

ON THE TERMINOLOGY OF COLOURS IN ENGLISH: *YELLOW*

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Abstract

Colours are signs of communication, they transmit, suggest, influence. A colour with a rich symbolism is yellow, perceived as intense, vivid, dazzling to the point of stridency at times, but also as the colour of cowardice, betrayal, ageing, sickness and, formerly, jealousy. Beyond this symbolism, the article makes valuable use of the information found in general-purpose and specialized dictionaries, as well as in other reliable sources in order to perform a linguistic analysis of the term *yellow* in the English language from several perspectives: definition, etymology, word formation, idioms and semantics.

Keywords: *terminology, colours, yellow, linguistic analysis, English language*

Résumé

Les couleurs sont des signes de communication, elles transmettent, suggèrent, influencent. Une couleur qui a un symbolisme riche est le jaune, perçu comme intense, vif, éblouissant jusqu'à la stridence parfois, mais aussi comme la couleur de la lâcheté, de la trahison, de la vieillesse, de la maladie et, autrefois, de la jalousie. Au-delà de ce symbolisme, l'article exploite les informations trouvées dans les dictionnaires générales et spécialisés, ainsi que dans d'autres sources fiables afin de réaliser une analyse linguistique du terme jaune en anglais sous plusieurs angles: définition, étymologie, la formation des mots, les expressions idiomatiques et la sémantique.

Mots-clés: *terminologie, couleurs, jaune, analyse linguistique, langue anglaise*

1. Preliminary remarks. Symbolism

An intense, vivid colour, dazzling to the point of stridency at times, yellow is a symphony of expansive light.

However, the symbolism of this colour has been characterized by ambivalence. From Greek mythology we find out that, as a symbol of love, harmony and immortality, the golden apples in the garden of Hesperides retain their value

even after they are stolen by Hercules. On the other hand, the apple of discord, also a golden apple, lies at the origin of the Trojan War.

Sometimes the ambivalence is given by the shades of yellow, the brightness or dullness of the colour. Thus, in Islam golden yellow meant wisdom or the good advice arising from it, while pale yellow represented betrayal or disappointment.

In Christian symbolism it is the colour of the saints' aura, of eternity, light and life, the basis of Christian rituals, as reflected in the golden crosses and cloaks of priests.

On earth it became an attribute of the power of kings, emperors, princes proclaiming the divine origin of the position they occupy at the head of the nations, it signifies nobleness¹.

The warmth and solar positivity that yellow exudes do not exclude negative connotations, like jealousy (formerly, as this figurative meaning has been taken over by *green* at present), cowardice or betrayal. Juda was rendered in painting as wearing a pale yellow cloak which suggested cunning. The paleness or yellowing that some diseases cause has led to the association with ageing and sickness. Similarly, plants wither and turn yellow and paper yellows in time.

From an anthropological perspective, it has been noticed that colours and emotions go hand in hand. Yellow, like orange, seems to collocate with joy in most cases, but “the association appears to be weak in that the emotion terms usually qualify the color term (as in *cheerful yellow*) in description of inanimate objects or flowers. Thus, no instance suggests a connection between emotion and color in the context of the human body”².

2. Definition and meanings of the term *yellow*

The scientific definition of yellow presents details of an exact and specific nature: “a fundamental colour of the spectrum of light, located between orange and green, with a wavelength varying between 550 and 590 millimicrons”³ or “1. the color produced by stimulation by light waves of wavelength

¹ Silvia Pitiriciu, *Din terminologia cromatică: galben în limba română*, in „Revista limba română”, nr. 3-4, anul XX, 2010, p. 108.

² Anders Steinvall, “Colors and emotions in English”. In R. E. Maclaury, G.V. Paramei, D. Dedrick (eds.), *Anthropology of Color - Interdisciplinary Multilevel Modeling*, John Benjamins Publishing Company; Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, 2007, p. 358.

³ Mircea Popescu (coord.), *Dicționar de artă A-M*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1995, p. 195, *apud* Silvia Pitiriciu, *Din terminologia cromatică: galben în limba română*, in “Revista limba română”, nr. 3-4, anul XX, 2010, p. 103.

of 571.5 to 578.5 mμ; 2. a color between orange and green, produced by energy of wavelengths between 570 and 590 nm”⁴.

The common, ostensive definition found in general-purpose dictionaries describes this colour through its physical features while relating to the surrounding world and some of its elements: “a color whose hue resembles that of ripe lemons or sunflowers”⁵, “a colour like that of a lemon or gold or the sun”⁶, or “the colour of lemons, butter, or the middle part of an egg”⁷. As a noun, it also designates a yellow pigment or dye and it is a synonym for the yolk of an egg.

The solar beauty of the colour is overshadowed by certain negative connotations. Informally, yellow means “cowardly” or “mean”. Another sense is “jealous, envious”. It might become offensive when denoting persons with light olive or light brown complexion, especially when describing people coming from East or South East Asia.

The plural form, *yellow*s, refers to “jaundice” and the association with the colour is justified by the yellowness of the skin, of the whites of the eyes caused by an abnormal body condition due to the increase of bile pigments. With this plural form, but singular in construction, it may designate a plant disease caused by phytoplasmas.

Yellow is a verb, too, and its meaning is “to make or become yellow”.

3. Etymology

As an adjective, *yellow* comes from Middle English *yelwe* (when it was also used of certain shades of gray), from Old English *geolu*, *geolwe*, “yellow”, in turn from Proto-Germanic **gelwaz* from PIE root **ghel-* meaning “to shine”, with derivatives designating gold, but also colours, in particular green and yellow. Reference to the light hue of complexion (of black persons) goes back to 1808. As a noun - the colour itself or its nuances - it comes from the Middle English adjective *yelwe* and from Old English *geolo*, *geolu*⁸.

⁴ Yellow. (n.d.) *Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health, Seventh Edition*. (2003), <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/yellow>, accessed 29 September 2023.

⁵ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/yellow>

⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/yellow>

⁷ *Collins Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/yellow>

⁸ *Online Etymology Dictionary*,

<https://www.etymonline.com/search?page=1&q=yellow&type=>

4. Word formation

There are not many derivatives formed from *yellow*: *yellowish* (*yellow* + suffix *-ish*), meaning “somewhat yellow, tending to yellow, tinged with yellow”, with its synonym *yellowy* (*yellow* + suffix *-y*), then *yellowness* “the state or quality of being yellow in colour”. *Yellowish* is often associated with old age and diseases due to the appearance of discoloration.

Instead, in certain scientific fields, like medicine, biochemistry, mineralogy etc., there are several word-forming elements used for yellow or gold: *aureo-*, *chrys(e)o-*, *flavo-*, *luteo-*, *xantho-*⁹, implying yellow coloration, as seen in, for instance: *aureochrome* (a blue light photoreceptor found in golden alga), *chrysoberyl* (an oxide of beryllium and aluminium of greenish or yellowish-green colour), *flavivirus* (a type of arbovirus causing human diseases among which yellow fever, dengue, etc.), *luteotropin* (a hormone secreted by the anterior pituitary; prolactin), *xanthophyll* (a yellow or brown pigment of the carotenoid group).

As for **composition**, *yellow* is part of hyponymic relations, forming structures where it is the head of the group, as a noun, or it is a modifier, as an adjective.

Many compounds represent names of plants, including trees and the wood/bark of these trees, and are constructed according to the pattern adjective *yellow* + noun: *yellow alder* (*Turnera ulmifolia*, a shrubby herb found in America, having axillary yellow flowers); *yellow adder's-tongue* (or dogtooth violet, any of the genus *Erythronium* of the lily family); *yellow archangel* (a weedy, perennial herb, *Lamium Galeobdolon*, of Europe); *yellow ash* (or *yellowwood*, any of various trees having yellowish wood or yielding a yellow extract); *yellow avens* (a perennial, European, rosaceous herb, *Geum urbanum*); *yellow azalea* (also called *fiery azalea*, an azalea with yellow or orange flowers); *yellow birch* (a North American birch, *Betula alleghaniensis*, with yellowish, sometimes silver grey bark; it also refers to its dark wood); *yellow bush* (small tree or shrub, *Rhamnus caroliniana*); *yellow calla lily* (a herb from South Africa, *Zantedeschia elliot*); *yellow camomile* (a garden plant from Eurasia, *Anthemis tinctoria*); *yellow cedar* (or yellow cypress, or Alaska cedar); *yellow daisy* (or the black-eyed Susan); *yellow-eye* (goldenseal, a perennial North American herb, *Hydrastis Canadensis*, of the buttercup family); *yellow foxglove* (a hairy herb, *Digitalis ambigua*); *yellow gentian* (a herb from which a bitter tonic is made); *yellow granadilla* (a climbing vine of tropical America); *yellow grass* (a bog herb of the lily family); *yellow-green alga* (an alga of the phylum *Chrysophyta* in which the chlorophyll is masked by brown or yellow pigment); *yellow gum* (any of several Australian eucalyptuses); *yellow*

⁹ *Microbiology Manual, University of South Australia*, <https://lo.unisa.edu.au/mod/page/view.php?id=1251633>, accessed 3 October 2023.

honeysuckle (a spreading vine with orange-yellow flowers); *yellow jasmine* (or *yellow jessamine*, a twining North American evergreen shrub with fragrant yellow flowers); *yellow pine* (a North American pine with yellowish wood; the wood of this pine); *yellow poplar* (a tall North American timber tree, *Liriodendron tulipifera*, of the magnolia family, also called *tulip poplar*, *tulip tree*; the wood of such a tree); *yellow cinchona* (or *calisaya bark*, cinchona bark obtained from either of two cinchonas, *Cinchona calisaya* and *C. ledgeriana*); *yellow tuft* (a European perennial herb, *Alyssum argenteum*). The noun that *yellow* modifies can be a compound itself (*yellow calla lily*) or can be preceded by another modifier (*yellow adder's-tongue*). *Yellow* can be followed by another colour to convey the presence of the two colours, e.g. *yellow-green alga*.

In names of animals (birds, insects, etc.), the adjective *yellow* denotes a physical characteristic of a species: *yellow angelfish* (a South American cichlid fish, *Pterophyllum scalare*, that people keep in aquariums); *yellow ant* (an ant that is yellow in colour; especially *Acanthomyops flavus*); *yellow-bellied sapsucker* (or *yellow-bellied woodpecker*, *Sphyrapicus varius*, a sapsucker from eastern North America with a pale-yellow abdomen); *yellow-billed cuckoo* (a North American cuckoo); *yellow-billed magpie* (a bird, *P. Nuttalli*, of California); *yellow bird* (any of various yellow or golden birds, as the golden oriole of Europe); *yellow-breasted chat* (an American warbler, *Icteria virens*); *yellow-crowned night heron* (any of the crepuscular or nocturnal herons); *yellow-fever mosquito* (*Aedes aegypti*, which transmits yellow fever and dengue); *yellow goatfish* (a goatfish found in the Atlantic Ocean); *yellow jack* (a yellowish carangid marine food fish, *Caranx bartholomaei*); *yellow jacket* or *yellowjacket* (a predatory wasp of the genera *Vespula* and *Dolichovespula* with abdomens marked with yellow and black); *yellow-shafted flicker* (a flicker of eastern North America that is golden yellow on the underside of the tail); *yellow-legged hornet* (formerly known as *Asian hornet*, is a dark brown and orange hornet with yellow legs, *Vespa velutina*, originating from Asia and introduced into Europe where it became an invasive species); *yellow perch* (a North American freshwater fish, *Perca flavescens*, of the perch family); *yellowtail* (a type of fish); *yellow warbler* (a North American warbler, *Dendroica petechia*, the colour of the male being bright yellow with brown streaks). *Yellow* may refer to a part of the animal's body directly (belly, leg, etc.): *yellow-bellied sapsucker*, *yellow-billed cuckoo*, *yellow-billed magpie*, *yellow-breasted chat*, *yellow-legged hornet*, *yellow-shafted flicker*, or indirectly, based on a metaphor, e.g. *yellow-crowned night heron*. In *yellow-fever mosquito*, the modifier is the compound *yellow-fever*.

The pattern adjective *yellow* + noun to form a compound is also found in names of diseases (in humans or in plants): *yellow dwarf* (any of several plant diseases of onions, potatoes, cereal grasses, etc. characterized by yellowing and

stunting); *yellow edge* (a virus disease of the strawberry in which the leaf is affected by a marginal chlorosis); *yellow fever* (an acute, often deadly infectious disease of warm climates that is characterized by fever and is caused by a flavivirus transmitted especially by the yellow-fever mosquito, *Aedes aegypti*); *yellow jack* (with a second meaning, the same as *yellow fever*).

Other compounds that contain *yellow* are mirrored in the following semantic areas: the human body, e.g. *yellow bile* (one of the four humours/ fluids in ancient and medieval physiology that was believed to enter into the constitution of the body and regarded as causing anger, as determining a person's temperament); *yellow body* (or *corpus luteum*, a yellowish mass of progesterone-secreting endocrine tissue that is formed in an ovary after ovulation); *yellow spot* (or *macula lutea*, a yellowish part of the retina that is responsible for visual acuity); sports, e.g. *yellow card* (in soccer, a yellow card held by the referee indicates a warning for a player's conduct); products or services, e.g. *yellowback* (formerly, a novel, not very expensive, bound in yellow cloth or paper); food, e.g. *yellow cake* (a yellow spongy cake often served at birthday parties); substances (nouns related to science, in particular chemistry), e.g. *yellow brass* (an alloy containing mainly copper and zinc); *yellow copper ore* (a yellow mineral consisting of a sulfide of copper and iron), *yellowcake* (uranic oxide); *yellow lead ore* (wulfenite); *yellow metal* (an alloy of about 60 percent copper and about 40 percent zinc; naval brass); *yellow rain* (a sticky yellow substance seen in South Eastern Asia when falling from helicopters or planes, held to be a chemical weapon used in the Vietnam War, but upon scientific examination it turned out to be identical to honeybee feces).

New chromatic terms are created in shades of yellow which have the structure noun or adjective + noun *yellow*: *canary yellow* (a light to a moderate or vivid yellow), *lemon yellow* (a brilliant, vivid yellow-orange or greenish yellow colour), *imperial yellow* (the reddish-yellow colour that became the emblem of the emperors of China); *primrose yellow* (a light to moderate greenish yellow; a light to moderate yellow); *straw yellow* (a pale yellow); *sulphur yellow* (a brilliant greenish yellow). The modifying noun is an object, substance, reality etc. that is chromatically related to yellow.

In pigments¹⁰, the prevailing structure is chemical element + noun *yellow* (as in *cobalt yellow*), but the modifier can also be a proper name or an adjective which indicates the place of origin of the colour (as in *Naples yellow*, *Indian yellow*, *Chinese yellow*). We have found the following examples: *cadmium yellow* (cadmium

¹⁰ For names of pigments, we consulted M. Douma, (curator), *Pigments through the Ages*, <https://www.webexhibits.org/pigments/intro/pigments.html>, accessed 29 September 2023.

sulfide; alternative name: aurora yellow; from Latin *cadmia zinc ore calamine*); chrome yellow (lead chromate derived from the mineral *crocoite*); cobalt yellow (an expensive artificial pigment deriving its name from Middle High German *kobolt*, i.e. a goblin; considered to harm silver ores); *Indian yellow* (a clear, fluorescent pigment; magnesium euxanthate in the beginning); *King's Yellow* (or Chinese Yellow, arsenic sulfide; also named *orpiment* from Latin *auripigmentum*, a hint to the golden shade); *lead-tin yellow* (a lead tin oxide); *lemon yellow* (a pigment and a shade of yellow; barium chromate); *Naples yellow* (a lead antimonate yellow already used in Babylon and Assyria in ceramic glazes); *titanium yellow* (nickel antimony titanium yellow rutile); *yellow ochre* (also known as Mars yellow, a natural pigment found in clay whose colour is given by an iron oxyhydroxide mineral; also a moderate orange yellow); *zinc yellow* (zinc chromate). In *yellow ochre*, *yellow* is an adjective.

As seen in the examples above, the vast majority of compounds are open/spaced compound words (as in *yellow camomile*), some are closed compound words (as in *yellowtail*). Sometimes, the compound is open with one meaning and closed with another, for instance *yellow cake* (a yellow spongy cake often served at birthday parties) and *yellowcake* (uranic oxide).

5. Idioms

The adjective *yellow* is contained in several idioms, some of which manage to surprise us.

Yellow alert (in military or civilian defence) denotes the first alert when hostile aircraft are approaching a military area.

Yellow-belly is a slang expression for a cowardly, spineless person, just as *yellow-bellied chicken*. In some dictionaries it appears as an informal, old-fashioned phrase. It seemingly originated from the yellow underside of some animals or it was associated with the presence of sickness and the absence of stamina.

Yellow dog or *yellow-dog* speaks of a despicable person, someone who is worthy of contempt, whereas in employment law a *yellow-dog contract* (dated) is a contract between a worker and an employer in which the former agrees not to remain in or join a labour union during the employment in order to get the job, but these contracts are now illegal. In an expression connected with politics, a *yellow-dog Democrat* resents Republicans so much that he would rather vote for a dog if it were the only opponent to the Republican party.

Nautically, a *yellow flag* is a quarantine flag, also called, informally, a *yellow jack*.

Yellow grease is a term employed in the fast food industry, referring to used cooking oil or to inedible fat.

The expression *yellow journalism* was coined at the end of the 19th century and stemmed from the rivalry between two New York newspapers, the *World* and

the *Journal*. They both tried to use sensational, sometimes scandalous news to shock and thus attract readers and, although the era of this kind of journalism is said to have come to an end, there are still sensationalist practices and techniques which can be seen around us, even in such media as television and the internet, where arousing readers' interest prevails over reporting facts accurately. The idiom actually originates in the "publicity stunt use of colored ink"¹¹ (1895) as applied to a Yellow Kid character whose clothes were yellow, in a comic strip called "Shantytown" in the newspaper *New York World*. *Yellow* is similarly used in *yellow press*.

Yellow light is the traffic light preceding the red signal that stops traffic; an indication to slow down and prepare to stop.

In many countries *yellow pages* is a telephone book where firms and services offered are arranged alphabetically and which includes advertising.

In the late 19th and early 20th century the syntagm *yellow peril* was used to describe the menace to Western culture, civilisation and living standards derived from the influx of Asian workers and the growing power of eastern Asian peoples.

Yellow ribbon encapsulates a custom of wearing such a symbol in order to show solidarity with close persons or fellow citizens at war. The origin is the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis when the U.S. embassy was stormed by Iranian militants.

A U.S state under the powerful influence of the Libertarian Party is a *yellow state*.

Slang expressions are found in *code yellow* (accidentally urinating in a place other than a toilet) and *mellow yellow* (another name for the psychedelic drug LSD or dried banana fibres used for smoking).

High yellow is an obsolete, even offensive phrase denoting an Afro-American person who has light complexion.

As for expressions containing verbs, there are several: *to be yellow* (to be cowardly), *to have a yellow streak* or *to have a yellow streak down one's back* (to be easily frightened), *to follow the yellow brick road* (to reach success and enjoy adventure, with reference to the path to the Emerald City, famous thanks to the works of Frank Baum), *to wear yellow stockings/ hose* (obsolete, to be jealous). *Don't eat (the) yellow snow* is a humorous way of warning children who have the habit of eating snow (i.e. they must not eat snow that has been urinated on).

6. Semantics

Chromatic terms which, semantically, contain the seme "yellow" or "close to yellow" are sometimes identified in the names of the objects, substances characterized by this colour, in the physical attributes of people. There are many

¹¹ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=yellow>, accessed 29 September 2023.

examples: *amber* “a variable color averaging a dark orange yellow”, *blond* “of a flaxen, golden, light auburn, or pale yellowish-brown color” or the person with pale yellow hair, *gold* “a variable colour averaging deep yellow”, *lemon* “of the color lemon yellow”, *sand* “a yellowish-gray color”, *straw* “pale yellow in color”, *wheat* “a light yellow”¹². Other chromatic terms are derivatives with the suffix *-en*: *golden* “of the colour of gold; yellow”, *flaxen* “of the colour of flax”; *-y*, as in *strawy* “containing or resembling straw”, etc.

Compounds are often described in terms of synonymic series determined by the seme [+ light yellow]: *canary yellow*, *primrose yellow*, *straw yellow*, or [+brilliant yellow]: *lemon yellow*, *sulphur yellow*.

Together with derivatives, compounds represent ways of expressing the hyponymy relation towards the hyperonym *yellow* which has fewer semes than its hyponyms. For instance, the compound *yellow jack* denotes: “1. *Informal.* quarantine flag; 2. *Pathol.* yellow fever; 3. any carangoid fish, esp. a Caribbean food fish, *Caranx bartholomaei*”¹³. There are semantic distinctions reflected in different registers and domains.

7. Conclusion

The lexicographic definition of *yellow*, the meanings of the compounds containing *yellow* as an adjective or a noun indicate the association with concrete elements from the physical world in most cases, which also leads to metaphorical uses. The compounds occur in various domains: botany, zoology, medicine, art, chemistry etc. and represent the most productive way of forming chromatic terms, enjoying a wide use. The meanings of these terms are characterized by clarity and precision, but also by approximation.

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¹² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

¹³ *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, Gramercy Books, New York, 1994, p. 1654.

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