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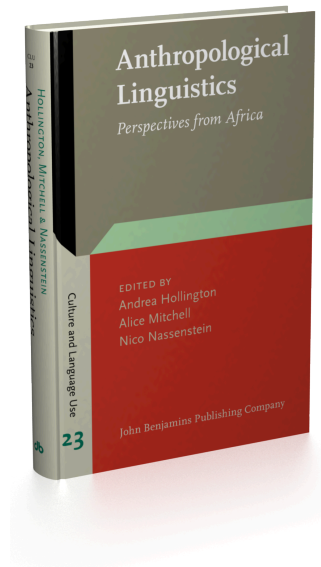
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Perception and expression of color among the Wolof of Senegal

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The analysis and description of color terms has re-emerged at the center of discussions in contemporary anthropological linguistic research (based on well-established previous studies over the past decades). However, work on color terms is still lacking in most West African linguistic research, particularly in Senegal. Wolof, a lingua franca spoken mainly in Senegal, has three basic colors used with adverbs that are never used in other contexts, namely *ñuul* ‘black’, *ñuul kukk* ‘extremely black’, *weex* ‘white’, *weex tàll* ‘extremely white’, *xonq* ‘red’ and *xonq coyy* ‘extremely red’, around which gravitate other shades of color whose terms are taken from the surrounding vocabulary. The aim of this chapter is first to present the color concepts and their “shades” in Wolof and to discuss the question of the morphosyntactic encoding of color terms in linguistic constructions. We will also consider their classification on the basis of their semantic properties and occurrence in idiomatic expressions. Finally, we will show how the community identifies itself through colors and what symbolic representations of colors exist in the Wolof-speaking community.

Keywords: categorization, color, cultural representation, morphosyntactic encoding, Wolof

1. Introduction

Different modes of categorization from an anthropological linguistic perspective help to segment and organize the elements of language and culture, or of a *linguaculture* (Friedrich, 1989), according to grammatical or lexical categories. This is the case with the perception and realization of colors, which is considered “universal” overall but is expressed by people in their own ways according to the language(s) they speak. The challenge is to investigate the reasons why, some colors have semantic and morphosyntactic specifications that are different from those of other colors. Do these designations depend on the way we see the world or are

they arbitrary? This study focuses on the perception and terminology of colors in Wolof, a Senegambian language of the Northern Atlantic group of the Niger-Congo family, bringing together various discussions and theories in contemporary anthropological linguistic research on the notion of color.

By using the nomenclature of colors in Wolof, we will demonstrate in this work that the perception of colors and their denominations can only be profoundly analyzed and understood by taking into account Wolof culture, its sociology and its environment. There are three basic colors (*xonq* ‘red’, *ñuul* ‘black’, *weex* ‘white’) which are expressed in the same way by all Wolof speakers, even if they speak different varieties of Wolof. The other colors, which we will call secondary, may be expressed differently in different localities. This article will describe color terms, including their special status within the linguistic system and their usage with their cultural connotations in idiomatic expressions.

1.1 Wolof: The ethnolinguistic context, data and the present study

Wolof people represent about 45% of the population of Senegal, estimated at nearly 16 million inhabitants. Wolof is the most important vehicular language and the most widely spoken lingua franca. It is widely used as a language of trade and social relations by nearly 90% of the population. We can note some differences in the regional dialects of Wolof, urban Wolof in the Cap-Vert peninsula and in the region of Saint Louis, the Wolof of Baol in the center of Senegal, and the Wolof of Saloum. These differences are mainly lexical but do not interfere with intercomprehension (and are thus mutually intelligible), nor with syntax.

Moreover, Wolof has certainly been the Senegalese language that has been most in contact with French since colonial penetration. It was also in contact with other foreign languages such as Arabic, Dutch, Portuguese, English and French very early on in their different periods of occupation in present-day Senegal. These contacts explain the large number of borrowings in the language. As a vehicular language, Wolof also has a significant place in the digital space, with new information and communication technologies across social media formats.

The corpus used in this work stems from various sources. As primary data, our corpus is made up of statements and texts drawn from oral and written productions in different linguistic registers by speakers from various social origins. We used public speeches, testimonies, accounts of conversations, public debates and Internet memes. Literary works, such as novels, plays, poems, stories, etc., songs and various other texts based around cultural events also served as part of our database. Another part of the corpus was drawn from spontaneous conversations among informants in Dakar (speaking so-called “Urban Wolof”), in Kër Madaaru (in the center of Senegal where Baol Wolof is spoken), in Saloum (where

Saloum Wolof is used), and in Saint Louis (where other regional dialects of Wolof are in use).

Mother-tongue judgments by the author as a native speaker were also included in the analysis when creating the corpus, and stimulus tests were conducted to check the hypotheses. As secondary sources, several articles, grammars, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries (Dard, 1826; Boilat, 1858; Kobès, 1869; Sauvageot, 1965; Diagne, 1971; Church, 1981; Dialo, 1981, 1983; Diouf, 2003, 2016; Robert, 1991; Fal, 1999; Cissé, 2009; Diagne, 2017; Sall et al., 2021), to name but a few selected sources, and text books (Ba, 2007; Juuf & Faal, 1996; Diop, 2012, 2017; Ndao, 2019, 2020; Mbaay, 2020) also served as a corpus and were consulted during the research. The data, collected from October 2018 to December 2021, comprised various formats, such as audio files, video files and written texts. As for the informants, these were mostly old people (over 70 years old) and some younger speakers, including men and women between 35 and 67, belonging to various groups with different socioprofessional profiles (e.g., teachers, computer scientists and data processors, students, housewives, farmers, fishermen and others).

1.2 General theoretical framework on color terminology

The theory on the terminology of color concepts can be analyzed from two main approaches: the universalist perspective and the relativist perspective, as outlined by Jameson (2005, p.103; see Jameson & D'Andrade, 1997). There is a universalist approach to color categorization which can be summarized by saying that “biologically, all people, regardless of their sexes, ages or races, see colors almost in the same way” (Lakoff, 1997, p.167; see also Heider Rosch, 1972). A popular version of this perspective asserts that although color naming differences exist across cultures, they are largely explained by a model of pan-human shared color experience, and this determines the non-arbitrary basis by which all cultures categorize and name color sensations. Our ability to produce and receive utterances must first be considered in relation to other abilities such as visual perception or motion control. There is not any “purely” linguistic concept, nor is there any word “truth” or reference either, but there are mental representations attached to words. As Jameson (2005, p.89) says, “[m]ost researchers would concur that sensible cultural relativists agree with universalists that biology serves as an important constraint for color perception”. Siouffi and Raemdonck (2018, p.90) assert that “depending on understandings and perceptions, very different representations can be associated to a single word”. Thus, focal colors have innate salience independent of any particular language. For instance, all humans see red in the same way due to their shared biology, and so they are bound to have a name for this color.

This universalist approach to the theory of color terms was highlighted by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (1969) in their study *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (see also Kay & Maffi, 1999). Berlin and Kay were the first to advocate for the universality of color terms by pointing out that the division of the color spectrum (using the Munsell color chart) in languages is not arbitrary, but rather governed by cognitive constraints. According to their theory, there are maximally 11 basic color terms, divided into six levels with a first level of two fundamental color terms: white and black. The second level languages have three basic colors: white, black and red, and so on until the sixth level, which includes pink, light blue, grey, orange and purple. They also imply that terms such as *green-ish* or *gray-ish* are not considered “basic” according to their model, since they are not monolexemic (see also Dimmendaal, 2022, p. 40). Figure 12.1 shows Stages I-XI of Berlin and Kay’s model.

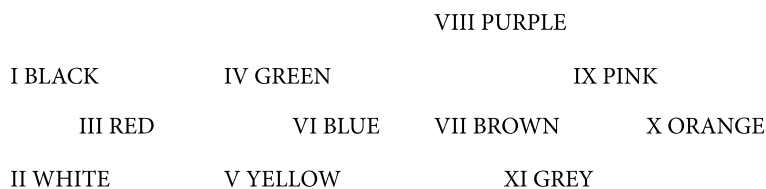


Figure 12.1 Basic color terms according to Berlin and Kay (1969); illustration taken from Dimmendaal (2022, p. 42)

The hierarchy and universality of designations for colors have been discussed and reworked by many authors. The model by Berlin and Kay, in particular, has yielded debates on its applicability in recent years, and on whether this model can still be used at all. Kimberly A. Jameson (2005, p.6) considers that “[w]hile it can be argued that bilingualism in English affects the results to some extent, they do not support the possible objection that bilingualism of their informants distorted their findings”. Furthermore, she says that:

[m]any languages that are classified at or above Stage V (using the original framework of Berlin and Kay, 1969, or recent revisions) have a separate abstract concept for color represented by a superordinate linguistic term; however, many unwritten languages (...) do not have a native construct for color indexed by an unborrowed superordinate lexical term and thus may not have an abstraction for color integral to their cultural transmission of the color lexicon. (...) Various results in the literature suggest that Kay would not likely observe the same correspondence between his computed centroids and elemental hues under different empirical settings or stimulus sets. (Jameson, 2005, p.97)

The universalist theory is thus challenged by a moderate form of the relativist perspective of color categorization. This theory points to the role cultural conventions and pressures may play in describing colors. In this approach, the reality of colors is universal but is represented by each people in their own ways. Thus, different languages draw the lines in different ways. There are many properties of color categories (see Rosch, 1975) that are a function of language and culture (Kay, Berlin & Merrifield 1991).

In the relativistic approach, categorization, as a process, is sometimes difficult to observe, because the frontiers of lexical units are not always defined in the real world, owing to the vagueness of some concepts. That is the case with color categorization, whose spectrum is a continuum in which it is difficult to see limits between units. However, this difficulty in categorizing does not prevent languages from naming the different colors and their variations, particularly the ones more frequently used than others (Tornay, 1979; Segerer & Vanhove, 2019). In this perspective, large parts of color naming and categorization behavior are shaped by sociocultural influences, and these influences produce differences in cross-cultural color naming that cannot be explained by the popular universalist explanations.

Colors, in Wolof, as well as in other Senegalese languages, are categorized in a different way. Color concepts can be encoded differently in terms of their morphosyntactic properties, semantic scope, and category assignment (Wierzbicka, 1992). It is problematic to apply the theory of Berlin and Kay to Wolof. Wolof has three “basic color terms” *weex* ‘white’, *ñuul* ‘black’ and *xonq* ‘red’. And we can add a fourth which is related to the shade of human skin *xees* ‘to have a light complexion’. These color terms, that we call basic color terms, are different (also from a morphosyntactic perspective) from the other color terms, which we consider as secondary. They show particular patterns of morphosyntactic behavior distinct from secondary color terms. This certainly does not mean that the secondary colors are less relevant than the basic colors or are derived from the basic colors. We distinguish between basic color terms and secondary color terms in Wolof because to the first can be added intensifiers, but not to the second. The basic color terms are also unanimously known to everybody and are named in the same way by all the speakers of the language.

2. Terminology of color concepts in Wolof

In Wolof, a term meaning ‘color’ itself does not exist. Other expressions are used instead with specific meanings to express the concept of color. The color can be

named *melo* *m*¹- or *wirgo* *w*- in Wolof and also (rarely) *cu*² *m*-, related to the name *cuub* ‘dye’. The word *cuub* is widely used in Wolof for ‘dye’ (the verb is *suub*³ ‘to dye’; however, the word *cu* for ‘color’ is no longer used). The term *wirgo* was consecrated by a Wolof researcher Fallou Cissé,⁴ who was one of the first to talk about a list of the different colors in Wolof and gave the lexeme *wirgo* as the equivalent of ‘color’. The word *wirgo* cannot be used to denote human beings. This word also means ‘kind’, ‘variety’, ‘category’, type, etc. It is starting to be used by some Wolof speakers to mean ‘color’. The lexemes used to express ‘color’ in Wolof (*melo* *m*- and *wirgo* *w*-) highlight the fact that color belongs to perceptual categories (Kay & McDaniel, 1978) in which are also contained the outline, form, variety, pattern, kind and category of a concept. We have to point out, however, that the term *melo* *m*- is common in expressions describing color but can also mean ‘shape’, ‘resemblance’, ‘appearance’ or ‘allure’. This word is a derivative of the verb *mel* ‘to resemble’ (see (1)–(2)).

(1) *Xale bi na mu mel?*

xale b-i na mu mel
 child CLSG.DEFPR-PR how 3SG.NAR is (look.like)
 ‘How is the child?’ Or:
 ‘What does the child look like?’

(2) *Bunt bi na mu mel?*

bunt b-i na mu mel
 door CLSG.DEFPR-PR how 3SG.NAR look.like
 ‘How (i.e., of what kind) is the door?’

For such a general question, the answer can be given with regard to the “color” of his/her skin (3), to the size (4), to the body size, the shape or an object’s materiality (8), etc. With regard to the question in Example (1), the answer could be, among others, one of the following qualifiers: *ñuul* ‘black’ (3), *gàtt* ‘short’ (4), *rafet* ‘beautiful’ (5) and so forth.

(3) *Xale bi dafa ñuul.*

xale b-i dafa ñuul
 child CLSG.DEFPR-PR 3SG.EMV black
 ‘The child is black.’

1. The abbreviations (*m*-, *w*-, *g*-, ...) are nominal classes attached to the noun. Wolof has eight singular nominal classes (*w*-, *k*-, *l*-, *m*-, *j*-, *b*-, *g*-, *s*-) and two plural nominal classes (*ñ*-, *ɣ*-).

2. This word seems not to be used anymore because none of the people who were interviewed knew it or were familiar with it. The 65-year-old interviewee who gave us this word says he remembers the use of this word by elders in his village when he was younger.

3. There is a consonant change between the noun and the verb in Wolof.

4. WAX (Wolof Ak Xamle) on Twitter: “#wolof # wirgo yi. Ban ak ban ngeen si xam? 2020”

- (4) *Xale bi dafa gàtt.*
 xale b-i dafa gàtt
 child CLSG.DEFP-PR 3SG.EMV short
 ‘The child is short.’
- (5) *Xale bi dafa rafet.*
 xale b-i dafa rafet
 child CLSG.DEFP-PR 3SG.EMV beautiful
 ‘The child is beautiful.’

And with regard to the question in (2), the answer could be, among others, one of these assertions:

- (6) *Bunt bi dafa ñuul.*
 bunt b-i dafa ñuul
 door CLSG.DEFP-PR 3SG.EMV black
 ‘The door is black.’
- (7) *Bunt bi buntu weñ la.*
 bunt b-i bunt-u weñ la
 door CLSG.DEFP-PR door-of iron 3SG.EMCP
 ‘The door is of iron (material).’
- (8) *Bunt bu dëgar la.*
 bunt b-u dëgar la
 door CLSG.DEFP-REL strong 3SG.EMCP
 ‘It is a strong door.’

To get an appropriate answer about the color of a referent or concept, it is necessary to mention terms for specific colors. This will assist one’s interlocutor in understanding that one seeks to get an exact answer about the color, already citing color terms in one’s question instead of asking for ‘color’ in general (see (9)).

- (9) *Xale bi dafa ñuul wala dafa xees?*
 xale b-i dafa ñuul wala dafa xees
 child CLSG.DEFP-PR 3SG.EMV black or 3SG.EMV light
 ‘The child is black or has a light complexion.’

The fact that there is no specific word for ‘color’ in Wolof, as there is in other languages such as French (*couleur*) or English (*color*), is not extraordinary and does not necessarily mean that Wolof has no knowledge of colors or that its speakers have little interest in them. Wolof exhibits a fine-grained understanding of “colors” and “shades”. These are just identified and named according to perceptual and sociocultural criteria that are different from those in other languages. Moreover, Wolof is not the only language without a specific word for ‘color’. This is, for exam-

ple, also a characteristic of the Yelî Dnye language of Rossel Island in Papua New Guinea, as described by Levinson (2000). The author points out that “Yelî has no higher word for ‘color’. To ask what color something is, one would be obliged to use the English borrowing (non-colloquial) color ... Instead, one would normally ask: His body, how is it? or His body, how does it look?” (Levinson, 2000, p.10). This is more or less the same process in Wolof. In a similar turn, Gerrit J. Dimmendaal states, mentioning the Munsell color system (Dimmendaal, 2022, p. 55), and also in alignment with the present author’s argumentation for Wolof:

[T]he lexical meaning of colour terms in languages is simply reduced to denotational meanings in the metalanguage. A speech community may have a concept of ‘colour’ without having a word for it. But the mere fact that not all languages have a word for ‘colour’ should at least provide us with a hint as investigators that not all people necessarily treat the connection between the lexical item and the object or referent as a socially or materially decontextualized ‘natural categorization of nature’.

3. Categorization of colors in Wolof

Colors in Wolof can be categorized into two types: basic elementary color terms and secondary color terms. By basic elementary color we mean the three main colors in Wolof, *ñuul* ‘black’, *weex* ‘white’ and *xonq* ‘red’, which are the only colors that collocate with a specific intensifying adverb. As for secondary colors, they are colors made up of the names of objects, plants, fruits or animals. They never carry intensifying adverbs and can have lexical and perceptual variations.

3.1 Basic color terms

3.1.1 *Black, red and white*

Among the color samples used in our surveys, black, red and white were easily recognizable and were described immediately with the same words by all of the participants in our survey. They are the three basic colors that are actually used in everyday speech, in the enunciative discourse. Their codability is much easier than that of other colors. The basic color terms that are commonly designated and uttered by all Wolof speakers are thus *ñuul* ‘black’, *weex* ‘white’ and *xonq* ‘red’. These three color terms are the only ones to be used with an intensifying adverb *kukk* (for *ñuul*), meaning ‘extremely black’, *tàll* (for *weex*), meaning ‘extremely white’, and *xonq* (for *coyy*) with the meaning ‘extremely red’. It should be noted

that expressive adverbs or intensifying adverbs specify the degree of intensity of a color at its highest point.

- (10) *ñuul* ‘black’ *kukk* ‘extremely’ *ñuul kukk* ‘extremely black’
 (11) *weex* ‘white’ *tàll* ‘extremely’ *weex tàll* ‘extremely white’
 (12) *xonq* ‘red’ *coyy* ‘extremely’ *xonq coyy* ‘extremely red’

There are no semantic differences between the intensifying adverbs but they cannot be used interchangeably. Each one is to be used with its specific color term. It is therefore not accepted by speakers to combine **ñuul tàll*’ or **ñuul coyy*’, **weex kukk* or **weex coyy*, **xonq kukk* or **xonq tàll*’.

In addition to the three basic colors, Wolof has other terms pertaining to the color “shade” when referring to Black people, making use of terms otherwise used to express degrees of “obscurity” (of the sky, etc.).⁵ These terms, referring to “Black” skin color and to obscurity, are *xees* ‘light complexion’ (when a person is perceived as “light-skinned”)⁶ and *lëndëm* ‘obscurity’, respectively (the latter being used when a person is perceived as “dark-skinned”). These terms also collocate with intensifying adverbs: *pecc* for *xees* only and *këriis* for *lëndëm* only, then taking an intensifying meaning of ‘extremely “light(-skinned)”’ vs. ‘extremely “dark(-skinned)”’; respectively.

- (13) *xees pecc*
xees *pecc*
 light.complexion extremely
 ‘extremely “light”’
 (14) *lëndëm këriis*
lëndëm këriis
 obscure extremely
 ‘extremely “dark” (obscure)’

In sum, the following five colors are the only ones to collocate with intensifying adverbs, each specific to one color term (Table 12.1). These are not interchangeable. Thus, it is, for instance impossible to utter **xonq pecc*, **null coyy*, **weex kukk* or **xees tàll* (to name but a few unaccepted pairings).

5. It should be noted that the notion of color terms for human skin color is a highly sensitive and politically charged topic. The concept of *colorism* is often used in discussions of the underlying ideologies and attitudes associated with skin color (often influenced by racist ideas rooted in imperial and colonial discourses). For a discussion of colorism in the Ugandan context see Knipping (this volume).

6. If it is a White person the basic color term *weex* is used with the intensifier *tàll*.

Table 12.1 Intensifiers and their specific color terms

Intensifier	Used with	Color
<i>coyy</i>	—————→	<i>xonq</i> ‘red’
<i>kukk</i>		<i>ñuul</i> ‘black’
<i>tàll</i>		<i>weex</i> ‘white’
<i>pecc</i>		<i>xees</i> ‘“light” complexion’
<i>këruus</i> (<i>kuruus</i>)		<i>lëndëm</i> ‘“dark” complexion’

The predominance of these basic color terms over secondary colors is explained by four factors listed by Berlin and Kay. First, a secondary basic color cannot include another color. For example, the color ‘crimson’ is encompassed in the term used for ‘red’, which is why it is not considered a basic color term. Besides, the wording of a basic color is generally simple; it cannot be made up of more than a single lexeme. Additionally, basic color terms must have a large semantic scope. Finally, basic color terms are often used, common and known by everybody. Only the third and fourth factors can be applied to the Wolof basic color terms. It must also be noted that, in terms of perception, focal colors are among the most salient ones. In addition, the existence of a color term in a speaker’s first language (or mother tongue) facilitates the memorization of that color. However, the most relevant observation with regard to the basic color terms ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘red’ is pointed out by Dimmendaal (2022, p. 47):

‘Black’ or ‘dark’, and ‘white’ or ‘light’ are presumably related to human experience with the rising and setting of the sun, i.e., with dynamic processes (expressed by verbs in many languages). But ‘red’ also tends to be treated as a dynamic verb (...) Again, there is probably a deeply rooted evolutionary reason for this. Being able to recognize the colour of fruits that have ripened in nature has tremendous evolutionary advantages, as it is essential for the survival of different species.

The basic color terms shared by all, without any ambiguity, have a meaning and are related to life and nature. According to Wolof thought, black and white denote the circularity of life between night and day, while red refers to the sunset, to the mature products of trees (as a source of life) and also to many cultural and mystical representations in Wolof cosmology. (see also Diané, 2012)

3.1.2 *Other linguistic operations with basic color terms*

The basic color terms can also be used with derivational suffixes, or are linked to cultural connotations. They operate well with causativization (in this case, they cannot co-occur with intensifiers.)

- (15) a. *ñuulal*
 ñuul-al
 black-CAUS
 ‘to blacken’
- b. *dafay ñuulal kawaram*
 dafa-y ñuul-al kawar-am
 3SG.EMV-IMPF black-CAUS hair-3POS
 ‘he blackens his hair’
- (16) a. *weexal*
 weex-al
 white-CAUS
 ‘to whiten’
- b. *dafay weexal këram*
 dafa-y weex-al kër-am
 3SG.EMV-IMPF white-CAUS house-3POS
 ‘he/she whitens the house’ i.e., ‘he/she paints the house in white’

Basic color terms often also carry further verbal derivation suffixes, as verbs usually do (see Table 12.2 for an overview).

Table 12.2 Derivative suffixes on basic color terms

Suffix	Basic color terms with suffix		Occurrence of the suffix on a verb	
-aat (REP)	<i>ñuul</i> ‘black’	<i>ñuulaat</i> ‘to become black again’	<i>dem</i> ‘to go’	<i>demaat</i> ‘to go again’
-aay (QUAL)	<i>xonq</i> ‘red’	<i>xonqaay</i> ‘to whiteness’	<i>dëgër</i> ‘to be tough’	<i>dëgëraay</i> ‘toughness’
-al (CAUS)	<i>weex</i> ‘white’	<i>weexal</i> ‘to whiten’	<i>néew</i> ‘to be few’	<i>néewal</i> ‘to render few’
-aale (COM)	<i>lëndëm</i> ‘be obscure’	<i>lëndëmaale</i> ‘being obscure at the same time’	<i>yóbbu</i> ‘to carry’	<i>yobbaale</i> ‘to carry at the same time’
-ul (NEG)	<i>xees</i> ‘be light’	<i>xeesul</i> ‘he/she is not “light”’	<i>lekk</i> ‘eat’	<i>lekkul</i> ‘he/she does not eat’

While the intensifying qualifying adverb can be attached to color terms with the derived suffix *-al* (expressing the causative) and *-aat* (repetitive), this is not the case for the derivatives *-aay* (qualifier) and *-aale* (comitative). The following expressions are not perceived as grammatically correct: *ñuulaay kukk, *weexaay tàll, *ñuulaale kukk, *weexaale tàll, and so forth. The “shades” of basic colors can be expressed either by verbal derivation, using *-aale* (‘anew, again’), or based on the addition of expressive adverbs such as *xaw* ‘almost, a little’ (see (17)–(18)).

(17) *Xonqaale*
 xonq-aale
 red-again
 'reddish'

(18) *xaw a weex*
 xaw a weex
 a.little CON white
 'a little/almost white'

Color terms display the same morphosyntactic encoding as verbs and occur in the same syntactic operations as stative verbs (see (19a–c), (20a–c)); this is the case for *xonq* 'red', *ñuul* 'black', *weex* 'white' and *xees* 'light complexion'. They can also occur with TAM markers. The three basic color terms *xonq* 'red', *ñuul* 'black', *weex* 'white' and *xees* 'light complexion' can serve as stative verbs (Dialo, 1981) and can be inflected for person and modality, as is, for instance, also the case for stative verbs like *tàng* 'be hot'.

(19) a. *Dama ñuul.*
 dama ñuul
 1SG.EMV black
 'I am black.'

b. *Dafa ñuuloon.*
 Dafa ñuul-oon
 1SG.EMV black-PAS
 'It used to be black.'

c. *Ñuulul.*
 ñuul-ul
 black-3SG.NEG
 'She/he is not black.'

(20) a. *Tàng na.*
 tàng na
 be.hot 3SG.PFV
 'It's hot.'

b. *Tàngoon na.*
 tàng-oon na
 be.hot PAS 3SG.PFV
 'It was hot.'

c. *Tàngunu.*
 tàng-unu
 be.hot-1PL.NEG
 'We are not hot.'

We can note that the secondary colors follow the same pattern, for example with regard to *nětëx* ‘green’ (as shown in (21a)).

- (21) a. *Dafa nětëx.*
 dafa nětëx
 3SG.EMV green
 ‘It is green.’
- b. *Nětëx la.*
 nětëx la
 green 3SG.EMCP
 ‘It’s a green one.’

3.1.3 Cultural connotations related to basic color terms

Colors are associated with cultural beliefs that vary greatly between one language and another (see also Seel & Nassenstein, this volume). Specific associations with a color can be reflected in the way a color term is used in idiomatic expressions or when describing an object or a referent. Black, for example, symbolizes wickedness, deviousness and mystery, while other colors have other specific meanings or symbolic associations in Wolof. In the following, we list some expressions and phrases using color terms and their (associated) meanings that are particular to Wolof society.

i. *The color white*

Among the Wolof, white is the expression of clarity, cleanliness, purity, righteousness, good or bad luck and also wisdom. Thus, Wolof speakers say *tëgg-bu-weex b-* ‘jeweler’ (to distinguish it from *tëgg-bu-ñuul b-* ‘blacksmith’), due to the fact that a jeweler works with gold, which is a sign of prosperity and wealth. *Xaalis bu weex* ‘white money’ can mean a lot of money. White can also embody purity, righteousness and clarity. *Nit ku weex tàll* ‘person who is very white’ refers to a good person with a good heart, a sincere, righteous man or a pure, almost holy person. In general, white is the color of purity and piety; a white loincloth and clothes are used by a new bride to display the mark of her purity and a white dress is also used for prayer. Today, due to the introduction of Western traditions following colonization, Senegalese brides (Muslims and Christians alike) have adopted white dresses for weddings and for the reception of guests in a wedding context. However, formerly, in traditional society, the color white was not specifically the color of the bride; it was the material that predominated over the color. Yet, white does not always have positive connotations. It can also be an expression of bad luck. The expression *weex-dunq* is used to mean ‘to be the scapegoat’, literally meaning ‘to have a white feather’ (i.e., someone with a white feather may be the most visible and therefore the one who is often accused of all wrongs and

all guilt). The same holds true for the expression *weex-bët*, literally meaning to have ‘white eyes’, which means to be fickle or to have difficulty deciding and making a choice. White is also used in the sense of retribution and of corruption. *Weexal* ‘whitening,’ ‘making it white’ means retribution, paying for prayers or giving money to corrupt somebody.

Often used idiomatic expressions that make use of *weex* ‘white’ are listed in the following:

- | | | | |
|------|--|-------------------------------|---|
| (22) | <i>weex-al</i>
white-CAUS | lit. ‘to whiten’ | meaning ‘to recompense (also for prayers), to give cash as a bribe’ |
| (23) | <i>weex-bët</i>
white-eye | lit. ‘white eye’ | meaning ‘to be fickle, to have difficulty making a choice’ |
| (24) | <i>weex</i> <i>dunq</i>
white feather | lit. ‘white feather’ | meaning ‘to be a scapegoat’ |
| (25) | <i>tëgg</i> <i>bu weex</i>
jeweler REL white | lit. ‘a jeweler who is white’ | meaning ‘a jeweler who deals in gold’ |
| (26) | <i>xaalis</i> <i>bu weex</i>
money REL white | lit. ‘white money’ | meaning ‘a massive bill, a lot of money’ |

ii. Idiomatic expressions with *ñuul* ‘black’

Black is the color of the night, of darkness, insecurity and also ignorance. The following saying illustrates this connotation, meaning that if you see something black that you cannot control, you must flee.

- (27) *Ku ndóbin rey sa maam, boo gisee lu ñuul daw.*
 ku ndobin rey sa maam boo gis-ee lu ñuul
 REL great.hornbill kill 2SG.POS ancestor CONJ.2SG.NAR see-TAM REL black
 daw
 run.away
 ‘The one whose ancestor was killed by a great hornbill runs away as soon as he sees something black.’

Another expression, *xam-xam bu ñuul*, is often used to talk about witchcraft, which can cause harm:

- (28) *xam-xam bu ñuul*
 xam-xam bu ñuul
 knowledge REL black
 ‘knowledge that is black’ (‘occult sciences’)

The color black can also represent, in the popular imagination, dishonesty, deceit, wickedness and much more. Wolof has the same representation (Diané, 2012). So, to speak of wickedness, Wolof will use *ñuul-biir* ‘black stomach’ to mean ‘to be cruel’, and *ñuul xol* ‘to have a black heart’ to mean ‘to be wicked’. The word *lëndëm* ‘dark’ is also used to express deceit or wickedness. *Nit ku lëndëm*, someone who is difficult to understand, can alternate with *nit ku ñuul* ‘a black person’, referring not to skin color but to his/her bad temper. Expressions using the color black are, for instance:

- (29) *ñuul-biir*
 ñuul biir
 black stomach
 ‘black stomach’ (meaning ‘to be mean, cruel’)
- (30) *nit ku ñuul, ku lëndëm*
 nit ku ñuul ku lëndëm
 human REL black REL obscure
 ‘person who is black, who is obscure’ (meaning ‘obscure, elusive person’)
- (31) *tëgg-bu-ñuul*
 tëgg bu ñuul
 blacksmith REL black
 ‘blacksmith’
- (32) *xam-xam bu ñuul*
 xam-xam bu ñuul
 knowledge REL black
 ‘knowledge that is black’ (referring to occult sciences)
- (33) *ñuul xol*
 ñuul-xol
 black heart
 ‘to have a black heart’ (meaning ‘to be mean’)
- (34) *Danoo rey bëy wu ñuul.*
 danoo rey bëy wu ñuul
 1PL.EMV kill goat REL black
 ‘We killed a black goat’ (‘We happened not to have dinner (accidentally)’.)

iii. *Idiomatic expressions with xonq 'to be red'*

Red can express femininity, can refer to being a woman or being attractive, and is associated with life and passion.⁷ The color red is also popular with Wolof families who practice *ndëp*, a ritual ceremony to ward off bewitchment, madness, disease, bad luck or evil in general. The red cow, the red rooster and the red kola-nut, among other things, are often sacrificed to ward off evil and avoid bad luck. Red can symbolize danger and misfortune in Wolof culture.

3.2 Secondary color terms

The secondary color terms represent descriptive expressions referring to objects in the natural environment like *mboq* 'corn', *ñax mu tooy* 'fresh herb' and *dàñq* 'light mauve (fruit with the botanical name *detarium microcarpum*)'. They serve as categorizing colors that make connections with elements of nature and the environment. These terms cannot be used with intensifying verbs. For these colors, some inter-speaker variation was observed, depending on the regions but especially according to professions of the speakers: dyer, farmer, fisherman. This makes sense as color is also a perceptive (cognitive-linguistic) category and speakers perceive color differently according to their environment. The important thing here is the conceptualization that draws on particular life experiences, so that a fisherman, for example, tends to describe the sea as *màndaxe* 'green', while others would categorize or perceive the sea as 'blue'. For the fishermen of Saint Louis (northern Senegal), *màndaxe* means not only the color 'orange' but also expresses 'beauty' and 'richness' (when the sea is not agitated and promises a fruitful fishery). This is the case also, for example, with regard to the term *mboq* 'corn' or 'light yellow', which can also be named *uul* in Bawol (the main Wolof-speaking region in Senegal) or *nere* in Saloum (another Wolof-speaking region). Actually, *mboq*, *nere* and *uul* represent 'cereals' or yellow tree fruits.

As noted above, the major theoretical assumption is the universality of visual perception, but what is different is the conceptualization (Rosch, 1975), which draws on particular life experiences, so that the fisherman, for example, tends to describe the color corresponding to 'blue' by using terms that also denote the sky.⁸

7. This color is much more culturally expressive among the Bedik, a small ethnic group in the east of Senegal, for example, than the Wolof.

8. The color of the sea for example, is not always perceived as what corresponds with 'blue' by the fishermen of Guet Ndar (a fishermen's district in Saint Louis). It can be perceived as 'green' or 'white', depending on the season and can be an indication of a "fishy" or "non-fishy" sea. The farmer will also describe colors with reference to objects in the natural environment that are green (plants or unripe fruit) or yellow (ripe fruits). The dyer (i.e., a person working with

Among dyers, ‘blue’ is either expressed with *baxa* (35) which is a famous dye color but can also be called *bulo* (borrowed from French *bleu*). Yellow has different variations according to specific regions. It can be named *mboq* ‘corn’, *puur, uul* ‘wild fruit (*parkia biglobosa*)’ or *rat* ‘*combretum glutinosum* tree’, which has a yellowish color when turned into an infusion. ‘Yellow’ can also be called *nete* in Saloum, a Wolof-speaking region in Senegal. ‘Purple’ is called *dànq*, which is the name of a wild fruit, *yolet* or *wiyolet*, which are borrowed words, or sometimes *palmaan*. Note that *palmaan* is a composite category; it covers not only the color purple but also part of the spectrum of green and black, or brown and black (see (36)).

(35) *mbubu baxa*
 mbub u baxa
 buckwheat of light.blue
 ‘a light blue buckwheat’

(36) *cuubu palmaan*
 cuub u palmaan
 buckwheat of dark.purple
 ‘a dark purple buckwheat’

‘Green’ is called, according to regional variants, *nētëx* ‘dark green’, *ngel* ‘light green’, *njaxnaat* ‘green of a type of sorghum mite’, etc., depending on lightness and a speaker’s language variety. The color ‘orange’ is commonly labeled *guro* ‘kola nut’, whose juice combines shades of red and orange. ‘Brown’ is given different names depending on the shades, i.e., *lëng* for ‘brown’, whereas *xuun* is used for ‘dark brown’. ‘Grey’ is called *baam* – which, however, is a word that is not known by many of the speakers who were interviewed and seems to be very rarely used. Most refer to ‘grey’ as *ñuul wu leer* meaning ‘light black’. The lexical variation shows the mobility of words in the lexical repertoire of a language, connected with and depending upon the mobility of the speakers.

Besides the primary division of colors into two fundamental categories, we also observe an effort of precision and detail. The range of Wolof color terms used nowadays could be extended further by including such borrowings as *xoraay* which is the designation for the color ‘pink’ by some speakers, probably as a reference to the coral pearl, of pinkish color. This is also the case with the word *bulo bik* ‘blue pen color’ to explain the dark blue color of a blue pen.

color to dye cloth, for example) uses a very specific color lexicon due to his/her profession and according to his/her mixtures. This is the case for the words *baxa* ‘light blue’ and *palmaan* ‘dark purple’ (see (35)–(36)).

In the following (Figure 12.2), we have grouped color terms and the names of different “shades”, with some other names that vary according to region and dialectal variety in Senegal. These color chips were reproduced on the basis of the cross-referenced color chips described by Fallou Cissé (2020),⁹ a Wolof researcher, and color words listed by our informants or found in common Wolof dictionaries. We endeavored to represent, in this table, the majority of the colors that can be identified by Wolof speakers and/or found in speakers’ surroundings, reflected in their clothing practices, beads, hairstyles, professional settings, etc. This overview figure does not, however, claim to be exhaustive.











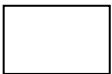






Basic color terms	Secondary color terms			
				
<i>ñuul</i> ‘black’	<i>baam/doomu taal</i> ‘grey’	<i>baxa</i> ‘blue’	<i>dàñq</i> ¹⁰ / <i>yolet</i> ¹¹ ‘light mauve’	<i>palmaan</i> ‘dark purple’
				
<i>xonq</i> ‘red’	<i>xoraay</i> ‘pink’	<i>lëng</i> ‘brown’	<i>ngel/màndaxe</i> ‘green’	<i>xuun</i> ‘dark brown’
				
<i>weex</i> ‘white’	<i>puur</i> ‘yellow’	<i>mboq/nere/</i> <i>uul</i> ¹² ‘light yellow’	<i>nëtëx</i> ‘dark green’	<i>njaxnaat</i> ‘sorghum green’
				
	<i>mbaasan/guro</i> (kola nut) ‘orange’ ¹³	<i>yume</i> ‘blackish’		

Figure 12.2 A chart of basic and secondary color terms in Wolof

9. WAX (Wolof Ak Xamle) on Twitter: “#wolof # wirgo yi. Ban ak ban ngeen si xam? (2020)”

10. The fruit *detarium microcarpum*.

11. *Yolet* is a deformation of the color term *violet*.

12. *Mboq* ‘corn’, *nere* ‘fruit of *parkia biglobosa*, *mimosacées*’, *uul* ‘fruit of the African carob tree’.

13. The equivalent to the term ‘orange’ is taken from the juice of the kola nut.

3.3 Luminosity, brightness, saturation, brilliance

The degree of luminosity, brightness, saturation and brilliance can be expressed in basic color terms as well as in secondary color terms with linguistic constructions employing qualifying stative verbs.

- (37) *xonq bu ñor*
 xonq bu ñor
 red REL ripe
 ‘red which is cooked’ (‘very red’)
- (38) *weex bu xall*
 weex bu xall
 white REL be.off-white
 ‘white which is off-white’
- (39) *ñuul bu tàkk*
 ñuul bu tàkk
 black REL turn.on
 ‘shiny black’
- (40) *guró bu lëndëm*
 guro gu lëndëm
 kola.nuts/orange REL dark
 ‘dark orange’

In addition to these expressions, one can also consider *leer* ‘to be clear’, *xàññaaral* ‘to be gaudy, with too many colors’, *boyy* ‘to be shining’ or *xoyyi* ‘to be luminous’, which are important for visual perception (Hering, 1964). It is culture, experience and environment of a speaker that determines the choice of these terms. This can be explained as follows, based on Dimmendaal (2022, p.55):

Visual physiology no doubt also plays a role in the perception and categorization of colour, setting constraints on the cultural construction of colour categories. However, our current understanding of the human cognitive system cannot help us in any way in explaining the tremendous variation between languages in terms of the semantic domains potentially covered by ‘colour terms’, as different dimensions are involved, for example material (skin colour of human beings and animals) or physical state (succulent or dessicated, ripe or unripe, dirty or clean).

3.4 Syntactic operations

Secondary color terms also play a role in syntactic operations based on lexical combinations (41), adding a nominal complement to color terms or based on relativization (42).

(41) Nominal complement:

baxa asamaan

baxa asamaan

blue sky

'sky-blue'

(42) Relativization:

baxa bu dër

baxa bu dër

blue REL dark

'blue which is dark', i.e., 'dark blue'

4. Names of colors distinguishing animate referents

In Wolof, based on the detailed and fine-grained description of colors and shades, human and animal typologies are treated differently and categorized according to different parameters. In the following, the categories around “shades” (see also the footnote below on human skin color) of human referents are explained (4.1).

4.1 Human beings

The color of human skin can vary, depending on a person's origin and whether the referent is categorized or categorizes him/herself as “Black”¹⁴ or “White”. Wolof therefore distinguishes a “Black” person *nit ku ñuul* from a “White” person *nit ku weex*. The category *nit ku weex* does not correlate with the (often-cited administrative) category “Caucasian” but includes people from very different backgrounds and various descents, including people who identify under the umbrella terms “Arab” or “Chinese”, Japanese nationals, and many more. The category *nit ku ñuul* distinguishes three “shades”: *ñuul* (a ‘dark black complexion’), *xeereer* (a ‘half dark-half light complexion’) and *xees* (a ‘light complexion’). Thus, in Wolof, the following terms are found:

14. Generalizing skin color categorizations such as “Black” and “White”, which are often politicized and debated categories, are marked with double quotation marks and capitalized in this chapter, as will already have become obvious. Moreover, it is widely known these skin color terms do not correlate in their entirety with the English general color terms *black* and *white* (used for skin color), which are commonly used to describe a person's skin color, as elaborated upon in the text.

- (43) *nit ku weex*
 nit ku weex
 person REL White
 ‘person who is White’ (‘person with White complexion’)
- (44) *nit ku ñuul*
 nit ku ñuul
 person REL Black
 ‘person who is Black’ (‘person with Black complexion’)
- (45) *nit ku xeereer*
 nit ku xeereer
 person REL slightly.light-skinned
 ‘person who is a little bit “light-skinned”’ (‘person with “half dark-half light complexion”’)¹⁵
- (46) *nit ku xees*
 nit ku xees
 person REL have.a.light.complexion
 ‘person who is “light-skinned”’ (‘person with “light complexion”’)

It can be noted that the complexions *ñuul* “Black”, dark, *xeereer* ‘dark-half “light”’ and *xees* “light” can also be associated with ethnic groups that are often associated with one of these categories. The Wolof, for example, are often (in the literature and in public discourse) characterized as *ñuul*, while the Seereer (in central Senegal), the Hal Pulaar or Fulani (in northern Senegal) are considered to be *xees* or *xeereer*, as are the Bedik (in eastern Senegal); the Diola in southern Senegal, a “minority” ethnic group that is said to have originated in Guinea, are also generally associated with the category *xeereer*, etc. However, with inter-ethnic marriages and the skin whitening (or bleaching) of young women, there are more and more Wolof who tend to display “light” (*xees*) or “half-light” (*xeereer*) skin complexions. This point on the link between ethnicity, complexion and practices of categorization can potentially be developed in forthcoming studies, especially by addressing the racialized ideas and colonially reproduced (perceived) distinctions behind them.

15. The distinction between different “complexions” in people’s (emic) perspective on skin color is here a rough approach to different conceptualizations; it becomes obvious that the English equivalents are not fitting translations or exact equivalents. These are listed to explain the perceived “shades” to the non-Wolof-speaking reader.

4.2 Animals

Some animals in Wolof society are described and designated with expressions describing the characteristic color of their hides. This is the case, for example, with horses, which can be referred to with different names depending on the specific color of their skin. This means that in terms of the descriptive colors and shapes used for horses, it is the visual systems of their users that seem to structure them. Pastoralists and farmers communicate and conceptualize all sorts of visual experiences in terms of the appearance of livestock. Characteristics such as brightness and shine, rather than tint, are central to the meaning of some color terms. In addition, the conceptualization of the highly descriptive distinction of “stripes” vs. “spots” used to name a horse is based more on visibility and highlighting effects than on actual geometric form. The Wolof terms correspond to colors, patterns and designs, but they also refer to attributes such as the brightness and shininess of a hide (see Table 12.3). This topic is well researched for numerous African languages and linguacultures.

Table 12.3 Color terminology used for horses and other animals in Wolof

Horse names	Gloss
<i>xacc w-</i>	‘grey horse’
<i>jàkkeer w-</i>	‘chestnut/brown horse’
<i>xëcc w-</i>	‘black and white horse’
<i>jébb w-</i>	‘black or chestnut-colored horse with white spotted legs’
<i>mbéey w-</i>	‘a white horse’
<i>pello b-</i>	‘a horse with a white spot on the forehead’
<i>seereer m-</i>	‘a sheep with albino, white, black or brown coat’
<i>xonq m-</i>	‘hissing snake, <i>Psammophis sibilans</i> ’

5. Conclusion

This analysis of the perception and identification of colors among the Wolof people has shown that color terms in this language can be categorized into two types: basic (elementary) color terms and secondary color terms. The three basic color terms (*ñuul* ‘black’, *weex* ‘white’ and *xonq* ‘red’) may correspond to the criteria set in Berlin and Kay’s (1969) study. The secondary color terms show, however, some degrees of variability, in the sense that different expressions exist for one and the same color. The basic colors or fundamental color terms are also differ-

entiated from the secondary color terms because they are perceived with more prominence than the other colors and have morphological as well as syntactic and semantic characteristics specific to them.

Basic color terms are the only ones to be used with an intensifying adverb. They can be used in derivations, especially with causative or factitive suffixes, among others. They are linked to cultural connotations. The “codability degree” is higher for the basic colors, because they are easily designated in Wolof by actual Wolof terms, whereas the secondary color terms are either lexemes borrowed from French, or words taken from the surrounding languages with possible lexical variants depending on the region where each different Wolof dialect is spoken. Secondary color terms are subject to variation according to the region where a speaker comes from because these are generally terms that stem from nature and the environment of a speaker. In Wolof the lexical item always has a link to something, the word in the utterance very often being socially or materially contextualized. Both primary and secondary colors can be used as verbs, but this can be understood to be due to the “verbalizing character” of the Wolof language.

Moreover, even though Wolof speakers identify and perceive colors and their patterns very well, Wolof does not have a specific term for ‘color.’ The names given to the word color in Wolof (*melo m-* and *wirgo w-* are used) highlight the fact that color belongs to perceptual categories in which are also contained outlines, forms, varieties, patterns, kinds and categories of a concept. Designations are based on perceptual and sociocultural criteria that are different from other languages.



This study has also shown that the Wolof color term system evolved by integrating new words and concepts into the language or by tapping into the Wolof lexemes that were no longer in use. It is certain that with economic and sociocultural development, other terms will appear to designate colors used and adapted in the daily life of the Wolof as they are confronted with modernism and openness to others. As the Wolof say, languages are sometimes “unruly” and “flexible” (as in *lakk dafa sob* ‘language is turbulent’) because they necessarily adapt to the environment in which they are spoken.

This work could have been further enriched had it been based on a comparative and diachronic analysis of the patterns of color terminology in other Senegalese languages, through a more in-depth sociolinguistic, ethnolinguistic and psycholinguistic analysis. This would have helped to better understand the link between tradition, culture, the natural environment of the speaker and the choice of words in the color lexicon in Wolof, but also in other ethnic groups that share historical links with the Wolof. This would also have enabled us to better perceive the motivations for the choices of secondary color terms. The analysis of the perception and explanation of cattle colors in relation to the visual perception of pastoralists could also be further investigated in future studies and research.

Abbreviations

1	1st person	IMPF	imperfective
2	2nd person	NAR	narrative
3	3rd person	OBJ	object
ADV	adverb	PAS	passive
CAUS	causative	PL	plural
CL	classifier	PFV	perfective
CLSG.DEFPR	singular classifier	POS	possessive
COM	comitative	PR	proximity
CONJ	conjunctive	QUA	qualitative
EMCP	emphatic complement	REL	relative pronoun
EMV	emphatic verb	REP	repetitive
FACT	factitive	TAM	time, aspect, modality

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