
**Further Reflections on the Unity and Diversity of the Human Mind**

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Professor Sir Geoffrey Lloyd’s contributions over the past decades to Greek intellectual history and the history of science are immense. Moreover, he has made remarkable efforts also within the field of comparative Greek/Chinese studies. Having established himself as one of the most prolifically productive writers on the classics of Greek and Roman intellectual history in a remarkably broad sense, Lloyd has now written extensively also on ancient Chinese culture. Together with Nathan Sivin he wrote the very ambitious comparative survey of Greek versus Chinese history of science, *The Way and the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). On his own he continued with *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and *The Delusions of Invulnerability* (London: Duckworth, 2005).

All this enables him to view cultural history from an unusually well-informed, broadened comparative perspective that includes a refreshing detailed interest in matters of natural science. Lloyd’s books are always engaging and highly readable. The present work *Cognitive Variations: Reflections on the Unity and Diversity of the Human Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) is certainly no exception. The questions he lines up and addresses with his customary polite erudition and conciliatory intellec-
tual diplomacy are invariably of more than ephemeral or purely “academic” interest.

Take the matter of spatial orientation, finding one’s way. It is common knowledge that in Peking one expects to be given objective directions in terms of turning north and south, whereas in Canton one certainly expects to be told to turn right or left, as the case may be. How exactly does this matter, cognitively? This is the book where one is given a splendidly lucid introduction to subjects of this order of generality and human relevance. (See Stephen C. Levinson, *Space in Language and Cognition: Explorations in Cognitive Diversity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Does it matter to our perception of the whale that our language, like most others, mistakes it for a fish? How do folk terminologies relate to scientific terminologies? What is it, in the first place, that marks out scientific terminologies versus folk terminologies? These are crucial questions that Lloyd invites us to ask with healthy intellectual persistence.

Do we actually tend to feel emotions just because we happen to have a name for them? And as a more general point of the ethnography of emotions: do the conceptual repertoires for the emotions have a significant impact on our emotional lives? And indeed, while one is at it: would people have felt quite as melancholic before Dürer and Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*? (And also: do children fail to be jealous until they learn a word for jealousy?)

Can we strongly and distinctly feel different emotions without having distinct names for them? What is the status of the current notions of physical and mental well-being as we take them for granted in our medical science and in our medical practice? Are these Western parochialisms imposed everywhere together with Coca-Cola, as an integral part of the Coca-colonisation of “other” minds?

Are there such things as universals of self-construal, construals of agency, or of causation? Or do we have here contingent structures that evolved in Europe while it was in ascendance, and that spread throughout the world while Europe still was culturally dominant, now to be ideologically rejected as Europe has become old Europe, degenerate and effete? Is the division between realms of Nature and of Culture a cognitive universal? If not, then why exactly do we feel entitled to apply it everywhere as anthropologists? Are all human cultures equally rational, basically? What are the diversities of rational behaviour and rational thinking on the globe?

Lloyd’s answers to broad and thoroughly worthwhile questions of this order are “Aristotelian” throughout. He sets up the biologistic universalist (who focusses on the fact that humans are biologically very much the same, across cultures and races) against the culturalistic relativist (who is impressed by the observation that everything is culturally contextual and
ultimately incommensurable). He does not care very much whether there really are neat representatives of any of these extremes. And then, very much in the Aristotelian manner, and not surprisingly, Lloyd tends to conclude everywhere that such extreme positions are wrong, and that sophisticated methodologies are needed to find empirical answers that lie appropriately in-between these postulated extremes that no one holds. The truth tends in every case to be the empirically disputable golden mean that recognises both the need to explore the biological universals, and, at the same time, to probe into the depths of cultural variation wherever and whenever any of these can be established empirically or philologically.

Lloyd’s book is a summation of many decades of reflection on the problems of de-parochialising and de-occidentalising the study of the Greek and Roman classics, and of accommodating in the purview of intellectual history other civilisations, especially the abundantly documented Chinese intellectual and cultural experience.

What he likes to call the “psychic” unity of mankind is conveniently demonstrated by the ability of humans to learn to communicate across cultural boundaries, and indeed to learn any language in the first place. We are clearly not sufficiently different from each other to prevent us from learning each other’s languages everywhere across the globe. The universal learnability even of “exotic” languages is demonstrated particularly well by those who explain where these languages are untranslatable: they would not know exactly what was untranslatable if they had not been able to learn sufficiently much about what is untranslatable in order to diagnose that untranslatability.

Donald Davidson insisted, in conversation, and I believe also somewhere in writing, on the translatability of everything into English. But such translatability (or should we perhaps suggest he should have said paraphrasability) is in fact inessential in the present argumentative context. From a cognitive science point of view it is learnability that is at issue.

In Par-delà culture et nature (“Beyond Culture and Nature”) (Paris: Gallimard, 2005) Philippe Descola manages to elaborate four profoundly different ontologies in beautiful French. He does not have to leave the French universe of discourse in order to specify these four radically incompatible ontologies. These ontologies, to the extent that Descola does justice to them, are not sufficiently radically distant and “other” for this presentation to have seemed impossible to him. This is not to say that French provides an impeccably neutral vantage point on all cultures. But French does tend to be able to provide an angle on the profound difference between ontologies as described by Descola.

The question now arises concerning the symmetry of this relation of translatability and expressibility, or on the equipollence of human languages. Michelle Z. Ronaldo, Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self
and Social Life (Cambridge: CUP, 1980) does manage to explain painlessly, in readable English, what she takes to be some Ilongot ways of thinking. But are we to assume that the Ilongot language equips the speakers of Ilongot to translate his book into Ilongot, and equally painlessly? It is not good enough to answer this question while comfortably seated in one’s philosophical theoretical armchair. The experience-based anthropology is what we need. See the epilogue by Clifford Geertz, “Making experience, authoring selves”, in the important volume of Victor W. Turner and Edmund M. Bruner (eds.), The Anthropology of Experience (Urbana and Chicago: Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 373-381).

Would a modern Chinese translation of Descola or Ronaldo provide a completely different Chinese angle on these different ontologies? From extensive experience with modern Chinese translations of Western books one should think not. But whether Thomas Aquinas Summa theologiae is or is not radically untranslatable into classical Chinese is a question that does need a careful answer based on close philological analysis and that very much remains a philosophical desideratum.

Consider now, just for the sake of argument, the task of translating Descola’s work into Shang dynasty oracle bone inscription Chinese (OBI). One is sure the deed cannot be done. The vocabulary of OBI Chinese is far too limited. The syntactic means provided by the language are far too narrowly constrained. The rhetorical devices available are far too restricted. The language does seem radically inadequate to the task.

One may object that OBI is only a limited linguistic code, not really a complete language. We do not, in fact, know much about the spoken language of Shang times.

Very well, then. Let us consider the early archaic Chinese language of the Book of Songs and the Book of Documents. Here we have a much better idea of what may have been sayable Chinese at the time, during the early to mid-first millennium BC. But even in this case one feels sure the deed still cannot be done. The vocabulary is far too limited, the abstract nature of the discourse could not be plausibly reproduced in Early Archaic Chinese.

The radical changes in the Chinese language that were necessary to make Descola’s or Ronaldo’s work translatable were introduced systematically during the early twentieth century. It was then that a high degree of intertranslatability of the language with English was made possible by a radical internationalised anglicisation of Modern Standard Chinese on the basis of Japanese precedents.

There is not just cognitive diversity, there is a radical asymmetry here of cognitive diversity. Languages are not equal. Some are much more equal than others. International de-anglicised basic conference koiné English rules the day. Hence the asymmetric cultural flow between languages.
But from the cognitive science angle, quite properly adopted by Lloyd, such interesting issues of the asymmetry of intertranslatability are not in fact proof of cognitive variation at all. The essential cognitive assumption is that just as we confidently expect an Ilongot child to be able quite naturally to learn to read Ronaldo’s book about the Ilongot people in English, so we do find it quite conceivable that Ronaldo has learnt enough about Ilongot cognitive schemes for his book—if indeed he has taken the philological trouble to do so properly. We may in fact also confidently assume that a Shang dynasty child, if miraculously transported to the twentieth century and to Cambridge, England, would have been able learn to read both Lloyd on the Chinese and Ronaldo on the Ilongot.

One must not confuse the crucial biologically programmed abstract cognitive ability to learn (about) something on the one hand, with the biologically inessential concrete linguistic ability (for example in Ilingot or in English) to articulate this (basically learnable) thing in a natural way.

When it comes to the linguistic ability to express things naturally and easily, cognitive variation changes significantly through the history of a given language, and it varies disconcertingly across linguistic cultures. Languages are highly unequal with respect to their ability to express things. Hence the excessively asymmetric flow of linguistic loans even between Greek and Latin, not to speak of French and Russian. Hence also the development of Latin from a peasant idiom to a highly sophisticated linguistic medium for the expression of abstract thought through conscious and systematic emulation of Greek.

When it comes to the biologically determined cognitive ability to learn languages, establishing such variations is much more difficult than establishing the manifest linguistic abilities: children are biologically able to learn literally any language whatsoever, even under the universally prevalent conditions of severe stimulus poverty during their childhood.

The difficulty of distinguishing carefully—and at all times—between the cognitive and the linguistic issues of variation has made things very difficult within this field of study.

Lloyd maintains: “The relativist will compare the way in which no one natural language can be judged more adequate to communication than any other.” (p. 3) But even stages of the same language differ radically from each other, later stages of that very same language having become radically more adequate to communication than earlier ones. Old Gothic was, of course, a splendid and a very impressive language, but there is no doubt that it was less adequate to communication even than Middle High German, not to speak of modern German. The German language radically increased its expressive power and thereby its adequacy to complex communication through borrowings of all kinds from Latin and Greek, not to speak of French and later English. The loans were made in the language
because the speakers felt they improved German for purposes of communication where German was felt to be insufficient. But if languages increase so manifestly in their expressive power through lexical as well as grammatical borrowing (as well as by other autochthonous means and indigenous developments) then the relativist is plainly wrong; languages differ in expressive power and they are manifestly found to grow by emulation as well as by internal autochthonous creative mechanisms.

Language cannot be a stable determining factor of thought from which one cannot escape, if only because language constantly and often very effectively, escapes from its indigent predicament through loans as well as syntactic emulation of other languages that are sufficiently neatly felt to be less indigent on a given point.

However, such cultural variation is circumscribed by biological commonalities. The relativist focusses on that manifest cultural variation. The universalist focusses on those equally manifest biological commonalities. Plainly, the relativist and the universalist might learn important things from each other. Commendably, Lloyd aims to encourage this mutual learning process.

Lloyd’s book is very rich in content, far too rich to allow one to provide even a general survey of its wide-ranging content: he covers spatial cognition (ch. 2), the natural kinds of animals and plants (ch. 3), the emotions (ch. 4), health and well-being (ch. 5), the self: agency and causation (ch. 6), nature versus culture (ch. 7), and reason itself (ch. 8). Let me stay, then, with that notoriously controversial issue of colour terminology.

I can only comment on most issues Lloyd raises as one of those “general readers” lacking the decades of professional endeavour needed to read and to judge the vast literature in the fields he covers with such magisterial poise and judgment.

The biological equipment to perceive colour would seem to be pretty much identical throughout the healthy and normal human population on earth. Colour terminologies can be more or less complex and difficult, but we all seem, indeed, reasonably well-equipped to learn each other’s colour vocabulary, whatever language we speak.

But, having said that, do the colour words in the language one has learnt make a difference to one’s subjective colour perception? Do you find things just as distinctly mauve, purple, crimson or pink without having a word for mauve or pink? Do we remember the set of things mauve or pink just as well when we do not have a word for mauve or pink? Does the presence of a word like “crimson” help in recognising this shade and distinguishing it memorably and learnably from purple? Does it really make no cognitive difference whether you do or do not have those words purple, crimson, and mauve? Is there no cognitive progress in distinct colour perception in children as they learn more colour words? Does the
learning of such words not add anything to children’s sensitivity or to the distinctive variety of colour experience? And if it does not help, cognitively, to learn such words, why do English children traditionally bother and waste their time learning them from their elders? Is that learning process really cognitively vacuous?

All these engaging questions arise in splendid clarity as one is reading Lloyd’s book. And such issues are fascinating not only from some narrow academic point of view. Lloyd’s issues rise above disciplinary boundaries. He has written a very engaging and inspiring book for the famous “general reader”.

The subject was felt of interest already by the author of the pseudo-Aristotelian book On colours, of which Prantl produced a wonderfully detailed commented edition that includes a comprehensive survey on ancient Greek views and theories on the colours and on colour perception. Our reflections, then, on the problem of colours may usefully start out not with the famous Berlin and Kay, Basic Color Terms (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) as in Lloyd’s book, but actually with pseudo-Aristotle as presented in Carl Prantl, Aristoteles ueber die Farben: Erläutert durch eine Uebersicht der Farbenlehre der Alten (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1849) which Lloyd never mentions but surely knows all about.

Nine years later, in 1858, William Gladstone, Prime Minister as well as consummate Homeric scholar, wrote extensively on colour terminology in his three volume set Homer (1858, vol. 3, pp. 457-499), and he suggested a historical development from luminosity towards hue-proper in colour terminology in Greek history.

William Gladstone is not mentioned in Lloyd’s index and I have not found any reference to him in the book, but I find it worthwhile to record his views in detail, if only because they seem to me to be much more philologically lucid than what I have found in the literature Lloyd does discuss:

I. The paucity of his colours.
II. The use of the same word to denote not only different hues or tints of the same colour, but colours which, according to us, are essentially different.
III. The description of the same object under epithets of colour fundamentally disagreeing one from the other.
IV. The vast predominance of the most crude and elemental forms of colour, black and white, over every other, and the decided tendency to treat other colours as simply intermediate modes between these extremes.
V. The slight use of colour in Homer, as compared with other elements of beauty, for the purpose of poetic effect, and its absence in
certain cases where we might confidently expect to find it (vol. III, p. 458).

Elsewhere Gladstone summarises, again very lucidly:

I conclude, then, that the organ of colour and its impressions were but partially developed among the Greeks of the heroic age. In lieu of this, Homer seems to have had, directly some crude conceptions of colour derived from the elements; secondly and principally, a system in lieu of colour, founded upon light and upon darkness, its opposite or negative. (ibid. p. 488)

I quote Gladstone at such length because in the detail of his work he is manifestly trying to understand the challenging specificities of the language he is studying rather than to subsume that language under any ready-made theoretical categories of his own. This is NOT to suggest that Gladstone was a relativist. It is just to acknowledge gratefully that he was a careful and thoughtful philosophically-minded philologist. And I am disappointed to find that his crucial contribution to the history of colour terminology goes unnoticed in Lloyd’s splendidly documented book.

During the rest of the nineteenth century a very considerable literature combined a keen interest in cognitive biology with historical philology and conceptual history, on which Guy Deutscher, Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010, pp. 79ff), dwells with such malicious suffisance in his highly entertaining book. Pre-Berlin and Kay literature on colour terminology was no way as ante-diluvian as post-Berlin and Kay discussion might make one believe.

The question is not whether there is or is not a strictly common biological physiological base for colour perception and for the making of colour terminologies. There surely is. The question is what impact the culturally distinct styles of deployment of these biologically determined identical faculties have on human experience.

What we need to try to reconstruct are the patterns in the changing and evolving cognitive subjectivities among the peoples of the world. One of the issues (focused on by Berlin and Kay) is whether underlying the manifest differences among repertoires of colour terminology one can reconstruct a biologically determined invariant underlying pattern in the structure and the development of colour terminologies throughout the world. This is very much an empirical philological question, which must be answered on the basis of cognitive variations between a maximal diversity of completely unanglicised linguistic cultures and language speakers. Sensitive philological and longue durée historical studies of this sort do not abound. Harold Conklin (1955) provides a splendidly sensitive example of
such description that we have all too few of, although he has not much history to go back to. He reports that the classification of colours among the Hununoo of the Philippines is radically different from our own. There are four basic colour terms: (a) (ma)lagtiʔ covers English ‘white’, but also all other light tints; (b) (ma)biru covers ‘black’, but also dark tints of other colours; (c) (ma)raraʔ covers approximately ‘red’, ‘orange’ and ‘maroon’; and (d) (ma)latuyʔ covers the range of ‘yellow’, and light tints of ‘green’ and ‘brown’. Furthermore, their classification is based on the wet/dry axis, which is different from that of brightness/intensity.

Lloyd takes as his point of departure the work of Berlin and Kay (1969) and the reactions this book provoked. This justly famous study was based largely on interviews conducted by non-native speakers of English, in English, with westernised informants (many of them students at American universities, specifically Berkeley—as reported by Eleonor Rosch of Berkeley University). Naturally, such interview arrangements prove precious little about those pristine monolinguals talking naturally to each other who, from Kant’s point of view and indeed from mine, should have held our main interest.

Such indigenous non-anglicised discourse would give us an idea of indigenous subjectivities other than the questions we impose on the material by our generalist methodology of questioning. Of particular interest will be the metalinguistic perspectives: how do the non-anglicised indigenous people define colours for each other (and not: how do they translate them into English for the outside investigator). Good colour-term ethnography should try to let the non-anglicised native speakers “speak for themselves”.

As Lloyd points out, we need something radically better than anglophone-indigenous responses to American questionnaires based on commercial American Munsell chips. Preferably, we need to listen very carefully to all these “others” (not only the dead Greeks of the past) talking among themselves and to themselves about colour and colours, eliciting their natural range of “basic colour term” use. We might, then, come to understand something of how their different discourses relate to each other and to our own, and we might then find out, very slowly, to what extent all these discourses fit, or fail to fit, into any general scheme of basic colour schemes. And, crucially, we always need to observe colour discourse at a stage where it is absolutely above suspicion of any interference whatsoever from that now-dominant medium of de-anglicised basic global koinê English that defines current academic discourse. Preferably, we should like to observe the use of basic colour terminology in a context of longue durée in order to see to what extent the lexical developments revealed by historical philologists and linguists do or do not conform to any such generalisations as those provided in Berlin and Kay (1969).
And, leaving aside historical considerations, bilingual anglophone informants are not the only ones that must be strictly excluded on the subtle matters under investigation here. Even those who have been taught by bilingual speakers can be problematic on subtle matters of terminology. In a rapidly globalised world our relevant informants are more and more difficult to find. Conversely, the informants that do become accessible to us are more and more likely to confirm us in our anglocentric preconceived categories: fewer and fewer aboriginals we interview will not directly or indirectly have been exposed to English or Western discourse on colour. The longer we wait for our confirmation of the data, the more likely we are to get indirectly westernised confirmation of our Western preconceptions.

On the Very Concept of “Colour”

To start with, one would have to try to find out what distinctions unanglicised native speakers of widely varying languages make within the general semantic field that in English is populated by such words as “colour, hue, shade, tint, tone, coloration, pigmentation, sheen, saturation, surface texture, etc.”, and which in French will contain such current items as “colorant, coloration, coloris, enluminure, teint, teinte, teinture, ton, tonalité, truculence, couleur”. If we are invited to believe that all humans are biologically programmed to separate out hue from saturation, brightness, and surface structure as a cognitive dimension, then I should politely decline that invitation. It is an empirical question of modern and classical philology to determine to what extent cultures do converge on their development of “colour terminologies” that would make them strictly comparable to each other and to English in particular. It is a manifestly empirical philological question to what extent different languages construe the very concept of colour in a sufficiently converging way to enable comparison between them.

The preliminary question to ask in this connection is this: What kinds of distinctions do languages make concerning the visual features attributed to surfaces? Which languages actually do seem to have a concept of colour that is sufficiently similar to our own for us to compare any “basic colour” notions? Is the very notion of “colour” a universal in human language, in the sense that any human language will have a word that non-misleadingly translates into English “colour”? And if they do not, in what sense may we attribute notions of “basic colour terms” to them? To them, these cannot be “colour” terms because they had no notion of “colour”. So, then, the description of their terminology is in our terms, not theirs. This is fine, as a methodology. But it does not entitle us to speak of their “basic colour terms”, if their very notion of colour radically differs from ours.
Homer, for one, certainly is not thought to have had any word that is translatable into English as “colour”. And if he didn’t, why should we assume that everyone else does?


So there we are: colour is not a universal concept in the first place. Moreover, exactly what it is for a colour term to be basic remains radically unclear, as will be seen when one applies the Berlin and Kay definitions to the colour vocabulary of ancient Chinese. And the universal notion of what might count as a basic colour in any language is even much, much less clear, if only because what is and is not going to be judged to be basic by non-anglicised native speakers may very much depend on cultural and material (pigment-availability-related) factors of colour use that are very far from being biologically determined.

The Greek term *chrōs* in Aeschylus, as well as the *chrōma* “colour” that figures in pseudo-Aristotle, *Peri chrōmatōn* “On Colours” is not Homeric: for Homer the closest to colour he had was “complexion of skin”. And it is amusing that both yán 颜 and sè 色, which form the current classical and modern Chinese binome for “colour”, are semantically related to the concept of the face.

**On the Very Notion of Basic Colour Terms**

Let me begin with a very simple philosophical query about the very concept of “colour terms”. From a cognitive science point of view what matters is not colour terms, even less colour words. Surely, the primary cognitive issue is not terminological. It is conceptual. If a people were found to happen to have a highly current, complex expression to refer to one of their basic colours, that would in fact make strictly no difference to their conceptual cognitive system. Berlin and Kay would have to say that they do not have a basic colour term, since they have no simplex “monolexemic” term. But they would surely have that basic colour concept for which they use a complex expression. Berlin and Kay confuse matters of linguistic encoding with matters of cognitive construal.

Whether or not these colour concepts are expressed by simplex words like lǜ 綠 “green”, as in classical Chinese, or by complex words like lǜsède 綠色的 “GREEN COLOUR ‘S>of green colour>green” is conceptually quite irrelevant. Whether lǜsède is or is not “monolexemic” is in any case not to
be judged on the basis of general theories of colour terminology. It is an interesting matter of Chinese philology and linguistic analysis. The primary issue should have been formulated as one not of basic colour terminology, but of basic colour concepts.

John Lyons (1999, p. 44) aims in the right direction when he defines level 1 colour words like “red” as those that are not only highly current, but also typically used as hypernyms to explain or define a range of other level 2 colour words like “mauve”. Level 2 words like “mauve”, on the contrary, are not typically used to define level 1 words like “red”. Here speaks a sound philologist and linguist. And what he reports as a philologist and linguist does matter to conceptual analysis. It is the arduous task of general linguists to see whether there really are no other languages that have non-“monolexemic” basic colour terminologies. Berlin and Kay invite us to believe that all languages are, in this respect, structurally similar to English, and that none use non-monolexemic basic colour terms. They would begin to be convincing if they were able to give a precise and universally applicable definition of what exactly it is for a word to be monolexemic in their definition.

Paul Kay (1999) writes at the outset of his response to Lyons:

Berlin and Kay (1969, hereafter BCT) operated with the tacit assumption that every language contains a small set of words—the basic color terms—each of whose significatum is a color concept and whose significata jointly partition the psychological color space.

One notes with dismay that the significata of colour terms are colours, not colour concepts. The word “red” does not refer to any concept, and it does not have any concept as its significatum. The word “redness” does refer to a concept, and it does have that concept as its significatum. I quibble on this, because I am convinced that neatness in the logic of semantic analysis is of the essence in the matter of the scientific interpretation of colour terms.

More generally, the insufficiently neat and clear distinction between conceptual cognitive science questions on the one hand, and of questions of linguistic articulation on the other seems to me to bedevil much of the discussion on basic colour concepts. It is as if one studied Begriffsgeschichte “conceptual history” as the history of words. And it is needful to repeat the commonplace that terminological history is not the same as conceptual history.

According to Berlin and Kay, basic colour terms have to be “monolexemic”. Presumably, this would exclude modern Chinese lǜsè 綠色 “GREEN COLOUR>green” as a candidate for a basic colour term in modern Chinese, while admitting the earlier word là 緑 “GREEN>green” as such a candidate. This looks like a thoroughly uncomfortable result of a linguistically little-thought-through definition. It turns out that the ancient
Chinese did have notions of zhèng sè 正 colour “basic colours”, and there happens to have been general agreement that there were five of these for the last 2500 years. The five basic colours known universally as wǔ sè 五 colour “five colours” are these:

- white
- black
- red
- BRELLO RANGE (brown/yellow/orange)
- GRUEY (green/blue/dark-grey)

Consider the colour huáng 黄: the term demonstrably refers to things brown, things yellow, and things orange. One may also say that it refers to things brown, yellow, or orange. But what it designates is neither the colour brown, nor the colour yellow, nor indeed the colour orange, since they do not have words for any of these. It designates, on the contrary, a feature that these three colours are deemed, in that culture, to have in common.

Thus the Chinese “have” neither yellow, nor brown, nor orange. And to this day I do not know of any way of referring to any object as being yellow in the Chinese language. One may be tempted to say that they “have” the colours “green”, “blue” and “dark-grey”, since they have a word to refer to these. This is tempting if one wishes to arrive at general statements, and if moreover one presupposes that our categories “green”, “blue”, and “dark-grey” are the biologically universal ones in which the ancient Chinese think when they identify something as being qīng 青. But there is no evidence whatsoever that the ancient Chinese do anything of the kind. Ancient Chinese uses of qīng 青 and their ways of glossing the word show that qīng 青 refers to what is construed as one colour qīng 青, and not as an ambiguous word for many specifiable other (basic) colours. In this empirical matter I much prefer to trust the judgments available in the 2000-year-old Chinese lexicographic and commentarial literature rather than to generalising theoreticians of colour terminology.

Archaeology supplies important evidence on distinct pigments: Cheng Te-k’un (1965) studied a group of fifteen pigment containers assigned to the late Shang and early Zhou period. In three out of the fifteen containers, he found deposits of white, black, red and green powder pigments. Does this by itself demonstrate that the Chinese “had” a basic or non-basic colour term “green”? I should think not. In order to establish this we would need to look for philological evidence to show that they did have the relevant terminology referring to green and only to green things.
Also, from an egyptological point of view, a significant contribution was made by John Baines (1985), where the importance of material culture and indeed the pragmatic cultural context in a society for the conceptualisation of colours is rightly stressed.

Turning now to the case of Chinese colour terminology in general, Zhāng Yǒngyán 张永言 (1992) has collected a large number of words that would be classified as subtypes of these five colours, but the interesting point is that the ancient Chinese from the fourth century BC onwards were not in any doubt what the names of the basic colours were: bái 白, hēi 黑, chì 赤, qīng 青, huáng 黃. What these terms are terms for is very much a philological question on which it is a theoretical circumulus vitiosus, indeed something of an academic circus vitiosus, to impose theoretical abstract preconceptions on what colour is and what basic colour terminology ought to be.

The proliferation of words that are defined as kinds of “black” and kinds of “white” in ancient Chinese is quite extraordinary: Zhāng Yǒngyán lines up and distinguishes 98 words under hēi 黑 “black” and 85 words under bái 白 “white”. The interesting point here is that the vast majority of the words in these two “synonym groups” are explicitly glossed by the use of 白 and 黑 respectively. Thus, in these two cases the evidence is rich but fairly neat.

Consider now our category “red”. Zhāng Yǒngyán discusses and distinguishes between 65 words under the general category “red”. Fǔ Huáiqíng 符淮青 (1996) analyses more closely 32 words mostly limited to words attested in the Shuòwén 説文 graphological dictionary of AD 100. The unanimous choice of chì 赤 as the “basic colour term” for “red” in ancient Chinese throughout premodern Chinese history is particularly interesting in this case because there is also the word zhū 朱 “deep red”, which has no particular links with any red objects and is in common use. The interesting thing is that whereas 赤 is typically defined or glossed— if at all—as the colour made (for example) by the rising sun, zhū 朱 is typically defined as a “deep/saturated” kind of chì 赤. Thus, the glossing traditions tend to respect the idea that among the many dozens of words for “red” there is one that is basic, and that tends to be used to define the rest as a kind of hypernym. And one is not surprised to learn that dān 丹 “cinnabar”, although quite common as a colour word, is not regarded by the Chinese as a zhèng sè 正色 “basic colour”. Nor is one in any way disoriented by the fact that the standard modern word hóng 紅 “red”, since it anciently refers to the pink of silk, would not be a strong candidate for a “basic colour red” by the ancient Chinese. (It is amusingly arguable, incidentally, that the Dream of the Pink Chamber is radically misunderstood in most Western translations even in the eighteenth century. The Chinese would seem considerably more romantic than the English translation...).
So far, so good, then. But consider now the very old Chinese word cāng 蒼 “pale blue (as of the sky)” already attested in the Book of Odes, which remained common in the combination cāng tiān 蒼天 “blue/steely-blue/azure sky”. But the colour “bright blue” won from the indigo plant was definitely not called cāng 蒼, but qīng 青 “GRUEY”. The trouble is that the Chinese do appear to have had something very much like a notion of “basic colours” under which all other colours are subsumed, but what struck them unanimously as the remaining two basic colour terms do not correspond to anything very clear in the Berkeley questionnaire setup: blue, for example, is out. By calling something huáng 黃 BRELLORANGE they neither provide any evidence that they “have” a basic colour “yellow” nor that they “have” a basic colour “brown”. Now, to say that the ancient Chinese “have” the basic colour “blue”, when they do not treat this colour as basic in their own cognitive system, is perfectly possible, if we wish to impose our basic colour terminology on theirs. Such indifference to indigenous cognitive systems will certainly lead to much neater generalisations on the cognitive anthropology of colour terms. However, this academic success comes at the significant cost of disregarding well-articulated autochthonous subjectivities.

We must insist: huáng 黃 BRELLORANGE is not conceived as ambiguous between “brown” and “yellow”, but identifies a feature that these two “English colours” have in common, just as, conversely, goluboi and sinii do not in fact refer to one colour “blue” with different degrees of saturation, but are conceived in Russian as two separate colours that have no current hypernym meanings anything like the English “blue”. In an important technical sense, the Russians, then, have no notion of blue. And as far as I have understood the literature on this well-rehearsed observation of Russian usage of “blue” terminology, this has never been explained with any logical rigour within the apologetic framework in support of the Berlin and Kay system.

The more self-assertive indifference the conceptual analysis of basic colour terms displays to indigenous (for example classical Chinese) analytic discourse on colour terms and basic colours, the more patently circular it would seem to become.

I most gratefully acknowledge the tremendous inspiration it has been for me to read Lloyd’s book so as to enter the crucial matters of cognitive ethnography that he discusses with such magisterial poise. I am neither a scientist, nor a biologist, nor indeed a professional specialist in the cognitive sciences. For a humble reader of that kind, Lloyd’s survey is certainly of singular usefulness, if only because it inspires and encourages one in the difficult task of finding sound arguments to pursue his issues further from
a logical and comparatist philological point of view. As the following list of reference indicates: 

Es ist ein weites Feld.

References


