

SGAW KAREN COLOR CATEGORIES

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As a part of my research project on a Sgaw Karen-Thai and Thai-Sgaw Karen Dictionary I have been compiling Sgaw-Karen words since 1976 in selected villages in the northern provinces of Thailand. My interest in the Sgaw Karen color categories is a result of my investigation into the weaving techniques of the women of this ethnic group. In asking about their words relating to color I first used dyed cotton thread and found out that originally the Karens used only a few principal colors for their clothes i.e. white, black and red. Only recently as a result of their importation of the factory-dyed thread from local Thai markets, they have added some new colors such as blue, green and yellow to their traditional designs. Besides dyed fabrics, I used as stimuli painted cards, toy bricks of different colors, beads and a certain number of existing colored objects in nature such as flowers, stones and plants. The main purpose of the paper is to report a part of my findings of the attributive words for colors and is intended to serve as a contribution to the study of lexical sets relating to perceptual categorization.

The main problem we usually encounter in our investigation into the color terms of several minority languages of Thailand e.g. Karen, Lawa, and Thin (Mal)¹ is the lack of a universal concept for "color" in a Western technical sense. This makes it difficult for us to ask an abstract question like "What is the color of this thing?." One must, therefore, ask instead an indirect question such as "What does this look like?." Even with this kind of question one still runs the risk of being given attributives for shape, weight, form and texture. It is only after being shown the same kind of object of different colors for many times that the informants get the idea of what we are after and eventually will give us a name of a specific color. As for the generic term "color" I am still unsuccessful in eliciting it from Lawa and Thin (Mal). Under repeated questions my Lawa and Thin (Mal) gave me the Thai word /sǐ/ meaning

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This paper was first tried out at the 11th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, University of Arizona, October 20-22, 1978, where the author received valuable comments and suggestions necessary for the revision of this final version. The author expresses her heart-felt thanks to Dr. David Thomas of the Summer Institute of Linguistics for the reading of this final version.

1. The data concerning the Karen, White Meo, Lawa and Thin (Mal) languages are from the author's unpublished field notes.

“color”. In the case of the Sgaw Karens, at first my informants from many localities repeated the same lack of a generic term for “color”. 27 informants did not have the generic abstract term “color”. I looked up Professor Jones’s glossary² and did not find it there either. Only the encouragement from the Meo-Yao languages³ where the common term “color” can be easily elicited helped me pursue my difficult task. This effort was rewarded when an old informant who had his education among the Sgaw Karens in Burma came up with the much coveted generic term /lwè/. Later I brought the term back to my former informants. Most of them recognized it and explained that the term was used only by some old people and was no longer in common usage. Why is it that the generic term “color” can be more easily forgotten than the terms specifying each color such as “red”, “white” and “black”? Should we explain this phenomenon by the naive theory of primitive people stating that these “simple” minority ethnic tribes lack the ability of abstract thinking? The theory has been under attack by many presentday anthropologists. To enter into this controversial issue is beyond the limited scope of my paper. Concerning this issue I would like to point out that the fact that most of the ethnic groups in Thailand have been using a Thai loan word /sǐ/ as a generic term for color does not mean they are incapable of abstract thinking. Still I cannot find any reasons why generic terms are more easily forgotten. With regard to the Sgaw Karens, they have a different way of abstract thinking especially in connection with colors. In this matter a common word /ki?/ is used to refer to any type of two (or more) colors in combination. This kind of word are not found either in Thai or in English. In Thai, for example, we must specify whether an object is /laaj/, equivalent to “to be striped, or to have decorative design or pattern”, or /dòk/, equivalent to “to have floral decorative design” or /cùt/, equivalent to “to be dotted, full of dots,” or /dàaj/, equivalent to “to be mottled, uneven of color”. All these several forms of two (or more) colors in combination is summed up in one Sgaw Karen word /ki?/. A counterpart of /ki?/ can be found in English in the word “polychrome”. This word, however, is a highly technical term rarely used thus does not have the same connotation as the words “striped” or “dotted” which are more equivalent to the Sgaw Karen word /ki?/.

2. Jones, Robert B., Jr. *Karen Linguistic Studies, Description, Comparison and Texts*, University of California Publications in Linguistics, Volume 25, 1961, 283 pp.

3. The White Meo word for color is /tšò/.

The Yao word for color is /si'g/

The Yao data are from Lombard, Sylvia J., *Yao-English Dictionary*, Data paper Number 69, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1968, 363 pp.

Having discussed the generic term for "color" used by the Sgaw Karen, we shall now proceed to analyze how they divide a spectrum into a number of prime colors. Here we admit that the Sgaw Karens know nothing about the spectrum, which was first investigated by Sir Isaac Newton. Neither have they seen a glass prism nor any kind of spectrophotometry nor calorimetry. Thus when we talk about an investigation into the Sgaw Karens' division of the spectrum, we mean that we shall investigate what colors the Sgaw Karens consider so important that they formulate words to designate these colors. In our investigation our attempt will be made first to find out what colors the Sgaw Karens perceive, and then the colors considered of secondary importance that they do not at first formulate words to designate them. We shall also try to see how the Sgaw Karens coin words for prime colors together to designate the latter.

In the Sgaw Karen color perception there are 6 prime colors as follow :

1. /wa/ meaning relative lightness or "white". This word can also be used to mean the presence of the white element or paleness. For example, the Sgaw Karen word for "pink" is /ʃɔ bɔʔ/ but very pale pink is /ʃɔ wa/.
2. /su/ meaning relative darkness or "black". This term includes all dark colors such as dark blue, dark brown, dark grey and very dark red.
3. /ʃɔ/ meaning "red". In my experience red is the easiest color to elicit from different ethnic groups. I have never come across people of any group who lack a word for red. Perhaps this is because red is the most visible color in contrast to the green color of the jungle. In Yao, for example, of all colors the term for red is most popular and can mean both "color" and "red". When one speaks in Yao that "it has color" it is equivalent to saying that "it is red", the words for "color" and "red" being homonyms. In Sgaw Karen /ʃɔ/ is used extensively to refer to several hues of red. The word is also used in combination with other words to form a great number of compound nouns such as /pəʔsə ʃɔ/ meaning "onion" and /tə mè ʃɔ/ meaning "a kind of ant with reddish orange color".
4. /bɔ/ meaning relative yellowness. The term includes orange color, brown and any yellowish and brownish hue. When the Karens want to mean "orange color" and not ordinary yellow, they use a compound word /bɔ ʃɔ/ meaning "yellow-red", for they know that there is a red element in an orange color. However, the Sgaw Karens lack a word for "brown". My effort in showing many stimuli ranging in colors from pale yellow, bright yellow to brown did

not elicit any other word than /bɔ/. Recalling Conklin's experience with the Hanunoo⁴ in the Philippines whereby the distinction between dryness and wetness or succulence plays a role in labelling colors, I tried an experiment on my Karen informants using fresh stalks of vegetables (greenish color) and dry wood (brownish color) as stimuli and asked them the name of the colors of these objects. I did this after having got that precious term for color /lwɛ̃/. That experiment was unsuccessful because the Sgaw Karens, unlike the Hanunoo, do not classify colors according to the dryness or wetness. My informants simply stated that the fresh stalks of vegetables was /tãdɔ̃' siso/ literally "vegetables raw" and the dry piece of wood was /sɛ̃de xe/ literally "branch (of tree) dry". It seemed I could not elicit the Sgaw Karen word for "brown". However, my enthusiasm in showing the informants many yellowish objects including gold and bronze objects did produce an unexpected result. The informants told me that the color of these glossy, shiny metals was /ble/, which was the word they once used to describe the skin of skinks. Later enquiries confirmed that in the Sgaw Karens' color perception shininess and glossiness of surface are regarded as colors.

5. /la/ meaning relative greenness. For the Sgaw Karens, there is no clearcut distinction between green and blue. There is no one word signifying "blue". When one wants to make clear that what one means is the blue color like that of the blue sapphire, one must use the compound word /su la/ meaning literally "black green"; and when one wants to indicate the pale blue color of the sky, one must use the compound word /la bɔ̃'/ meaning literally "green paleness".
6. /lĩ'/? meaning "purple". Concerning this color the Sgaw Karens are most different from their neighbors such as the White Meo, the Yao, the Lawa and the Thin (Mal) who usually do not make a distinction between "blue" and "purple". The Sgaw Karens differentiate at least two shades of purple i.e. the ordinary purple /lĩ'/? and the pale purple /la lĩ'/? meaning literally "green purple".

4. Conklin, Harold C., *Hanunoo Color Categories* in "Language in Culture and Society : a reader in Linguistics and Anthropology" edited by Dell Hymes, 1964, p. 189-192.

The six terms mentioned above are prime colors discerned by the Sgaw Karens from the spectrum. The term /bɔ̃ʔ/, though not signifying any particular color, can be combined with almost any color and carries with it the element of paleness or whiteness. The Sgaw Karens lack a term for "grey". Dark grey can be called /su/. Very pale grey and off-white can be called /wa/. Real neutral grey such as the color of ashes can be referred to only by comparing it to ashes.

What has been discussed is the internal structure of the Sgaw Karens' color categories. However, our knowledge of the Sgaw Karens' color system will not be complete if we do not mention two other categories, i.e. shininess and brightness. Although these two categories are not color hues, the Sgaw Karens regard them as colors. We have mentioned already the Sgaw Karen word for shininess under 4 /bɔ̃/. The term for brightness is /kəʔpɔ̃/. /kəʔpɔ̃/ signifies brightness that stems from within, brightness by one's self. It is somewhat like fluorescence. Things such as the moon and a firefly are said to be /kəʔpɔ̃/, but a shiny reflecting object such as a diamond or a looking-glass cannot be described as /kəʔpɔ̃/.

In conclusion we may say that generally speaking there are 6 basic color categories among the Sgaw Karens. However, one must take into consideration also the paleness category /bɔ̃ʔ/, the polychromeness category /kiʔ/, the shininess category /ble/ and the brightness category /kəʔpɔ̃/. One should note also that these four latter categories have no opposite terms. In my investigation I was surprised to find out that the Sgaw Karens did not have words for uni-colorness nor non-glossiness nor darkness. But this needs to be checked further.

If we consider the findings in this research in the light of the general findings in other languages by Berlin and Kay (1969), we find that roughly speaking these two findings go along quite well. Karen was not reported in the Berlin and Kay findings, but if we adopt the categories of languages classified according to the number of basic color terms they possess, Sgaw Karen would be placed as type 6 having 6 basic color terms. Type 6 languages of Berlin and Kay, however, contain terms for white, black, red, green, yellow and blue as shown in Table 1 in Berlin and Kay, p. 3.

TABLE I
THE TWENTY-TWO ACTUALLY OCCURRING TYPES
OF BASIC COLOR LEXICON

Perceptual categories encoded in the basic color terms												
Type	No. of basic color terms	white	black	red	green	yellow	blue	brown	pink	purple	orange	grey
1	2	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	3	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3	4	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4	4	+	+	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
5	5	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
6	6	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
7	7	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-
8	8	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-
9	8	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	-
10	8	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	-
11	8	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	+
12	9	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-
13	9	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-
14	9	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+
15	9	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	-
16	9	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+
17	9	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+
18	10	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-
19	10	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+
20	10	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+
21	10	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+
22	11	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

NOTE: Only these twenty-two out of the logically possible 2,048 combinations of the eleven basic color categories are found.

Karen is different from Berlin and Kay's Type 6 in that it contains the term for purple instead of blue. According to Berlin and Kay a term for purple color would not occur in language unless that language had eight or more basic color terms. Apart from this disparity, the findings in Karen go along nicely with the universal distributional restrictions of color terms, e.g. the absence of terms for brown and orange in type 6 languages is reported world-wide by Berlin and Kay.

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