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BOJE U IDIOMIMA EKONOMSKOG DISKURSA

ON COLOUR IDIOMS IN ECONOMIC DISCOURSE

***Abstract:** Our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical and idiomatic expressions operate in a similar way in almost all languages. Economic discourse is a rich source of colour idioms. General meanings of colours and emotions attached to particular colours can help in understanding colour idioms in economic discourse, although not necessarily. Concepts are rooted in tacit knowledge and majority of idioms are conceptual and not linguistic. Globalisation processes will bring new culture-specific colour idioms into the economic discourse.*

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Colours are powerful signalling system, it is the Nature's own non-verbal language. Feeling livelier in a spring-blooming garden or need to instinctively draw in and hibernate when the sky is grey are simple examples of how colours affect our mood and behaviour. However, the power of primitive instincts, although unconscious, is often underestimated. Here colour psychology ought to be distinguished from colour symbolism, the latter based on natural associations and nowadays arising from cultural and contemporary concepts.

We observe the world in colours and much of our experience consists of metaphors. Colours have traditionally been associated with particular emotions but, for differences among the cultures, we may not immediately work out the proper meaning – particularly in economic discourse. In regards to the sense of touch, colours may appear warm, cool, dry, and wet – this connection was made upon the associations of the sun, fire, water, soil, sky and other earthly elements.

Meanings of colours are complex and on occasion even contradictory. Since globalization picks up speed and global competition is getting tougher and

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fiercer every day, the notion of culture has become even more important. Colours are often culturally associated, thus **green** is connected with Islam (the *Prophet* wore a green robe), but also with money (US banknote is often called *greenback/green*), and political movements and parties in the Western World (*Greenpeace* and *Green Parties* worldwide emphasizing environmentalism). Surprisingly enough, **green** is the colour of betrayal in China. If a wife betrays her husband, he is said to wear a green hat. Men's clothing manufacturers and wholesalers from other parts of the world must bear in mind this old Chinese saying, being a hindrance to selling green items, if they want to do well. On the contrary and on the other side of the world, in Ireland, **green** is considered the colour of luck. Interestingly, in some Far Eastern languages such as Japanese and Vietnamese there is no separate word denoting 'green'. In recent years, there has been a tendency of applying cultural colour knowledge not only to product design, but also in business communications – having gained a better understanding of cultural colour meanings and social conventions, companies now endeavour to adjust their web pages both verbally and visually.

Some contradictory psychological and cultural meanings of colours may result from historical and political associations. In ancient Rome **red** was the colour of generals, peers and emperors and even cloth merchants were not allowed to deal with red clothing material. A long historical journey took place between the time when **yellow** was the symbol of the emperor of China and our time when sensationalism triumphs over facts in '*yellow journalism*'. At European royal courts traditional colour of aristocracy was **purple** for its rareness in nature and very high price. This august status was later inherited by **blue** colour in the Middle Ages.

Red colour has traditionally been linked with socialist and communist parties since the Russian Revolution at the beginning of XX century. However, western cultures looked disapprovingly upon red colour in the sense of politics, although supporters of the Republican Party in the modern USA or the Labour Party in the UK nowadays use red as their official colour.

Religions and myths have also something to do with particular colours. A long time ago there was an ancient myth about Genghis Khan – the blue blood was said to run through his veins. Ancient interplay between the sky (*blue / white*) and the Earth (*red / green*) was transferred into the field of political fights and sport competitions, which may be recognized in the use of particular colours as well. The colour of green was once connected with '*green pastures*' and eternal youth, but later it became associated with stereotypical extraterrestrials and – evil (Chartres Cathedral, France).

From language to language colour terminology can vary a lot. Celtic languages share the same word - '*glas*' - to designate three colours: blue, green and grey. At the same time, they make distinction between the two shades of red: *derg* (bright red) and *ruad* (dull red). In Scottish Gaelic, the word '*gorm*' is

used when describing something blue (e.g. eyes), green (e.g. grass) or even black (e.g. skin). In Serbian the same word is used to specify blond hair and blue eyes – ‘*plav*’, and the Dani language of Indonesia differentiates only two words for basic colours ‘*mili*’ and ‘*mola*’ for cool/dark and warm/light colours respectively.

Since colours fall in and out of fashion, all sorts of manufacturers have to look hard at how the markets respond to their products. In addition, up to 80% of human communication is nonverbal (Zaltman, 1997:424) and subconscious judgements about any new situation or item is made within 90 seconds according to the Institute of Colour Research. The human brain notices colour even before shape or wording (Mortimer, 2004:24), which is of particular importance in advertising and designing new products. While quantitative events in the world of economics are typically understood and explained in metaphoric terms (White, 203:148) such as *growth*, *rise*, *fall*, *sickness*, *blossom*, *freezing bottleneck*, etc, qualitative events may be shown and (mis)understood in colour metaphors.

Generally speaking, red is the warmest colour – in China even brides wear red – and it symbolizes prosperity and joy. Besides fiery heat and warmth, red colour is also associated with burning. Red is considered a symbol of life, vitality, passion, lust and intensity, but also – of rage, fierceness, anger and speed. Surprisingly enough, blushing red is also a natural reaction from embarrassment and shame, directly opposite to courage and bravery. In business and economics red colour may have connection with a negative amount in a bank balance (*in the red*) which, if often repeated, leads to ‘the best overdraft deal’; it can also be related to an unprofitable day (*Red Day*) or to firms deemed unprofitable and given the name of *red* for the colour of ink showing losses on financial statements. It may also remind of bureaucracy and its typical products of procrastination and circumlocution (*red tape*). Red colour warns and denotes the highest degree of urgency (*red alert*), but there are also other colour warning signs – such as blue, purple and black – related to potentially lethal food. It may denote a person/company caught doing something wrong (*red-handed*). It also designates good risk-free Chinese companies (*Red Chips*) and it is used to specify the official speech published on the day of the Budget which can be regarded as the financial statement of a country (*Red Book*). It gives the name to the pathfinder prospectus regarding the flotation of a new company that contains only sufficient details to test the market reaction (*Red Eye*). Use of red in advertising is and has been maybe most frequent of all the colours due to its obtrusiveness. Sometimes even brand names emphasize its power and have expectantly aggressive marketing campaigns (*Red Bull*) or company names indicate that they inject new life through their powerful strategy (*Red Cell*). The colour of red may also have twofold connotations – a *red light* indicates a signal to stop or a danger signal, but a *red-light district* is the area of a town or city with brothels – the same colour with completely adverse role; the above

mentioned *red day* should not be muddled up with *red-letter day* which is a memorably important or happy occasion.

The most common positive connotations of blue colour are peace, calmness, loyalty and intelligence. Blue is the deepest and least material colour. In nature it seems as accumulated air and water emptiness. Thus, negative associations related to blue are coldness, sadness and depression and blue light or environment slows the heartbeat, decreases temperature and completely relaxes the muscles. Consequently, what happens suddenly and unexpectedly is said to come *out of the blue*. Even stocks and bonds that have no value are given the name of *Blue-sky securities*, being worth the same as 'blue sky'. On the other side, *Blue-sky Law* regulates investments to protect investors from being swindled. Companies of the highest quality and in which an investment would be considered as low risk and reliable regarding both capital values and dividend incomes are also 'of this colour' – they are named *Blue Chips / Blue Chip companies* and originally referred to blue counters used in poker, which had a higher value than other tokens (Smith, 1995:51). In addition, physical labour was also connected with blue colour – the term *blue-collar job* is now rarely used, but has traditionally been referred to blue overalls worn in factories. In Australian English manual workers or working-class is also connected with blue in term *blue-singlet*. Unexpectedly enough, blue colour is getting closer to brainstorming and generating ideas, to kinds of job traditionally known as *white-collar jobs* for long – *blueshirts* are now employees of the company IBM and the *Extreme Blue* program is their incubator for talent, technology and business innovation.

While talking about 'green', the first association is related to the concern for the environment, then to balance and good luck, but green also has some negative connotations such as jealousy (*green with envy; green-eyed*), illness, greed, and corruption. Since 'green' contains the powerful energies of nature, fertility and growth, in business vocabulary 'green' is also connected with potential for growth designating such small companies (*Green Chips*), and environmental friendliness expressed in bans imposed on work threatening the natural environment or a historically significant area (*green ban*), or in taxes discouraging harmful business behaviour to the environment (*green taxes*), in supply of new open box and refurbished networking equipment (*green market*), and in marketing that highlights environmentally friendly policies and achievements (*green marketing*). Sectors such as green technology innovation, clean technologies and energy efficiency are often addressed within a framework of *green business*. On the contrary, display of concern for the environment shown by organizations may be insincere or superficial (*greenwash*), and green colour sometimes brings some 'black' connotations such as in a situation of purchasing enough of a company's stock and threatening with takeover (*greenmail*) – which is nothing but a usual blackmail, since the threatened company buys back its shares at higher price and a threatening one makes a

quick profit. However, green is a 'go' colour and often used along with red as opposites – not only on the colour wheel or traffic lights – the former meaning 'go forward' and the latter meaning 'stop', although in Old French a single term was used for both red and green. Some cultures have no word for particular colours – in Chinese a phrase meaning 'red-red-green-green' is used to describe something colourful. Between these two, we are to find the way to protect 'the blue planet' (Earth) from 'little green men' (Martians) who are actually inhabitants of 'the red planet' (Mars), simultaneously trying to save the planet by cutting 'greenhouse gasses' and to solve the puzzle: The greenhouse is made of glass and is not green at all!

Since our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical and it not only influences our language, but also our everyday activities and our interaction with other people (Lakof & Johnson, 1980:3), it is not odd that yellow colour – being the colour of the sun and the easiest colour to see – symbolizes joy and happiness. But, apart from the previous colours mentioned here, yellow is not largely used in business vocabulary. While sunlight, creativity, confidence and wealth are positive connotations of yellow, it is sometimes used for its negative associations, e.g. hazard, deceit, cowardice and anxiety. The colloquial name for *Admission of Securities to Listing – Yellow Book* – resulted from the positive connotations, regulating the admission and obligations of companies with listed securities at the London Stock Exchange. In the USA, prices and information on bonds are given on so-called *yellow sheets*. On the other side, the same colour is used in the *yellow-dog contract* which is now illegal in the USA, but once presumed the agreement between an employer and an employee in which the latter agreed not to be a member of the labour union. Similarly, *yellow-dog clause* prevent an employee from working for other employers in the same industry, and both remind of acts of cowardice and inhumanity, producing lots of silent resentment. This dual symbolism originated from the ancient Greece. A yellow golden apple was given to Aphrodite by Paris as a symbol of love, but there was another apple of the same colour – the Apple of Discord – which eventually led to the Trojan War.

Brown is not largely used in economic discourse – besides *brown goods* including TVs, radios, hi-fis, computers and other electrical goods used for entertainment, *Brownfield* is the term generally related to land in towns that was previously used for industry and is currently unused, distinguishing it from *Greenfield* site as a piece of land that has not previously been built on – a virgin site. Furthermore, two forms of investments got their names the same way – *Greenfield investment* as a foreign direct investment entering into developing countries to build new factories or stores and *Brownfield investment* presuming purchasing or leasing existing production facilities to launch a new production activity. There is also an interesting entry of this 'colour of earth, wood or coffee' – *brownie points* – which is a notional mark of achievement or approval from the boss for doing extra work. Although the symbolism of brown colour is

mainly negative and it might be considered on the dull side, it represents earthiness and wholesomeness but not necessarily – dirt and decay. In Roman and Catholic world brown was generally the colour of poverty and submission, in Ireland it was connected with the underworld and army, and in Nazi Germany the fascists wore brown shirts which were counted as evidence of sadism and brutality. In business world of today *blue* is the typical corporate colour, but there are some examples of building the business around the dependability associated with – *brown!* *United Parcel Service* is an example – the world's largest package delivery company, managing the flow of goods, funds and information.

Some expressions operate in a similar way in almost all languages. ***Black market*** is one such expression dealing with buying and selling of merchandise illegally – no matter if the goods are illegal, prohibited or stolen (weapons, illegal drug trade, etc.) or they are legal goods sold illicitly to avoid tax payments or licensing requirements (firearms, cigarettes, etc.). As a general rule of thumb, if the price is too good to be true, then it comes from a ***black market!*** Since the affairs are conducted outside the law, involving bribery, forgery, piracy and other forms of malpractice, all of which are performed 'in the dark' – the origin of the term is not mysterious and uncertain. Similarly, the ***grey market*** refers to the flow of goods through distribution channels which are not authorized by their manufacturers. Goods at grey market are in short supply and they are imported and offered for sale at lower prices than the equivalents produced in the home country. These markets are generally legal but they are considered morally wrong. However, the same expression may be used for the activity of buying and selling company shares that have not been issued – before they are officially available. Grey colour is, on the other hand, often connected with elderly population as in expressions ***grey population, grey vote, grey pound*** and ***grey-hair investment***, the last of which is used for a company that is potentially profitable and a good investment but the fruits of the investment should be available when the investor's hair is – grey! Sometimes widely-known expressions change their original meaning. Thus, ***grey matter***, once used to express intelligence and the brain, in business nowadays stands for older and more experienced business experts hired by newly established companies to give an impression of seriousness and dependability.

An interesting thing appeared while dealing with 'colour knighthood' in business discourse. As in old fairy tales, the epic battle between Good and Bad has not been softened or sentimentalised over the time, but simply re-fashioned and updated. Three knights are now on the move: the least adorable one – ***black knight***, a person or firm making an unwelcome takeover bid for a company; the welcome counter bidder for the target company – ***white knight***; and an ambiguous intervener whose appearance is not welcome to all – ***grey knight***. Not much of the ethos and ideas of mediaeval knighthood and chivalry among them – at all!

While talking about white, the colour of purity and innocence, it should be pointed out that not everything is clean and ‘white’ at the same time, even when complete honesty and good moral mean *whiter than white*. At least once in a lifetime we might have been eyewitnesses to, or even worse – offered or accepted – a *white bribe*. A nice term used for the popular “coffee-money” envelope, in business sometimes in connection with *whitemail* – a takeover target’s sale of its own shares at a bargain price to a friendly party. Such envelope is seen as a sign of gratitude and satisfaction, but not all gifts are that invisible and discreet. A white elephant used to be given as a present to somebody not liked by the king in Siam. The person then had to spend all their money on looking after the rare animal still widely venerated in East Asia. The idiom ‘*white elephant*’ is now used to describe a rare, expensive possession that is a financial burden to maintain. Back to our households, much smaller *white goods* are large appliances as refrigerators or cookers, formerly finished with white enamel, but now they all come in vast array of colours and are not necessarily white.

Emotionally, not everything is the way it first appears. General meaning of colours is often expected in colour idioms as well, but, as may be seen above, this is not by the book. To be *in the pink* or to see *pink elephants* still implies good health and physical condition or something not seen by a stone-cold sober one. Expectantly enough, a *pink-collar job* is a term for a position held by a young woman, but, on the other side, *pink advertising* is aimed at homosexual people in hope to attract their money, whatever currency it might be (*pink dollar, pink pound*, etc). However, pink is not always a gay and feminine colour. An employee who has been given a *pink slip* is officially told that their employment is – ended! Similarly, to *be in black* is not expected to be more favourable position than to *be in red*, although black is associated with pain and sorrow and red is often related to passion, life and vitality. Not at the bank account where it is preferable to be *in the black* – not to be in debt, but in financially profitable condition. Thus, the figurative interpretation cannot be determined through analysis of the meanings of individual words, but through general colour associations instead.

There was an interesting survey trying to find a correlation between a specific colour and some words that do not inherently assume to be linked to any specific colour, such as trust, security, speed and high-technology (Joe Hallock, web site). Traditionally, blue was correlated to sadness and depression (Birren, 2006: 170) and is not to be expected that correlation between sadness and trust could be found. However, most participants choose blue as the colour of ‘trust’ – a strong belief in the honesty and goodness of somebody/something. The same colour was chosen as a relational tie to ‘security’, probably because of the fact that security is hard to establish without trust. Energizing effect that calls for actions resulted in picking red as the highly predominant colour of ‘speed’, and although black colour traditionally represents darkness, depression and death

(Birren, 2006: 143), it has been chosen as the colour close to ‘high-quality’ and ‘high-technology’. At some deeper levels one can find a connection between the decency and elegance of the stylish black clothes and ‘high’-class of whatever. With non-verbal associations, as with figurative language, there is the same problem – we cannot always predict the destination of meaning extension (Holme, 2004:97).

There is no doubt that economic discourse is a rich source of colour idioms. Along with the processes of globalization, they tend to be culturally independent but generally they are imposed by the western countries and their tradition. Since words become more collocationally fixed in the Business English environment (Nelson, 2006: 232) which is true of both ‘business-related’ and of general words, certain patterns of colours used in idioms in economics can be noticed. In addition, idioms are not to be treated as non-decomposable arbitrary units, but to be explored beyond their figurative sense into the literal sense of their constituents (Boers, 2001: 41). General meanings of colours and emotions traditionally attached to particular colours can help in breaking a ‘code’ of colour idioms in economic discourse. Insipid and dull colours may not always convey the meaning of negativity and of low standards or quality (*grey knight, brownie points*) and, on the other hand, light shades and rich hues are not inevitably positive (*pink slip, greenmail, red tape*). In some cases when the meaning of an idiom is not interpreted or understood on emotional grounds, only the explanation of its origin can help proper understanding (*yellow-dog contract, white elephant*). The figurative meanings of idioms, thus, may be immediately accessed, understood, or at least discerned when these expressions are read or heard in appropriate discourse contexts (Gibbs, 1995: 286). The point is in avoiding lengthy explanations and in higher memorability ratings. As linguistic phenomena, colour idioms in economic discourse are used not only for artistic and rhetorical purposes, but for the creative economy of language as well.

Since pure idioms must have constituent elements from which the overall meaning of the whole is not deducible (Fernando, Flavell, 1981: 30), colour idioms in economic discourse can be generally classified into the transparent (*black market*) or semi-transparent (*pink-collar worker*) categories, while some of them are completely opaque (*white elephant*). The more idioms are grounded in culture-specific knowledge, the greater is the chance that cross-cultural differences may be a hindrance in applying imagery technique and breaking the idiom code. Yet, most idioms are products of our conceptual system and not simply a matter of language or lexicon. In other words, the majority of idioms are conceptual, and not linguistic, in nature (Kovecses, Szabo, 1996: 330). That is why idioms of the same meaning are often composed of the same words in different languages – the concepts being rooted in tacit knowledge. Intensified globalisation – worldwide flows of resources, goods,

information – will surely bring some new culture-specific colour idioms into the economic discourse.

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