Chapter 5
The Blackness of Black:
Color Categories as Situated Practice

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Abstract

In what remains one of the central accomplishments of cognitive anthropology, Berlin and Kay (1969) demonstrated that the diversity of human color systems was built on a universal infrastructure, with black and white being the most basic colors in all systems. The analytical focus of their work is a structural system divorced from the messy tasks of actually using color terms to make relevant distinctions within specific courses of action situated within the concrete settings that constitute the lifeworld of a particular society. By way of contrast, Wittgenstein's later philosophy argues that it is precisely such endogenous activities that provide the necessary framework for the analysis of human language. Using as data videotape of chemists attempting to determine when to stop a reaction by deciding when the material they are working with is jet black, this chapter explores (1) the diverse practices they deploy to establish what can count as black; (2) how such a distinction is embedded within a local activity system lodged in turn within a relevant community of practice; and (3) the embodied apprenticeship required for new members to become competent in the use of such a category. For the chemists, jet black (e.g., the most prototypical example of black) is not a preformulated, context-free universal color category, but instead a problematic judgment to be artfully accomplished through the deployment of a collection of systematic work practices. This analysis contributes to the development of a practice-based theory of knowledge and action.
Two of the central and enduring topics in the analysis of cognition are the study of vision (in neurophysiology, vision is the cognitive system that is best understood, and its architecture provides a point of departure for the analysis of how the brain organizes other types of representations) and semantic categories (which at times have formed the essential subject matter for whole fields such as cognitive anthropology) or, more generally, processes of classification. One crucial place where these two lines of research intersect is in the analysis of color categories, terms provided by language that are used to codify and structure perception of the visual field. Different languages classify the color spectrum in different ways. This has been argued to provide evidence for the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language structures perception of the world that a particular society inhabits (Bruner, Oliver, & Greenfield, 1966; Greenfield & Bruner, 1966). In what remains one of the central accomplishments of cognitive anthropology, however, Berlin and Kay (1969) demonstrated that the diversity of human color systems was built on a universal infrastructure, one almost certainly linked to structures in the brain.

The focus of analysis in such work is an abstract structural system, divorced from the messy tasks of actually using color terms to make relevant distinctions within specific courses of action situated within the concrete settings that constitute the lifeworld of a particular society. In contrast, Wittgenstein’s later philosophy argues that it is precisely such endogenous activities that provide the necessary framework for the analysis of human language. Analysis of category use from such a perspective has been a major focus of research by ethnomethodologists and conversational analysts (e.g., Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Jefferson, 1987; Lynch, 1991; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1972; Suchman, 1987). Recently, some scholars have begun to analyze seeing as a social process lodged within endogenous communities of practices (Goodwin, 1994, in press; Goodwin & Goodwin, in press; Heath, in press, this volume; Heath & Luff, in press; Säljö & Bergqvist, this volume).

Color Categories as Cognitive Universals: Divorcing Cognition from Practice

Berlin and Kay (1967, 1969) demonstrated that all languages locate the foci of their basic color labels at roughly the same place in the color spectrum and,

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1Problems with Wittgenstein’s initial treatment of color perception provided the Achilles’ heel that led to the dismantling of the Tractatus (Hacker, 1986, p. 109) and its replacement with a theory of color terms that emphasized their situatedness within the grammars of diverse natural activities.