

Savitska Kateryna, BA Student
Kaptiurova Olena, PhD (Philology), As. Prof.
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Educational and Scientific Institute of
Philology

COLOR ADJECTIVES IN THE US MASS MEDIA DISCOURSE

In contemporary US journalism, color adjectives do more than name hues. They carry evaluation, emotion, and ideological messages. A headline that calls a sky “*blood red*” creates fear, while a caption that says “*yellow dress*” suggests cheerfulness. This study examines how color adjectives work in American mass media. The data comes from more than 100 articles published between 2020 and 2026 in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *CNN*. The goal is to describe their theoretical basis and then show their semantic and pragmatic roles.

Discourse analysis provides the first theoretical foundation. Media language does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs it. News texts select what is newsworthy and frame events through specific linguistic strategies [2]. In the US context, journalists build a relationship with readers using informal tone and emotionally charged headlines.

The linguistic study of color terms offers a second foundation. English has eleven basic color terms, and languages acquire them in a predictable evolutionary sequence [1]. Lindsey and Brown confirm that these eleven colour categories are universal across languages and cultures [5]. Color adjectives are semantically flexible: they can be gradable when describing intensity or non-gradable when assigning a fixed category [4]. This flexibility allows journalists to use the same colour word for different communicative purposes, from precise description to categorical labelling. Cultural and psychological color symbolism forms the third area. At the biological level, colors trigger automatic emotional responses: *red* increases arousal, *blue* calms [6]. These physiological effects are largely universal across human populations because they are rooted in the biology of vision. At the cultural level, meanings vary: *red* means luck in China but danger in the West [3]. The relationship between a color and its meaning is socially constructed.

With this framework, the analysis of media texts identifies five overlapping functions. The denotative-descriptive function supplies visual facts. The classifying-terminological function marks fixed categories, such as *White House* or *green card*. The evaluative-axiological function carries judgment, as in *golden future* (positive) or *toxic black clouds* (negative). The symbolic-ideological function compresses value systems: *red carpet* signals celebrity, *red states* mark Republican affiliation. The expressive-emotive function creates atmosphere, for example *crimson lighting* at a concert. These functions usually operate together.

At the semantic level, color adjectives modify nouns in four ways. Literal modification adds a chromatic property without changing the core meaning of a phrase. Metaphorical transfer moves color associations to an abstract domain, such as *gray zone* meaning uncertainty. Metonymic shift makes the color stand for something closely associated: *blue state* means Democratic-leaning area, *white-collar* means office workers. Phraseological units are fixed idioms where the color has no independent meaning, for example *red tape* meaning bureaucracy. Many color adjectives are polysemous. Journalists exploit this polysemy to pack multiple layers into short headlines.

At the pragmatic level, the choice of a color adjective is never neutral. A headline that calls a storm sky “*apocalyptic blood red*” creates alarm and frames the event as a disaster. An article that asks “*Should I Stop Dyeing My Gray Hair?*” then calls *gray*, *silver*, and *white* “*very elegant colors*” reframes ageing as desirable. A report that says astronauts wear “*International Orange*” for visibility presents the color as a life-saving technology and builds trust. Repeated contrasts between *red states* and *blue states* deepen a sense of political division. A description of a “*maroon-colored Iranian passport*” makes an abstract discrimination case feel personal. The pragmatic force comes from the interaction between the color term, its context, and shared cultural knowledge.

Color adjectives in US mass media are not decorative. They are multifunctional tools that describe, classify, evaluate, and evoke emotion within a few words. Their power lies in the convergence of linguistic flexibility, sensory physiology, and cultural meanings. For journalists, they shape public perception and maintain the appearance of objective reporting. For researchers, they reveal how language, culture, and media influence work together.

REFERENCES

1. Berlin B., Kay P. Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1969. 178 p. URL: <https://books.google.com.ua>
2. Fairclough N. Discourse and Social Change. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1992. 252 p. URL: <https://www.academia.edu>
3. Fox J. The World According to Color: A Cultural History. New York : St. Martin's Press, 2022. 320 p. URL: <https://books.google.com.ua>
4. Kennedy C., McNally L. Color, context, and compositionality. *Synthese*. 2010. Vol. 174, no. 1. P. 79–98. URL: <https://semantics.uchicago.edu>
5. Lindsey D. T., Brown A. M. Lexical Color Categories. *Annual Review of Vision Science*. 2021. Vol. 7, no. 1. P. 609. URL: <https://doi.org>
6. Valdez P., Mehrabian A. Effects of Color on Emotions. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. 1994. Vol. 123, no. 4. P. 396–398. URL: <https://www.academia.edu>