

Colour, emotion and the universality/relativity debate. A perspective from languages of the Ancient Near East

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In emotion studies, scholars tend to swing between presenting emotion as socially constituted (relativism) and depicting it as something experienced by humans irrespective of their cultural background (universalism). When it comes to colour and emotion, the problem of relativism vs universality is compounded. Colour terms are contested items on this axis (since studies of less well-documented languages suggest that even the most 'basic' of 'basic colour terms' are not universal) and the metaphorical load that colour terms carry likewise seems to differ along cultural lines.

This study will focus on colour metaphors in the language Ancient Egyptian—an independent and dead phylum of the Afro-Asiatic language family—and try to account for the limitation, when describing emotion, to the colour red. It is proposed that the embodiment argument may well account for red's predominance, even primacy, as a metaphorical (and/or metonymic) expression of emotion (specifically high arousal), not just in Ancient Egyptian but in cross-linguistic perspective.

Bio

A Sydneysider with a passion for Ancient Egypt since childhood, I have BA(Hons) and PhD degrees in Ancient History from Macquarie University (2000–2008). I moved to Berlin to conduct postdoctoral research in Egyptology and linguistics, first as a Fellow of the Excellence Cluster 'Topoi: The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilizations' (2009–2010) and then with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (2010–2012). Following this, I was Junior Professor for Egyptology at the Georg-August University in Göttingen, Germany (2012–2019), then a Research Fellow at the University of Vienna (2019–2020). In April 2020 I moved back to Sydney to take up a Lectureship in Egyptology at Macquarie University.