

Most English speakers take the colors of the rainbow for granted. When one appears in the sky, seven colors are distinguishable. Schoolchildren often learn a mnemonic device to recall the seven colors, such as ROY G. BIV, each letter standing for a color of the spectrum in order.

When anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) did fieldwork among speakers of the Ndembu language of Zambia, he found that they only used three primary color terms: white, black, and red. Other colors are either derivative (i.e., gray = darker white) or descriptive (green = “water of sweet potato leaves” or yellow = “like beeswax”). Many societies use a different number of color terms than our seemingly “natural” seven.

For example, Vietnamese and Japanese specify more color terms than three, but have only one term to refer to blue and green. In Vietnamese, both blue and green are covered by the term *xanh*. Speakers define the color they want to identify by description. Is it *xanh* like the ocean, or *xanh* like the grass?

Some languages focus on saturation (darkness) or luminosity (lightness) rather than hue.

Anthropologist Harry Conklin (1986) discusses such a classification scheme among the Hanunóo people of Mindoro Island, Philippines. The Hanunóo use four major categories of color: “darkness” (dark colors including black, deep blues, greens, and purples); “lightness” (light colors including white and other pale hues); “redness” (colors of dry plant life such as reds, oranges, and yellows); and “greenness” (colors of fresh plant life such as light greens and browns). In their forest environment, light/dark and fresh/dry characteristics play an important part in perception.

What does this mean? Does language shape reality so much that, because the Ndembu or Hanunóo only have a few terms to talk about color, they only visually see three or four colors? No, because language relativity doesn’t mean language determinism. They can see all of the variations in the color spectrum, and can express them as well, using modifications to a basic color scheme. The divisions simply reflect that they interpret the colors in a way that is relevant to their lives.