“Informational Richness” and the Development of Basic Color Terms: The Case of Latin

Most modern languages of the industrialized world have developed strikingly similar inventories of Basic Color Terms (BCTs), which may be defined informally as the set of ordinary, simple color words, known to all (or nearly all) speakers of a language, that exhaustively name all parts of the visible color space, that are not the name of a material (such as gold or silver), and whose meaning is not contained in that of any other color word. (Berlin and Kay 1969, Kay et al. 2009). The BCTs in English are black, white, grey, red, yellow, orange, pink, brown, green, blue, and purple. The modern Romance and Germanic languages have similar eleven-terms inventories that name approximately the same focal colors, although Russian perhaps divides blue further into light blue (*goluboy*) and dark blue (*siniy*) (Paramei 2007). These inventories contrast starkly with the smaller inventories found in many languages of the non-industrialized world, documented in the World Color Survey (2009) and the Mesoamerican Color Survey (MacLaury 1997), whose BCT inventories may contain as few as two or three terms. Such differences are usually explained in terms of cultural or technological complexity, where the development of more BCTs is thought to be "a response to an informationally richer visual environment" (Berlin and Kay 1969 p. 16).

Thus it is surprising that ancient languages such as Egyptian and Coptic (Baines 1985, Schenkel 2007), Akkadian (Landsberger 1967), ancient Hebrew (Bulakh 2006), ancient Greek (Berlin and Kay 1969), and Latin (Bradley 2009) appear to have developed systems with small BCT inventories, having Basic terms only for white, black, red+yellow, and green+blue, even though all these ancient cultures used sophisticated dye and pigment technologies to produce a full range of subtle hue variations that were ubiquitous in public and private life. Why did these

"informationally rich visual environments" fail to produce the expected inventory of BCTs in antiquity?

I propose, following Sahlins (1976), that development of an inventory of BCTs is not simply a "response" to a complex visual environment but a cultural choice, or rather the aggregation of many such choices. Looking specifically at the evidence from Latin, I will argue that many of its nonbasic terms were "informationally richer" than typical BCTs in their power to communicate both sensory and cultural information, and hence were resistant to being conscripted into the ranks of the more semantically homogenized BCTs.

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