

## MULTIPLE SEMANTICS OF BLACK AND WHITE IN ONLINE FASHION DISCOURSE (BASED ON CHANEL FASHION STORIES)

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### **Abstract**

The article presents multiple semantics of color terms *black* and *white* in Chanel online fashion discourse, including wide range of meanings, namely colorless, monochromatic, dark vs light, contextual and gray shades. Connection between color terms semantics and creation of brand image is established.

**Keywords:** color terms, contextual meaning, colorless, monochrome referential meaning

Color as one of the basic distinctive features of humans' visual perception of objects in the real world, alone with texture, shape and size, provides people with massive information about properties of things. Words for naming colors in a language are usually called *color terms* [4, p. 610] or *color names* [6, p. 129] and at present are used both to refer to color as optical phenomenon and nominate social categories associated with color.

Despite numerous linguistic studies connected with psychological [1, p. 134], cultural [9], political [5, p.371], etc. perspectives of color terms use, multiple semantics of *black* and *white* opposition in contemporary online fashion discourse has not been studied yet. Consequently, current research on the use of color terms in online discourse of modern fashion industry seems to be essential, as far as color itself and the words used to nominate it in the fashion industry discourse often go

far beyond visual presentation of color as part of spectrum, and often acquire additional contextual meanings or bear specially assigned message which speaks for a brand. In other words, the terms for naming colors as well as collocations of basic color terms with adjacent adjectives start to convey special meaning and are important to study for understanding how semantics undergoes changes in the language, depending on where words are used and in what context or discourse. Thus this article focuses on the meaning and role of basic color terms, derived color names and collocations with color terms which nominate black, white and their shades and are used in online fashion discourse. The aim is to identify contextual meanings of *black* and *white* and group them in accordance with their functions in discourse.

**Methodology.** We co-use two semantic theories – reference and contextual – to identify semantics of *black* and *white* in online fashion discourse.

Semantic reference theory [7] makes solid background for study of color terms. According to it, a word is used to refer to an object or idea [ibid] so that there is strict correlation between words and notions. It is well-established belief that basic color terms, i.e. universal colors terms, which in English are represented by a set of eleven words, namely *black*, *white*, *gray*, *red*, *yellow*, *green*, *blue*, *orange*, *purple*, *pink* and *brown* [ibid], initially had a lot to do with reference, as *green* used to and still now represents grass, *blue* stands for sky and *red* for blood. For example, collocation *green grass* below describes color of lawn: *The business mogul shared a snap on Instagram standing in front of sky-high blades of green grass in her native land* (British Vogue, December 09, 2019).

However, nowadays basic color terms go far beyond the idea of reference, as reference itself may differ when uttered by different speakers in different situations [3, p. 481-563]. That is to say new meanings of basic color terms appear as a result of semantic extension especially when basic color terms collocate with nouns or adjectives which modify them. For instance, *canary-yellow* and *grass-green* in the following Vogue magazine extract name bright hues of yellow and green gems, based on their metaphoric similarity to a bird and grass, *An elegantly restrained bracelet is transformed by a sweet-shop selection of canary-yellow and grass-green tourmalines [...]* (British Vogue, July 22, 2019). On the ground of reference and contextual semantic theories we differentiate *referential* meaning of color terms, when color terms are used without modifier and name optical hue perceived physiologically by human eyes, and *contextual* meaning, when under influence of noun or adjective modifiers in discourse color terms develop new semantics.

Let us now turn to *black* and *white* semantics in Chanel fashion discourse. When conducting research, we have analyzed online articles regarding winter-fall 2020 Chanel collection called “NOIR ET BLANC”, and Métiers d’Art show “Paris-31 rue Cambon”, as well as online description of cosmetic product range on official website, in which we allocated *black* and *white* usage and then studied their near context and meaning they acquire in it. Consequently, color terms *black* and

*white* semantics thereafter could be divided into five groups, namely absence of color, monochrome, opposition of dark and light as implementation of referential semantics, contextual semantics when combined with adjectives, meaning of gray.

**Colorless.** One of Gabrielle Chanel famous quote says “*Women think of all colors except the absence of color. I have said that black has it all. White too. Their beauty is absolute. It is the perfect harmony*” [8, p. 37]. These words prove that the designer related to *black* and *white* as colors having no hue. If we take a step back to look at basic color terminology, which helps to define physical, i.e. optical properties of colors, four key terms could be separated, namely hue (color), tint, tone, shade. Hue represents specific color family and a part of visual specter, such as *green* or *red* or *blue*; tint describes addition of white to a hue, for example, *light yellow* or *whitish-blue*; tone presents addition of gray to basic hue, for instance, *grayish-blue*, while shade denotes mixture of hue with black, for example, *dark-red* or *intense-green*. Regarding the above mentioned four properties of color, even though *black* might be characterized from the point of view of tint and tone, and *white* can have tone or shade, both of them lack crucial characteristic of a hue, so neither black or white can be considered as a color. This is proved by lexeme *colorless* in the following article extract: *Chanel Beauty’s Fall 2019 “NOIR ET BLANC” makeup collection is proof that monochrome tones don’t need to be boring. Created with the symbolic black and white shades of the Chanel logo in mind, the range features essential colorless, yet glamorous pieces* (Hyperbae, 29.07.2019). Accordingly, black and white dichotomy stands aside from all other colors as they have no specific hue, thus in the world of fashion are often treated as basic and colorless feature that is contrary to hue-specified qualities of *red*, *blue* or *green*.

**Monochrome.** In addition to being colorless, *black* and *white* are said to be *monochrome*, that is representing different shades of a single color, not two [5, p. 125]. Monochromatic semantics of *black* and *white* in fashion discourse rises from the time of black-and-white photography and cinematography technologies, when camera sensors captured only shades of black on the film, followed by post-processed images showing perceived brightness (whiteness in case of black-and-white photography) of objects on fashion illustrations. Thus, color names *black* and *white* convey the meaning of essential and fundamental, and a result symbolic and not boring (see Hyperbae citation above).

The importance of monochromatic feature for Chanel brand image was additionally proved by “2009 Monochrome White Haute Couture” collection, which was described by Karl Lagerfeld as “*a linear and timeless graphic interpretation. It’s like a starting point for the story of this new era, [...] This monochrome collection is first and foremost a “game of lines and shapes, [...] Underneath the geometry and purity of the cuts”* (Chanel Official Website, 27.01.2009). The color name *white* in articles related to this collection convey universal for many languages semantics of white as something new (*starting point*), eternal (*timeless*) and clear (*linear, purity*). In other words, meaning

of color term *white* for Chanel in Monochrome White Collection is grounded on psychological and archetypal associations with cleanliness, simplicity and eternal goodness [8, p. 236]. Semantics of *white* as a new beginning in this article is additionally proven by paper theme of the collection, as paper, which is normally associated by present-day fashion discourse readers with white color, is place to write new ideas: “*That is why I chose paper as the theme for the couture collection this season. [...] Everything begins on paper. Without paper I would be lost!*” (Chanel Official Website, 27.01.2009). Lexeme *paper* in this extract may be regarded as metonymic presentation of white color.

**Dark vs light.** Visual perception and differentiation of monochromic black and white colors is often correlated to semantic categories of darkness and lightness. It is no doubt that the most obvious semantic references of color names *black* and *white* are night and day, which serve as universal human prototypes of these two colors respectively [2, p. 126].

However, in fashion discourse, especially Chanel brand image, color name **black** is used without adjectival or nominal modifiers denoting night, consequently semantics of darkness is only implied and perceived so, when contrasting with blight, the latter being nominated by color term *white*: *STYLO YEUX WATERPROOF eye pencils are included in contrasting black and white colorways as well* (Hyperbae, 29.07.2019). Color black and lexeme *black* respectively, in Chanel stands for elegance: *The journey begins with black, a colour that up until 1926 was only worn by servants and those in mourning before Coco Chanel deemed it the colour of elegance. It accentuates essential details or, as Coco would say, “reveals a woman’s radiance”* (Chanel Online Brand Book). Unlike traditional understanding of *black* as color of servants’ clothes and mourning garment, semantics of *black* in Chanel brand changes dramatically. Instead of negative connotation of sadness and poverty, the lexeme’s *black* meaning shifts to the positive aspect, denoting beauty and elegance, and is used to underline important details (*accentuates essential details*). Surprisingly, even though color name *black* has nothing to do with light and usually represents darkness, in Chanel color portfolio color term *black* acquires oxymoronic semantics of illumination, i.e. light, as it assists to “*reveals a woman’s radiance*”. One probable explanation of such semantic deviation is illusion of brightness and lightens created as a result if contrast between black garments and white skin and accessories.

**White** color which is nominated by basic color term *white* in online Chanel fashion discourse represents light, cleanliness and purity, similar to its monochrome semantics, described above: *Then comes white, a colour that captures light, illuminates the face and enhances beauty. A colour that signifies purity, as in the beginning there was only white* (Chanel Online Brand Book). Reference to light in this discourse is expressed directly by noun *light* and verb *illuminate*, so the importance of light which is embodied in white color proves to be huge for brand image. What is more, color name *white* possesses meaning of an initial and only color, which gave rise to other shades.

Contextual semantics. In Chanel online fashion discourse color names *black* and *white* often collocate with adjectives, denoting brand’s interpretation of the colors, thus are used not only to provide understanding of these colors as brand ones to the readers, but also give the vision of the brand itself and create its image. Color terms *black* and *white* in this way acquire contextual semantics, as the adjectives modifying them add much to meaning of these color lexemes in the fashion discourse, resulting in five semantic subgroups. The first semantic shift is related to time, when adjectives *modern*, *classic* and *timeless* characterize color terms *black* and *white* relating to their durability and part of brand’s history, meaning that these colors are there to stay: *Chanel captures this feature effectively on its website’s homepage, which opens with the Chanel double C logo in the brand’s classic black and white colours* (Online review, Luxury Fashion Branding: Trends, Tactics, Techniques, 2016). The second group of contextual meanings of color names *black* and *white* stands for Chanel unique identity, as adjectives *iconic*, *symbolic*, *legendary*, *exclusive* indicate uniqueness of the brand: *Chanel Beauty’s Fall 2019 “NOIR ET BLANC” makeup collection [...] Created with the symbolic black and white shades of the Chanel logo in mind, the range features essential colorless* (Hyperbae, 29.07.2019). The third semantic group is connected with brand’s **ideality**, when adjectives *minimalistic*, *absolute* and nominal collocation *perfect harmony* combined with color names *black* and *white* appeal to the **perfect quality**, taste and style of the goods: *Black and white are the absolutes of CHANEL* (Chanel Official Website). The fourth contextual meaning added to color terms *black* and *white* is beauty or brand’s aesthetics, when the color terms collocate with adjectives *glamorous*, *elegant*, *beautiful* or related nouns: *The journey begins with black, [...] Coco Chanel deemed it the colour of elegance* (Chanel Official Website). The last but not the least contextual meaning of color names *black* and *white* is connected with supernatural, as adjectives *mysterious*, *divine*, *innocent* imply a might connection with god: *“Black and white are the absolutes of CHANEL. There is something both deep and mysterious yet divine and innocent about each”, said Kristen Stewart* (Fashion Gone Rogue, 15.08.2019). To summarize, contextual semantics of color terms *black* and *white* appears as a result of their collocation of adjectives, which denote Chanel brand qualities and unique features of its image.

**Gray and silver.** In addition to color names *black* and *white* monochromatic Chanel pallet is represented by shades of gray, which lie in between the two extremes, and are nominated by basic color name *gray* and derived word *silver*: *this collection explores the two opposites and the nuances in-between them: greys, browns and deep burgundies* (Chanel Official Website, Make-up section). Color terms *gray* and *silver*, being a part of black and white color range, possess the meaning of certain amount of light in online fashion discourse and in the articles can collocated with basic color names as well as with modifiers *cooler tones*, *sparkling*: *“Noir Suprême” palette [...] is made up of cooler tones of silver, white and matte black*

(ibid). Color name *gray* in Chanel online fashion discourse is predominantly used for description of make-up features, whereas garments are mostly black and white.

All things considered, color names *black* and *white*, paired with *gray* and *silver*, are used in Chanel online fashion discourse with multiple semantics. Meaning of these color terms range from colorless, to monochrome, to separate colors when *black* and *white* are used without modifiers. Yet additional meanings of brand image appear when the color terms collocate with opinion adjectives, presenting brand's values and its unique qualities.

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