

# An analysis of colour idioms in English: a comparison with Croatian

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ANALYSIS OF COLOUR IDIOMS IN ENGLISH: A COMPARISON WITH CROATIAN

Master's Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

This master's thesis aims to analyse those idioms in the English language that have a colour term as one of their components, and compare them to such idioms in Croatian. Colours are everywhere around us, while idioms are an element of language that is of particular interest to linguists. First, the term idiom was described, and the difference between the traditional and cognitive view on idiomatic language was presented. This was followed by a section on idiom motivation and the notion of conceptual metaphor and metonymy. Then, the concept of colour and the categorization of colour terms was described. Following that, the analysis of the idioms was conducted. The colour terms that were analysed were *black/crna*, *white/bijela*, *red/crvena*, *blue/plava*, *green/zelena* and *yellow/žuta*. The idioms were found in English and Croatian dictionaries and looked up in different English and Croatian language corpora. 63 English and 35 Croatian idioms were analysed, with most of them being culture and language specific. While some conceptual metaphors, such as PESSIMISM IS BLACK, were found to be common to both languages, others, such as SADNESS IS BLUE, were specific to only one language.

key words: idioms, colour terms, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, metonymy

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to identify, analyse and interpret the meaning of English language idioms which have a colour term as one of their components and compare them to Croatian language idioms which also contain a colour term. The various colours around us are an important element in our everyday lives. As such, different colour terms and their exact meaning have been subject to much research in several languages. Idioms are also a common element that is subject to intense research. Therefore, it is an important task to examine idioms which have a colour term as their component and determine how they are used in the two languages. In this thesis, the various characteristics of the idioms will be discussed and their significance in language will be determined. Which colour terms appear most often? What do they stand for in these idioms? Are there any differences between the idioms in Croatian and English and can those differences be explained by cultural characteristics?

The structure of this thesis consists of an introduction, the theoretical framework of the thesis, the methodology used, the analysis of data and the discussion about it. In the end, a conclusion will summarize the thesis.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this section of the thesis, the basic information about idioms and the different views on them will be presented. After that, the most important facts about colours and the human perception of them will also be discussed.

### 2.1 Idioms

Idiomaticity is a feature of most languages that have been studied, but despite this, the exact definition of idioms has not yet been established. In many cultures there are different terms which refer to the same or similar elements in language. For example, in Croatian linguistics the term *frazem* is used most commonly, but other terms such as *frazologizam*, *frazološka jedinica* and *idiom* also appear (Menac 2007: 11). Kövecses and Szabó (1996: 326) state that the most common definition of idioms is that idioms are “linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent parts”. Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen (2005: 8) describe the classical approach towards idioms, which postulates that idioms are “frozen elements of a language and have arbitrary meanings”, but then go on to challenge this view and describe idioms as “parts of a conceptual system that is fixed in the metaphors of a given language”. The traditionalist view was also challenged by George Lakoff who proposed a new theory within the framework of cognitive linguistics. Lakoff (1987: 448) states that most idioms are in fact not arbitrary, but are rather expressions motivated by the conventional images in one’s brain, which are joined by a number of conceptual metaphors linking the idiom to its meaning.

Kövecses and Szabó claim that the category of “idioms” also includes metaphors, metonymies, pairs of words, idioms with *it*, sayings, similes, grammatical idioms, phrasal verbs and others (1996: 27). However, Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen note that in terms of their characteristics, pure idioms are can be distinguished for their polylexicity (they consist of more than one word), stability (their form does not change, they are “reproduced with approximately the same form and meaning”), and they are idiomatic (they can be interpreted on two different conceptual levels, the first being the level of their literal meaning and the second one on the level of their figurative (metaphorical/idiomatic/lexicalized) meaning) (2010: 74). It should be kept in mind that even these pure idioms often incorporate other types of figurative language (Gibbs 2007: 699). A classic example of a pure idiom in English is *kick the bucket*.

## 2.2 Traditional and cognitive view of idioms

As mentioned earlier, the view on idioms has changed throughout the history of linguistics. The traditional view, prevalent for decades before cognitive linguistic theories appeared, saw them as simply a matter of language alone. They are taken to be items of the lexicon independent of any conceptual system. According to the traditional view, idioms have “certain syntactic properties and have a meaning that is special relative to the meanings of the forms that comprise it” (Kövecses and Szabó 1996: 328). Some authors, such as Carter and McCarthy, claim that idioms and other multi-word units are a special set of the larger category of words since they largely behave like single words for the purposes of examining meaning-relations in the lexicon (1988: 19). In the traditional view, idioms are viewed as independent of each other, and according to Kövecses and Szabó this stems from the fact that idioms are simply a matter of language, with only certain sense relations between them recognized (1996: 329). Linguistic meaning is divorced from the human conceptual system and encyclopaedic knowledge that speakers of a language share. Kövecses and Szabó criticise this approach and suggest that it is a major stumbling block in understanding the nature of idioms and using that knowledge in the teaching of foreign languages. In short, it views idioms as “fossilized”, “frozen” language, even described as “dead metaphors”, with learners having to learn them by heart the same way they would learn a list of words (1996: 329)

On the other hand, the cognitive linguistic view sees idioms in a very different way. This view came into prominence in the late 1980s, with influential works by George Lakoff, Raymond W. Gibbs, and others, and it is the view on which most linguists today rely when discussing and analysing idioms. The cognitive linguistic view is that idioms can be at least partially analysed, with the figurative meanings of the parts making some contribution to the metaphorical meaning of an entire phrase (Gibbs 2017: 40). With the development of cognitive linguistics, idioms are not described simply as fossilized, frozen forms, but are claimed to be the products of our conceptual system, and are conceptual, not linguistic, in their nature. As such, their meanings arise from our general knowledge of the world (Kövecses and Szabó 1996: 330). If this claim is in fact true, we can rely on this knowledge to make sense of the meanings of various idioms, and to understand their motivation. When processing an idiom, “speakers map the conceptual domain evoked by the idiom’s lexical structure (source) onto another conceptual domain (target) that underlies that idiom’s lexicalized meaning” (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2010: 74). It is interesting that idiomatic expressions such as idioms have particular figurative

meanings that resulting from the entailments of their underlying conceptual metaphors and as such, they can't always be replaced with their literal counterparts (Benczes 2002: 22).

### 2.3 Motivation

Idiom motivation, of which there are several types, is a part of the inner form of an idiom that “involves the possibility of interpreting the underlying mental image in a way that makes sense of the meaning conventionally ascribed to it” (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2010: 75). Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2010: 75) note that the majority of idioms are semantically motivated. The two major types of semantic motivation are metaphoric motivation and symbol-based motivation. The difference between the two is that metaphoric motivation involves the idea of some kind of similarity between the entity encoded in the inner form and the entity denoted by the idiom taken in its lexicalized meaning, while symbol-based motivation exploits certain cultural conventions based on the ability of material objects to “stand for” some non-material entity (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2010: 79). The third type of motivation they describe is intertextuality, which, unlike metaphoric motivation and symbol-based motivation, is not a purely semantic type of motivation (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2010: 76).

According to Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2010: 76), the motivational links relevant to metaphorically motivated idioms are explained on the superordinate level of the conceptual metaphor (the level of the abstract metaphoric model) or on the basic level of categorization encoded in the lexical structure of an idiom, and these “basic level cases” of motivation are called frame-based metaphors. Determining the image component of an idiom, how it contributes to its meaning and how it determines the contextual behaviour of a given idiom is important.

Metaphor and metonymy are commonly used in everyday language. Idioms can be connected to our conceptual structures, and these conceptual metaphors help us in understanding them. A classic example is the idiom *to spill the beans*, which means “to unintentionally reveal a secret”. Another example given by Lakoff (1987: 447) is *to keep someone's at arm's length*. Lakoff calls such idioms “imageable idioms”. These idioms have associated conventional images and these images are almost always the same. According to him, “the relationship between A and B is motivated just in case there is an independently existing link, L, such that A-L-B “fit together.” L makes sense of the relationship between A and B.” The relevance of folk etymologies is noted. Usually seen by historical linguists as things to avoid, when it comes to idioms, these etymologies are the only explanations a historical linguist may rely on. Also, they



are often the only etymologies the speakers of a language know, and as such, to them they are also psychologically real. Lakoff describes these folk etymologies as the motivational links for an idiom (1987: 451-452).

In idioms with symbol-based motivation, the relevant cultural knowledge extends to one of constituent and the concept behind it, rather than to the idiom as a whole, and the key constituents of such idioms have clear semantic autonomy (Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2010: 79). As an example, Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2010: 79) give the idiom *to keep the wolf from the door*, meaning “to ward off starvation or financial ruin; to maintain oneself at a minimal level”. In this case, the concept WOLF has the symbolic functions of “hunger, greediness, economic despair”, and these symbolic functions are deeply anchored in various cultural codes. In the processing of this idiom, this knowledge must be activated in order to understand it. This example proves that, in symbol-based idioms, the motivational link between the literal and figurative readings of the constituents is established by the semiotic knowledge about these symbolic functions and their meaning in culturally relevant sign systems other than language Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2010: 79).

In idiomatic language, the various colour terms, not all of which are analysed in this thesis, are often the main component of idioms, and in them they may represent and symbolise various concepts.

## 2.4 Colour

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, “colour” is “the appearance that things have that results from the way in which they reflect light”,<sup>1</sup> while the Encyclopaedia Britannica describes it as “the aspect of any object that may be described in terms of hue, lightness, and saturation”. The Dictionary of Physics defines it as “the sensation produced when light of different wavelengths falls on the human eye”. Therefore, humans perceive colour through their eyes, which have light receptors that send messages to the brain, where this information is translated into vision. Colours are categorized into groups such as blue, red, green, white, etc. Wierzbiczka (2006, 2) argues that not all languages have a term for the concept of “colour”, but that this absence of a word does not necessarily prove that the concept itself doesn't exist. Because the colour terms by which its speakers categorize and structure the colour continuum and the spectrum of different colours are not naturally divided, the number of colour terms differs between various languages and the exact manner in which different

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/colour\\_1](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/colour_1)

languages classify the colour continuum differ (McNeill 1972: 21). Berlin and Kay (1969) identified 11 different categories of colours and concluded that languages acquire these terms in a well-defined order, with the distinction between dark-light appearing first, being followed by red, one of green and yellow, then both of those colours, and in the later stages blue, followed by brown, and finally, purple, pink, orange and grey. Their work has since been revised and the strict order in which the categories appear has been loosened. Wierzbiczka (1990, 103) argues that while the perception of colour is the same for all human groupings, the conceptualization of colour differs from culture to culture. She further explains her opinion by describing that language reflects what happens in people's minds, rather than in their brains, and that human minds are partly shaped and influenced by the culture that surrounds them.

Analysing colour terms and idioms in which they appear is of importance for linguists: the research on this topic can reveal how much culture or one's native language influences metaphors, and as it will be done in this thesis, compare the findings between two different languages.

### 3. Methodology

The colours included in the analysis are black, white, red, blue, green and yellow. These colours were chosen because of the order in which they appear in languages (they are the first six colour categories that languages acquire, according to Berlin and Kay) and because they are particularly prolific in idioms in both English and Croatian. Also, red, blue and yellow are traditionally thought of as primary colours, especially in painting.

Prior to analysis, idioms were found in different sources and a list was made. The sources used were the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (2004), McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (2005), Hrvatski frazeološki rječnik (2014), Baza frazema hrvatskog jezika and Hrvatsko-englesko frazeološki rječnik (2008). The final list consisted of 98 idioms.

The examples used were found in the following corpora: Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC) for the examples of English idioms and hrWaC (the Croatian Web Corpus) and Hrvatski jezični korpus (HJK) for the examples of Croatian idioms. Due to the possibility of idioms showing up in the corpora in different forms, they were searched in a way that would give the best results possible, for example, for the idiom *paint the town red*, the search term entered was "PAINT the town red", so that every form of the word *paint* (paint, paints, painted, painting) would be taken into account. The idioms were then grouped by colour. Following this, a semantic analysis was conducted.

#### 4. Analysis

##### 4.1 Idioms with the colour black as a component

ENGLISH	CROATIAN
be in someone's black books	biti na crnoj listi
blacken someone's image (name/reputation)	ocrniti obraz
black hat	
be as black as one is painted	nije sve tako crno
be in a black mood	
black box	
black sheep	crna ovca
beyond the black stump	
pitch black	
in the black	
a black mark against someone	
a black spot	
pot is calling the kettle black	
beat someone black and blue	
black thoughts	crne misli
	crni petak
	zaviti u crno
	crno se piše
	gledati crno
	biti upisan/zapisan crnim slovima
	bojati se kao crnoga vruga
	crni oblaci se nadvijaju
	crna zemlja
	crno ispod nokta
	na crno

*Table 1. idioms with black or crno in English and Croatian*

Is several of the idioms, the colour black signifies a pessimistic view on life or other things, employing the PESSIMISM IS BLACK metaphor, for example, the English idiom *be in a black mood* can be used in contexts such as

(1) He spent the rest of the day **in a black mood** and woke up the next day feeling the same.<sup>2</sup>

The idioms *black thoughts* and its Croatian equivalent *crne misli* are used in similar ways:

(2) These terrible feelings, these **black thoughts** and feared memories, were why she avoided coming home as much as possible.<sup>3</sup>

(3) Ne znajući što da radi, pa da si neke **crne misli** protjera, stane brojiti prozore.

The idiom *not be as black as one is painted* stands out from the rest of the group as it is usually used when someone (or something) is better than it looks, it often refers to the positive qualities someone possesses. However, it can also be used as in the example:

(4) Are you **as black as you're painted**?<sup>4</sup>

It comes from the proverb which claims that the devil is not as black as he is painted, which originated as a warning that one shouldn't be scared of something based on exaggerated reports.<sup>5</sup>

The idiom *nije sve tako crno* has a similar meaning in Croatian. Again, black symbolizes pessimism, but the idiom as a whole refers to more positive qualities, the bright side of something:

(5) Ovo nas doista tjera na zaključak kako u našem nogometnom podneblju ipak **nije sve tako crno**, da u našem mentalitetu postoji »supstanca« koja može stvoriti pozitivno, afirmativno ozračje.<sup>6</sup>

The Croatian idiom *crni oblaci se nadvijaju* is obviously motivated by the dark clouds that foretell a storm coming soon, or in its figurative meaning, an anticipated unpleasant event.

(6) Nad Hrvatskom **nadvili su se crni oblaci**; možda da se rastrgaju, možda neće planuti oluja, ali treba biti na oprezu, potražiti za vremena zaklonište.<sup>7</sup>

Another Croatian idiom of a similar meaning is *crno se piše*:

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<sup>2</sup> COCA

<sup>3</sup> COCA

<sup>4</sup> COCA

<sup>5</sup> Not as black as he is painted – Idioms by The Free Dictionary, <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/not+as+black+as+he+is+painted>

<sup>6</sup> HJK

<sup>7</sup> HJK

(7) Otkrije li se da je netko od policijskih šefova sklon podmićivanju ili podmetanju nepostojećih kriminalnih djela, **crno mu se piše** i u službi i u društvu.<sup>8</sup>

*Gledati crno* is a Croatian idiom meaning to consider things from a pessimistic point of view, to only see the bad in something:

(8) Kad je Johnny vidio svoju bistu, rekao je da ga želim pokopati živa. Na sve **gleda crno**.<sup>9</sup>

The colour black can also stand for someone's bad or worsening reputation, or being in someone's disfavour, and the main conceptual metaphor seen here is BAD REPUTATION IS BLACK. The first example is *be someone's black books*:

(9) How many doormen and parking valets in Denver had her name **in their little black books**?<sup>10</sup>

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, a black book was generally an official book in which various misdemeanours and their perpetrators were written, but it is also possible that the idiom originated in the black bound book in which evidence of monastic scandals was recorded by King Henry VIII's commissioners in the 1530s, before his dissolution of monasteries.

This idiom is similar to the Croatian *biti na crnoj listi/dospjeti na crnu listu*, and in fact, the term to blacklist someone is also sometimes heard in English:

(10) Beatlesi su bili bolje sreće. Ili lošije, znamo li da su potom **dospjeli na crnu listu**, nakon što je John Lennon kao jedan od liverpoolske četvorke vratio odlikovanje kraljice pred kojom će za par mjeseci službeno nastupiti McCartney.<sup>11</sup>

The idiom *blacken someone's image (name/reputation)* was first recorded in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and refers to harming someone's reputation:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> HJK

<sup>9</sup> HJK

<sup>10</sup> COCA

<sup>11</sup> HJK

<sup>12</sup> Idiom Origins – blacken someone's name, <https://idiomorigins.org/origin/blacken-someones-name>

(11) But the loss of Russians in Syria may still **blacken the image** of the Kremlin's intervention in the six-year civil war, which it portrays as peace-keeping and inexpensive.<sup>13</sup>

The Croatian equivalent is *ocrniti obraz* or *biti crna obraza*:

(12) On **bijaše** u Huseinovicima očima čovjek **crna obraza**, a takove je ljude Husein svom snagom svoje strastvene duše prezirao.<sup>14</sup>

(13) Umjesto riječi duboke zahvale Muhamed Papi **ocrnjuje obraz**.<sup>15</sup>

The idiom *a black mark against someone* refers to something that someone has done and it has caused them to be disliked or disapproved of by others. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, this idiom originates from the practice of putting a black cross or spot next to the name of a person who has done something wrong.

(14) The lack of an optical viewfinder was a big **black mark against** the Agfa and Ricoh cameras, even though these models sport nifty rotating lenses that let you snap shots at any angle.<sup>16</sup>

As seen in the example, the idiom doesn't necessarily have to refer to a person.

There are several idioms in which the colour black stands for someone or something's negative characteristics or evilness, and as such, it is the purest form of the BADNESS IS BLACK conceptual metaphor.

An example is *black hat*, which is used when referring to someone who is considered a villain. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, this idiom originates from old Western movies, in which the villain cowboys would wear black hats.

(15) For those few **black hat** pirates who refuse to ever buy anything (if such pirates truly exist), they don't represent a lost sale anyway.<sup>17</sup>

*Black spot* refers to a place that is notorious for something, especially illegal activity or accident rate. In its figurative meaning, it can also be used similarly to the

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<sup>13</sup> COCA

<sup>14</sup> HJK

<sup>15</sup> HJK

<sup>16</sup> COCA

<sup>17</sup> COCA

(16) “Critics of the president will look at any **black spot** on this report and jump to the absolute worst conclusion,” she said.<sup>18</sup>

The expression *pot is calling the kettle black* originates in translations of the novel *Don Quixote*, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> In this idiom, it is possible that *black* represents the colour of the items after they are heated over a flame. It is used when one criticizes someone else for a flaw they themselves have:

(17) The congressman from Alaska making disparaging statements about New Jersey is **the pot calling the kettle black**.<sup>20</sup>

The Croatian equivalent is the proverb *rugao se lonac loncu, a oba su crna*.

In some idioms, black signifies bad luck. For example, the Croatian idiom *crni petak* refers to a day in which bad things happen, or a day filled with accidents:

(18) Nakon uspješnih nastupa u prva dva kola, hrvatskim je tenisačima ovo je u Marseilleu bio **crni petak**- ni Ivan Ljubičić niti Goran Ivanišević nisu se uspjeli plasirati u polufinale ATP Tour turnira »Open 13«. <sup>21</sup>

The idiom *biti upisan/zapisan crnim slovima* is used when describing sad or unlucky events which resulted in harm, for example:

(19) Riječani su se poigrali s ugledom kluba i osjećajima svojih navijača. **Crnim slovima ostat će upisan** poraz od skromne skupine iz Džepčišta.

Black is the colour of death and mourning in many cultures. While there aren't any idioms in English in which this relation is seen, there are several in Croatian. The first is *zaviti u crno*, which is used when a tragic event such as an accident happens and causes death:

(20) Malo mjesto Podravski Podgajci, nedaleko od Donjeg Miholjca, u petak je bilo **zavijeno u crno** nakon što su se dan ranije u popodnevnim satima utopile njihove tri sumještanke.

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<sup>18</sup> COCA

<sup>19</sup> What are the Origins of the Phrase "the Pot Calling the Kettle Black"?, <https://www.languagehumanities.org/what-are-the-origins-of-the-phrase-the-pot-calling-the-kettle-black.htm>

<sup>20</sup> COCA

<sup>21</sup> HJK



The mental image evoked by this idiom is that of someone being dressed in black clothing and this is indeed the tradition in Croatia when someone, especially a close relative, dies.

The idiom *bojati se kao crnoga vraga* means to be very scared:

(21) On se **bojao** te ženine haljine **kao crnoga vraga**, ako je ona i bila bijela, no napokon se sretno dočepa svoje košulje.<sup>22</sup>

The black devil in the idiom is a metaphor for death, which is seen as something to be scared of.

Black can also sometimes be used in to describe activities not in compliance with law. The Croatian idiom *na crno* means to do something illegally or under the table. For example, it can be used for a gun one obtained illegally, or unreported employment:

(22) Mnogi nezaposleni primaju socijalnu pomoć, ali usput rade poslove **na crno**, a i novac primaju **na crno**, što je javna tajna.

In some idioms, black can point to someone being an exception in some way. The idioms *black sheep* and *crna ovca* refer to someone who in some way brought discredit upon a family or other group or is otherwise a bad, disliked or simply different character:

(23) Unless you're really **the black sheep** of the flock, chances are you'll get a very favorable interest rate.<sup>23</sup>

(24) Do jučer je nogomet bio mezimac, a sad je **crna ovca** s kojom se svi žele obračunati.<sup>24</sup>

These idioms originated from the fact that, rarely, a black coloured sheep may be born into a flock of white sheep, and as such, it stands out and is considered less worthy because black wool cannot be dyed easily.<sup>25</sup>

The Croatian idiom *crno pod nohtom* refers to something that is small or unimportant:

(25) Ne znam čak ni gdje je na mapi, ne želim ni saznati, ali u tri sata ujutro sa svim onom olovom u žilama i odjećom zasićenom znojem i metvicom i zveketom linotipa i

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<sup>22</sup> HJK

<sup>23</sup> COCA

<sup>24</sup> HJK

<sup>25</sup> What Does Black Sheep of the Family Mean?, <https://writingexplained.org/idiom-dictionary/black-sheep-of-the-family>

onim pivskim brbljarijama, na koje sam osuđen, sitnice kao što su geografija, lokalna odjeća, govor, arhitektura, ne znače ni koliko je **crno pod noktom**.<sup>26</sup>

The mental image this idiom evokes is that of dirt under someone's nail. The actual volume of this dirt is small and insignificant, which is possibly the motivation of this idiom. It is important to note that in this idiom the colour term black is not the most important, core component, and it is not the most significant for the overall meaning of the idiom.

Black can also represent mystery and obscurity. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, the term *black box* was at first slang for aircraft navigational instruments and it originated from the arcane nature of their functions. Later it became used for the flight recorder in an aircraft. As an idiom, it is used in its original meaning, to refer to something, a machine or an apparatus, that is mysterious to non-experts:

(26) It deliberately romanticises Step 2 for comic effect, making it look like a **black box**.<sup>27</sup>

The term *beyond the black stump* comes from Australian English and refers to something that is beyond the limit of settled, civilized life, that is, the outback. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, it originated from the practice of using a fire-blackened stump of wood as a marker when giving directions to travellers, and is an idiom in which the colour term black is not the most significant, main component.

(27) Then you drive 4Ks **beyond the black stump**.<sup>28</sup>

In some idioms, black is simply used to describe the visual appearance of something, for example, the English idiom *beat someone black and blue* means to beat someone up to the point where they are covered in bruises.

(28) But one time, our daddy caught him in the act. **Beat him black and blue**.<sup>29</sup>

The idiom originates from the dark colour of bruises, which comes from the pooling of the blood under the skin after small vessels are damaged by injury.

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<sup>26</sup> HJK

<sup>27</sup> COCA

<sup>28</sup> COCA

<sup>29</sup> COCA

The idiom pitch black refers to a very dark place, a place where nothing can be seen due to the darkness. Pitch is a very dark substance created by distilling wood tar.

(29) Retrieving a flashlight was necessary cuz the inside of the mushroom building is **pitch black** soon as the outside light is gone, and it was gone!<sup>30</sup>

The idiom in the black signifies that someone doesn't own any money, that they are solvent.

(30) State governments are **in the black** and it's individuals who have the savings problem.<sup>31</sup>

These idioms in which black describes the appearance of something are the only among the idioms which have *black* as a component in which the black doesn't represent something inherently negative (pessimism, bad luck, bad reputation, negative characteristics, death).

#### 4.2 Idioms with the colour white as a component

ENGLISH	CROATIAN
white hat	
little white lie	
big white chief	
bleed someone white	
mark something with a white stone	
white elephant	
white knight	
whiter than white	
white knuckle something	
show the white feather	
white as a sheet/a ghost/snow/the driven snow	bijel kao smrt/krpa
	bijeli svijet
	u pol bijela dana

Table 2. idioms with *white* or *bijelo* in English and Croatian

<sup>30</sup> COCA

<sup>31</sup> COCA

White can represent innocence or morality in several idioms, the first of those being *little white lie*, which signifies a harmless, minor lie.

(31) This is one of those cases where you have to tell a **little white lie**.<sup>32</sup>

As it can be seen in the example, the lie in question can even be considered necessary or beneficial to the one who is telling it, or it can be used to protect someone from finding out a truth they wouldn't want to know about. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it was first recorded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and comes from the fact the colour white is related to the concepts such as innocence, purity or goodness.

The idiom *whiter than white*, in its literal meaning, refers to something that is extremely white in colour. In its figurative meaning, it means morally beyond reproach.

(32) Lance Armstrong is certainly the biggest villain in sport, with fans across the globe feeling cheated by a man who was thought to be **whiter than white**.<sup>33</sup>

The idiom *white hat* is the antonym to the earlier discussed *black hat*, and comes from the same source. It is therefore an example of the GOODNESS IS WHITE conceptual metaphor and can be used when someone is considered to be good, almost a hero:

(33) Why not put on the **white hat**, admit this is an illegal business, and ALSO work with artists on new models?<sup>34</sup>

In Croatian, the colour white is found in idioms and meanings which represent the vastness of something that is not fully known or understood. Such an example is *bijeli svijet*:

(34) Istodobno je taj ministar prema sumnjivim kriterijima po **bijelom svijetu** slao svoje miljenike, uguravajući ih u sigurne diplomatske sinekure, a ni rastrošnost njegovih bliskih suradnika nije bila zanemariva.<sup>35</sup>

The English idiom with the closest meaning is *wide world*.

The idiom *white elephant* refers to something that is considered useless, troublesome, while being expensive to maintain or difficult to dispose of. The idiom comes from the practice in Southeast Asia, where white elephants (a rare kind) were considered sacred and would be gifted

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<sup>32</sup> COCA

<sup>33</sup> COCA

<sup>34</sup> COCA

<sup>35</sup> HJK

to people of a higher status. These animals were very difficult and expensive to maintain.<sup>36</sup> It is an example of an idiom in which the colour term is not at the core of the meaning of the idiom, it is not its most important, defining component.

(35) If the city gets a rejection-slip, the dome will turn into a giant **white elephant** for embarrassed city officials.<sup>37</sup>

As seen in the example, the term is often used when referring to buildings or other architectural structures.

White can also describe someone's financial troubles. The English idiom *bleed someone white* means to take or extort all of someone's money.

(36) And it's **bleeding me white** because there's less and less of a market for launch services.<sup>38</sup>

The idiom is motivated by the image of a person who has bled out and is pale, while the money is symbolized by blood.

The idiom *show the white feather* means to be cowardly. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it was first recorded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and likely originates in the practice of cockfighting or Rooster fighting.<sup>39</sup> It was thought that if one of the cocks in the game had a white feather, it was not purebred and wouldn't perform well in the fight. The colour term white is again not the defining component for the meaning of this idiom.

(37) When a thing threatens to happen that will throw me or mine in the way of destruction, I do not turn tail or **show the white feather** at calamity's first notice.<sup>40</sup>

While the idioms *white as a sheet*, *white as a ghost* and *white as snow* can be used to signify that something is strikingly white:

(38) Its coat was curly and as **white as snow**, and it sat on the man's shoulder and looked around itself.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Why do we say 'white elephant'?, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/why-do-we-say-white-elephant/>

<sup>37</sup> COCA

<sup>38</sup> COCA

<sup>39</sup> white feather, n.: Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228592>

<sup>40</sup> COCA

<sup>41</sup> COCA

they can also be used to represent emotions such as fear or shock:

(39) Her face was as **white as a sheet** and she looked out of it, like she wasn't really here.<sup>42</sup>

(40) But yeah, she turned **white as a ghost**, and she pressed the silent alarm.<sup>43</sup>

This use comes from the appearance of a scared person, whose face might turn pale. Ghosts are often portrayed as white, while the comparison to a sheet comes from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the colour of bed sheets was predominantly white.<sup>44</sup>

The Croatian idioms *bijel kao smrt/krpa* can be used in the same sense:

(41) Ušao je **bijel kao krpa**. Rekao mi je što se dogodilo i mislim da mi je to ponovio nekoliko puta jer sam mislila da se šali.<sup>45</sup>

The colour term white can also be used in idioms which signify someone's endurance, as in the idiom *white knuckle something*, which means to survive something that is considered threatening through strained endurance, to hold on tightly. When one is scared or stressed and consequently holds on to something, it is possible that their knuckles may turn white due to the tight grip and this is the likely motivation behind this idiom:

(42) She sits without breathing, hands **white knuckled** and clutching the table.<sup>46</sup>

This is an idiom in which the colour term is not the most significant component to the overall meaning of the idiom.

The only idiom in which happiness is represented with the colour white is *mark something with a white stone*. It means to regard something as happy or fortunate. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, the practice of marking lucky days on the calendar with a white stone (or chalk) originated in the ancient times:

(43) History itself is now **marked with a white stone** every day since that first Easter Sunday until the end of time because time, once marred by our failures and losses, is redeemed by compassion without limits.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> COCA

<sup>43</sup> COCA

<sup>44</sup> "white as a sheet" Definition and Origin, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/white-as-a-sheet>

<sup>45</sup> Jutarnji list, <https://www.jutarnji.hr>

<sup>46</sup> COCA

<sup>47</sup> COCA

The idiom *white knight* refers to someone who comes to help another person, or company. It comes from the mythological figure of the white knight who was seen heroic, noble warrior. The colour white here symbolizes positive qualities such as goodness, morality and heroism:

(44) There's a reason you have to be everybody's **white knight**, Michael. You left because you thought if you saved the world, you'd be safe at home.<sup>48</sup>

As seen in the example, nowadays the idiom is often used to portray such a person as an unwanted or unwelcome “saviour”.

The idiom *big white chief* refers to an important or successful person. The term chief is usually used for the leaders of Native American tribes, while white is used as to describe a person's skin colour. It is potentially offensive because it possibly originated as a pseudo-Native American term.

The Croatian term *u pol bijela dana* refers to something, potentially shocking or unexpected, happening in broad daylight:

(45) Prije nekoliko godina ubijen je **u pol bijela dana** u Zagrebu jedan od mafijaških bossova, pa prave okolnosti te smrti ipak nisu otkrivene.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4.3 Idioms with the colours black and white as components

Black and white are often seen as the opposites of each other, with black representing bad qualities such as evilness and white representing innocence or purity. As such, they may appear together in idioms.

ENGLISH	CROATIAN
in black and white	crno na bijelo
	ni crne ni bijele
	čuvati bijele novce za crne dane

Table 3. idioms with *black and white* or *crno i bijelo* in English and Croatian

The idioms *in black and white* and *crno na bijelo* mean that something is written down and as such it is more reliable than just spoken word. The idioms are likely motivated by the fact that official documents are printed in black ink on a white paper.

<sup>48</sup> COCA

<sup>49</sup> HJK

(46) Maybe by writing it here **in black and white**, I'll hold myself accountable.<sup>50</sup>

(47) Svi podaci koje je Mamić iznio na konferenciji za novinare su točni, sve brojke stoje **crno na bijelom**.<sup>51</sup>

The Croatian idiom *ni crne ni bijele* is used when someone remains quiet in some situation:

(48) Nitko o tome nije progovorio **ni crne ni bijele**.<sup>52</sup>

The idiom *čuvati bijele novce za crne dane* means to save money:

(49) Stoga **čuvaj bijele novce za crne dane**. Štedi zbog svojih milih i dragih, da starcima roditeljima vratiš, što su te u svijet opremili, a djeci svojoj, koja nijesu kriva što si ih porodilo, da pomažeš, dok stanu na svoje noge.<sup>53</sup>

Knowing the associations black has, it is easy to guess that *black days* refer to difficult days, while *white money* is seen something that can save one from that situation.

#### 4.4 Idioms with the colour red as a component

ENGLISH	CROATIAN
better dead than red	
reds under the bed	
in the red	biti u crvenom
paint the town red	
red as a beetroot	crven kao paprika
red herring	
red in tooth and claw	
red letter day	
a red rag to a bull	kao bik na crveno, crvena krpa za /koga/
see red	
not be worth a red cent	
raise a red flag	
red in the face	
red-carpet treatment	

<sup>50</sup> COCA

<sup>51</sup> hrWaC

<sup>52</sup> hrWaC

<sup>53</sup> hrWaC



roll out the red carpet	
cut through red tape	
	crvena nit

Table 4. idioms with *red* or *crveno* in English and Croatian

One of the most common connotations for the colour red is anger. This comes from the physiological effects this emotion has on a person: due to the blood vessels in one's face widening, the sudden blood rush is obvious on the face. The English idiom *see red* is an example of this:

(50) I have read and loved your magazine for six years now, and I've often gifted subscriptions to friends as they became new mothers. However, when I saw your new column, I **saw red**.<sup>54</sup>

The next idiom is *red in tooth and claw*, meaning something that involves savage or merciless conflict or competition:

(51) But they have managed it: even to the point of convincing me, a neoliberal who believes very strongly in capitalism **red in tooth and claw**.<sup>55</sup>

The idiom became more popular after being used in Tennyson's 1850 poem "*In Memoriam*" and originally referred to conflict in nature.<sup>56</sup>

The English idiom *like a red rag to a bull* and the Croatian idioms with the same meaning *kao bik na crveno* and *crvena krpa za nekoga* come from the fact that the colour red is traditionally used in bullfighting because it is considered aggravating for the animal, which then causes them to attack. Interestingly, this is not true because bulls are actually colour-blind to red and there is no evidence that any colour in particular aggravates them, and the actual reason is that they get irritated by the movement of the rag.<sup>57</sup>

(52) To Gould such claims were like the proverbial **red rag to a bull**.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> COCA

<sup>55</sup> COCA

<sup>56</sup> In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII [all 133 poems], <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/memoriam-h-h-obiit-mdcccxxxiii-all-133-poems>

<sup>57</sup> What is it about red that makes bulls so angry?, <https://www.wtamu.edu/~cbaird/sq/2012/12/12/what-is-it-about-red-that-makes-bulls-so-angry/>

<sup>58</sup> COCA

(53) Ne može tako, izdiru se on i roguše kao **bik na crveno**.<sup>59</sup>

(54) A američke policajke su stalno naglas »mljele« o svemu, pa i o Iraku, što je pripadnicima UNMIK-a iz arapsko-islamskih zemalja bila **crvena krpa**: malo po malo rasprave vođene povišenim tonom dostigle su točku ključanja.<sup>60</sup>

Red can also represent embarrassment, as seen in the idioms *red as a beetroot* and *red in the face*, and its Croatian equivalent *crven kao paprika*. These idiom can also be used to describe anger and, just like the idioms related to anger, in this use it also comes from the physical effects of embarrassment on one's face:

(55) From where I sat I could see that she was blushing **red as a beetroot**.<sup>61</sup>

(56) The thought was so embarrassing that she turned **red in the face** and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner.<sup>62</sup>

(57) He screamed at me, **red in the face**, until he just could not speak anymore.<sup>63</sup>

(58) Nakon dosta vremena iz prostora kafića izašao je čovjek, u licu **crven kao paprika**, i krenuo prema njima.<sup>64</sup>

Another use of red is to represent danger, warning or alarm. This association is not only seen in language, but also on signs or traffic lights. Interestingly, even some elephants have learned to connect the colour red with danger (due to their fear of the Maasai people who traditionally wear red clothes and sometimes attack them with spears) so this association can't even be called species-specific: they have shown aggression when presented with red cloths (Bates et al. 2007: 1941). The idiom included in this group is *raise a red flag*.

(59) It may **raise a red flag** for your current employer if you suddenly check off those options and display that you're open to opportunities publicly.<sup>65</sup>

As can be seen, while raising a red flag can be a literal act that signals alarm (for example, in motor sport races when an accident happens and a race is stopped), which is how this idiom

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<sup>59</sup> HJK

<sup>60</sup> HJK

<sup>61</sup> COCA

<sup>62</sup> COCA

<sup>63</sup> COCA

<sup>64</sup> hrWaC

<sup>65</sup> COCA

came into being, it can also be used metaphorically. In the example above, someone's action warns another person of one's potential for trouble.

Red can also represent a political ideology, most notably communism and socialism. The two idioms in which the colour red stands for communism and communists are *better dead than red* and *reds under the bed*. The colour red has been used on flags for a long time, such flags were sometimes seen as a symbol of revolution. In 1870, it was prominently used in the Paris Commune and was later adopted by the Bolsheviks and made the official flag of the Soviet Union (with a hammer and sickle on it). In the West, communism was seen in a negative light. The idiom *better dead than red* was first used during the Cold War. Interestingly, there is also the reversed variant *better red than dead*.

(60) For when it comes to Carrot Top, his stupid AT&T; commercials, or that steaming pile of offal Chairman of the Board, you are either with us or you are with the terrorist. Suffice say, you're **better dead than red**.<sup>66</sup>

As can be seen from the example, since communism is no longer perceived to pose a danger to the West, the *red* in the idiom can refer to a different perceived enemy. In some cases, it was replaced with a different word altogether, even if it then loses its rhyming component:

(61) "I was brought up thinking you'd be **better dead than gay**. I must have known I was gay and it was so unacceptable," said the 45-year-old.<sup>67</sup>

(62) Our war on drugs, furthermore, teaches that some people are **better dead than drugged**.<sup>68</sup>

The other idiom in which red stands for communism is *reds under the bed*:

(63) A similar dynamic operates in Britain, though much moderated because we are less hysterical about the spectre of **reds under the bed**.<sup>69</sup>

As in the first idiom, communism and communists are seen in a negative light, being portrayed as something that is hiding, staying dormant in society and waiting to attack (comparable to the concept of a monster under the bed).

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<sup>66</sup> COCA

<sup>67</sup> COCA

<sup>68</sup> COCA

<sup>69</sup> COCA

There are some idioms which signify how important (or unimportant) someone is and how they are treated. For example, if someone gets the *red-carpet treatment* or they *roll out the red carpet* for them, this signifies that the person was received with a particularly warm, maybe even pompous welcome and was treated extremely well.

(64) We won't exactly be getting the **red carpet treatment**.<sup>70</sup>

(65) So do they **roll out the red carpet** to foreign visitors? Make things pleasant, show off the best aspects of your country? Try to entice those dollars back? No.<sup>71</sup>

A red carpet was often used to welcome important political figures on formal visits or other occasions, and by the 1920s was also commonly associated with Hollywood.

The idiom *not be worth a red cent* signifies that something is worth very little, as in:

(66) In the old days, apartments belonged to the government which assigned them to the people. They **weren't worth a red cent**.<sup>72</sup>

The cent is the lowest denomination of the American currency, and a single cent is practically worthless. The red here is simply used to describe its appearance because it used to be minted from copper and has a reddish-brown colour.

The Croatian idiom *crvena nit* is the only Croatian idiom in which the colour red has the association of importance or prominence. It refers to the main or most important thought or idea presented in something:

(67) Radi se o »djelima koja su zbog svoje poetičnosti ili pak anarhičnosti za povijest suvremene umjetnosti nebitna, odnosno zaboravljena« – kako stoji u popratnom katalogu izložbe, bez čije pomoći ne bi bilo moguće pronaći **crvenu nit** koja povezuje te radove.<sup>73</sup>

There are two English idioms in which red refers to having fun or having a good time, or something that is remembered fondly. For example, *red-letter day* refers to a particularly happy, fortunate or memorable day:

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<sup>70</sup> COCA

<sup>71</sup> COCA

<sup>72</sup> COCA

<sup>73</sup> HJK

(68) I still remember the **red letter day** that I realised I could walk away from bullying' friends.<sup>74</sup>

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, this idiom comes from the practice of writing important holidays or saints' days in red letters in church calendars, which is again done because of the striking effect the colour has.

The idiom *paint the town red* means to go out, have fun, drink and dance:

(69) I remember SLV encouraging me to go out dancing and Lilybelly nudging me to **paint the town red** and I just didn't even want to think about men, let alone a relationship.<sup>75</sup>

The origin of this idiom is unknown. It is possible that the red refers to the physical characteristics of a person who is having fun or drinking: their face might turn red due to physical activities or the influence of alcohol.

An interesting idiom found in English is *red herring*. This refers to something which is intended to be distracting or misleading in some way.

(70) This is a classic "**red herring**", since whether the accuser is guilty of the same, or a similar, wrong is irrelevant to the truth of the original charge.<sup>76</sup>

The meaning possibly comes from the practice of using dried and smoked herrings, which were red, in training hounds in hunting foxes or badgers. The herring, which had a strong smell, would be dragged perpendicular to the trail of the animal to confuse the hound in training. However, there is another possible explanation which claims that red herrings were used to train horses to follow hounds during hunting, which was noisy and could otherwise confuse them.<sup>77</sup>

The idiom *cut through red tape* refers to eliminating or neutralizing something that is complicated, such as bureaucratic rules and procedures. The idiom possibly has its origins in the red cloth tape that was used to bind documents in England.<sup>78</sup> Red tape stands for bureaucratic procedures such as filling out paperwork or obtaining different licences. The metaphor here is HARM IS DESTRUCTION, and an example is:

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<sup>74</sup> COCA

<sup>75</sup> COCA

<sup>76</sup> COCA

<sup>77</sup> World Wide Words: The Lure of the Red Herring, <https://www.worldwidewords.org/articles/herring.htm>

<sup>78</sup> Red tape Definition & Meaning – Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/red%20tape>

(71) I know from personal experience how frustrating it can be to try and **cut through red tape** just to accomplish a simple task.<sup>79</sup>

Another example of red being used for the visual impact it has is the idiom *in the red*. This idiom is used when someone is in debt or losing money. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms, it originates in the practice of using red ink to mark debt or losses on someone's bank account. As such, it is the opposite of the idiom *in the black*.

(72) If the budget is **in the red**, it's because they want it **in the red**.<sup>80</sup>

#### 4.5 Idioms with the colour blue as a component

ENGLISH	CROATIAN
blue blooded	plave krvi
bolt from the blue/out of the blue	
the wild blue yonder	
between the devil and the deep blue sea	
do something until one is blue in the face	
once in a blue moon	
scream blue murder	
talk a blue streak	
turn the air blue	
true blue	
feel blue	
	plava kuverta

*Table 5. idioms with blue or plavo in English and Croatian*

Two very similar idioms which represent a sudden event exist in English and those are (*like a bolt from the blue* and *out of the blue*):

(73) Was Monitor's demise something that happened unexpectedly **like a bolt from the blue**?<sup>81</sup>

(74) My dad sent this to me **out of the blue** for Christmas one year.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> COCA

<sup>80</sup> COCA

<sup>81</sup> COCA

<sup>82</sup> COCA

In both of these idioms, the *blue* refers to the clear, blue sky, from which it would be very unexpected to see a bolt. An idiom with a similar meaning used in Croatian is *kao grom iz vedra neba*.

An idiom that is used to denote the frequency of something is *once in a blue moon*, referring to something that happens very rarely. The origin of the idiom likely lies in the appearance of a fourth full moon in a single season (as opposed to the usual three), which was called a “blue moon”. Another possible, but less likely, explanation is that it comes from the event of two full moons happening in a single month, a phenomenon known as a “full blue moon”.<sup>83</sup> An example of usage is:

(75) In many parts of the country, electronics recycling centers are few and far between and community-recycling drives are only offered **once in a blue moon**, if at all.<sup>84</sup>

Blue can represent the vastness of something, or something that is unknown. This is seen in the idiom *wild (wide) blue yonder*, which originates in a song composed in 1939 by Robert Crawford, with lyrics written in 1947 by him. The song was originally titled “Army Air Corps” and later renamed to “The U.S. Air Force”, but is still commonly referred to as “Wild Blue Yonder”.<sup>85</sup> The lyrics of the song are:

(76) Off we go into **the wild blue yonder**, climbing high into the sun.<sup>86</sup>

From the topic of the song and the lyrics, it is obvious that the author refers to flying his plane in the sky. Later, the idiom entered the English language and is can be used in the meaning of “a far, unknown distance”, as in:

(77) And here we are, off to **the wild blue yonder**. You don't mind, do you?<sup>87</sup>

This idiom is similar to the Croatian idiom *bijeli svijet*.

Blue may stand for the positive quality of genuineness, an example of which is the idiom *true blue*. It was recorded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as meaning “faithful, staunch, unwavering in one’s

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<sup>83</sup> The Reason Why We Say “Once in a Blue Moon”, <https://interestingengineering.com/culture/the-reason-why-we-say-once-in-a-blue-moon>

<sup>84</sup> COCA

<sup>85</sup> History of the Air Force Song, <https://www.music.af.mil/USAFBand/About-Us/History/History-of-the-Air-Force-Song/>

<sup>86</sup> Air Force Song, <https://www.music.af.mil/Multimedia/AF-Recordings/Air-Force-Song/>

<sup>87</sup> COCA

commitments and principles”.<sup>88</sup> Its origin lies in the dyeing of cloth in the city of Coventry, England, in the Late Middle Ages. Due to the quality of the dyeing process, the expression *true as Coventry blue* became popular.<sup>89</sup> Today, the idiom is used completely detached from the colour blue, as seen in the interesting example below, in which communism, traditionally symbolised by the colour red, is given the trait of being *true blue*:

(78) It was **true blue** communism, because it was supposedly succeeding.<sup>90</sup>

There is one idiom which relies on the BLUE IS SADNESS conceptual metaphor, and that is *feel blue*. It is used in the sense of feeling sad and depressed:

(79) If you're **feeling blue**, how do you give yourself a happiness boost?<sup>91</sup>

The exact origin of the idiom is unknown. The connection of the colour blue with sadness is culture specific, for example, according to research conducted by Barchard, Grob and Roe on 205 people from the USA and 161 people from India, 65.9% of Americans associated the two, while only 15.6% respondents from India did the same (2017: 450). It is not easy to determine where it comes from, as people who are sad don't physically turn blue and is it unlikely that people feel more sad on days when a clear blue sky is visible (Fetterman, Robinson and Meier 2012: 6). In Croatian, idioms in which blue stands for sadness were not found.

The idiom *between the devil and the deep blue sea* is used when someone is faced with a difficult choice or dilemma. A similar expression is to choose *between the lesser of two evils*. The idiom was first recorded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it is likely of nautical origin.<sup>92</sup>

() By articulating the philosophy up front it keeps you from emotionally charged decisions like this one, and you can be up front with your SO and not feel like you are deciding **between the devil and the deep blue sea** at every opportunity to spend money.<sup>93</sup>

Anger is represented by the colour blue in the idiom *scream blue murder*, meaning to scream loudly, make a fuss, have an angry outburst. According to Cryer (2012: 45), it is possible that

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<sup>88</sup> Meanings and origins of Australian words and idioms, <https://slll.cass.anu.edu.au/centres/andc/meanings-origins/t>

<sup>89</sup> As True as Coventry Blue, <https://theweavershouse.org/as-true-as-coventry-blue/>

<sup>90</sup> COCA

<sup>91</sup> COCA

<sup>92</sup> Idiom Origins – between the devil and the deep blue sea, <https://idiomorigins.org/origin/between-the-devil-and-the-deep-blue-sea>

<sup>93</sup> COCA



the term *blue murder* comes from the French *morbleu*, which itself is a corruption *mort bleu*, which again is a slang form of *mort Dieu*, “death of God”, an expression used to signify horror or shock. As seen in the example, the fuss caused may be excessive:

(80) You can bet that Bezos would **scream blue murder** about being cut out, as would authors who would see less sales.<sup>94</sup>

Blue can signify the manner in which someone is speaking or doing something. For example, to *talk a blue streak* is to speak continuously and at great length. It first occurred in American English in the 1830s and the *blue streak* refers to the speed of a lightning bolt.

(81) I’ve been **talking a blue streak**, haven’t I? And that’s strange, because I’m known as a more or less quiet person.<sup>95</sup>

The next idiom is *turn the air blue*, which refers to someone swearing excessively. Its origin is uncertain, but similar forms were recorded in J.S. Farmer and W.E. Henley’s 1890 work *Slang and Its Analogues*, in the form of *make the air blue*.

(82) Then she encourages them to **turn the air blue** by hurling schoolyard curses at one another, the catch being that they must do it only with gestures.<sup>96</sup>

The idiom *do something until one is blue in the face* refers to someone who is talking a lot or someone who tries persistently to do something, but ultimately fails. Its origin comes from the fact that someone’s face may turn a shade of blue when talking incessantly or performing an activity that requires a lot of effort, which happens due to a lack of oxygen.

(83) I could have said it **until I was blue in the face** last year, but no one would listen to me, which is great.<sup>97</sup>

Blue may represent nobility or aristocracy. There are two idioms as an example, *blue-blooded* and its Croatia equivalent, *plava krv*:

(84) She left her **blue-blooded** Boston family for a brief stint in the Ziegfeld Follies.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> COCA

<sup>95</sup> COCA

<sup>96</sup> COCA

<sup>97</sup> COCA

<sup>98</sup> COCA

(85) Za razliku od drugih kraljevskih obitelji španjolska **plava krv** se nije previše uzburkala nakon vijesti kako će se princ oženiti običnom građankom.<sup>99</sup>

Both of these idioms come from the same source. In English, it was first used in the 1811, but its origins are likely from the Spanish *sangre azul*. This term was originally used to refer to the Spanish noblemen who were fighting the occupation of the Iberian Peninsula against Moor warriors. It is thought that due to their light complexion, blue looking veins were seen on their faces and this is how this idiom became widespread (Opašić and Spicijarić 2010: 126).

The Croatian idiom *plava kuverta* is used to refer to illegal activities, more specifically bribery and corruption:

(86) Korupcija, mito, **plave kuverte**, pršuti i prasići dio su »tradicije« ukorijenjene tako duboko da je njihovo čupanje proces bolan poput vađenja zuba bez anestezije.<sup>100</sup>

In English, there is a corresponding idiom, *brown envelope*. The differences are cultural and they originate in the different colour of envelopes which contain money used for bribery.

#### 4.6 Idioms with the colour green as a component

ENGLISH	CROATIAN
green with envy	zelen od zavisti
green-eyed monster	
get/give the green light	dobiti/dati zeleno svjetlo
green as grass	mlad i zelen
green about (or around or at) the gills	
the grass is always greener (on the other side of the fence)	
have a green thumb	
	(doći) na zelenu granu
	za zelenim stolom

Table 6. idioms with *zeleno* or *green* in English and Croatian

The colour green has symbolised envy or jealousy for centuries. This likely comes from the ancient theory of medicine which relied on the system of 4 humours flowing through a person's body and causing physical symptoms. Jealousy and envy were thought to be caused by an

<sup>99</sup> HJK

<sup>100</sup> HJK

increased concentration of green-coloured bile.<sup>101</sup> The idiom *green-eyed monster* was first used by William Shakespeare in his play *Othello* and today, it is commonly used as a metaphor for “jealousy”:

(87) You spent most of the time consumed by the **green-eyed monster**, didn't you, sis?<sup>102</sup>

The idioms *green with envy* and *zelen od zavisti* also come from the same conceptual space and can be used as in the following examples:

(88) Want the neighbors to be **green with envy** over your grass next summer? Start putting in the work today.<sup>103</sup>

(89) Kad moji kolege, usprkos sjajnoj opremi, nisu ulovili ništa, bili su **zeleni od zavisti**.<sup>104</sup>

Green may symbolize someone being naïve, young, inexperienced and immature. This can be connected to the green appearance of many unripe plants, fruits or vegetables, which happens due to chemicals called chlorophylls, for example, unripe tomatoes are green.

English and Croatian both have idioms appearing in this group, for example, *green as grass* and *mlad i zelen*:

(90) ...and because she remained, in spite of all her opportunities, as **green as grass**, she was certain they had got their head start because they had grown up in apartments, where there was nothing else to do but educate themselves.<sup>105</sup>

(91) Tako smo se upoznali Zagreb i ja. Već na početku s obje strane. On iskusan i mudar, ja **mlad i zelen**.<sup>106</sup>

Green can be used to signify permission to do something, and it has been used as a symbol for “go” or “move forward” dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when red and green signals were used on railroads and were further expanded onto traffic lights on roads.<sup>107</sup> This is where the 2 idioms in this group, *give/get the green light* and *zeleno svjetlo*, come from.

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<sup>101</sup> Karen Fang: *No. 3241: Hooker's Green*, <https://www.uh.edu/engines/epi3241.htm>

<sup>102</sup> COCA

<sup>103</sup> COCA

<sup>104</sup> HJK

<sup>105</sup> COCA

<sup>106</sup> HJK

<sup>107</sup> Green light – Idioms by The Free Dictionary, <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/green+light>

(92) Women here in Saudi Arabia have finally been **given the green light** to drive.<sup>108</sup>

(93) Ipak, od snimanja se nije odustalo već se samo **očekuje zeleno svjetlo**.<sup>109</sup>

Green may symbolize having good, desirable qualities or abilities in a number of English idioms. For example, the idiom *the grass is always greener* is used when someone else's situation seem better than our own, as in the following example:

(94) **The grass is always greener** we say, though it's important to be happy with what you've got which is pretty comfortable compared to many people.<sup>110</sup>

This idiom is motivated by the fact vividly green grass is considered beautiful and desirable, unlike unhealthy grass which may appear yellowish or dry.

The other idiom in this group is to *have a green thumb*:

(95) I think that if you did a survey of people who supposedly **have a green thumb** you would find that one characteristic was pretty universal-they visit their garden fairly regularly.<sup>111</sup>

People who work with plants usually do that with their hands, of which thumbs are a part, therefore, here we have an example of the prototypical PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymy, while the green symbolizes the successfully grown and cared for plants.

In some idioms, green may stand for illness or feeling sick, which is likely due to ancient medicine and the relation of bile with disease. The idiom *green about (or around or at) the gills* refers to a person who looks sick or nauseous, with the term gills referring to the area around human jaws and ears, and it has been used in this sense since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>112</sup> An example of its usage is:

(96) He looked **green around the gills**. She had never seen him drunk before.<sup>113</sup>

In Croatian, green is used in an idiom which means to improve or stabilize, and that is *doći na zelenu granu*, as in:

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<sup>108</sup> COCA

<sup>109</sup> hrWaC

<sup>110</sup> COCA

<sup>111</sup> COCA

<sup>112</sup> "green around the gills" Definition and Origin, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/green-about-the-gills>

<sup>113</sup> COCA

(97) Nikako da NK Osijek **dođe na zelenu granu** kada su u pitanju dugovanja iz prošlosti.<sup>114</sup>

Like in the previous idioms, green, when referring to a plant, symbolizes success or a desirable outcome.

The idiom *za zelenim stolom*, which means that something is taking place at an official, formal location, possibly originating in the custom of covering official tables by a green tablecloth:

(98) Budući da se bodovi izborni na travnjaku ne oduzimaju **za zelenim stolom** tek tako, »disciplinci« svoju stroguću mogu trenirati na Mamiću.<sup>115</sup>

#### 4.7 Idioms with the colour yellow as a component

ENGLISH	CROATIAN
a yellow belly	
a yellow streak down	
	žuta minuta
	žuta kuća
	žut kao limun

*Table 7. idioms with yellow or žuto in English and Croatian*

In the 2 English idioms found, the negative characteristic of cowardice is represented. For example, the idiom *a yellow belly* can be used as:

(99) We always said that he **had a yellow belly!**<sup>116</sup>

while *have a yellow streak down* is used as following:

(100) He is a chickenhawk **with a yellow streak down his back** a mile wide who ran as far as he could from military service when called on to serve and he questions other people's patriotism.<sup>117</sup>

In European culture, yellow has been related to being cowardly or craven, which is where the English idioms get their meaning.

<sup>114</sup> hrWaC

<sup>115</sup> HJK

<sup>116</sup> BNC

<sup>117</sup> COCA

Brenko (2009: 78) notes that yellow has at times been used to mark undesirables in a society, the most notable example of this is of course in the Holocaust, and may also represent disease or mental instability.

In Croatian, this is obvious in the idiom *žuta minuta*.

(101) Imao je i eru polukomičnih kikseva, ali svaki vratar ima **žutih minuta**.<sup>118</sup>

This idiom signifies a short amount of time, merely a moment, in which someone does something that is out of character for them.

There is another Croatian idiom in this group, *žuta kuća*, referring to a mental hospital. The term madhouse is used in a similar sense in English.

(102) Da nas netko čuje, pomislit će da smo pobjegli iz **žute kuće**.<sup>119</sup>

The Croatian idiom *žut kao limun* refers to someone who appears ill.

(103) Bio je **žut kao limun**, teško je govorio i oči su mu bile mutne.<sup>120</sup>

According to Brenko (2009: 77), this association comes from the fact the skin colour of people who live an unhealthy life may turn slightly yellow.

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<sup>118</sup> HJK

<sup>119</sup> hrWaC

<sup>120</sup> Hrvatski frazeološki rječnik

## 5. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the goal of this thesis was to analyse English idioms which have a colour term as one of their components and then compare it to Croatian idioms. What the research primarily showed is that English idioms are more numerous than the Croatian ones. I found 63 English idioms and 35 Croatian idioms, a significant difference. The colour black appears often in both English and Croatian colour idioms: 15 times in both languages, which altogether is 30 idioms. In both languages, it was shown that it stands for negative feelings and qualities (pessimism, bad luck, bad reputation) in the majority of the examples. As for the colour white, English has many more idioms belonging to this group: 11 as opposed to 3. White can represent purity and innocence, while a unique association exists in Croatia, where it stands for vastness. In both languages, black and white are perceived as opposite to each other and can be used to show contrast between something. While red can be used in a descriptive manner, it can also represent anger and embarrassment. Aside from that, in English it can also stand for a specific political ideology and its adherents. Unlike in Croatian, it is blue in English that stands for vastness. It can also symbolize the blue sky. In both languages, blue can be associated with nobility. In Croatian, its unique association that is culture specific is that with corruption and bribery. Green has both positive and negative associations. A common association is that with envy and jealousy. In both English and Croatian, it may represent luck and positive characteristics, usually motivated by the greenness of plants, or permission to do something, but it can also stand for naivety and immaturity. In English, it is uniquely associated with sickness, while in Croatian, motivated by a cultural custom, it is used in an idiom describing something as official. Yellow is the least prolific colour in colour idioms: only 2 in English and 3 in Croatian were found. In English it has a specific association with cowardice, while in Croatian it may symbolise sickness or mental instability.

The research showed that the idioms are in most cases culture and language specific, as most English idioms did not have its equivalent in Croatian and vice versa, however, it also showed that a number of shared conceptual metaphors and metonymies exist in these languages. For example, the PESSIMISM IS BLACK metaphor exists in both English and Croatian, as do BAD REPUTATION IS BLACK and BADNESS IS BLACK. Among shared metaphors are also GOODNESS IS WHITE, ANGER IS RED, EMBARRASSMENT IS RED, JEALOUSY/ENVY IS GREEN, PERMISSION IS GREEN and IMMATURITY IS GREEN. These similarities may stem from a shared wider cultural circle: both Croatia and the majority of English speaking countries are part of the Western world, in which these colours have similar

symbolic meanings. Another reason for the similarities may be the fact that they originate in the physical characteristics of someone or something, and these characteristics don't differ from country to country (for example, a green light is green in both England and Croatia).

A limitation of this thesis is that not all colour terms were examined, for example, colour terms such as *gray* (*sivo* in Croatian), *purple* (*ljubičasta*), *brown* (*smeđa*), *orange* (*narančasta*) or *pink* (*ružičasta*) were not analysed. This is despite the fact that it would be interesting to conduct a similar analysis with these colour terms and determine how often they appear in idiomatic language, if they are more common in English or Croatian idioms, and what they represent in them. Another limitation is that using dictionaries and corpora might not always give the best results. For example, when using the corpus, some examples may lack context or the phrase that is being looked up may not be used in an idiomatic manner. Also, English dictionaries and corpora are more extensive than Croatian ones, due to the fact English simply has more speakers and more research is done on it.



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