

IN SEARCH OF THE GREEN DONKEY: CHANGING COLOUR
TERMINOLOGY IN SAN‘ANI ARABIC¹

JANET C. E. WATSON

Peter Behnstedt’s work in northern Yemen since the early 1980s has detailed extensive dialect variation within the country lexically, morphologically and phonologically, showing the extent to which Yemeni dialects differ from one another, from non-Yemeni Arabic dialects, and from Standard Arabic. I am delighted to be able to offer this study of the diachronic development of colour terms in San‘ani Arabic as a tribute to Behnstedt’s continuing contribution to the field.

1. Introduction

I visited the donkey market – *sūg al-‘irj* – on three separate occasions during my most recent field trip to San‘a, in early summer 2003. Donkeys are interesting from the point of view of colour terminology – the outsider sees vague, merging shades of grey and brown and black, the insider a myriad of intermediate and overlapping colours, and the insider provides the terminology of distinctions. Here, on my first visit, I was introduced to *aswad*, *axḍar*, *aḥmar*, *ašhab* and *abyaḍ*, and various permutations thereof. My San‘ani family, Bayt Banga, laughed themselves silly over *al-ḥimār al-axḍar*. ‘What colour is that?’ they asked, pointing at a bright green leaf. ‘*Axḍar*’, I replied. ‘And have you ever seen a donkey that colour?’

The next week, no *ḥimār axḍar*, but the week after that I determined to take one of the Banga sons with me. And this time all the colour varieties were present. The *axḍar* was distinguished, so we were told, from the *aswad* by having a clear black dorsal stripe. Otherwise it was dark brown. *Aḥmar* ‘bay’ differs from *axḍar* by being lighter, brighter, and bearing reddish tints.

Back at the house, we explained the colour terminology, and this time I had a reliable witness. ‘Ah!’ the eldest son exclaimed, ‘It’s not really *axḍar*, it’s just the way they use the word!’

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This was the eureka moment. The colours themselves don't really change – we may add to them, by adding extra red to orange or brown, and in times of drought certain natural colours may be exhausted – but the basic blacks, whites, reds, yellows and greens are always there. What does change, though, is the terminology used to describe them, exchanging one term for another, or subdividing through terminology a hue that was once described using a single term. Bayt Banga did not recognise the use of *axḍar* to describe a dark brown donkey because *axḍar* was no longer used outside the field of fur coat names to describe dark brown.

Considering a variety of semantic fields, this paper looks at areas in which colour terminology has remained constant, areas in which new terms have ousted old terms, and areas in which additional sub-divisions of colour hues have been recognised through the introduction of new terms. During two field-work periods in 2002 and 2003, I examined colour terminology in the semantic fields of donkeys, dagger handles, metallic thread, gold, agate, amber and coral, *gāt*, thread, wool, cloth and clothing, skin, eyes, hair, and paints. Within the section on cloth and clothing, I subdivided my enquiry into women's and men's clothing. My informants are all long-term residents of the Old City of San'a: including children from the age of seven, middle-aged men and women, and women who had reached adulthood by the time of the September Revolution in 1962.

2. Areas in which colour terminology has remained constant

The main areas in which colour terminology appears to have remained constant are specialist areas in which the actual colours found have not changed over the years; these are generally areas of which non-specialists may have little or no knowledge. They include colour terms for animals, the handles of *jambiyih*'s [traditional daggers], metallic thread used in *jambiyih* belts, agate, amber and coral, gold, and *gāt* [*catha edulis* Forsskal]. The main colour terms for donkeys with their corresponding terms in English are: *aswad* 'black', *aḥmar* 'bay', *axḍar* 'brown', *aḡbar* 'dun', *ašhab* 'grey', *ašgar* 'chestnut/light bay', *ašfar* 'yellowish brown', *adxan* 'light bay', and *abyaḍ* 'light grey'. Of these, *ašgar* is explained as *mitmayyil lā dahabī* 'tending towards gold', *ašbah* is said to lie between black and white, and *adxan* is described as *aḥmar mitmayyil lā šafarah* 'bay tending towards yellow'. *Axḍar*, which I translate here as 'brown' and consider to be the colour we would describe as 'brown' (as opposed to 'bay') in horses, is said to differ from *aswad* by the presence versus the absence of the dorsal stripe, described as *xatṭ* 'line' (*al-axḍar abū xatṭ* 'the brown has a line'). Donkeys are distinguished in terms of being 'pure' in colour, as, for example, *aḥmar šāfi* 'pure bay', or having a mixture of colours, in which case the dominant colour is mentioned first; a light bay or chestnut with white spots is described as *ašgar munaggat b-abyaḍ* 'chestnut/light bay spotted with white', as opposed to *ašgar šāfi* 'pure light bay/chestnut'; a bay with an undefined admixture of white is described as *aḥmar mušakkal abyāḍ* 'bay mixed [with] white'. Donkeys of one dominant colour (colour A) which contains hints of a

second colour (colour B) are described as colour A + $lā^2$ + colour B, i.e. *aswad lā ḥamarah* ‘black tending to red/bay’. Donkeys of no specifically identifiable colour are described as *mušakkal* ‘mixed’. Animals which come in two or more distinct colours (skewbald or piebald), mainly goats and very occasionally donkeys, are described using the colour adjectives conjoined by *wa-*, as in: *aḥmar w-abyaḍ* ‘red (bay) and white’ and *aswad w-abyaḍ* ‘black and white’. The blue-grey colour typical of many cats is described as *azrag* (cf. Watson 1992 for horses).

Lexically, the colours of Yemeni dagger *jambiyyih* handles are not properly separable from their quality. The best handle is described as *ṣayfānī*, and, while the use of this term today has extended metaphorically to include a number of items judged to be of excellent quality, *ṣayfānī* in *jambiyyih* handles indicates a transparent aged yellowish colour in which the hairs of which the rhino horn is composed are apparent. The *baṣalī* (lit. ‘oniony’) handle differs from the *ṣayfānī* in being less transparent, having traces of pink colouring³, and not having hairs in evidence. I was told that the *baṣalī* handle comes from a younger animal than the *ṣayfānī*.

Metallic thread used to embroider *jambiyyih* belts is divided into two main types: *sīm*, a gold or silver metallic thread, and *naḥās* (lit. ‘copper/brass’), a thicker copper thread. The *sīm* comes in three main colours, a bright yellow, *līmī* ‘lime’, a paler yellow, *labanī* ‘milk’, a bronzeish colour, *aḥmar* ‘red’, and *fudḍī* ‘silver’. As in most (if not all) other Arabic dialects, further lexical distinctions are made by adding the adjectives *ġāmiġ* ‘dark’ or *fātiḥ* ‘light’ to the colour term.

Gold, *ḍahab*, whose name has lent itself to describe the prototypical gold colour, *ḍahabī*, comes in three main colours: *abyaḍ* ‘white’, *aṣfar* ‘yellow’ and *aḥmar* ‘red’. Amber is described as *aṣfar fātiḥ* or *ġāmiġ*, with the more valuable *aṣfar ġāmiġ* also described as *kabadī*, lit. ‘liverish’. Coral typically comes in shades of red with the darkest red, *aḥmar*, being the most prized. The paler pinkish coral is described as *wardī*, one of the few colour terms ending in the nisbah *-ī* which is already listed in Rossi (1939)⁴. *Yusr* denotes black coral, and therefore describes the intersection of a particular colour with a particular object. Coral may also be *abyaḍ* ‘white’. The ‘white’ coral, less valued than either the *aḥmar* or the *wardī* and said to come from China, is not actually white, but significantly paler than the light-toned *wardī* coral.

The prized Yemeni ‘agate’, *agīġ*, ‘agate’, comes in a myriad of colour combinations, including *aswad* ‘black’, *abyaḍ* ‘white’, *azrag* ‘blue’, *aḥmar* ‘red’, *kabadī* ‘liverish’, and *samā’ī* ‘sky blue’. The translucency or semi-translucency typical of much agate is described as *mā’ī* lit. ‘watery’, a term regarded by native speakers to be a colour adjective. Where the translucency is mixed or

² Derived from **ilā*.

³ In Iraqī, *baṣalī* is described as ‘very light red in colour, like onion peelings’ (Masliyah 2004: 36).

⁴ The other colour term ending in *-ī* is the word for ‘brown’, *binnī*, less commonly, *bunnī*, lit. ‘coffee-beanish’.

tinged with a colour, the colour adjective is coordinated to the adjective *mā'ī*, as in *mā'ī w-abyaḍ* 'translucent and white/translucent white', *mā'ī wa-samā'ī* 'translucent and sky blue/translucent sky blue'.

The ubiquitous *gāt* [*catha edulis* Forsskal] leaf, chewed by circa 80% of adult male Yemenis to give a mild stimulant effect, comes in a variety of greens and reds. Interestingly it is described from lightest to darkest using the nominal terms *bayāḍ* lit. 'whiteness'⁵, *ḥamār* lit. 'redness' and *ḥamār musawwad* lit. 'blackened redness', with *bayāḍ* denoting 'light green' and *ḥamār musawwad* 'purple'. A *gāt* described as both a type and a colour is *gāt azrag*, lit. 'blue *gāt*'; the colour of this *gāt* type is explained as *ḥamār lā bayāḍ* 'red tending towards white'.

3. Semantic fields in which new colour terms have ousted old terms

During the 1930s when Rossi was carrying out his fieldwork in San'a, the term *axḍar* was used to signify brown not only in describing animal fur colours, but also human skin colour. Three major terms were recognised, from darkest to lightest (black to white): *aswad*, *axḍar*, *abyaḍ*. *Axḍar* was considered a sign of beauty, entailing not just the hue of the colour, but all that was associated with greenness, including water, freshness and youth (al-Baraddūnī 1988: 227 ff.)⁶. The term *axḍar* continued to be used to describe a brown skin colour⁷ with all its associated features of beauty, youth and freshness until the generation which grew up with the September Revolution (1962). Terms derived from the root /x-ḍ-r/ are also used to denote wetness, but not necessarily maintaining the positive connotations of freshness: a wet cloth is described as *axḍar*, and *xaḍḍar* means 'to make s.th. wet'. Today *axḍar* as a term of beauty in women and men remains immortalised in many songs, including those sung today by the San'ani singer, Fu'ād al-Kibsi. The following verse was cited to me by Dr. Ḥasan al-Šamāḥī⁸:

Axḍar ligīt axḍar
gubāl bāb bayt al-ānisi
fa-gallanī mālak
gult rūḥī xānisi

Brown I met a brown [beauty]
 By the door of Bayt al-Anisi
 She asked me what I wanted
 I said I want to run away.

⁵ Whiteish round grapes are also described using the nominal term *bayāḍ* (Piamenta 1990). Tim Mackintosh-Smith (p.c.) suggests these forms could be non-standard broken plurals, since both *gāt* and *'inab* are usually referred to in the plural.

⁶ *Axaḍar/axḍar* has connotations of freshness in central Yemen in general (Behnstedt 1992: 330), and in other modern Arabic dialects, including Iraqi (Masliyah 2004: 34), Negev Bedouin (Borg 1999: 132) and Sudanese (Reichmuth 1981).

⁷ As in Sudanese dialects of Arabic (Reichmuth 1981).

⁸ In the following two verses, the masculine singular of the poem is translated as feminine singular, because in both cases a woman is intended (cf. Piamenta 1998).

Al-Baraddūnī cites the verse below which he analyses as the comparison of a beautiful young woman with a fresh sprig of herbs (al-Baraddūnī 1988: 227):

Axḍar min al-bārī wa-zād tanayyal
w-innū šabīh al-mušgar al-muḡayyal

Green beauty from God embellished with indigo dye
 fresh like a sprig of newly watered herbs

In other cases, *al-bint al-xaḍrā* lit. ‘the green girl’ has been replaced by the term *al-bint al-xuḍrāniyyih* in which the adjective is a more complex form with the root /x-ḍ-r/, and *axḍar* as a general skin colour has been largely replaced by the term *asmar*, which has most probably been imported from Egyptian Arabic (al-Baraddūnī 1988: 227; cf. Stewart 1999: 112). Among some speakers, however, *axḍar* has remained, but the spectrum of skin colours has been split through the insertion of differentiating colour terms: a number of my women informants from Sūg al-Bagar in the Old City of San‘a distinguish lighter to darker shades of brown skin using the terms *gamḥāwī* or *gamḥī* ‘wheat-coloured’, *axḍar* ‘medium brown’, and *asmar* ‘dark brown’. The term *gamḥāwī/gamḥī* is almost certainly a loan from Egyptian Arabic, ‘*amḥī/amḥāwī*’ ‘light brown; wheat-coloured’ (Stewart 1999: 113; cf. Badawi and Hinds 1986), since *birr* (Piamenta 1990), and not *gamḥ*, is otherwise used in Yemeni dialects to denote wheat.

The colour of eyes is described using the plural form of the colour adjective as: *sūd* ‘black’, which covers eye colour as dark as and darker than medium brown, ‘*asaliyyāt*’⁹ lit. ‘honeyish’, *xuḍr* ‘green’, and *zurg* ‘blue’. Of these, *xuḍr* ‘green’ has squeezed the term listed by Piamenta (1990) as *azrag* to split the green – blue spectrum into *xuḍr* ‘green’ and *zurg* ‘blue’. Terms derived from the root /z-r-g/ in Yemeni Arabic in general often entail shine or sparkle¹⁰, as in *zāriḡih* ‘ray of sun’, *mizabrag* ‘shining’ and *zabragī* ‘glob of fat’ (Piamenta 1990), and this may be what was originally intended by the use of *azrag* to describe eye (colour?). The vocative expression *yā ‘azrag* lit. ‘Hey, blue [one]!’ is still used to call someone who has eyes lighter than dark brown and/or fair hair and skin (Tim Mackintosh-Smith p.c.). Red eyes are described as ‘*uyūn ḥumr*, a phrase also used as a metaphor for braveness and/or cleverness, as exemplified in the proverb: *aḥmar al-‘uyūn yifiḍḍ li-nafsih* ‘[he who is] red of the eye will forge his own way through’ (al-Akwa^c 1984: 62)¹¹.

⁹ ‘*asali*’ as a colour adjective is used exclusively to describe the light brown eye colour described as ‘hazel’ in English.

¹⁰ As in Old Arabic (Fischer 1965: 54) and some other peninsular dialects of Arabic (e.g. Omani, Reinhardt 1894).

¹¹ Red is also associated with passion, as in *laylih ḥamrā* ‘night of arguments’ (cf. also Masliyah 2004: 28 for Iraqi Arabic). Masliyah provides an interesting discussion of the symbolic value of different primary colour terms in Iraqi Arabic.

4. Semantic fields in which additional sub-divisions of colour hues have been recognised lexically

While colour terminology has remained relatively constant in those semantic fields in which the hues and tones themselves have not changed significantly, terminology associated with areas in which there has been an expansion of artificially produced colour hues and tones has multiplied. This is particularly the case in the semantic fields of cloth and clothing, thread and wool, and paints and crayons. One of my principal old generation informants, who died in September 2002, used to distinguish the following colours lexically: *aswad* 'black – dark blue', *binnī* 'brown', *aḥmar* 'pink – red', *aṣfar* 'yellow – orange'¹², *axḍar* 'green – blue'¹³, and *abyaḍ* 'white – cream'. She distinguished colour saturation, where necessary, by addition of the adjectives *fātiḥ* 'light' and *ḡāmiḡ* 'dark'. In summer 2003, I took a paint chart to San'a to test a wider range of colours. Women who had already reached adulthood by the time of the Revolution (1962) described all colours with a saturation as deep as or deeper than dark brown or navy blue as *aswad* lit. 'black'. *Axḍar* covered the spectrum of green through to medium blue. *Binnī* covered the spectrum of light brown (our coffee) to purple. *Aṣfar* covered the spectrum yellow – orange. All colours as pale as or paler than cream, including colours such as blue-white, were described as *abyaḍ*. The term *kuḥlī* lit. 'antimony-ish', which among teenage girls to young women most commonly denotes navy blue today, was used variously to describe semi-dark greys, greens and, less commonly, blues.

Children from sixth grade up to early adulthood, particularly girls, were adept at both grouping and splitting similar colours lexically; however, I did not find complete agreement about the terminology to be used for certain colour hues and tones, a finding which suggests that some of these terms have been very recently adopted, and are as yet unstable. The yellows on the paint chart, which they grouped as the yellows (*al-aṣfarāt*), were classified from lightest (yellowish cream) to darkest (orange)¹⁴ as *labanī* lit. 'milky', *aṣfar fātiḥ* 'light yellow', (*mawzī* lit. 'bananaish'), *laymūnī* 'lemon'¹⁵ and *burtagālī* 'orange'. The last three of these terms relate to fruit skin colours. The greens, *al-axḍarāt*, were classified from lightest (a green somewhat darker than apple-white) to darkest as *tuffāḥī* lit. 'appleish', (*ambarūdī* lit. 'pearish'), (*faṣfūrī* 'phosphorescent [green]'), *axḍar* 'green', *xabaḡī* lit. 'mossy/licheny', (and *xiyārī* lit. 'cucumbery'). Four of these terms relate to

¹² According to Fischer (1965: 116), *aṣfar* in Old Arabic covers the spectrum from the lightest yellow and beige to orange and a golden brown.

¹³ As in a number of other dialects, including Sudanese Arabic in which *axaḍar* covers a spectrum from light blue to green and may also describe grey tones (Reichmuth 1981).

¹⁴ In the following lists, colours which were less generally agreed upon are placed in brackets.

¹⁵ One teenage female informant used *laymūnī* rather than *burtagālī* to describe 'orange'.

flora, of which three relate more specifically to fruit¹⁶. The creams were distinguished from white by the terms *sakrīmī* lit. 'ice-creamy'¹⁷, *samnī* 'cream' and *bīj*¹⁸ 'beige'. Of these, one colour term is an unanalysable loan from French via Egyptian Arabic, and one is a relational adjective, with the suffix *-ī*, derived from the English loan word, 'ice cream'. Blues, *al-azragāt*, ranged from *samāwī* 'sky-blue'¹⁹, *sawsanī* 'lilic/violet', *azrag fātīḥ* 'light blue', *azrag* 'medium blue/royal blue'²⁰ (to *kuḥlī* 'navy blue'). One of these terms, *sawsanī*, is derived from the name of a flower. The greys ranged from *fudḍī* 'silver', a colour which has the saturation but not necessarily the lustre of silver, *ramādī* 'ash grey' to *raṣāṣī* 'lead grey'. Some younger speakers classified what was listed as cinnamon grey on the paint chart as *kuḥlī* (see below). The reds, *al-aḥmarāt*, ranged from very pale pink, *jildī* lit. 'skinnish', *wardī fātīḥ* 'light pink', *wardī* or *wardī gāmīg* 'dark pink, rose pink', *aḥmar* 'red', *ḥabḥabī* lit. 'watermelonish'²¹, *yāgūtī* 'ruby red', *dam gāzāl* 'burgundy' through to *banafsajī* 'purple'. The more recent terms describing reds relate to blood, (white) human skin, fruit, and the semi-precious stone, ruby. Browns ranged between *turābī* lit. 'dusty', *aḡbar* 'dust', *binnī fātīḥ* 'light brown', *girfī* lit. 'cinnamony', *xaṣabī* lit. 'woody', *binnī gāmīg* 'dark brown' to *innābī* lit. 'prune-ish'. Of these, *xaṣabī* was used to describe a colour sample which did not just have the brown colour of wood, but also the wood grain. One eighth-grade child, whose elder brother is a carpenter, described one of the brown wood paints as *furmaykī*, lit. 'formica-ish', because it reminded him of formica.

Additional colour terms used for various materials include *sukkarī* lit. 'sugary', said to describe a colour explained as *abyaḍ gāmīg* 'dark white' or *abyaḍ mitmayyil lā 'aswad* (see below), and most closely corresponding to English off-white, *jismī* lit. 'bodyish' which is restricted in use to the tan colour of women's tights and stockings, and terms to describe colours which necessarily entail lustre – *ḍahabī* 'gold', *naḥāsī* 'bronze/copper', and *mumawwij* lit. 'wavy', used to describe the colour of a new cloth type which shimmers between green and blue.

Many of the more recent colour terms have not yet become conventionalised beyond generally identifying the meaning of a colour term with the typical colour of the object concerned: for example, *mawzī* covers any yellow colour typical of a healthy banana skin; *ambarūdī* the colour of

¹⁶ In Iraqī, many secondary colour terms are also derived from flora names (Masliyah 2004: 35).

¹⁷ In the wool *sūg*, a rather violent intersection of pink and orange was described by a wool trader as *sakrīmī*. This use of the term was rejected by my middle-aged and young women informants.

¹⁸ Loan from French beige via Cairene Arabic *běj*.

¹⁹ According to one of my late-middle-aged female informants, the colour denoted by *samāwī* / *samā'ī* went through a stage of being called lawn *as-samā* 'the colour of the sky'.

²⁰ As a (usually lustrous) dress material colour, royal blue is described by long-term residents of San'a from Ta'izz as *midādī* lit. 'inky'.

²¹ *Ḥabḥabī* describes the colour of the inside of a watermelon.

an average pear skin. Though for most speakers *tuffāḥī*, lit. ‘appleish’, denotes a light green, the term can, for some young San‘ani speakers, denote either a green or a red colour typical of apples. Some speakers insist there is no colour difference in San‘ani between *laymūnī* and *limī*, because only limes (*līm*) and not lemons (*laymūn*) are found in San‘a. When I asked one of my educated middle-aged informants about the colour denoted by the term *girfī*, lit. ‘cinnamony’, she fetched some cinnamon sticks and said it would be that colour. Older colour terms ending in *-ī*, however, such as *binnī* ‘brown’ and *wardī* ‘pink’, as well as colour terms loaned from other Arabic dialects, such as *dam* (*al-*)*ğazāl* ‘burgundy’ and *bīj* ‘beige’, have, by contrast, developed more conventionalised meanings. They thus behave more like a colour term such as ‘orange’ in English, which covers a different range from the range of colours actually found in oranges (some oranges have yellow rather than orange skin).

Shades of colour verging towards another hue – for example reddish brown (i.e. brown verging towards red) – are described in one of three ways in San‘ani, all of which begin with the main colour adjective. Where the second hue is a colour which takes the adjective pattern *af‘al*, i.e. *aḥmar*, *azrag*, *aswad*, *aşfar*, *abyaḍ*, *ağbar*, the main colour adjective may be followed by the form IV participle of the defining colour root, as in: *binnī muḥmar* ‘reddish brown’, and *aḥmar muşfar* ‘yellowish red’²². Alternatively, the second hue can follow the preposition *lā* ‘towards’ or *mitmayyil lā* ‘tending towards’ and be denoted by a noun, viz:

Colour adjective + (*mitmayyil*) *lā* + colour noun

Examples include: *binnī lā ḥamarah* ‘brown towards redness’ and *aḥmar lā şafarah* ‘red towards yellowness’. Where the second hue is described by an adjective formed by suffixation of the nisbah ending, the colour adjective follows (*mitmayyil*) *lā*, viz:

Colour adjective + (*mitmayyil*) *lā* + colour adjective

Examples include: *binnī lā wardī* ‘pinkish brown’, *aḥmar la ḍahabī* ‘goldish red’, *burtagālī lā wardī* ‘pinkish orange’.

Where two colours are (almost) equally dominant in an intermediate colour, this is generally expressed as:

Colour adjective + ‘*alā* + colour adjective

Examples include: *burtagālī ‘alā wardī* ‘orange-pink’, *binnī ‘alā ‘aḥmar* ‘red-brown’.

²² When a speaker wants to describe a vague colour, in the sense of English ‘reddish’ or ‘greenish’, the *muf‘al* form of the colour root is used in place of the *af‘al* form, as in: *muxḍar* ‘greenish’, *muḥmar* ‘reddish’, *muşfar* ‘yellowish’, *muzrag* ‘blueish’, etc. This pattern is attested in other dialects of Yemeni Arabic; for the dialect of al-Naḍīr, Behnstedt (1992, 1996) includes *mişfir* ‘gelblich’, *mizrig* ‘bläulich’, *muxḍir* ‘grünlich’.

5. Shades of meaning

Colour terminology has developed in order to distinguish one significant colour from another. When someone says that they saw a red book, or that their living room carpet is green, we may imagine a prototypical red or green, but have no idea whether the red of the book is pillar-box red, or burgundy red, or blood-orange red, or whether the green of the carpet is the colour of moss or of freshly watered grass. To appreciate the meaning of a colour term we need to be able to visualise the colour denoted in context. In San'ani Arabic, we have already seen that in addition to 'green' the term *axḍar* could mean 'brown' in reference to a donkey's fur or a person's skin, and that the meaning may depend not only on the actual context, but also on the identity of the speaker, because *axḍar* describes the whole green – medium blue colour spectrum among people who were adults at the time of the Revolution, and among some middle-aged adults. The meaning of a colour term also depends on the relative need to distinguish one colour from other similar colours. The colour described as *abyaḍ* in stone pots would be described as *azrag* in cats and as *ramādī* or *fuḍḍī* in paint because stone pots come in two main shades: dark (*aswad*) or light (*abyaḍ*). In clothing, the different hues and tones of women's cloth are generally easily distinguished from one another, and therefore a term such as *samāwī* 'sky blue' may refer to any number of different actual sky blues; the subtly different hues and tones of men's cloth today, however, can often only be distinguished through close comparison with neighbouring colours²³. In material used for men's robes (*zinīn*), lavender blue, which in women's clothing would most commonly be termed either *sawsanī* or *samāwī*, is described as *nīlī* lit. 'indigo'²⁴; the colour term *samāwī* refers to the almost imperceptibly blueish white that used to be so prized in British washing-powder adverts, *wardī* to a very light almost dusky pink, and *kuḥlī* to a grey which is lighter than that denoted by *ramādī*.

6. Conclusion

Colours are a product of the lexical and grammatical structure of particular languages (Lyons 1995), and languages are subject to change. In recent years, there has been a rapid introduction into Yemen of (mainly artificially produced) colour hues and tones in the semantic field of consumer goods. Responding to a need to distinguish these colours, San'ani Arabic has adopted and derived vocabulary to split fuzzy unions of two or more primary colours (e.g. [green or blue], [yellow or orange]), to distinguish fuzzy intersections of primary colours (e.g. [red AND yellow] i.e. orange, [blue AND red] i.e. purple), and to distinguish colours, such as light pink, cream, and beige, whose luminosity and saturation are involved in their definition.

²³ According to a man selling and tailoring men's *zinīn* (robes; sing. *zinnih*) in the Old City, there are now more than thirty different whites in *zinnih* material.

²⁴ In San'a, the colour produced by indigo dye is described as *aswad bi-yilma* 'black which shines'; one of the names for the cloth was *bazz aswad* lit. 'black cloth'; and the men's indigo robe of old was called *muṣabbaḡ* lit. 'dyed'.

The introduction of additional colour terms is very new in San‘a. At present we have a linguistic situation in which the oldest generation and many middle-aged people preserve the basic black, white, red, yellow, green/blue and brown distinctions, while the generation of young teenagers through to young adults recognises a myriad of intermediate and intersecting chromatic and achromatic colours. The lexical recognition of intermediate and intersecting colours, however, does not yet mean that San‘ani society has developed a stable set of secondary colour terms. Many of the more recently introduced colour terms, such as *mawzī* lit. ‘bananaish’, are still transparently analysable as [entity to which a comparison is being made] + *-ī* (e.g. [*mawz*] + *-ī*), and have not yet developed a separate conventionalised meaning. There are bound to remain some context-dependent distinctions in specialised semantic fields, but only time will tell whether terms such as *mawzī* lit. ‘bananaish’, *fasfūrī* ‘phosphorescent [green]’ and ‘*ambarūdī* lit. ‘pearish’ will gain general currency, and whether terms such as *kuhlī* lit. ‘antinomy-ish’ and *nīlī* lit. ‘indigo’ will come to denote generally agreed upon colour hues and tones.

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