

The puzzle of two terms for red in Hungarian

In “Das Grammatische Raritätenkabinett” Frans Plank has included the Hungarian language among his rarities for being the only language with two basic colour terms for red – RED₁ and RED₂. According to that database this is a nonesuch trait found in no other language.

In their classical study “Basic color terms: their universality and evolution” (1969) Brent Berlin and Paul Kay argue that all languages (with a fully developed colour term system) have 11 basic colour terms at most. They also claim that Hungarian is an exception with 12 basic colour terms. In this tradition it is thus commonly believed that in Hungarian both *piros* ‘RED₁’ and *vörös* ‘RED₂’ are basic colour terms. Yet no profound empirical tests with a sufficient number of native speakers have, until recently, been conducted to support this claim.

In this paper we will present our empirical results of the relevant tests conducted in Hungary. On the one hand, we have relied on the hypothesis and theory of Berlin and Kay. On the other hand, we have used the field method of Ian Davies and Greville Corbett to collect our data. This method consists of two tasks – a list task and a colour naming task, where the subjects are shown 65 colour-squares, one square at a time, in a random sequence and asked how they would name each colour in their native language.

In 2002 and 2003 one of the authors of the present paper interviewed 125 native speakers of Hungarian in Budapest, Debrecen, Győr, Pécs, Dejtár, Ipolyvece, Balassagyarmat and Budaörs in Hungary. Of the 125 subjects, 66 were women and 59 were men. Their age ranged from 9 to 82, with a mean of 36 years.

Analysis of the collected data enabled us to conclude that in Hungarian only *piros* ‘RED₁’ is a basic colour term, which *vörös* ‘RED₂’ is not. In Hungarian there are just 11 basic colour terms: *fehér* ‘white’, *fekete* ‘black’, *piros* ‘red’, *zöld* ‘green’, *sárga* ‘yellow’, *kék* ‘blue’, *barna* ‘brown’, *lila* ‘purple’, *rózsaszín* ‘pink’, *narancssárga* ‘orange’, and *szürke* ‘grey’. Thus, Hungarian is in line with the theory of Berlin and Kay and its colour system is linguistically not exceptional, at least not on the basic (term) level.

As for the puzzle of two terms for red it could be solved in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic collocations of John Lyons. Also, the phenomenon could well be an areal one. In the Czech language, for example, there are also two terms for red – *červený* and *rudý* – that behave similarly in collocations. To solve this areal and semantic puzzle of two reds we are currently planning extensive field work in the Czech Republic and its neighbouring Slavic countries.