

“WHITE AND BLACK IN ENGLISH: A COGNITIVE-SEMANTIC AND SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS”

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Abstract

This article investigates the semantic, idiomatic, and symbolic uses of the *white* and *black* color terms in English. Adopting a cognitive-semantic and discourse-analytic approach, it examines how *white* and *black* function as metaphors, moral symbols, and evaluative devices in modern English. The study draws on psycholinguistic experiments, corpora of idioms, and literary examples. It finds that while *white* and *black* maintain a strong dual opposition in morality and aesthetics, their use is nuanced by context, allowing for ambivalence, reversal, or metaphorical extension.

Keywords: color semantics, metaphor, white, black, English idioms, moral symbolism

Introduction

Color terms, especially *white* and *black*, have long held a privileged position in language and culture: they often stand not only for visual properties but also for moral, aesthetic, and emotional values (Berlin & Kay, 1969). In English, the color words *white* and *black* are deeply embedded in idiomatic expressions (e.g. *white lie*, *black sheep*), metaphors (*white as purity*, *black as evil*), and moral discourse (e.g. *black and white morality*).

Psycholinguistic research suggests that automatic associations exist between *white* and moral purity, and *black* and immorality or wrongdoing (Meier, D’Agostino, & McCullough, cited in “The Color of Sin” studies). Yet, this binary mapping is not rigid: contexts can invert, complicate, or subvert such associations.

This study aims to (1) survey the idiomatic and metaphorical uses of *white* and *black* in English, (2) examine psycholinguistic evidence of their moral associations, and (3) analyze cases where the standard mapping is contested or reversed (e.g. *white* in negative senses, *black* in positive senses).

Methods

This research combines three primary methods:

Idiomatic corpus analysis: Selection of common English idioms containing *white* or *black* (e.g. *white lie*, *white knight*, *black sheep*, *black market*, *in black and white*, *blackout*) and examination of their semantic behavior.

Literature and poetry examples: Analysis of literary and poetic uses of *white* and *black*, particularly in modern poetry, to illustrate symbolic extensions (e.g. Torhovets’s examination of black/white symbolism in English poetry).

Psycholinguistic experimental studies: Review of published experiments linking color cues with moral or evaluative judgments (e.g. “The Color of Sin: White and Black Are Perceptual Symbols of Moral Purity and Pollution”).

Critical discourse analysis: Identification of instances where *white* or *black* deviate from standard connotations, and exploration of how those deviations negotiate meaning. These combined approaches allow a multi-level analysis—lexical, figurative, psychological, and discursive.

Results

English offers a rich inventory of idiomatic expressions using *white* and *black*. Examples and their semantic tendencies include:

- *White lie* — a lie considered harmless or socially acceptable; *white teal* (honorific term)
- *White knight* — a rescuer or savior
- *White-collar* — referring to professional/office class
- *In black and white* — clearly, unambiguously written; sometimes contrasted with *in red* (i.e., debt)
- *Black sheep* — a deviant or unwanted member of a group
- *Black market* — illicit trade
- *Blackout* — loss of consciousness or suppression of broadcast
- *Blacklist* — list of entities disallowed or shunned

Idioms overwhelmingly show *white* as positive, moral, clean, visible, while *black* rows in with danger, hidden, forbidden, negative.

However, some idioms complicate this. For instance, “blackmail” does not literally refer to color but to extortion; *black box* (in engineering or computing) denotes opacity (untrackable) rather than moral negativity. Also, *black mood* may refer to sadness rather than evil.

A more systematic typology is given by Amanj & Muhammad (2023) in a comparative study: idioms with *white* and *black* are categorized by degrees of semantic transparency (transparent, semi-transparent, opaque).

The well-known set of experiments reported in “The Color of Sin” shows implicit associations: in reaction tasks, people more quickly associate *white* with words like *honest*, *pure*, *innocent*, and *black* with *evil*, *sin*, *guilt* (cited in PMC article).

These findings support the hypothesis that *white* and *black* operate as perceptual symbols in the moral domain, at least in English-speaking populations. Yet the experiments also note context dependence: when counterexamples are primed (e.g. *white elephant*), associations weaken.

In contemporary English poetry, *white* typically signals positive states (innocence, light, transcendence), while *black* signals negative or internal states (darkness, despair).

However, poetic use often juxtaposes or fuses them—e.g. contrast *black* with chromatic colors, or use them as complementary forces rather than strict opposition (white/black as dynamic balance).

Moreover, the broader cultural metaphor of *black-and-white dualism* is pervasive: conceptual metaphors like *light = good*, *dark = evil* are typical in Western philosophy and religious narratives (also documented in general accounts of black-and-white dualism).

Though dominant connotations are strong, English sometimes reverses or nuances them. For example:

- *White elephant* (a burden, costly gift) has negative meaning for *white*.
- *Black is beautiful*, a slogan in African-American culture, reclaims *black* positively.
- In fashion, *black* is elegant, formal, chic (e.g. *little black dress*).
- *White as pale* can be negative when describing skin (e.g. *turn white with fear*).

Thus, context, pragmatics, and metaphorical framing modulate or even invert default associations.

Discussion

The data confirms that *white* and *black* in English are deeply entrenched as moral and evaluative symbols, not merely as perceptual descriptors. The idioms and metaphors map onto a culturally shared moral binary: *white* as purity, openness, innocence; *black* as danger, hiddenness, immorality. Psycholinguistic evidence suggests these associations are processed (at least implicitly) by native speakers.

Yet the rigidity of the binary is softened in discourse. Idiomatic and poetic uses allow flexibility: *white* may carry negative senses (e.g. *white elephant*), *black* may be revalorized in certain subcultures (e.g. *black is beautiful*) or used in neutral technical senses (*black box*). These deviations show that metaphorical systems are negotiable; culture, genre, and pragmatic intention affect meaning.

The presence of reversal or ambiguity also points to the possibility that not all speakers or contexts subscribe to the *light = good*, *dark = bad* mapping. It resonates with contemporary critiques of racialized color metaphors (though those issues are outside the strict scope of this article).

From a cognitive semantics viewpoint, *white* and *black* function as **conceptual metaphors** (e.g. *MORALITY IS LIGHT / IMMORALITY IS DARKNESS*) and also as **metonymic gateways** to extended evaluative domains. Their meanings are not static but mediated by context, frequency, idiomaticization, and cultural discourse.

Conclusion

This article has traced how *white* and *black* operate in English as rich semantic and symbolic systems. While they are entrenched in a moral dualism, their actual usage is more flexible: idioms, poetry, and pragmatic inversion can subvert, moderate, or reframe standard connotations.

Future research might include corpus-based frequency studies (how often different idiomatic senses appear), cross-cultural comparison (e.g. English vs. non-European languages), or psycholinguistic experiments with bilingual speakers to see how color morality mappings transfer or diverge across languages.

References

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