

COLOUR IDIOMS AND BUSINESS ENGLISH TERMS

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Abstract: *The article focuses on idioms containing an element of colour that have become economic and business terms. The analysis of these naming units is based on a corpus of 140 idioms comprising eleven different colours, extracted from business English dictionaries. It concentrates on the semantics of these expressions, considering their figurativeness as well as the symbolic nature of colours. Based on the findings that this naming process is productive, methods for incorporating colour idioms into the teaching of English for specific academic purposes are suggested.*

Keywords: *business English, colour, English for specific academic purposes, idioms, terms*

1. Introduction

Idioms are a prominent feature of language use in many contexts, including professional business communication. In business English, idiomatic expressions that contain colour words are widely used to convey complex meanings, ideas, and notions related to finance, economics, and other business domains in a concise and efficient manner. At the same time, colour idioms that have also become business English terms pose significant challenges for non-native speakers, due to their figurative meanings and cultural specificity.

The article explores the connection between business English idioms containing colour words and business English terms related to common economic concepts and situations, e.g. *blue chip*, *green economy*, *grey pound*, *red clause letter of credit*, *yellow sheets*, etc. The reason for this is that economic terms constitute a substantial part of English for specific academic purposes (ESAP), and refer to particular concepts or ideas within the domain of economics and business.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of colour idioms functioning as business English terms, exploring their semantic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions. To achieve this aim, I first review the existing literature on idioms and terms in general and colour idioms in business English in particular, focusing on studies that have examined the functions and meanings of these expressions in different contexts. I then present a corpus-based analysis of a range of colour idioms that are business English terms, analysing their meaning and symbolism in this genre. Finally, I discuss the pedagogical implications of my findings and suggest strategies for teaching and learning these lexical units to ESAP learners.

2. Idioms and terms

Idiomatic expressions and terminology are usually the focus of different areas of linguistics. However, there are similarities between idioms and terms that are not obvious from the definitions below, but become clearer when analysing their characteristics.

The definition of *idiom* given by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2023) is that it is “an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements ... or in its grammatically atypical use of words.” *Term* is defined as “a word or expression that has a precise meaning in some uses or is peculiar to a science, art, profession, or subject” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2023).

Lexical complexity is common to both idioms and terms. Idioms usually contain two or more lexemes, e.g. *green economy*, *three black crows*, *red clause letter of credit*, but compounds such as *blackmail*, *brownout*, *redlining*, etc. can also be classified as idioms. On the other hand, terms can consist of a string of words for the sake of precision, which is their main characteristic, e.g. *stock exchange*, *gross domestic product*, *asset turnover ratio*, but one-word business English terms (e.g. *austerity*, *barter*, *budget*, *marketing*, *inflation*, *securities*) are more common than single-word idioms. The same can be said about the semantic transparency of idioms and terms, since both can be semantically opaque to a greater or lesser extent, especially to non-experts in the field. Semantic transparency/opaqueness is often linked to figurativeness, which is apparent in idioms such as *blue-collar (jobs)*, *get the tills ringing*, *hush money*, *horse-trading*, *white elephant*, and also in terms from different areas: *black hole*, *Milky Way*, *red dwarf* (astronomy), *mouse*, *Trojan horse*, *worm* (information technology), *bear market*, *bull market*, *offshoring* (economics), etc. These two categories of lexemes are also institutionalised and contained in specialised lexicographical works and dictionaries. Moreover, terms are subject to detailed scrutiny and a process of standardisation. The most striking difference between idioms and terms is in their level of formality. Idioms are considered more informal than terms and are, therefore, used mostly in journalistic texts, advertising, and other informal registers of language, while terms occur in scientific literature – research papers, patents, and coursebooks (Resche 1999).

3. Review of literature dealing with colour idioms

Idioms as a peculiar phenomenon of language have attracted the attention of linguists for a relatively long time. In this section, I shall focus on colour idioms in English in general and their use in economic and business discourse in particular.

Numerous studies have undertaken the contrastive analysis of colour idioms in English and other languages, examining them from various perspectives. Shabasheva and Ignatovich (2020) compared a value component in English and Russian colour idioms and concluded that this component is predominantly negative. The authors also state that the “value attitude to a particular colour by Russian and English speakers indicates differences in the language picture of the world of the two languages” (Shabasheva, Ignatovich 2020: 18).

Similarly, culture as a basis for idioms is highlighted in a study conducted by Fityan and Azcutia (2017), in which they analyse idioms of colour in English,

Arabic, and Spanish, and the way they are translated, literally or with the help of non-literal equivalents; attention is also paid to the translation of idioms with no equivalent in other languages.

Economic discourse is a valuable source of idioms featuring colour, as noted by Vukićević Đorđević. The author asserts that “the majority of idioms are conceptual and not linguistic” (Vukićević Đorđević 2009: 113). Therefore, comprehending the overall meanings of colours can be of aid in understanding certain idiomatic expressions. However, this is not always the case, and knowing the origin of an idiom and reading or hearing it in an appropriate context serves to facilitate its comprehension.

Mykhaylenko (2018: 101) adds that “the symbolic meaning of the colour is not a constant value” and suggests translating English metaphorical economic terms into the target language (in this particular case into Ukrainian) by using modulation, literal translation, and explicatory translation.

Colour idioms used in economic discourse are the focus of two studies by Rotaru. In one research, she investigates the fixity of idioms as a typical characteristic and concludes that they “manifest a relative degree of variability and prove that they can be exploited creatively, giving birth to new concepts and idioms” (Rotaru 2019a: 311). The author also studies idiomatic manifestations of colours in economic discourse, using the perspective of conceptual metaphor, and further compares them with their Romanian translations. Rotaru’s research indicates that cross-cultural communication has been facilitated by the assimilation of English colour idioms in other languages, as a result of English being the *lingua franca* in the business world these days (Rotaru 2019b).

Ivanyan (2022) refers to colour terms in economic discourse as *transterms*, due to their origin in the science of colours and their subsequent transfer to another scientific field, specifically economics, where they have been adopted. He (2022: 1729) then analyses colour terms represented through the conceptual metaphors of *COLOUR IS ECONOMICS*, *COLOURS ARE PEOPLE*, and *COLOUR IS STRATEGY*.

Research on colour idioms in the economic discourse indicates that they can be a productive tool for enriching specialised economic terminology. The comprehension of idioms is closely linked to cultural concepts, and therefore can be facilitated by etymology and conceptual metaphors.

4. Analysis of colour idioms as business English terms

The analysis presented in this paper draws on idioms extracted from Cambridge Business English Dictionary (CBED 2011) and Oxford Business English Dictionary (OBED 2005), supplemented by terms from Investopedia.

Idiomatic expressions that include an element of colour, but are not exclusively related to economics or business, e.g. *out of the blue*, *to see red*, *green with envy*, *all cats are grey by night*, were omitted from the corpus, as they are not terms of business English. On the other hand, proper nouns that are used as common concepts are included in the corpus, e.g. *Yellow Pages*, *Bluetooth*, *Blu-ray*.

The corpus comprises 140 colour idioms that are also terms of business English. In total, there are ten colours included, with numbers in brackets, indicating the number of occurrences in the corpus: green (32), black (22), white (14), red (14), blue (13), golden (12), pink (10), grey (10), yellow (6), brown (4),

and silver (3). They are listed according to the number of idioms in which the colour appears, from the most to the least frequent.

Syntactically, most of the 140 idioms are noun phrases or compounds, which is typical for technical terminology, including economic-related terms in English. Only one verb phrase was attested (*to go green*) and four lexemes can function as both a noun and a verb (*blackmail, greenmail, greenwash, pink-slip*). The three prepositional phrases identified in the corpus relate to the financial situation of a company (*in the black, in the red, in the pink*). Finally, the terms referring to the type of work people do (*blue-collar, green-collar, pink-collar*) are categorised as adjectives.

In the case of differences between the British and the American orthography, such as *grey* vs. *gray*, only the British spelling was taken into consideration, because it is taught in Slovak schools, where British textbooks are predominantly used.

In the corpus, I have not singled out idioms that are labelled as Americanisms (*gray dollar, greenback*) or considered as such because they originated in the US (*Black Friday, blue-sky laws, green card, white coat rule*), as they are widely used around the world, thanks to globalisation and the use of English as the lingua franca of business.

Finally, it is rare for the colour idioms in my corpus to be classified as informal (*red-eye flight, greenback, red-hot*), which is due to the fact that they have become economic English terms, whose level of formality is higher.

4.1. Green

Green is the colour that represents nature, growth, vitality, positivity, and consequently also the environment. Ecology being one of the main concerns in the present-day society, economy included, it is unsurprising that the overwhelming majority of idioms involving the colour *green* pertain to the ecological and environmental realm: *go green, green architecture, green audit, green building, green business, green certification, green-collar, green consumerism, green credentials, green dwelling, green electricity, green energy, green investment, green job, green marketing, green power, green procurement, green waste, and greenwash*. All of the aforementioned terms have positive connotations, except for *greenwash*, which is related to environmentalism, but denotes a company falsely claiming to be environmentally friendly. The phrase *green revolution* is associated with both a heightened interest in environmental matters and an increase in crop yields during the latter half of the 20th century.

The reference to nature is reflected in expressions such as *green belt* (an area surrounding a city where construction is prohibited), *green shoots* (the initial signs of economic recovery following a decline, evoking the image of new plant growth after a winter period), and *greenfield* (a location without any existing buildings or structures). Neutral or even positive connotations are attached to the word *greenhouse* as a structure for cultivating plants. However, in terms *greenhouse effect, greenhouse gas, greenhouse gas emissions*, it acquires a negative undertone.

The remaining terms pertain to the colour *green*, utilised in various documents, such as the *green clause (letter of credit)* that was printed in green ink, *green paper* (a document issued by a government to initiate discussion about a new law) printed on green paper, *green card* (a permanent resident card, originally called “Alien Card”), nicknamed after its bright green colour, and *greenback* (US

banknotes). The term *greenmail* is a lexical blend of *greenback* and *blackmail*, referring to the practice of buying enough shares in a company to gain control, with the intention of selling them at a high price. This is the only term containing the word “green” that has a negative connotation.

The last term, *greenshoe option*, originates from the proper name of the Green Shoe Manufacturing Company, which first employed an overallotment option.

4.2. Black

Black is the darkest colour, resulting from the absence of light, and it represents night, evil, misfortune, and even death. Business English terms containing the element *black* are often associated with illegal activities, such as *black economy*, *black market*, *black market premium*, *black marketeering*, *black money*, *blacklist*, and *blackmail*.

The designations *Black Monday*, *Black Tuesday*, and *Black Thursday* indicate plummeting prices on stock markets in 1929, leading to the Great Depression. *Black Wednesday* is linked to September 16, 1992, when the UK withdrew from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, resulting in significant devaluation of the pound. *Black Friday* has a historical origin, dating back to 24th September 1869, when a group of people attempted to control the gold market in the United States, which caused serious economic problems (CBED 2011). Presently, *Black Friday* is associated with the commencement of Christmas shopping in the United States. However, originally it was nicknamed “black” by the police in Philadelphia in the 1960s, due to traffic congestions (Hotchen 2016).

The downward trends in finances are mirrored in the expressions *black hole* and *three black crows*. Negative connotations are also associated with the terms *black knight* (a company that makes a hostile takeover bid) and *blackout* (a period of time when product or service is unavailable).

Different figurative meanings underpin the terms *blackleg* (strikebreaker, originally referring to miners who emerged from mines covered in dust during a strike), *blackbox* (a system or process that uses information to produce a particular set of results, but works in a way that is secret or difficult to understand), *black swan* (an event as rare as a black swan, with potentially severe consequences), *black tax* (originating in South Africa; the financial burden borne by people of colour who have achieved a level of success and who provide support to less financially secure family members), and *black water* (wastewater containing pathogens).

The expression *(to be) in the black* stands out among phrases that incorporate the word “black”, because it has a positive meaning: it refers to recording favourable financial results using black ink.

4.3. White

The colour white in business English (and elsewhere) is generally associated with purity, innocence, goodness, and truth. This symbolism is reflected in terms such as *white knight* and *white squire* – both referring to friendly investors or companies that purchase a stake in a target company to prevent a hostile takeover (Kenton 2021b). Similarly, the expressions *white-hat hacker* and *white-shoe firm* carry positive connotations of ethical behaviour and prestige respectively. In

phrases like *three white soldiers* and *white candlestick*, the colour white signifies a favourable, upward trend in prices.

Its sole negative meaning is linked to *white elephant* – “burdensome charge, inconvenient thing that one does not know how to get rid of”, which supposedly goes back to the King of Siam who presented one of the sacred albino elephants to a courtier that had fallen from favour; the gift was a great honour, but its proper upkeep was ruinously expensive (Harper 2001-2023).

The remaining terms that feature “white” pertain to the colour itself, such as *white goods* (washing machines, dryers, dishwashers, etc.) having white cases, *white-label product* – a product manufactured by one company and sold by another company that fills the white label with their brand name, *white paper*, derived from the colour of the document’s cover (a shorter version of a *blue book*), *the White Pages* – a list providing contact information for people or companies, printed on white paper (as opposed to the *Yellow Pages*), and *white sale*, originally referring to the sale of household linens, which were mostly white.

Metonymy underlies concepts such as *white coat rule*, which legally prohibits doctors or actors dressed in white coats to advertise medical products on television, and *white-collar* which refers to white collared shirts worn by office workers.

4.4. Red

Red, as the colour of blood, bears diverse cultural connotations, ranging from strength, passion, life, and love, to war, revolution, anger, and danger.

In the English business discourse, there is a common association between decreasing prices and operating at a loss, which can be traced back to the historical use of red ink in financial reports that indicate negative trends, such as *in(to) the red*, *red candlestick*, *red clause letter of credit*, and *red ink*.

Red tape is believed to have originated in the practice of binding legal and government documents with a red tape (Harper 2001-2023). The term *red herring* refers to a document issued by a company that plans to sell shares for the first time. This document discloses details of the company but omits information about the price of the shares, which is perceived as a misleading clue. The term is derived from the practice of using red herrings to throw hunting dogs off the scent. The use of red marks as a warning is evident in the terms *red-circling* (the practice of freezing salaries that are higher than the maximum salary for a position) and *redlining* (the denial of lending, mortgages, or selling home insurance to individuals residing in impoverished areas). According to experts who coined the term *red ocean*, the fierce competition in current markets can be aptly named ‘bloody’ (Kim, Mauborgne 2005).

On the contrary, the term *red-hot (market, economy)* has a highly positive connotation, signifying success, strength, and activity. Similarly, a *red top* newspaper has extensive readership, with “red” referring to the colour of the letters on the front page.

A physiological response to sleep deprivation underlies the term *red-eye flight*. The term *red-chip company* does not relate to the colour of poker chips, as in the case of *blue chips*; rather, it describes Chinese companies that are listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, with red symbolising the communist regime in Mainland China. The rationale behind *red goods* is unclear. Red may signify fire, as such goods are readily consumed and replaced, but it could also refer to danger or loss, given the low profitability of their production.

4.5. Blue

As the colour of the sky and the ocean, blue is often associated with open spaces, intuition, freedom, as well as trust, loyalty, and wisdom. A direct reference to the ocean is found in the term *blue ocean* – a market that is yet to be exploited and contested (Kim, Mauborgne 2005), while *blue bonds* got their name from the fact that a significant proportion of the proceeds is earmarked for the protection of marine ecosystems. The word “sky” features in *blue-sky thinking* and *blue-sky laws*, albeit with different meanings. *Blue-sky thinking* denotes unbiased and unrestricted thinking akin to the vastness of the sky, or alternatively, detached from reality. On the other hand, *blue-sky laws* govern securities trading and are aimed at curbing speculative investments which are worthless, much like the sky devoid of value.

In contrast, *blue laws*, which in some US states prevent shops from opening on Sundays, derive their name from the paper on which the laws were originally printed. Other examples of items printed on blue paper include *the Blue Book* (the accounts of the UK economy, published every year), *blue list* (a daily listing of mostly tax-exempt municipal bonds), and *blueprint* (a technical drawing that has also been used in the figurative sense of a plan for the future). The term *blue-collar* was inspired by the colour of shirts worn by manual workers. *Big Blue*, a nickname for IBM, is based on the colour of the company’s logo.

The concept of *blue chips* derives from the game of poker, where blue chips represent the highest value. Therefore, *blue-chip stocks* are deemed as sound investments. The trademark *Blu-ray™* has its origin in the blue laser used to read the disc. Another trademark, *Bluetooth™*, goes back to King Harald Bluetooth, who united Denmark and Norway, in much the same way that Bluetooth unites communication protocols.

4.6. Golden

The colour of gold is naturally associated with wealth, prosperity, and money. Over half of the terms containing the lexeme “golden” are related to financial rewards for employees in the form of starting bonuses – *golden hello*; retention incentives – *golden handcuffs*, *golden leash*; end-of-employment benefits – *golden coffin*, *golden farewell*, *golden goodbye*, *golden handshake*, and *golden parachute*.

Rather than being inspired by the colour itself, terms such as *golden formula*, *golden goose*, *golden hammer*, and *golden share* are motivated by the precious metal, which is considered special and advantageous to its holder. For instance, a holder of a golden share has veto power. The term *golden goose* has its origins in antiquity, as it appears in one of Aesop’s fables about a goose that laid golden eggs.

4.7. Pink

Pink is commonly linked with health, as those in good health will often have rosy cheeks. Within economic discourse, *in the pink* indicates the financial health of a company or economy that is quickly moving into a state of recovery.

In Western cultures, *pink* is also paired with femininity, as seen in the phrases *pink-collar (jobs)* and *pink tax*. The figurative meaning of *pink* as a

reference to gay people is found in the terms *pink dollar/pound/money*, *pink economy*, and *Pink Pages*TM.

Two terms, *Pink Sheets*TM (a list of stocks traded over the counter, rather than on major stock exchange) and *pink slip* (a notice of dismissal from employment), were originally motivated by the colour of the paper on which they used to be printed.

4.8. Grey

The colour grey is a mixture of black and white, with black symbolising negative, illegal, or evil aspects, and white symbolising positive, legal, or innocent aspects. A *grey knight* stands somewhere between a *white knight* (an entity that rescues a target company from a hostile takeover) and a *black knight* (an entity that makes a hostile takeover bid), because the term *grey knight* refers to a potential acquirer who outbids a white knight but is considered friendlier than a black knight. Similarly, a *grey hat hacker* is a type of hacker who falls between the categories of *white* and *black hat hackers*. Unlike black hat hackers, grey hat hackers do not have malicious intent when breaking into computer systems, although they may still violate laws. White hat hackers, on the other hand, break into computer systems with the owners' permission to identify security flaws and protect databases and software. *Grey market* activities are not illegal like *black market* activities, but are still considered at least immoral, similarly to the notion of *grey goods* (products bought abroad and sold more cheaply than in the manufacturer's usual distribution system). The difference between *black* and *grey swans* lies in the level of predictability. While a *black swan* event is totally unpredictable, a *grey swan* event is predictable but not likely to happen. Finally, *grey water* contains lower levels of contamination than *black water*.

In the term *grey collar*, the colour grey is not the result of the combination of white and black as expected, but white- and blue-collar. Another association with the colour grey is *grey hair*, metonymically referring to older age, as seen in the terms *grey dollar/pound* (the money that older people have available to spend as a group), *grey market* (a group of people over fifty years of age, to which specific products or services can be sold), and *grey wave* (a long-term investment that becomes profitable when an investor becomes old). Finally, computer equipment is called *grey goods*, because of the grey colour of the desktops.

4.9. Yellow

The colour yellow is a complex and multifaceted symbol with conflicting meanings. It is generally considered to be the colour of vitality, optimism, and positivity, due to its connection to sunlight and gold. However, negative traits such as cowardice, jealousy, and deceit are also linked to yellow, as these negative connotations are rooted in the colour of bile. In practical scenarios, caution signs are typically made in yellow to guarantee optimal visibility, especially when combined with black, as a result of its physical properties.

The term *yellow knight* is thought to be linked to the negative connotations of cowardice and deceit. Similarly, the term *yellow-dog contract/clause* derives from the dysphemism "yellow dog", which refers to a contemptible or cowardly person. Concerning the proper name *the Yellow Book* and the trademarks *Yellow Pages*TM and *Yellow Sheets*TM, the colour component refers to the cover and/or the

paper on which they are printed. Furthermore, the use of yellow in these contexts may evoke associations with *gold* or *golden*, in the sense of something precious, benchmarking or guiding principles.

4.10. Brown

The colour brown is the colour of the ground (Wierzbicka 1990: 137), associated with the notion of earthiness, which is reflected in the idiom *brownfield (site)*.

In the other three occurrences, brown is used figuratively to refer to the colour itself, rather than to the earth. In the idiomatic expression *brown bag meeting*, the reference is to informal gatherings, where participants bring food packed in brown bags (Kenton 2021a). *Brown goods* denote cases in which merchandise like televisions, radios and stereo sets were originally manufactured. *Brownout* refers to the reduction in voltage that leads to the dimming of lights.

4.11. Silver

The lexeme *silver* is part of only three economic terms, all of which are motivated by the metonymic association of the word “silver” with the grey hair of elderly people: – *silver economy*, *silver market*, and *silver surfer*. According to OBED (2005), a synonym for *silver market* is *grey market*. However, these two terms can be confusing, as *silver market* also refers to the trade of the precious metal, while *grey market* is an unofficial but not illegal system of selling goods.

5. Pedagogical implications

From this presentation of economic terms containing a colour component, it is evident that incorporating them in the business English syllabi of the tertiary education institutions is a useful means of developing students’ business English vocabulary. This approach is particularly relevant for ESAP courses at universities and faculties of economics.

Learning and comprehending idioms necessitates understanding their figurativeness. In the case of colour expressions and concepts, it is useful to consider the symbolic nature of colours, which is also important in marketing, an integral part of higher education in the field of business.

Besides other techniques used in teaching idioms, such as appropriate context, finding equivalents in students’ mother tongue, and elucidating their etymology, our analysis of idioms/terms relating to colours suggests that employing tasks on social networking sites, such as Instagram or Facebook, to post visual representations of such expressions could prove to be effective. This can also trigger creativity in the students, and as these sites are powerful marketing tools, they can result in content and language integrated learning.

My findings also show that the productivity of economic colour idioms leads to the formations of oppositions and strings, whose meaning can be guessed on the basis of a familiar idiom and/or meaning of the colour used in them, e.g. *in the red* – *in the black*, *brownfield* – *greenfield*, *three white soldiers* – *three black crows*, *white* – *grey* – *black* – *yellow knight*, *white-collar* – *blue-collar* – *grey-collar* – *pink-collar* – *green-collar (workers)*.

6. Conclusion

Idioms “are not mere linguistic ornaments, intended to dress up a person’s speech style, but are an integral part of the language” (Gibbs, 2010: 697). Despite their figurative, opaque, and informal nature, they cannot be overlooked in ESAP, as they facilitate the comprehension of specific economic discourse and help students communicate more effectively in the global context.

The analysis of colour idioms describing economic concepts has shown that it is a productive way of enriching the English language with new terms and, at the same time, of contributing to the economy of language. Understanding these economic terms requires an awareness of the symbolic nature of colours, which can sometimes be ambiguous or even contradictory. For example, the colour black has mostly negative connotations, but the expression *to be in the black* is highly positive, as it refers to profit making. On the contrary, *to be in the red* means operating at a loss, while *red-hot economy* is a very successful economy.

Due to the productivity of these expressions, chains of names are formed, e.g. *white – yellow – grey – black knight*, which are helpful for understanding the individual terms.

Further research could be aimed at the frequency and collocations of colour business and economic terms in larger corpora of the English language, so that the more numerous should be selected for teaching in ESAP courses, thus providing the basis for their correct use in communication.

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