The Journal
OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HUMAN STUDIES
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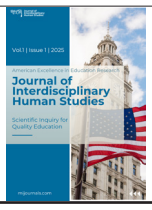

https://doi.org/10.57033/mijournals-2026-9-0358

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NATIONAL AND CULTURAL FEATURES OF THE SEMANTICS OF WHITE IN KOREAN AND UZBEK

Abstract. *The article examines the national and cultural features of the semantics of white in Korean and Uzbek. The material – the native Korean adjectives* 희다 *[huida] and* 하얗다 *[hayata], the Sino-Korean morpheme* 백 (白) *[baek] and the Uzbek lexeme oq with their derivatives – is drawn from explanatory dictionaries and published studies. Componential, comparative and linguocultural analysis reveals nine groups of meanings: four are shared by both languages (colour and brightness, purity, openness, pallor), three are specific to Korean (emptiness, intensity, cosmology and national identity) and two to Uzbek (blessing and good wishes, seniority and honour). The Korean meanings reflect the five-colour system and the custom of wearing white clothes, whereas in Uzbek white is predominantly positive and tied to Turkic and Islamic values.*

Keywords: *colour semantics, white, Korean, Uzbek, linguoculturology, connotation, phraseology, obangsaek, comparative linguistics.*

INTRODUCTION

Colour terms reflect how speakers perceive and evaluate the world. Since B. Berlin and P. Kay showed that basic colour terms emerge in languages in a certain sequence (Berlin & Kay, 1969), colour vocabulary has been studied from the standpoint both of linguistic universals and of cultural differences.

White is especially rich in symbolic meanings: H. Saraç found that in Turkish

culture white carries only positive meanings, whereas in Russian it carries both positive and negative ones (Saraç, 2022). In Uzbek linguistics, phraseological units with the component *oq* "white" have been compared with English (Xakimova, 2026). Yet, despite the growing volume of translation between the two languages, colour terms in Korean and Uzbek have hardly been compared. The aim of the article is to identify the common and the nationally specific aspects of the semantics of white in the two languages and to explain them on the basis of cultural traditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material of the study comprises the Korean adjectives 희다 [*huida*] and 하얗다 [*hayata*], the Sino-Korean morpheme 백 (白) [*baek*], the Uzbek adjective *oq*, and their derivatives and set expressions. The meanings of the Korean units were taken from the Korean Basic Dictionary (National Institute of Korean Language, n.d.) and an existing study (Hong, 2024), those of the Uzbek units from the Explanatory Dictionary of the Uzbek Language (O‘zbek tilining izohli lug‘ati, 2006–2008), and the cultural data from sources on the custom of wearing white clothes (Kim & Kim, 2006) and on the five-colour system (Lopez Velazquez, 2021). Componential analysis, the comparative method and linguocultural analysis were used; the meanings identified were divided into groups common to both languages and groups specific to one language only.

RESULTS

Lexical means denoting white. In Korean, white is expressed by native Korean and Sino-Korean words. The dictionary defines the adjective 희다 [*huida*] as "bright and clear like the colour of snow or milk", and its synonym 하얗다 [*hayata*] as "brilliantly white like the colour of snow or milk" (National Institute of Korean Language, n.d.). Besides "white", the Sino-Korean morpheme 백 (白) [*baek*] also expresses the meanings "clear, pure, bright" and forms a large number of words (Hong, 2024). In Uzbek, white is expressed by the common Turkic adjective *oq*, from which many derivatives and set expressions have been formed (O‘zbek tilining izohli lug‘ati, 2006–2008) (Table 1).

E-ISSN 3069-8375

Table 1. The main lexical units denoting white in Korean and Uzbek

Type	Korean	Uzbek
Basic adjective	희다 [*huida*], 하얗다 [*hayata*]	*oq*
Colour noun and verb	흰색 [*huinsaek*], 백색 [*baeksaek*]; 희어지다 [*huieojida*] “to whiten”	*oq rang*, *oqlik* “whiteness”; *oqarmoq* “to turn white”, *oqlamoq* “to whitewash; to acquit”
Borrowed layer	백 (白) [*baek*]: 고백 [*gobaek*] “confession”, 자백 [*jabaek*] “admission”, 백서 [*baekseo*] “white paper”, 백지 [*baekji*] “blank paper”, 백발 [*baekbal*] “white hair”	no productive borrowed layer; Persian *safid* is used mainly in classical poetry

Meanings shared by both languages. The first group is colour, brightness and clarity: in both languages white is defined through the colour of snow or milk (National Institute of Korean Language, n.d.; O‘zbek tilining izohli lug‘ati, 2006–2008). The second group is purity and sincerity. In Korean this meaning is expressed in Sino-Korean words such as 결백 [*gyeolbaek*] “innocence, blamelessness” and 순백 [*sunbaek*] “pure white”, and in Uzbek in combinations such as *oq ko‘ngil* “kind-hearted” (lit. “white heart”), *ko‘ngli oq* “sincere” and *oq niyat* “good intention” (Xakimova, 2026).

The third group is openness and vindication. In the Korean words 자백 [*jabaek*] “admission” and 고백 [*gobaek*] “confession, declaration”, the morpheme *baek* conveys the meaning “to disclose without concealment” (Hong, 2024). In Uzbek, the verb *oqlamoq* has extended its meaning from “to paint with lime” to “to find innocent, to acquit” (O‘zbek tilining izohli lug‘ati, 2006–2008). The fourth group is turning pale from fear or cold: the dictionary gives the adjective 하얗다 [*hayata*] the meaning “(of the face) to turn pale from cold or fear” (National Institute of Korean Language, n.d.), and in Uzbek the same meaning is expressed by the verb *oqarmoq* and the expression *rangi oqarib ketdi* “he/she turned pale” (O‘zbek tilining izohli lug‘ati, 2006–2008).

Meanings specific to Korean. The first group is emptiness, absence and idleness: 백지 [*baekji*] “blank paper; knowing nothing”, 백수건달 [*baeksu geondal*] “idler”, 머릿속이 하얘지다 [*meorissogi hayaejida*] “one’s mind goes blank” (Hong, 2024). The word 백안시 [*baegansi*] “to look upon with contempt” shows that in Korean white can also express a negative evaluation (Hong, 2024).

E-ISSN 3069-8375

The second group is intensity. The adjective 하얗다 [*hayata*] also denotes the highest degree of a process or quantity (National Institute of Korean Language, n.d.), as in 하얗게 밤을 새우다 [*hayake bameul saeuda*] “to stay up the whole night”.

The third group is cosmology, national identity and ritual. In the traditional 오방색 [*obangsaek*] system, which links the five basic colours with the cardinal directions and the elements, white corresponds to the west, the element metal and the autumn season and signifies purity and justice (Lopez Velazquez, 2021). For centuries white clothing was the everyday dress of the common people as well as ritual and mourning attire (Kim & Kim, 2006). Because of this custom, Koreans called themselves 백의민족 [*baegui minjok*] “the white-clad people”, and white became a symbol of the nation.

Meanings specific to Uzbek. The first group is blessing and good wishes: *oq yo‘l* “bon voyage” (lit. “white road”, a wish for a safe and successful journey) and *oq fotiha* “white blessing” (the blessing given by elders, especially at a betrothal). The second group is seniority, honour and family duty. The word *oqsoqol* (lit. “white beard”) denotes a respected elder and also the head of a mahalla (neighbourhood community); the expression *yuzi oq* “with a clean name, not disgraced” (lit. “white-faced”) refers to a person’s social standing; and the combination *oq sut* “white milk” in the reproach *oq sutimni oqlamading* “you have not repaid my white milk” expresses a child’s debt to the mother (O‘zbek tilining izohli lug‘ati, 2006–2008) (Table 2).

Table 2. Groups of meanings of the term for white in Korean and Uzbek

Group of meanings	Korean	Uzbek	Specific to
1. Colour, brightness, clarity	희다 [*huida*], 하얗다 [*hayata*], 백색 [*baeksaek*]	*oq*, *oq rang*	both
2. Purity, innocence, sincerity	결백 [*gyeolbaek*], 순백 [*sunbaek*]	*oq ko‘ngil*, *ko‘ngli oq*, *oq niyat*	both
3. Openness, vindication	자백 [*jabaek*], 고백 [*gobaek*]	*oqlamoq*, *oqqa ko‘chirmoq* “to make a fair copy”	both
4. Pallor (fear, cold)	하얗게 질리다 [*hayake jillida*] “to turn pale”	*oqarmoq*, *rangi oqardi*	both

E-ISSN 3069-8375

5. Emptiness, absence, idleness	백지 [*baekji*], 백수건달 [*baeksu geondal*], 머릿속이 하얘지다 [*meorissogi hayaejida*]	–	Korean
6. Intensity	하얗게 밤을 새우다 [*hayake bameul saeuda*]	–	Korean
7. Cosmology, national identity, ritual	오방색 [*obangsaek*], 백의민족 [*baegui minjok*]	no special word or expression	Korean
8. Blessing, good wishes	–	*oq yo'l*, *oq fotiha*	Uzbek
9. Seniority, honour, family duty	백발 [*baekbal*] "white hair" (no meaning of honour)	*oqsoqol*, *yuzi oq*, *oq sut*	Uzbek

DISCUSSION

In both languages the semantics of white consists of a common core and nationally specific parts. The common core (groups 1–4) is formed by meanings based on universal human experience of light and on human physiology (Berlin & Kay, 1969). The meanings specific to Korean were shaped by the five-colour system (Lopez Velazquez, 2021), the custom of wearing white clothes (Kim & Kim, 2006) and the Sino-Korean morpheme *baek*, which brought in the meanings of emptiness and contempt (Hong, 2024). In Uzbek, white is evaluated almost exclusively positively, which agrees with H. Saraç's conclusion about Turkish culture (Saraç, 2022). For this reason, the Korean units of groups 5–7 cannot be translated word for word: the figurative meaning of 백지 [*baekji*] and the expression 하얗게 밤을 새우다 [*hayake bameul saeuda*] should be rendered into Uzbek without the colour component, while the Uzbek expressions *oq yo'l* and *oq fotiha* require an explanatory translation into Korean.

CONCLUSION

In Korean and Uzbek the term for white shares the common meanings of brightness, purity, openness and pallor. The remaining meanings have been shaped by national culture: in Korean, white expresses a wide range of meanings from national identity to emptiness, intensity and contempt, whereas in Uzbek it is an almost exclusively positive symbol associated with blessing, respect for elders and family duty. These differences should be taken into account in translation and in

E-ISSN 3069-8375

teaching Korean.

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E-ISSN 3069-8375