
The Meaning of Colour in Ancient Mesopotamia

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As part of the recently formed partnership between Charles University and Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island, United States), Dr Shiyanthi Thavapalan paid a visit to the Czech Institute of Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts. On the 26th of March she delivered a talk based around her PhD dissertation topic: "The Meaning of Colour in Ancient Mesopotamia". The way in which language shapes how one thinks and functions in the world is central to Dr Thavapalan's work. At the lecture, a simple experiment was conducted to help illustrate this. Attendees were asked to shut their eyes and point in the direction they believed to be South East and it was quickly determined that no one in the room could knowingly indicate this direction.

Dr Thavapalan went on to talk about 'Kuuk Thaayorre', a language spoken by an indigenous group in Western Australia. Whilst we are familiar with body centred terms (such as "left" or "ahead") to navigate space, Kuuk Thaayorre speakers instead use cardinal directions: North, South, East and West. This means that from the point they begin learning to speak, in order to do so properly and be understood, they must always be orientated. Their language has formed the way they navigate the world around them, equipping them with a different set of cognitive abilities.



The focus of Dr Thavapalan's work is the Akkadian language and how this affected cognition in Mesopotamia. As only certain types of documents and artefacts remain from this ancient culture, there are limitations as to how to investigate this.

In order to seek insight into the mentality of Mesopotamian people, Dr Thavapalan directed her research towards colour – how people talked about and used colour in these times. A lot of colourful substances from Mesopotamia had been recovered, therefore resources were not limited to only textual sources.

Commonly used in colorimetry is the Munsell colour system which was devised in the first decade of the 20th century. Three colour dimensions are taken into account in this system: hue, saturation and tone.

This system however, as Dr Thavapalan pointed out, is a very Anglocentric way to consider colour. Akkadians did not consider hue a defining feature when identifying colours. Instead, brightness and saturation were the focus. For example, warqu meaning 'pale' also meant 'green' and 'yellow'. The term for 'vivid', sa?mu, could also signify 'red'. Not that they didn't see the variety of colours one might easily point out today as blue, red, green, and so forth, but insight into their mentality can be obtained through how they perceived colour so differently from the way people do today.

Interestingly, in Akkadian language there existed no word for 'colour' (though the concept of colour did exist). For Akkadian speakers, talking about characteristic appearance was how they construed and communicated colour. Comparisons and metonyms relating to natural objects, such as plants, metals and minerals, were common.

A case study was provided by Dr Thavalapan in which this is observable. Amethyst, a semi-precious purple quartz, was likely imported from Egypt. The Akkadian word for the stone, ?ašm?nu, became identifiable in documents as it is traceable to the word Egyptians had for amethyst.

Hašm?nu became the appearance word of amethyst, a term that denotes the stone. However, the term ?ašm?nu gradually also became a colour term in Akkadian language. For example, in the textile industry it denotes amethyst wool – what can only be considered to be a purple dyed wool.

Developments in craft industries can also be proven to affect language and meaning of terms. Dr Thavapalan talked through an example concerning the language Ugaritic, in which the term lapis lazuli (or síg-za-g?n) was used to refer to purple dyed wools, alongside referring to the recognisable blue stone. Later, síg-za-g?n also extended to refer to wools blue and green in colour. The only explanation is that, in the textile industry, lapis lazuli came to designate wools that underwent a particular dyeing technique which soon developed and had this range of colours produced from the process. To conclude, Dr Thavapalan discussed current research into imitations in ancient Mesopotamia. Notably, the creation of these imitations shatters the link established between traditional, precious materials and their appearance and qualities. As their language is seen to be so rooted in this link, the cheaper materials allowing for imitations would have affected the way in which people considered materials and the Akkadian language.

Colour is regarded as a cultural experience and the way in which Akkadian speakers conceptualised, categorised and denominated colour allows for insight into Mesopotamian thought and experience. Information about language, trade and development also stem from this kind of research. The modern eye can benefit from this knowledge and regard ancient Mesopotamian art and Mesopotamian use of colour as an aesthetic with new-found appreciation.

Melissa Batcharj is a third year student at Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland where she is striving towards a BA in English Literature and Film. She is completing a semester at Charles University under the Faculty of Arts and was keen to take on a role at iForum as it provides experience useful towards the career path Melissa aspires to take after university. She also chose to work with iForum to gain more insight into Czech culture and extend her writing skills. Melissa is interested in the arts, film, technology and student life.