

WHAT DOES RED MEAN?

THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE WORD RED AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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RESUMEN

Con este artículo, se pretende estudiar en profundidad una palabra “sencilla” como, en principio parece, la palabra rojo , y analizar tanto su forma como su significado. Al hacer esto, quedará claramente demostrado que las palabras no pueden ser enseñadas o aprendidas de forma aislada. Deben ser presentadas dentro de diferentes contextos, con sus diferentes formas, y dentro de expresiones típicas de una lengua y cultura determinadas.

El análisis de esta palabra en particular, nos servirá para darnos cuenta de que a la hora de aprender otra lengua, debemos introducirnos también en su cultura para comprender sus expresiones idiomáticas. Como profesores de lengua extranjera, debemos conocer tanto los distintos significados de una palabra, como los usos que se hacen de ella.

Finalmente, se dan unas pautas para el aula de inglés cuando se presenta vocabulario nuevo a los alumnos.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse in depth an “ordinary” word such as red, and examine its form and meaning. By doing this, it will be clearly proved that words cannot be taught or learned in isolation. They must be presented within different contexts, with their different forms and within the typical expressions of a particular language and culture.

The analysis of this word in particular, will make us aware of the fact that when we learn a language we must also learn its culture to understand its idiomatic expressions. As teachers of the English language, we must know the different meanings of a word as well as the way native speakers make use of it.

Finally, I have presented some implications of this analysis for the teaching of new vocabulary in the language classroom.

Words do not live in isolation they enter into all kinds of groupings held together by a complex, instable and highly subjective network of associations. The sum of this associative network is the vocabulary. [\[1\]](#)

When a new item of vocabulary is introduced in the foreign language classroom, the teacher has to bear in mind the existence of this ‘subjective network of associations’ in which any word of vocabulary is embedded. The teacher will find it necessary to explain not only the form but also the meaning of words as efficiently as possible, by displaying the different ways in which that word is used in the target language as well as the associations which native speakers make with it, that is to say, culturally specific meanings of the item.

A simple word such as *red* conveys different meanings as it occurs in various contexts either as a noun or as an adjective. The relationship of *red* with other words in English is varied and complex, and the teacher should make the students aware of this, in

order to enable them to infer and interpret correctly the meaning of words in context. Therefore, they will be able to gain full command of the second language.

My intention in this article is to show how words can be studied and analysed in depth. Even an ordinary word such as *red* can have a complex relationship with its 'referents' and with the other words with which it exists in a structural semantic network. For this purpose, I have used a simple framework created by Gairns and Redman [2].

As a sort of conclusion, I shall make clear the implications that a thorough study of words has for vocabulary teaching and learning. It is clear that the different meanings of a word can be learned by looking them up into a dictionary, or pointing at real objects, but there are other culture-specific features of words that have to be taught and assimilated in a different way. For example, "*red carpet*" is an English expression used to indicate "special treatment given to someone" or "a special ceremonial welcome to a guest", but it can merely be a carpet which is *red*. Hopefully, the context will give us the clues to translate or understand the exact and appropriate meaning of a word at any different moment.

In order to analyse vocabulary items, it is useful and even necessary, to create a framework to cover as many meanings and associations as possible. This will enable us to see the kind of problems that learners experience with words. That is the reason why I have made use of Gairns and Redman's classification so as to explore the word *RED*.

The structure is as follows:

1. FORM

2. MEANING: Denotative and Connotative

Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic relations

a. Collocations

b. Idioms

Although this framework has been followed to facilitate the analysis of *red*, there are some areas of overlapping, and sometimes it is difficult to make differences between what is exactly meaning of the word and what is form of that same word. But, I believe that the aim of this article has been fully completed, always bearing in mind the obvious limitations that the study of a living language implies.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE WORD *RED*

1. FORM:

Both teachers of English and learners should be aware of the fact that *red* can be used either as a noun or as an adjective.

The house is *red*. (adjective)

The Reds will beat the Conservatives. (noun)

As well as this, the 'base form' *red* is used to build new words in the vocabulary.

By adding certain affixes to *red*, we find:

Redden: to cause or to turn *red* (Verb)

Reddish: slightly *red* (adjective)

Redder, reddest: comparative and superlative form of *red*
(Adjectives)

Redness: the quality of something *red* (Noun)

Another important point is the use of the word *red* to form compound words, formed by *red* + a noun (redbreast, redskin, redneck etc...) or *red* + an adjective (*red*-haired, *red*-handed). These words usually refer to an object or a person that relates in some way or other with the colour *red*, but even though there is certain connection with real life items, students will find it difficult to translate them into their own language (redbreast: petirrojo, redskin: pielroja, redneck: campesino del sur / patán, redhead / *red*-haired: pelirroja, *red*-handed: culpable/con las manos en la masa).

This is a cross-cultural problem, because each language organizes actual facts, images or people in a different and particular way, depending on its History and culture.

2. MEANING:

Obviously, when we need to know the meaning of a word, the best thing to do is to look it up in a dictionary. We could make use of a monolingual or a bilingual dictionary, depending on the command that we have of the language, and also of the aim of our search. Nowadays, there is a great variety of dictionaries in the market, and even in the Internet, we find on-line devices for learners of English or else, for translators who require more sophisticated and precise tools in their daily work. But, this was not true some years ago, when the majority of dictionaries for learners of English were not very complete.

Whenever we needed to know the basic or primary meaning of an item of vocabulary, any dictionary was useful but very often, if we were looking for something more specific or academic, the first or second meaning that we came across was not very helpful for our purpose. What a word or expression denotes may be useful for some purposes but very frequently, when we use a dictionary is because we are looking for something else, that is to say, the feelings or ideas connected with the word.

a. Denotative meaning:

As it is found in Longman Dictionary [3] *red* is defined in two different ways.

1. Colour sensation stimulated by the wavelengths of light in that portion of the spectrum ranging from orange to infrared, being the colour of blood flowing from a vein.
2. Person pertaining to a country or group of communist ideas.

A more recent edition of this same dictionary, however, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English [4], includes a wider variety of meanings associated to the word *red*. It obviously displays a number of collocations too which will be analysed later in this article.

Red (adjective):

1. *Red*: of the colour of blood or of fire.
2. (of hair) of a bright brownish orange or copper colour.
3. (of the human skin, lips or tongue) pink.

4. (of wine) of a dark purple colour.

Red (noun) :

1. *red* colour. *The red and the yellows of the evening sky.*
2. *red* clothes : *I shall wear red for the ceremony.*
3. the state of being in debt, or owing money to the bank. *Be/get into the red.*

Red (noun or adjective)

1. (derogative) a Communist.

The problems that a teacher has to cope with when introducing a new vocabulary item, frequently arise from limited dictionary definitions, which are referential definitions, or that only show certain aspects of the connotative meaning of words, in this case “*red*”.

E.g.: to the left politically.

That is the reason why the foreign language teacher will need to appreciate learners’ problems with the different associations that link the word *red* to more complex networks of meanings and contexts.

Fortunately, more up-to-date dictionaries display a great number of definitions and meanings of a word, colloquialisms, collocations, idioms etc... This is true of Collins Cobuild Dictionary [5] which includes a great deal of expressions with *red*.

b. Connotative meaning:

At this point, I would like to make a distinction between Personal connotations and General connotations. Sometimes, the same word is associated by different speakers of the same language, with completely opposite things.

As an example, we find people who like *red* colour because it is bright or cheerful, but we also find people who hate that colour because they had a wound years ago and the sight of ‘anything’ *red* reminds them of blood or trauma.

Nevertheless, I will concentrate on General connotations rather than Personal connotations along this article, understanding by general, those associations that every speaker of the same language perceives when writing, reading, using or interpreting a word or group of words.

In England, for instance, *RED* is associated with a variety of things. I have mentioned below some of the most common associations:

1. Health: When a person is ‘*red-cheeked*’ or ‘*red complexion*’, he or she is supposed to be healthy as opposite to a white, pale face which is a symptom of illness or weakness.
2. Danger: Danger signals are usually *red*, stop signals are *red*.

This is due to the special brightness of this colour, it is very easy to see it from a long distance. A *red flag* is usually used as danger signal in different places, such as beaches, races, roads etc...

3. Luck: This association with luck comes from the Old English calendars which marked Festivals in *red* and also from people circling special days in *red* ink. A *red-letter day* is a specially happy day that will be remembered.
4. Embarrassment: a ‘*red-faced*’ person feels shame or embarrassment.

5. Anger: *to see red, to turn red with anger eyes.*

6. Sexual connotations: *A scarlet woman.* *Red* is still associated with 'promiscuous and provocative' women because of the Victorian Age custom of prostitutes wearing *red* petticoats underneath. Besides, the *Red light district* is the part of the town where one can hire women for sexual pleasure.

7. Left-wing political ideas: In England, the Labour Party has taken as its emblem a *red* rose. The same is true in Spain with the Socialist Party. The Conservative Party, however, has the colour blue as its symbol of *red-wing* ideas.

Red is as well an adjective used mainly to describe a Communist. In English, it has a derogative meaning when it is employed.

8. Financial meaning: To be '*in the red*' is to be overdrawn, without money, as an opposite to '*be in the black*' which means that you are in good terms with your bank, or that you have *got out of the red*. Or a *red cent*, which is something of the least possible value.

Spanish Students

English language students will have to cope with these different meanings from the beginning, no matter what or how, in their own culture is associated with *Red*, they will have to learn them if their aim is to master the foreign language. Unless it conveys the same variety of things, which may occur, they will need the help of the teacher or of a good dictionary to choose the correct word in a particular context.

For Spanish students, for instance, it will not be difficult to learn the association of *red* with *danger or left-wing ideas* because they have the same connotations in their own culture. However, it would be useful and even necessary for them to know what a '*scarlet woman*' or a '*red-letter day*' mean in order to understand and use them in the appropriate context.

They will also find that in the English language, some of the associations that are widely spread in Spanish, have no translation or even do not exist as such in the target language. When we start learning a foreign language, we expect to find an equivalent for every single word in our language, but there are no such perfect equivalents, even sometimes we can say that there are not perfect synonyms to be found.

Associations which are widely spread in Spain, will also have to be learned by people trying to command the Spanish language. For example, a '*red day*' in Spain used to be a day in which the train fares were more expensive because it was expected that a great number of people were going to travel. These '*red days*' were included within a closed system of antonyms. Blue and white days in the calendar were together with *red* days, all of them creating a system which made possible for passengers to know the fares in the different days (cheaper, ordinary and more expensive fares respectively).

Another typical Spanish association is that of *Red* with the traditional '*Fiesta and Bullfighting*'. *Red* is associated with blood, the blood of the bull, blood and sand (*sangre y arena*). These particular examples, may give an idea of the different connotations that a simple word may have, depending on the country, their own culture and their previous History. This shows that language is like a human being, whatever happens in a society, has its repercussions on the language.

Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic relationships

Still using the framework described by Gairns and Redman[6], I shall describe those interactions of the word *red* with other words of the language. These are Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic.

1. PARADIGMATIC RELATIONSHIPS: Synonymy, Antonymy, Superordinates and Hyponymy.

At this point, we refer to those words which could be substituted for *red* in the same context. It is easier to understand the meaning of words in terms of their associations with other words of the language rather than in isolation. The use of synonyms and antonyms is a very efficient way of explaining and introducing new items of vocabulary, but sometimes, words that appear to have identical meanings convey different ideas and are not exchangeable in all contexts.

Synonyms:

For example, as synonyms or near-synonyms of *red*, we can find several words[7] such as *crimson*(of a deep slightly purplish red colour), *vermilion*(bright reddish-orange), *scarlet*(of a very bright red colour often associated with marks of rank office etc), *magenta* (of a dark purplish red colour), *maroon* (of a very dark red-brown colour). Nevertheless, there are problems when we use them in context because, for instance, you can say `a *red* woman´, wanting to say that she has got left-wing political ideas but it cannot be said `a *scarlet* woman´ to mean the same thing, because as I have explained previously, we would be calling her `promiscuous´ or even something worse instead.

Another clear example is the use of the expression: `he went *red* /he went *crimson*´ to refer to someone who became very angry or embarrassed. In this case, the two words are interchangeable, but you could not say `he went *vermilion*´ because the word *vermilion* is never associated with anger or embarrassment by English speakers.

At this point, I would like to insist on the fact that, in my opinion, there are no real synonyms in a language, or at least no exact equivalents for each word. When a speaker or a writer, chooses one word and no other, he or she is consciously or unconsciously wanting to convey something. Probably, there will be a hidden desire, feeling or connotation implied on his/her words. That is the reason why, we, as learners of a foreign language, must be careful and pay attention to the use that native speakers make of the words and expressions.

Antonyms:

When we move on to the field of Antonyms, we also come across several problems and particularities. Which are to be considered as antonyms of *red*?. In real life situations, the other colours of the spectrum cannot be regarded as opposites because, sometimes, the boundaries between different colours are not very clear. Black is not the opposite of *red*. However, when we refer to “closed systems”, we may find words which have to be considered as antonyms in a particular context.

Antonyms of *red* are, for instance, yellow and green, as part of a closed system in the traffic lights code, or *red* when it stands for the Central line in the London underground map, as opposite to all the other lines represented with different colours. Or *red* flags when we are at the beach as opposed to green or yellow flags.

In the same way, Blue and *Red* are opposites when they stand for the Conservative and the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, or when they represent Heaven and Hell.

Superordinates and Hyponymy:

At a different level, we find that the general word *Colour* would function as superordinate of *red*, yellow, blue etc... and the relationship between *red* and the other colours would be Hyponymy, as they are within a set of words which could be embedded under a general label (*Colour*). But, if we bear in mind the existence of such colours as *vermilion or, crimson*, we find that *red* can also be regarded as superordinate and could maintain relationships of Hyponymy among its so-called synonyms.

2. SYNTAGMATIC RELATIONSHIPS:

The connection of *red* with other vocabulary items could be also explained in terms of Syntagmatic relationships. Expressions like '*red-alert*' or '*red-cheeked child*' are non-idiomatic collocations, that is to say, they can be easily understood because they involve what it is written, a situation of danger or a child whose cheeks are *red*. Still, it has to be learned that native speaker would never say "vermilion alert" or "crimson-cheeked child".

Syntagmatic relations are the relationships that linguistic units (e.g. Words, clauses) have with other units because they may occur together in a sequence. For example, a word may be said to have syntagmatic relations with the other words which occur in the sentence in which it appears.

Within the field of Syntagmatic relationships, we should mention Collocations and Idioms:

A. Collocations:

A collocation is an arrangement of words which sounds natural: "*Strong*" is an English collocation for coffee but "*powerful*" is not. [8]

Collocation is the way that some words occur regularly whenever another word is used. A collocate of a particular word is another word which often occurs with that word. If two or more words collocate, they often occur together. [9]

Red is frequently used in English next to words such as *alert, faced, wine* etc...

It could be complicated for a foreign student of a language to understand the expression '*red hair*' when nobody has got *red* hair unless it has been painted, or '*red wine*' as opposite to '*white wine*' when neither of them is *red* or white colour. In both cases, the reality has nothing to do with the words chosen to describe it. These collocations, so specific of a language have to be learnt and exemplified in their different contexts to make it easier for learners to understand and eventually, assimilate.

Most of the collocations mentioned belong to colloquial English or to an informal style and are very commonly used among native speakers, therefore, it is extremely useful that English learners know all the meanings implied when they are used.

Some of the most common collocates for *red* are: [10]

red alert: a situation of danger

red Army: the army of the Communist countries.

red flag: a flag of *red* colour, used as a danger signal.

Also, the flag of the political Left.

red wine: a wine made from dark grapes

red Indian: Indian (American Indians)

red hot : (of metal) so hot that it shines *red*.

red brick: any English university started in the late 19th century in a city outside London, made with *red* bricks.

B. Idioms:

An idiom is a phrase which means something different from the meaning of the separate words: *To be "hard up"* is an English idiom meaning to lack money. [11]

An idiom is a fixed group of words with a special different meaning from the meanings of the separate words. So *"to spill the beans"* is not at all connected with beans: it means *"to tell someone a secret"*. [12]

Probably, the difficulties that these linguistic expressions can cause among students of English are significant.

A number of idioms which refer to actions that have a specific meaning in English culture may be misunderstood if one is just starting to learn English. [13]

An example is the so-common idiom:

‘It’s like *red* rag to a bull’ (usually translated into Spanish as : *es lo que más le provoca, no hay nada que más le enfurezca*) [14]

The meaning has to do with ‘anger’, but for Spanish people, the relationship between something *red* and bulls is different, in other words, anyone wearing *red* clothes will be too obvious or outstanding, so some people will say that he or she would attract a bull as bulls feel attracted by *red* bright colour. Another example is the expression ‘*red* meat’, that in English means both *beef meat* and *the most powerful, practical politics or pornography*, whereas in Spanish the only meaning that is conveyed is ‘*beef meat*’.

The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms [15] describes idioms and how they are used very fully. Some of the most typical in English using the word *red* are mentioned below:

- *As red as a beetroot(or as a lobster or a tomato)* : feeling awkward or ashamed.

- *To be in the red*: to be in debt, normally with the bank.

- *not have a red cent*: to have no money at all, to be extremely poor.

- *paint the town red*: to have a very enjoyable time, especially in a lively and noisy manner.

- *a red herring*: a suggestion, piece of information etc... introduced into a situation in order to draw someone’s attention away from the truth.

- *red tape*: the heavy use of and emphasis on official papers, formal details,

rules etc... that characterizes the work done by some public groups, such as government departments.

- *see red* : become violently angry

- *see the red light*: to see possible danger in the future.

- *the thin red line*: a small group of courageous people that defend an area or principle and refuse to yield to any attack.

- *discover someone red-handed*: to discover someone just as he is doing something forbidden, unlawful.

- *a red-letter day*: a day on which something good or special happens or is supposed to happen.

- *Reds under the bed*: members of the Communist Party, especially when regarded as having a secret but dangerous influence on political life in Britain.

As it can be seen from this set of English idioms, it is impossible for a non-native speaker of English to understand what they mean unless they are looked up thoroughly in a dictionary. Their meanings, uses in different contexts, collocates and idioms, have to be analysed in depth so as to get full command of the target language.

Which are the implications of this study for the English Language Classroom?

The role of the teacher in relation to vocabulary items is much wider than simply giving synonyms or translating the literal meanings of words.

Mainly, at higher levels, when students reach a wider knowledge of the language and are able to understand the conceptual differences between their mother tongue and the target language, it is possible for the teacher to include in the curriculum, activities which make students more aware of the complexities of vocabulary items.

Besides, introducing certain aspects of the culture of the language we are learning is essential to assimilate new language expressions and their appropriate use. Learning a second language may imply some difficulties, one of them is the fact that the person already has a network of associations in his/her mind. Sometimes, this may help but others, students get confused and misunderstand ideas or make mistakes when choosing a combination of words.

As McCarthy^[16] points out throughout his article, *A new look at vocabulary*, in course books, especially at the beginner and lower-intermediate level, the treatment of vocabulary is lacking. Most times they concentrate on structural paradigms, and when they introduce new words, they simply do it as slot-and-fill practice and not in terms of their lexical relations or lexico-grammatical dimensions. Vocabulary skills are more than understanding the componential features of words and recognising their typical collocations, more than the ability to define a word and slot it in a sentence. According to this author, the key to a new approach to Vocabulary teaching lies on the examination of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of collocation and set between lexical items, as it has been exemplified with the word *red* in this article.

- a) Above sentence level
- b) Across conversational turn-boundaries
- c) Within the broad framework of discourse organization

Teachers of English should make students aware of the existence of the complex relationships among words and create opportunities in the classroom for practising the language in a global approach rather than in an atomised way.

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