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COLORS AND CULTURES

MARSHALL SAHLINS

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MARSHALL SAHLINS

COLORS AND CULTURES¹

It seems no exaggeration to claim for Berlin and Kay's *Basic Color Terms* (1969) a place among the most remarkable discoveries of anthropological science. If exaggeration there be, it would consist in attributing the results to the authors alone, without reference to the development of the methods by Lenneberg and Roberts (1956) or the anticipation of the conclusions in the early researches of Magnus and Rivers – the debt to all of whom Berlin and Kay generously acknowledge.

Within a few short years, knowledge of the Berlin-Kay results has been widely diffused and intensely debated. For the purposes of the present commentary, it will be sufficient to mention briefly the three findings of most general and fundamental import: first, that despite the proven ability of human subjects to discriminate thousands of color percepts, natural languages manifest only a very limited number of 'basic color terms', such as are applicable to a wide variety of objects; the number ranges from two to eleven, corresponding to English 'black', 'white', 'red', 'green', 'yellow', 'blue', 'brown', 'grey', 'purple', 'orange', and 'pink'. Secondly, these terms show a regular, cumulative order of appearance cross-culturally, such that natural languages can be arranged in a progressive sequence of color determinations, all those of any given stage discriminating the same basic hues (Fig. 1). Finally, the empirical referents of the basic terms on a spectrum of

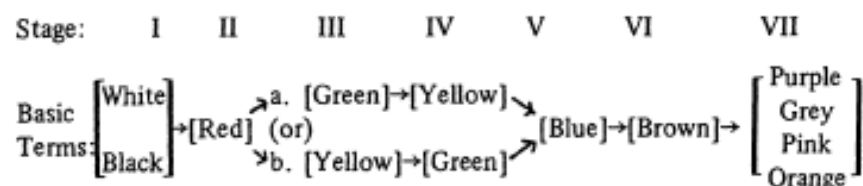


Fig. 1. Progressive sequence of basic color terms in natural languages (Berlin and Kay, 1969).

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