

# Conceptual metaphors of black color in English and Mongolian

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## **Abstract**

*Several efforts have been made to study metaphors of different colors in various languages of the world. The studies of metaphors have been conducted from different viewpoints. Metaphor is regarded as a literary method, the best poetic one that is used by numerous writers. Things, plants, animals, phenomena and colors are used as objects to give the message indirect ways. Consequently, I assume that there could be numerous similar metaphors in various languages. My study aims to compare the similarities and differences in the conceptualization of black color metaphors in both languages. Moreover, another goal of this paper is to support foreign researchers and students comprehend the similarities and differences of English and Mongolian and to give a valuable support during their research work and studies. In addition, I am trying to show that there must be some culture/language-specific metaphors. I have found that there are more similarities than differences between the metaphorical expressions in English and Mongolian. A comparative study of black color metaphors may be extremely valuable to overwhelmed misunderstanding and identify cross-cultural communication in both languages. There is still much to explore the relationship of the various degrees of this field, and study on color terms deserves more attention.*

**Keywords:** black color metaphor, cognitive, cross-cultural, conceptual, Mongolian

## **Introduction**

A metaphor has been one of the most motivating and demanding themes for many centuries. What is a metaphor? Recently, in 1980, Lakoff and Johnson argued that metaphor was pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action (Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M., 1980). The core of a metaphor is recognizing one item in terms of another.

According to linguists, one of the problematic issues related to communication, which is the mental expression of man, is the research on metaphors in the color lexicon. Cognitive linguists claim that

metaphors are based on the man culture, thought and action. In addition, Huang (2011: 99) mentioned that culture consists of language, and language has a significant role in culture (Huang, 2011). According to the studies of cognitive linguistics, metaphor has an important position in our concepts, experiences, culture and life. There are numerous studies on color metaphors not only in English but also in other languages.

Color is everywhere and everything in the world has its own color. For example, coal is black, milk is white, blood is red, the sea is blue, grass is green and the sun is yellow. In addition, all the languages in the world have their own color terms. There are many studies on color. However, the questions - what is color? and how do people perceive it? - have been one of the main issues discussed by scholars and linguists from different generations starting from the time of Aristotle and Democrat. However, in 1969, Berlin and Kay showed that there were 11 basic color terms in English: white, black, red, blue, green, yellow, purple, brown, grey and orange (Berlin, B. and Kay, P., 1969). As a result, there are six basic color terms shared in English and Mongolian. Counting on their logical backgrounds, each color has various metaphorical meaning in every language. However, color metaphor study is new in Mongolian. I will focus on the black colors. I aim to examine the similarities and differences of color metaphors in English and Mongolian, and provide suitable metaphorical expressions on similarities and differences. Color metaphors in English and Mongolian are maybe about extraordinary vitality in the cross-cultural communication and support the cognitive view of metaphor.

I am trying to prove that there must be some culture/language-specific metaphors in English and Mongolian. The Earth is the only home for the human beings even though we speak in lots of different languages. The English have had a sedentary lifestyle, whereas the Mongolians have a nomadic culture. Since there is lack of sufficient, systematic research on color terms in Mongolian, I hope that this research will be one of valuable studies on color terms. Additionally, I pay more attention on the cultural basis of black color metaphors in English and Mongolian, which are completely different languages. Therefore, this study will help to understand the relationship among cognition, culture and language itself in the two languages.

### **Methodology**

I attempted to show an efficient comparative study on color terms in the two languages. Therefore, I collected the data not only from the Mongolian National Corpus and Mongolian etymology

dictionaries, but also different sources such as previous studies on color terms, dictionaries and online sources. At that time, I selected black color metaphors in Mongolian. Later, I found similar metaphors from English dictionaries and other different sources, and analyzed the data. There are a numerous black color terms, which can be shown in English and Mongolian linguistic data. Several color terms indicate different metaphoric senses in these two languages.

The primary meanings of black are similar in the both languages. In addition, Mongolians understand that *tsagaan* (white) is the basis of all colors, *khar* (black) is the complement of other colors. Black and white in the Mongolian color culture have a symbolic meaning of parents of other colors. Black is the father of other colors and white is their mother.

### **Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors of black colors in English and Mongolian**

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggested the conceptual metaphor theory. In addition, they mentioned that metaphor is a crucial piece of person's life, relating to language, thought and action. This study shows that most of the senses of black color have negative tone and are associated with metaphorical meanings such as 'threatening', 'illegal', 'bad/substandard/harmful', 'non-standard', 'sick/unhealthy', 'disgrace', 'dangerous', 'disfavored', 'hidden/ secret' and so on.

#### **THREATENING IS BLACK**

In English, the black banner – the flag most universally known as pirate flag since 1720s. The pirate flag was designed to intimidate, threaten or spread fear as in the following example:

(3) a. Could she set sail again and raise her **black** flag, if only in our dreams?

(Oxford Dictionary)

b. She was a victim of **blackmail**.

(Merriam Webster Dictionary)

Blackmail means to attempt to influence the action so far person, especially by unfair pressure or threats.

However, the *Dörvön khölt khar tug* (*Four-base black flags*) was used in the period of war during the *Genghis Khan* Empire in Mongolia. It is made of black horse tail hairs and flown in the same fashion. The modern Mongolian black flags are kept in the Ministry of Defense. *Dörvön khölt khar tug* was designed to threaten and intimidate the other side.

(4) *Dörvön khölt khar tug*

lit. 'four base black flags' > 'Genghis Khan's Black flags' – theses flags were used during

War'

(Dulam, 2000; 2007)

'Threatening and intimidating' is related to black and these two languages share the same metaphor  
THREATENING IS BLACK.

ILLEGAL IS BLACK

The black metaphor is converged with obscurity and devil, and is used to outline some person or something disallowed in English and Mongolian. The black market is the economy in which merchandise or services are operated unlawfully. Here are some examples:

- (5) a. The men planned to sell the meat on the **black** market.  
b. His moral obligation would be to give us the names of the donors of the **black** money.

(Oxford Dictionary)

In (5a), black market is the location, in which one trades and sells illegal commodity smuggled from an illegal source, especially outside of the location. In addition, in (5b), black money is an income illegally obtained or not declared for tax purposes.

Actually, drug or narcotic is white itself. In Mongolian, narcotic is related to black as in the following example:

- (6) a. *khar tamkhind dontokh*  
lit. 'black cigarette in addict' > 'to become addicted to drugs or narcotics'  
b. *ted solongos yvaad kharlasan*  
lit. 'they Korea went blacked' > 'living illegally in a foreign country'

(Mongolian National Corpus)

The term (6b) refers to the group of people, who live and work illegally in foreign countries. They live and work without a visa or permission in foreign countries. 'Illegal' is understood in terms of black in both languages.

BAD/SUBSTANDARD/HARMFUL IS BLACK

This conceptual metaphor works as a counterpart of the metaphor GOOD IS WHITE, which will be named the most fundamental of all specified in the next section dealing with white. He (2011) mentioned, "In western culture, the black color is the sign of darkness. In the Bible, the black color stands for the devil, the pain and misfortune" (He, 2011). The color black is mostly related to negative qualities as in the following examples:

- (7) a. He does have a **black** mark against him now though.

(Oxford Dictionary)

b. Rushworth, but much worse-looking, and with a **blackguard** character.

(The Free Dictionary)

In (7a), black mark is a note or record of a person's misdemeanor or discreditable action. In (7b), blackguard means a scoundrel, an unprincipled contemptible person and an untrustworthy person. In addition, Black lie is about easy and unkind 'selfishness'. Black lie is very harmful for others and it means 'bad'. People use black lie in order to get themselves out of trouble or to gain something they wish.

In Mongolian, 'being bad' is also understood in terms of black as in the following examples:

(8) a. *khar sanaatai baikh*

lit. 'having black idea' > 'having bad idea'

b. *chamaas bolj dotor kharlachikhlaa*

lit. 'because of you inside became black' > 'being bad; feeling bad'

c. *mash khar sanaatai*

lit. 'very black plan' > 'to bear bad intention'

d. *urd gudamjni khar buleg*

lit. 'front street black group' > 'a group of bad people'

(Mongolian National Corpus)

The expressions in indicate that black means 'bad/substandard/harmful' in the two languages.

#### NON-STANDARD IS BLACK

Black English is used by a number of North American black people, who form some new vocabulary or terms, which differ from Standard English. In fact, Black English refers to the English spoken by North American Black people. Black means black-skinned people, who speak English in their own way. Their English sounds non-standard as in the following example:

(9) It came from reading people who were using **Black English** and celebrating people who spoke **Black** English.

(The Free Dictionary)

As mentioned before, some Mongolian metaphors are based on an influence of Western culture and this is an example of American influence. As mentioned earlier, North American Black people speak English in their own way. Their English sounds non-standard. After Democratic revolution, Mongolians started using Mongolian in their own way. In Mongolian black is used to symbolize 'non-standard' in the following examples:

- (10) a. *gudamjnii khar yaria*  
lit. ‘street black talking’> ‘slang; non-standard speaking’  
b. *orchin ueiinkhar khelleg*  
lit. ‘modern black phrase’ > ‘non-standard expression’

(Mongolian National Corpus)

In English and Mongolian ‘non-standard’ is understood in terms of black.

#### SICK/UNHEALTHY IS BLACK

Metaphors are necessary within a regular everyday life in language and in humans’ thoughts and activities. When we think about some negative qualities, they are easily connected with black color. Black is connected with sickness or death as in the following example:

- (11) Right now people wanna say, Oh it’s a **black disease**.

(The Free Dictionary)

Black disease is a disease of the liver caused by liver flukes and their by-products. It is an animal disease and it typically does not affect human beings.

- (12) a. *khort khar khavdar tuslaa*  
lit. ‘venomous black cancer’>‘very serious illness; sick’  
b. *khar uvchin tusaad*  
lit. ‘black sick take’ > ‘to be sick; have a serious illness’

(Mongolian National Corpus)

Black is related to ‘disease’ in the two languages. In both cultures, black is associated with some ‘serious diseases’. In Mongolian, black cancer is a byword. Cancer, which is serious disease, is described with black in Mongolian.

#### DISGRACE IS BLACK

So far, I have mentioned that black is related to various bad things and behaviors. Along these lines, it is nothing amazing that ‘disgrace’ is understood in terms of black as in the following examples:

- (13) a. **black** spot on her heart (Urban Dictionary)  
b. Your behavior will give the family a **black** eye.

(Dictionary.com)

The term (13a) means a woman, who is so callous that nothing gets to her. She is said to have a black spot on her heart. In English, black eye means a ‘bad reputation’ and ‘failure’. People express

disgrace using black metaphor in both languages. In Mongolian, there are a few examples as in the following:

(14) a. **khar** *tolbo uldeekh*

lit. 'black spot leave' > 'a broken heart, being badly named among others'

b. **khar** *udur dairakh*

lit. 'black day face' > 'encounter misfortune; disgrace'

(Mongolian National Corpus)

In these two examples, black is related to 'bad things' and 'bad behaviors'. In reality, our heart does not turn into black, but people express 'disgrace' using black in both languages.

#### DANGEROUS IS BLACK

Black associates with darkness or shadow. Dangerous things frequently happen in the dark. In an English example, black ice itself is not black. Black ice means that parts of the ice are regularly nearly hidden to people walking on it. Consequently, there is a risk of slipping and falling. Black ice is a smooth, barely visible and dangerously slippery film of ice.

(15) A sharp crackling sound came up from the harbor, where the tide fumbled at the edges of **black** ice.

(Dictionary.com)

Mongolians understand slippery in terms of black as shown in the following example: *khar khaltirgaand yu khij yvaan?* (What are you doing through black slippery?).

(16) a. **khar** *khaltirgaand yu khij yvaan*

lit. 'black slippery what are doing' > 'dangerously slippery'

b. **khar** *usan boroonor*

lit. 'black watery during rain' > 'during dangerously heavy rain'

c. **khar** *shonoor aikhgui baina uu*

lit. 'black night during afraid do not' > 'at dangerous dark night'

(Mongolian National Corpus)

As we see, the above-mentioned examples are related to 'danger' in both languages.

#### DISFAVORED IS BLACK

In both languages, black means disfavored and detested. In the English dialect, black sheep is an expression used to portray an odd or offensive individual from a gathering, particularly inside a family. The term originates from the hereditary impact on sheep whereby a latent quality every so

often shows in the birth of a sheep with dark as opposed to white color; these sheep emerge in the herd and their wool was customarily viewed as worthless. The term has commonly been given negative connotations.

(17) He always was the **black** sheep in the family, as an artist among doctors and lawyers.

(Phrases)

In English, black sheep means disliked person or one who is disfavored. In England, in ancient time the black sheep was understood in terms of 'evil'. In Mongolian, *khar muikhar* (black foolhardy) is same as black sheep.

(18) a. *Margaan zoroon deer **khar** muikhar zangaa uzuuldeg.*

lit. 'In arguments black foolhardy character is noticed' > 'man with stupid thoughts; disliked behavior'

b. ***khar** teneg tolgoit*

lit. 'black foolish headed' > 'disliked person; disfavored one'

(Mongolian Etymology Dictionary)

In both cultures, black stands for negative 'disfavored' quality.

#### HIDDEN/SECRET IS BLACK

The color black is associated with secrecy and unclear things. In English, men in black are men wearing dark suits, which stand for official. The term is often used to depict baffling men working for obscure associations, and also different branches of administration purportedly intended to secure privileged insights. The term is non-exclusive, utilized irregular for any, undermining or peculiarly acted person. Here, I could find the following examples in the two languages:

(19) a. One day, the Men in **Black** showed up at my friend's house, and after day, I never saw him again. (Urban Dictionary)

b. As a magical **black** box, computers were portrayed as a source of hope amidst fear.

(Oxford Dictionary)

Men in Black usually refers to members of the F.B.I., C.I.A., N.S.A., or any members of other covert, government run, or the official organizations themselves. Black box is a complex system or device, whose internal workings are hidden or not readily understood. Mongolian has a similar metaphor as in the following examples:

(20) a. *Khakhir Govid erdene bii, **khar** avdart nom bii*

lit. 'Rugged desert has treasure, black chest has knowledge' > 'to have a hidden



knowledge’

b. ***khar** khairtsgiin bodlogo*

lit. ‘black box policy’> ‘state secret policy’

c. ***khar** danskhutluv*

lit. ‘black account carried’ > ‘ a hidden secret bank account’

(Mongolian Etymology Dictionary)

Black is closely a term full of ‘hidden’ and ‘secret’ in both English and Mongolian languages.

#### EVIL IS BLACK

Black is seen as the conventional color of witchcraft and black magic in the cultures of Western countries, and it has been connected with ‘evil’.

(21) He wore a special necklace to protect against **black** magic.

(Merriam Webster Dictionary)

Black magic is associated with the devil or with evil spirits; hidden or secret magic. “In Western Esotericism’s shared belief that magic was real and defining it as evil and using such labels as sorcery, witchcraft, and black magic. Black magic as practiced in medieval times may be defined as the use of the supernatural knowledge of magic for evil purposes; the invocation of diabolic and infernal powers to blind them as slaves and emissaries to man’s will; in short, a perversion of legitimate mystical science” (Melton, 2001). In Mongolian, there are a few similar metaphors as in the following examples:

(22) a. ***khar** dom khiij khun, amitan ailgaad*

lit. ‘black magic is done person, animal afraid > ‘black quackery’

b. ***Khar** id shid, dom togloom bish.*

lit. ‘black magic, quackery game not’ > ‘black magic is not a game’

(Mongolian National Corpus)

Black is understood in terms of ‘evil’ in both languages. Black is seen as the traditional color of quackery in both cultures. Black-heart means a malicious person, disposed to doing or wishing evil.

(23) I have to say that I have been a bad and **black**-hearted man.

(Dictionary.com)

In Mongolian, black is related to negative qualities and it is related to evil as in the following examples:

- (24) a. *tsaadakh ni khar dotortoi khun baisan*  
lit. 'the man black side in had' > 'to have an evil thought or mind'  
b. *khar muu sanaa sanakh*  
lit. 'black bad mind think' > 'to think an evil thought'

(Mongolian Etymology Dictionary)

However, there are a few different black color metaphors in English and Mongolian as follows. Mongolian understands 'fast' in terms of black but there is no counterpart in English.

#### FAST IS BLACK

- (25) a. *khar khurdaaraa guin ireed*  
lit. 'black in fast run' > 'someone runs very fast'  
b. *khar khurdaaraa davkhij odson*  
lit. 'black fast gallop and leave' > 'someone rushes really fast'

(Mongolian National Corpus)

The history of the Mongolian people begins through *Genghis Khan*, who was the great founder of the world's biggest empire. *The Secret History of Mongols* has been the oldest existing legendary work. After the *Genghis Khan*'s death in AD 1227, it was written by an unknown writer for the Mongol royal family. At that time, *tsagaan yast* (white boned) terminology referred to the noble in *the Secret History of Mongols of Genghis Khan*. In this script, *tsagaan yast* means golden kinship of *Genghis Khan* (royal blood), but *khar yast* (black boned) a servant or a slave (Anonymous). The lower class does not exist in English in terms of *black*. The lower class is understood in terms of black in Mongolian as in the following example:

#### LOW IN RANK IS BLACK

- (26) a. *Baliar khar guilgachin be?*  
lit. 'what a black beggar' > 'lower social class, but nowadays people use this word as a slang'  
b. *kharts khun khar yastai*  
lit. 'servant has black bone' > 'poor people; maidservant of *Genghis Khan*'

(Mongolian National Corpus)

In Mongolian, black is associated with 'dungeon/prison'. *Khar ger* (black ger) itself is not black. It is white. From the ancient time *khar ger* (black ger) is understood in terms of a prison, a dungeon or a jail. Black assimilates negative vitality and it implies the unfamiliar ending. It is cryptic,

keeping a great deal covered inside, unwilling to demonstrate its genuine sentiments.

#### DUNGEON IS BLACK

(27) *Ukhevch bi **khar** gert orohgui*

lit. ‘died I black *ger* go not’> ‘Even if I die, I won’t be in prison, jail’

(Mongolian National Corpus)

In English, ‘angry’ is understood in terms of black as in the following examples:

#### ANGRY IS BLACK

(28) a. **Black** words

b. I tried to apologize for what I said, but she gave me such a **black** look that I knew it wasn’t the right time to talk to her yet.

(The Free Dictionary)

Black words means unlucky or not good words, which can make others ‘angry’. In English, Black look means an expression of anger, hatred, or utter contempt. In English, there is another example related to ‘angry’.

In English, ‘unlucky/ominous’ is understood in terms of black. In English, a black day means a day when something very unpleasant or sad happens. In addition, a black letter day means an unlucky or tragic day. It is the ominous day for a person.

#### UNLUCKY/OMINOUS IS BLACK

(29) a. When we heard the news that David Bowie had died, we knew it was going to be a **black** day for all of his loyal fans.

(The Free Dictionary)

b. A **black** letter day

(Dictionary.com)

Different cultures share basic values, but in different ways. The values vary from culture to culture. As mentioned earlier, English and Mongolian have completely different histories, cultures, religions, experience, backgrounds and lifestyles, even though there exist the same color conceptual metaphors in these two languages. This study shows that English and Mongolian share same black color metaphor. Black is related to the official things such as cars, dress code and documents. THREATENING IS BLACK metaphor shows that black is related to threaten or spread fear. In both languages, black means power to threaten. In

English, the black banner – which was the pirate flag and designed to intimidate, threaten or spread fear. However, in Mongolian, the *Dörvön khölt khar tug* (four-base black flags) was used in the

period of war during the *Genghis Khan* Empire.

*Dörvön khölt khar tug* was designed to threaten and intimidate the other sides. ILLEGAL IS BLACK metaphor shows that black is converged with darkness and evil spirit, and it is used to outline some person or something disallowed in English and Mongolian.

### **Conclusion**

Culture and language reflect each other. People can understand different terms and idioms without knowing a specific cultural background. There are a lot of metaphor explanations; here I can mention Kövecses (2010), “in addition to objective, pre-existing similarity – conceptual metaphors are based on a variety of human experience, including correlations in experience, various kinds of non-objective similarity, biological and cultural roots shared by the two concepts, and possibly others” (Kövecses, 2010). In conclusion, I was able to find more similar examples of black color metaphors due to the universal cognitive thinking, cognitive procedures, and way of thinking and experiencing in English and Mongolian. At this point, in this article I compared Conceptual metaphors of black color in English and Mongolian and tried to analyze them. The main purpose of this study is to analyze conceptual metaphors of black color by showing evidence from Mongolian in comparison with English. Moreover, it should be noticed that this study mainly focuses on the language use and its association with the given cultures. This systematic comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors of black color in English and Mongolian contributes importantly to the major claims of the Contemporary Metaphor Theory. Even though English and Mongolian belong to very different language families representing totally different sedentary and nomadic cultures, they share some conceptual metaphors for particular colors with each other.

From what has been demonstrated above, we can get the point that there really exist great similarities and differences of English and Mongolian black color metaphors. Consequently, understanding and learning the cultural implications of the color terms actually have excessive importance in encouraging the multicultural exchanges. Color is thoroughly associate with our life and has no general boundaries. Acquiring and understanding the cultural implications of the multicultural terms is extremely beneficial to scholars and students.

The data in my article has shown that construction of metaphorical expressions of colors in English and Mongolian are grounded in reality as well; cultural believes, and to some extent symbolism, may also have a role to play. In addition, findings of this study showed that metaphorical

expressions of colors, besides their universality, are also culturally-oriented. We have completely different history, cultures, religions, experience, backgrounds and lifestyles. For these reasons, there exist some different color metaphors in English and Mongolian. All of these differences head to form different conceptual metaphors of the black color in these completely diverse languages. In addition, the aim of this paper is to help foreign scholars and learners understand the similarities and differences of English and Mongolian and to provide some helps during their research work. However, it was problematic to define each black color terms in details, therefore, the analyses of this paper are critically incomplete. This paper was initial comparative study on the cultural implications of English and Mongolian black color terms by analyzing the similarities and differences of them, as well as the reasons caused these similarities and differences, and each one contains specific examples. Since there must exist some limitations, I hope some further research could be performed later, such as adding more cultural implications of each basic color terms, similar and different, and researching more reasons that had caused these differences.

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