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Seeing colours through Portuguese dictionaries definitions

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The present work focuses on the universe of colours, specifically within wine tasting notes because of its richness in creating new lexical units to designate the light spectrum, helping the experts to express and categorize the chromatic experience.

According to Lyons (1968), there is a mental distribution of the colour terms and we are able to distinguish one colour from another not as individual entities, but in a relational way. Different languages tend to agree with the focal meaning of the most common colours, but problems arise with peripheral areas, as it means establishing borderlines in the continuum.

We intend to identify how colour definitions change according to the target public, the domain, and the cultural context and how to represent such differences in lexical resources. For example, we can define the yellow colour in multiple way: (a) colour evoked by light with a dominant wavelength of roughly 445-460 nanometer; (b) colour of the lemon, of yolk and gold (*Infopedia*).

The technical (physics) definition (a) appears more precise, but less intuitively understandable, while the common one (b) appears more ambiguous but much more intuitively understandable and largely used in wine tasting notes.

Therefore, we collected data from EnoTerm – a European Portuguese wine tasting notes *corpus*, in order to understand the objectivity of the referents used to define colours in definitions of type (b). We analyzed each colour term (noun and adjective) in order to (i) list the morpho-syntactic structures, (ii) determine the productivity/frequency of those constructions, and (iii) identify the potential referents of those colours terms.

Through the categorization of the data we identified some recurrent patterns in the nominal and adjectival expressions collected, such as the structure [colour + of + Noun (entity)], like “cor de tijolo” (brick colour), one of the most frequent structures to designate colours.

Apparently, the users that share the same language, culture and knowledge fully comprehend the referents invoked by this type of lexicalization (Gotti, 2004). This led us to wonder if the same lexicalization would be understood in different varieties of the same language. For this

purpose, we made a comparative analysis of definitions of colour terms from European Portuguese (EP) and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) dictionaries to test the differences in the lexicalization and definitions and their relation to the cultural element.

We observed that definitions are not uniform and regular: it depends on the entity and on the cultural value associated with it. In some cases, even if the definition could be different, we are facing the same reality (specialized and non-specialized definitions – “yellow” e.g.). While, in other cases, the referents are definitely different – “cor de ginja” (sour cherry colour): in EP “ginja” is a “dark-red bitter cherry” (*Infopedia*), while in BP is a “yellowish or red bittersweet or sour cherry” (*Michaelis*).

The results can be very helpful to avoid ambiguity due to cultural interpretation through EP and BP to better understand how “the language we speak affects the way we think” (Lucy, 1997) in a multilingual perspective.

Keywords: lexicology, colours terms, wine, European Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese

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