (Rodríguez, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to examine the linguistic, semantic, and cultural significance of color components in French phraseological units. Through a detailed analysis of their usage, this study aims to shed light on how colors are integrated into French idiomatic expressions and what they reveal about the French-speaking world. By exploring both their literal and figurative

meanings, we will uncover the broader cultural connotations associated with color in French phraseology.

Theoretical Framework

Phraseological units (PUs), which include idioms, collocations, and proverbs, are a crucial part of linguistic study due to their unique ability to express fixed meanings that often differ from the literal meanings of the words involved. They function as a reflection of a language's history, culture, and social realities, often encapsulating collective experiences within compact expressions (Liotta, 2023). Understanding PUs provides insight into both the linguistic structure and the cultural framework of a language, making them an essential area of study in linguistics.

In the context of phraseological units containing color components, the cognitive linguistics approach offers a compelling framework for analysis. This approach posits that language reflects the way humans perceive and conceptualize the world. Colors, as part of this perception, are deeply embedded in cultural contexts and often carry meanings that go beyond their physical descriptions. For example, colors in French PUs are frequently tied to emotional or symbolic representations, such as *voir rouge* (to see red, meaning to become very angry) or *être vert de rage* (to be green with rage, also signifying extreme anger). By analyzing PUs through the lens of cognitive linguistics, we can explore how color terms in French embody these cultural meanings and influence the way speakers conceptualize and communicate emotions (Rodríguez, 2017).

3. Classification of Color Components in French Phraseological Units

In French, colors play a vital role in phraseological units (PUs), adding layers of meaning that range from literal descriptions to metaphorical representations. Understanding how colors are used in these expressions helps reveal their linguistic and cultural significance. French PUs frequently employ a variety of colors, each carrying distinct connotations depending on the context.

Commonly Used Colors in French Phraseological Units

1. Blue (bleu)

Avoir une peur bleue: This phrase means "to be very scared." The term "peur bleue" metaphorically intensifies the feeling of fear, with blue symbolizing the coldness or paleness that comes with terror.

Être bleu de quelqu'un: This means "to be madly in love with someone." In this case, the color blue reflects romantic idealism and passion.

Se mettre au bleu: This PU means "to take a break from work or hide from responsibilities." The color blue here may be associated with the calm and peacefulness of the sky, symbolizing relaxation or retreat.

2. Red (rouge)

Voir rouge: This expression translates to "to see red," which means to become extremely angry. It reflects the physical and emotional reaction of anger, often associated with increased blood flow and heightened emotions.

Être dans le rouge: This phrase is often used in financial contexts, meaning "to be in debt" or "to have a negative balance." The color red is symbolic of danger or warning, particularly in the context of finances.

Passer au rouge: Literally translating to "to go through the red light," this PU means to cross a boundary or act against regulations, again reflecting red's association with caution or prohibition.

Table 1: Common Color-Based Phraseological Units in French with Literal and Figurative Meanings

Color	Phraseological Unit (PU)	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning	Cultural Significance
Blue (bleu)	Avoir une peur bleue	To have a blue fear	To be extremely scared	Blue associated with cold, fear, and extreme emotional states
	Être bleu de quelqu'un	To be blue of someone	To be madly in love	Blue represents romantic idealism
	Se mettre au bleu	To put oneself in the blue	To hide or take a break	Blue associated with calm and retreat
Red (rouge)	Voir rouge	To see red	To become extremely angry	Red symbolizes strong emotions like anger or passion
	Être dans le rouge	To be in the red	To be in financial trouble	Red linked with danger or warning in financial contexts
	Passer au rouge	To pass into the red	To break rules or cross boundaries	Red used as a sign of prohibition
Black (noir)	Avoir des idées noires	To have black ideas	To be depressed or pessimistic	Black symbolizes negativity and despair
	Travailler au noir	To work in the black	To work illegally	Black represents secrecy or hidden activities
	Voir tout en noir	To see everything in black	To be overly pessimistic	Black linked with hopelessness and negative outlooks
Green (vert)	Être vert de jalousie	To be green with jealousy	To be extremely envious	Green associated with envy or jealousy
	Avoir la main verte	To have a green hand	To be skilled in gardening	Green symbolizes nature and growth
	Donner le feu vert	To give the green light	To give permission	Green linked with progress and permission (e.g., traffic lights)
Yellow (jaune)	Rire jaune	To laugh yellow	To give a forced, awkward laugh	Yellow associated with discomfort or unease
White (blanc)	Blanc comme neige	White as snow	To be innocent or pure	White represents purity and innocence

3. Black (noir)

Avoir des idées noires: This phrase means "to have dark thoughts" or "to be depressed." Black is associated with negativity, despair, or deep sadness.

Travailler au noir: This common French phrase refers to "working illegally" or "working under the table." The color black here symbolizes secrecy or something hidden from public view.

Voir tout en noir: Meaning "to see everything pessimistically," this PU demonstrates black as a metaphor for hopelessness or negativity.

4. Green (vert)

Être vert de jalousie: This phrase translates to "being green with envy." Green symbolizes envy or jealousy, likely influenced by its connotation with illness (a "sickly green").

Avoir la main verte: This expression means "to have a green thumb," indicating skill in gardening or plant care. Green, the color of nature, represents growth and vitality.

Donner le feu vert: This PU means "to give the green light," indicating permission or approval to proceed. Green here is symbolic of progress or permission, as seen in traffic signals.

Syntactic Structures of Color in Phraseological Units

In French phraseological units, colors can function in various syntactic roles, most commonly as adjectives and nouns. Here's how color components operate within these structures:

1. Adjectival Use of Colors

- Colors are often used as adjectives to modify a noun within a PU. For example:

- Peur bleue (blue fear): Here, "bleue" modifies "peur" (fear) to indicate an extreme state of fear.

- Idées noires (black ideas): In this PU, "noires" serves as an adjective that modifies "idées," suggesting negative or depressive thoughts.

2. Nominal Use of Colors

In some PUs, the color itself becomes the noun, taking on a central role in the expression. For example:

Voir rouge (see red): Here, "rouge" functions as a noun representing the emotional state of anger.

Le feu vert (the green light): "Vert" in this PU operates as a noun, representing permission or approval.

3. Idiomatic Phrases with Fixed Structures

French PUs containing colors often appear as fixed expressions where the syntactic structure is immutable, meaning the word order and the use of colors cannot be altered. For example:

Être dans le rouge (to be in debt) follows a fixed structure where "rouge" always denotes a state of financial trouble.

4. Semantic Analysis of Color Components

Colors in phraseological units often carry both literal and figurative meanings. While some expressions may have once had more literal interpretations, they have evolved over time to become fixed phrases with figurative or symbolic significance.

Literal vs. Figurative Meaning of Color Terms in PUs

1. Literal Use of Colors

Some PUs retain elements of their literal color meaning while gaining idiomatic layers. For example:

Avoir la main verte (to have a green thumb) is rooted in the literal association between green and plant life. While the phrase has a figurative meaning, the connection to green as a symbol of nature remains intact.

2. Figurative Use of Colors

Most color PUs in French have a purely figurative meaning, often bearing little relation to their literal color sense. For instance:

Voir rouge (to become angry) uses "red" to evoke the idea of heightened emotions and fury. The association with literal redness is distant, as the phrase is now fully metaphorical.

Examples of Color PUs and Their Meanings

Here are a few more examples of commonly used color-based phraseological units in French:

Rire jaune (to laugh yellow): This expression means "to give a forced or awkward laugh," with yellow symbolizing discomfort or awkwardness.

Être blanc comme neige (to be white as snow): This PU means "to be completely innocent," with the color white representing purity and cleanliness.

Voir la vie en rose (to see life in pink): Meaning "to be optimistic" or "to see the bright side of life," pink is associated with warmth and happiness in this context.

Avoir un cordon bleu (to be a great cook): Here, "bleu" refers to the traditional blue ribbon worn by great chefs, making it a symbol of culinary excellence.

Polysemy of Color Terms

Polysemy refers to the phenomenon where a single word can have multiple meanings based on context. In the case of color-based PUs, polysemy is often evident. For example:

Bleu: In *avoir une peur bleue* (to be very scared), "blue" conveys fear. However, in *être un cordon bleu* (to be a great chef), "blue" refers to a high level of expertise, particularly in cooking.

Vert: In *être vert de rage* (to be green with rage), green denotes extreme anger. However, in *avoir la main verte* (to have a green thumb), it is associated with nature and growth, representing skill in gardening.

The polysemous nature of color terms in French PUs allows for flexibility in how these expressions are understood and used, often depending on both the immediate linguistic context and the broader cultural associations with certain colors.

Colors in French phraseological units not only enrich the language but also provide insight into the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with these colors. Through both literal and figurative expressions, colors such as blue, red, black, and green take on meanings that go beyond their physical representations, revealing deeper layers of emotion, social context, and cultural significance. Understanding the classification, syntactic structures, and semantic nuances of these color-based PUs allows for a richer appreciation of the intricacies of the French language and its phraseology.

Table 2: Literal vs. Figurative Meaning of Color-Based Phraseological Units

Color	Phraseological Unit (PU)	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning
Blue	<i>Avoir une peur bleue</i>	To have a blue fear	To be very scared
Red	<i>Voir rouge</i>	To see red	To become angry
Green	<i>Avoir la main verte</i>	To have a green hand	To be skilled in gardening
Black	<i>Travailler au noir</i>	To work in black	To work illegally

5. Cultural and Symbolic Aspects

Cultural Connotations of Colors in French-speaking Cultures

In French-speaking cultures, colors are more than just descriptive elements; they carry significant cultural and symbolic weight. Colors often symbolize specific emotions, social statuses, and even moral values, and these associations can vary depending on the historical and societal context.

Red (rouge): In French culture, red often represents strong emotions such as love, passion, and anger. It can symbolize both positive and negative feelings. For instance, *voir rouge* (to see red) conveys anger, while red can also represent love and desire, as seen in Valentine's Day traditions.

Blue (bleu): Blue in French culture is traditionally associated with calmness, loyalty, and depth, as reflected in phrases like *être bleu de quelqu'un* (to be madly in love). It also represents sadness in many contexts, echoing the broader European symbolism of "feeling blue."

Green (vert): Green is associated with nature, renewal, and health in French-speaking countries. Expressions like *avoir la main verte* (to have a green thumb) emphasize the connection between green and nature. However, green can also denote envy, as seen in *être vert de jalousie* (to be green with envy).

Black (noir): Black holds dual meanings. It often signifies death, mourning, or negativity (*avoir des idées noires*—having dark or depressing thoughts). However, in some contexts, black also conveys elegance, mystery, and sophistication, particularly in fashion and design.

White (blanc): White in French symbolizes purity, innocence, and cleanliness. Phrases like *blanc comme neige* (white as snow) highlight this symbolism, often implying moral integrity or innocence.

Comparison with Other Languages

While colors often carry universal symbolic meanings, their specific connotations can differ across languages and cultures:

Red in English and Azerbaijani: In English, red is similarly associated with passion, danger, and anger, as seen in phrases like "seeing red" or "red alert." However, in Azerbaijani culture, red can also represent joy and celebration, particularly in traditional events and wedding ceremonies.

Green in English vs. Azerbaijani: Like French, English often uses green to symbolize envy (green with envy) or nature (green thumb). In Azerbaijani, green (*yaşıl*) holds strong connotations with Islam, symbolizing paradise and religious significance.

Black in English and Azerbaijani: In both French and English, black frequently denotes darkness or negativity. Similarly, in Azerbaijani culture, black (*qara*) is associated with mourning and grief, but it can also carry a metaphorical sense of power or resilience, as in the expression *qara gün* (dark day) for difficult times.

The different meanings of colors across languages reveal the nuances of cultural interpretations and how they are embedded in phraseological units.

The Influence of History, Literature, and Art on the Use of Color Components in French PUs

French history, literature, and art have significantly influenced the development of color-based phraseological units. Throughout history, artistic movements, such as Impressionism, played a critical role in shaping the symbolism of colors in France.

Historical Influences: During the French Revolution, red became a symbol of revolution and defiance, a meaning still present in some political phrases today. Similarly, the Royal Blue (*bleu roi*) associated with French royalty carries connotations of nobility and power.

Literature: French literary works often employ color to create imagery or express themes. In Victor Hugo's works, for example, black frequently symbolizes despair and death, while white denotes hope and innocence.

Art: In the works of Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and other Impressionists, colors played a central role in expressing mood and emotion. These artistic representations have permeated everyday language, where colors are used to evoke emotional depth or subtlety in phraseology.

6. Pragmatic and Functional Aspects

Usage of Color-based Phraseological Units in Everyday French Language

Color-based phraseological units are commonly used in everyday French communication, both in spoken and written forms. They serve to convey complex emotions or ideas succinctly and often appear in conversations, media, and even formal discourse.

Everyday Speech: In casual conversation, PUs like *voir rouge* or *être vert de rage* are frequently used to describe emotional states. These phrases help speakers express intensity without resorting to literal descriptions of feelings.

Literature and Media: In written texts, particularly in literature and journalism, color PUs are employed to evoke vivid imagery and emotional depth. A novelist might use *avoir des idées noires* to subtly indicate a character's depression, while a journalist could describe a political situation as *dans le rouge* (in the red) to indicate financial or societal crisis.

Advertisements and Commercials: French media often uses color-based PUs in advertisements, leveraging their connotations to create compelling narratives. For instance, an eco-friendly product might use phrases like *une nouvelle ère verte* (a new green era) to suggest sustainability.

The Role of These Units in Oral and Written Communication

In both oral and written communication, color-based phraseological units fulfill several pragmatic functions:

1. **Emotional Expression:** PUs like *voir rouge* or *avoir une peur bleue* are used to communicate heightened emotions quickly and effectively, allowing speakers and writers to convey strong feelings without long explanations.
2. **Cultural Identity:** The use of specific color phrases also reflects cultural identity, reinforcing shared experiences and values within a French-speaking community. Phrases like *blanc comme neige* are steeped in cultural history and instantly resonate with speakers familiar with these idioms.
3. **Metaphorical Depth:** These PUs often add layers of metaphorical meaning to communication, enhancing the richness of the language. For example, *travailler au noir* (to work illegally) evokes the hidden, secretive nature of the activity in a way that a literal description would not.
4. **Economy of Language:** By using established PUs, speakers can economize their language, saying much with fewer words. A phrase like *passer au rouge* (to break a rule) succinctly conveys the idea of transgression without needing further elaboration.

5. Cohesion in Narrative: In storytelling and narrative writing, color-based PUs help maintain cohesion and thematic continuity. For example, describing a villain as *voir noir* (seeing black) throughout a narrative reinforces their negativity and bleak outlook.

The practical application of color-based PUs in French language and communication underscores their importance as tools for emotional expression, cultural representation, and linguistic economy. As we have seen, these units not only serve functional purposes but also carry deep cultural and symbolic meanings that resonate across time and society.

7. Challenges in Translation

Translating color-based phraseological units (PUs) from French into other languages presents several challenges due to the deep cultural, historical, and symbolic meanings embedded in these expressions. Colors in French PUs are often tied to specific emotions, societal norms, or literary traditions, which may not have direct equivalents in other languages. This creates difficulties in retaining the same depth of meaning and cultural nuance during translation.

Table 3: Translation Challenges in Color-Based Phraseological Units

French Phrase	Literal Translation	Equivalent in English	Challenge
Avoir une peur bleue	To have a blue fear	To be terrified	Loss of emotional intensity in translation
Voir rouge	To see red	To be very angry	Same color meaning, but cultural connotations differ
Rire jaune	To laugh yellow	Awkward or forced laugh	Color doesn't match cultural associations in English
Travailler au noir	To work in the black	To work under the table	No direct equivalent without losing color reference

Difficulties in Translating French Color Phraseological Units into Other Languages

1. Cultural Specificity

Many color-based PUs in French are culturally bound, making direct translation challenging. For instance, *voir rouge* (to see red) is a common way to express anger in both French and English, but translating this phrase into a language where red does not carry the same emotional connotation may result in confusion or loss of meaning. In Azerbaijani, for example, red might not symbolize anger in the same way, which would require a translator to find a culturally relevant equivalent, possibly losing the color component altogether.

Similarly, *rire jaune* (to laugh yellow), which signifies a forced or awkward laugh in French, may not have an equivalent in other languages, where yellow does not carry the same connotations of discomfort. A direct translation might seem nonsensical to speakers of other languages, requiring a more descriptive or context-specific explanation.

2. Polysemy and Multiple Meanings

One of the challenges in translating color-based PUs is the polysemous nature of colors. A single color can have multiple meanings depending on context. For example, in French, bleu can signify fear (avoir une peur bleue), romantic infatuation (être bleu de quelqu'un), or culinary expertise (cordon bleu). Translating these phrases into another language requires an understanding of which meaning of the color is intended and finding an equivalent expression in the target language, which may not always be possible.

In some languages, a particular color might not have the same range of meanings as it does in French. This requires translators to either alter the expression to fit the target culture or explain the multiple meanings through added context, which can detract from the simplicity and impact of the original phrase.

3. Idiomatic Nature of PUs

Color-based PUs are often highly idiomatic, meaning they cannot be translated word for word. For example, travailler au noir (to work illegally) cannot simply be translated as “to work in black” in English, as the phrase would not make sense. In English, the equivalent phrase would be “to work under the table.” This highlights the challenge of maintaining the same metaphor or symbolism when translating color PUs.

Additionally, some PUs may be unique to French culture and lack any clear parallel in other languages. A translator must then decide whether to replace the phrase with an entirely new idiom that conveys the same meaning or to preserve the original wording and provide an explanatory note.

Possible Loss of Meaning or Cultural Context in Translation

1. Loss of Symbolism

Colors often carry symbolic meanings that are unique to a particular language or culture. Translating French PUs that rely on these symbolic meanings can result in the loss of important cultural or emotional layers. For example, être blanc comme neige (to be white as snow) signifies innocence and purity in French, where white is associated with these qualities. In some cultures, however, white may have different associations, such as mourning or death, which could lead to a misunderstanding of the phrase if translated literally.

Another example is voir la vie en rose (to see life in pink), which in French symbolizes optimism and happiness. The color pink may not carry the same connotations in other cultures, and translating the phrase literally could lead to confusion. In English, the equivalent idiom is “to see the world through rose-colored glasses,” but this phrase does not carry the same cheerful tone as the French expression, highlighting how translation can shift the emotional resonance of an idiom.

2. Cultural Discrepancies

Some color-based PUs reflect cultural practices or historical events that are unique to France and French-speaking cultures. When translating these expressions, there is often a loss of the historical or cultural context that gives the phrase its deeper meaning. For example, the color red in *rouge comme un coq* (red as a rooster) may reference the symbolic association of the rooster with France itself, adding a layer of national pride or identity to the phrase that would not carry over in translation.

3. *Lack of Equivalents*

In some cases, there is no direct equivalent for a French color PU in the target language, necessitating paraphrasing or omission of the color element. For instance, *avoir un bleu* (to have a bruise) uses "blue" to describe the color of the skin when bruised, but in English, we say "bruise" rather than refer to the color. The loss of the color-specific component can diminish the vivid imagery in the expression, reducing the impact of the original phrase.

4. *Literal vs. Figurative Translations*

Translating PUs literally can sometimes result in a loss of the figurative meaning. For example, *voir rouge* (to see red) is a metaphor for anger in French, but a literal translation into another language might not carry the same figurative sense. Without an equivalent idiom in the target language, the emotional weight of the expression may be lost. In some cases, translators may need to choose between conveying the literal meaning of the words or capturing the figurative essence, both of which can compromise the original intent of the phrase.

Translating French color-based phraseological units into other languages presents unique challenges due to cultural specificity, idiomatic nature, and the polysemy of color terms. The difficulty lies in maintaining the original meaning, emotional impact, and cultural context without distorting the phrase or losing its significance. Translators must carefully navigate these challenges to ensure that the essence of the original French PUs is preserved in the target language, often relying on creative solutions or contextual explanations to bridge cultural gaps.

8. Conclusion

Color-based phraseological units (PUs) in the French language offer a fascinating insight into the intersection of language, culture, and symbolism. These expressions, which embed rich cultural, emotional, and historical connotations, serve as a powerful tool for conveying nuanced meanings. From the vibrant emotions associated with *voir rouge* to the innocence implied by *blanc comme neige*, the use of color in French PUs reveals how deeply ingrained symbolism is in everyday language. These phrases not only enrich the language but also reflect the societal values and historical narratives that have shaped the French-speaking world.

However, the complexity and cultural specificity of these PUs pose significant challenges in translation. The symbolic meaning of colors often varies between cultures, and without careful consideration, important nuances can be lost in translation. Translators must grapple with the polysemy of color terms, the idiomatic nature of PUs, and the cultural contexts that give these expressions their unique flavor. As a result, some aspects of French color PUs may not have

direct equivalents in other languages, requiring creative solutions or detailed explanations to preserve the original meaning.

Ultimately, translating French color-based phraseological units is not just a linguistic challenge but also a cultural one. Successful translation requires not only a deep understanding of both the source and target languages but also the cultural contexts from which these expressions arise. By maintaining the balance between literal and figurative meanings, translators can help preserve the richness of French phraseological units, ensuring that their cultural and emotional depth resonates across languages.

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