

FIXED COLOR SIMILES IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH: A SEMANTIC, COGNITIVE, AND LINGUOCULTURAL STUDY

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Abstract: This article examines fixed color similes in contemporary English as a distinct phraseological subsystem located at the intersection of semantics, cognition, and culture. While color words, color idioms, and figurative language have all received sustained scholarly attention in recent years, fixed color similes such as *as white as snow*, *as black as night*, and *as red as blood* have often been discussed only indirectly, as part of broader research on idiomaticity, figurative processing, or color symbolism. The study aims to clarify the semantic structure of these units, identify their cognitive motivation, and explain their linguocultural and evaluative functions. Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach grounded in recent work on phraseology, color semantics, simile processing, cultural linguistics, and cross-linguistic research on color expressions. The analysis shows that fixed color similes in English perform three central functions: they intensify perception, encode evaluative meaning, and preserve culturally stabilized prototypes through which speakers conceptualize visible and affective experience. The findings further suggest that the meaning of such expressions is shaped not only by the color term itself, but also by the cultural salience of the object that serves as the standard of comparison. As a result, fixed color similes are revealed to be semantically layered units whose transparency is only partial: their force derives from both lexical familiarity and figurative conventionalization. The article argues that a focused study of these expressions contributes to English phraseology, cognitive semantics, cultural linguistics, and translation studies.

Keywords: fixed simile, color simile, phraseology, figurative language, color semantics, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, English phraseology, evaluative meaning, linguocultural analysis.

I. Introduction

In contemporary linguistics, figurative expressions are no longer treated as merely ornamental elements of literary style. They are increasingly understood as conventionalized resources through which speakers categorize experience, compress evaluation, and mobilize culturally recognizable imagery. Recent phraseological scholarship has been especially important in this shift, because it has clarified that phraseology and figurative language overlap without being identical: not all phraseological units are figurative, and not all figurative expressions are phraseological, yet many conventional expressions belong to both domains at once. This intersection is especially visible in fixed similes, whose grammatical transparency coexists with lexical stability and cultural conventionality.

Within this broader field, color-based figurative expressions occupy a particularly productive position. Color is one of the most basic domains of human perception, but modern research shows that color meaning is not reducible to visual stimulus alone. It is shaped by concept associations, contextual contrast, emotional loading, and the cultural organization of experience. In other words, colors in language do not simply denote wavelengths or visible qualities; they also activate schemas of purity, danger, vitality, innocence, shame, decay, youth, ripeness, and countless other culturally mediated concepts. For that reason, color expressions are a privileged site for studying how language binds perception to meaning.

Fixed color similes in English deserve focused attention because they combine two highly productive semiotic resources: the symbolic density of color and the comparative explicitness of simile. Expressions such as *as white as snow*, *as black as coal*, *as red as blood*, *as pale as chalk*, or *as green as grass* seem structurally simple, yet their communicative effect depends on conventionalized prototypes rather than on spontaneous comparison. Their persistence in English suggests that they are stored and retrieved not as ad hoc utterances, but as ready-made semantic patterns. At the same time, these expressions are not semantically flat. Their meanings extend beyond visual description into emotional, axiological, and cultural interpretation.

The relevance of this topic is strengthened by recent developments in several adjacent fields. Research on color categories has shown both cross-linguistic regularities and language-specific distributions; research on color perception has renewed debates about linguistic relativity; research on color-emotion associations has demonstrated the coexistence of broad cross-cultural tendencies and local differences; and studies of color idioms have shown that figurative color expressions often resist simple translation equivalence. Together, these developments make it possible to revisit fixed color similes in English with a more integrated framework than earlier stylistic descriptions typically offered.

The purpose of this article is therefore to analyze fixed color similes in contemporary English from three complementary perspectives: semantic, cognitive, and

linguocultural. More specifically, the study seeks to determine how these expressions organize meaning, why particular standards of comparison become conventional, what kinds of evaluations they encode, and why they matter for interpretation and translation. The central argument is that fixed color similes form a coherent micro-system within English phraseology: they intensify description, stabilize culturally meaningful prototypes, and reveal how speakers convert perceptual experience into shared figurative knowledge.

II. Literature Review

Recent research on phraseology has emphasized that fixed expressions should be studied not only in terms of lexical stability, but also in terms of figurativeness, motivation, semantic layering, and discourse behavior. Dobrovolskij's 2025 synthesis is especially useful here because it distinguishes phraseology from figurative language while insisting that many phrasemes are organized around image components that shape both their meaning and their use. This approach is highly relevant to fixed similes, which often preserve visible and culturally memorable images while functioning as conventional lexical units. A fixed simile such as *as black as night* is thus not merely a syntactic comparison; it is a conventional figurative resource whose meaning depends on its stored imagery and accepted usage.

At the same time, research on simile processing has refined our understanding of how similes differ from other figures of speech. Mathisen, Allott, and Ronderos argue that similes and metaphors are not processed in identical ways, and their 2025 eye-tracking study supports the view that similes retain distinct cognitive properties even when they are highly familiar. This is important for the present topic because fixed color similes often look transparent on the surface, yet their conventionality does not erase their figurative structure. Rather, familiarity appears to make them easier to process while still leaving their comparative architecture intact. Such findings support a view of fixed color similes as cognitively economical but semantically active units.

The literature on color semantics adds a second indispensable layer. Schloss's color inference framework shows that color meaning is flexible, context-sensitive, and grounded in networks of color-concept associations rather than in isolated denotations. Liu, van Paridon, and Lupyan extend this discussion by demonstrating that English speakers, including congenitally blind participants, can learn robust color-adjective associations from language itself. Together, these studies imply that color meaning is partly distributed across usage, association, and conceptual inference. This matters for fixed color similes because the color term in such expressions does not act alone: its meaning is strengthened and directed by a culturally familiar comparison object. The force of *as red as blood*, for instance, depends not only on "red," but on the conceptual network attached to "blood."

Cross-linguistic work on color categories and color perception reinforces this point. Xu, Zhu, and Benítez-Burraco show that even basic color-term inventories differ across languages, while Brosa-Rodríguez and Jiménez-López demonstrate that the salience of basic colors varies across linguistic corpora. Sinkeviciute and colleagues, moreover, show that active language use can modulate color perception in bilinguals, and Kapelle and Flecken's review confirms that the relationship between language and color perception remains a serious empirical topic rather than a speculative one. These findings do not mean that fixed color similes are determined by perception alone; rather, they suggest that even apparently simple color expressions are shaped by language-specific categorization habits and patterns of salience.

A third strand of scholarship concerns affect and evaluation. Jonauskaitė and colleagues' large cross-cultural study of color-emotion associations, as well as Xu, Zhu, and Benítez-Burraco's 2024 comparison of Spanish and Mandarin, both indicate that colors are regularly associated with emotional meanings, although the exact distribution of those meanings varies across languages and contexts. These findings help explain why fixed color similes in English frequently exceed descriptive function. *White* can index purity or lifeless pallor; *black* may suggest darkness, danger, or moral negativity; *red* can signal vitality, anger, embarrassment, or violence; *green* may indicate freshness, youth, or inexperience. Fixed similes do not invent these associations from nothing, but they crystallize them into highly reusable phraseological forms.

Finally, translation-oriented studies of color idioms show that figurative color expressions are both culturally revealing and translationally unstable. Oguz and Uusküla's 2023 article demonstrates that color idioms can be "false friends" across languages and that transparency does not automatically guarantee ease of translation. Oguz's 2026 work further shows that empirical elicitation captures color idioms that dictionaries may miss and that language communities differ in the inventory and salience of such expressions. Although these studies concern idioms more broadly rather than fixed similes alone, they strongly suggest that color-based phraseology is not a universal code with uniform mappings. This insight is central to any account of English fixed color similes, especially when their apparent simplicity tempts translators or analysts to overlook their cultural specificity.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical design. Its purpose is not to produce a frequency-based corpus map of all English color similes, but to provide a theory-grounded analysis of a representative set of widely recognized fixed color similes in contemporary English. The methodological choice is appropriate because the main research questions concern semantic organization, cognitive motivation, evaluative loading, and linguocultural meaning rather than statistical distribution. The study therefore treats fixed color similes as phraseological units whose linguistic

interest lies in their conventionality, relative stability, and capacity to encode shared imagery.

The analytical framework combines three approaches. First, the semantic approach identifies denotative and connotative components within each expression. Second, the cognitive approach examines the prototype or comparison standard that motivates the simile and explains why it becomes memorable or retrievable. Third, the linguocultural approach considers how the simile reflects habitual ways of evaluating reality in English-speaking discourse. These three dimensions are treated as interdependent rather than isolated, because fixed similes become conventional precisely when perceptual salience, conceptual accessibility, and cultural familiarity reinforce one another.

The units considered in the discussion are representative examples such as *as white as snow*, *as white as a sheet*, *as black as coal*, *as black as night*, *as red as blood*, *as red as a beetroot*, *as green as grass*, and *as pale as chalk*. These examples are treated as qualitative data points rather than as exhaustive inventory items. Their interpretive value lies in the fact that they illustrate recurrent English patterns: color intensification through highly salient standards of comparison, semantic extension from visible trait to evaluation, and partial transparency combined with phraseological fixedness. The study is therefore interpretive but disciplined, grounding its claims in recent work on phraseology, color semantics, simile processing, and color-based figurative language.

IV. Results

The analysis indicates, first, that fixed color similes in English are organized around prototype-based intensification. Their most immediate function is not simply to name a color, but to intensify the degree to which a color-related feature is perceived. In expressions such as *as white as snow* or *as black as coal*, the second component acts as an extreme standard or benchmark. The resulting meaning is stronger than that of a simple adjective because it recruits a culturally salient perceptual model. In this respect, fixed color similes rely on the same basic principle identified in recent research on color semantics: color meaning becomes communicatively powerful when it is embedded in a larger network of concept associations.

Second, these expressions show that fixedness does not eliminate semantic transparency but restructures it. The general direction of comparison is usually understandable: snow evokes whiteness, night evokes darkness, blood evokes redness. Yet this transparency is only partial, because the conventional force of the expression depends on prior cultural familiarity. Not every logically possible comparison becomes phraseologically stable. English could, in principle, generate innumerable ad hoc comparisons for redness or blackness, but only some become fixed. What distinguishes the fixed expressions is not raw descriptiveness alone, but the recurrence of a culturally available prototype that speakers can access quickly and interpret with little effort. This

finding accords with recent accounts of phraseological conventionalization and with current research distinguishing similes from fully novel figurative constructions.

Third, fixed color similes in English carry clear evaluative and affective loading. The color term does not function neutrally in many cases. *As white as a sheet* often signals fear, illness, or shock rather than mere whiteness. *As red as a beetroot* is frequently associated with embarrassment or physiological excitement. *As black as night* may index opacity, danger, or menace, depending on context. What appears to be a simple visual analogy therefore often encodes a secondary layer of bodily, emotional, or moral meaning. This result is consistent with large-scale work on color-emotion associations, which shows that colors regularly attract patterned affective interpretation across speakers, even if those patterns are never completely universal or context-free.

Fourth, the data suggest that the comparison object in a fixed color simile is more culturally decisive than the color term alone. Snow, chalk, coal, grass, blood, sheet, and rose are not interchangeable carriers of color. Each brings with it a cluster of experiential and cultural assumptions. *Snow* evokes purity, brightness, winter, and visual spread; *coal* evokes depth, residue, darkness, and industrial materiality; *blood* evokes life, injury, corporeality, and urgency. This means that fixed color similes should not be analyzed as simple “color labels plus intensifier.” They are compressed cultural miniatures in which the object of comparison selects which aspect of the color becomes semantically foregrounded.

Fifth, the analysis confirms that fixed color similes occupy an intermediate position between descriptive phraseology and broader figurative cognition. They are more explicit than metaphors because the comparison is overtly marked, but they are more lexically stabilized than spontaneous similes. This hybrid status explains both their communicative efficiency and their persistence in English. A speaker who uses *as white as snow* does not need to invent a new image, yet still benefits from vividness, memorability, and emotional resonance. Recent research on simile processing supports precisely this point: conventional similes are cognitively effective not because they are semantically empty, but because their figurative work has become routinized.

Sixth, fixed color similes also reveal a selective relation between language, perception, and category structure. The present analysis suggests that some English similes feel more “natural” because the underlying color standard is highly salient within English discourse and cultural environment. This observation is compatible with recent research showing that color categorization, color salience, and even color discrimination can vary with linguistic practice. Fixed color similes do not merely reflect these structures; they help stabilize them by repeatedly pairing color terms with preferred standards of comparison. In this sense, they are not passive mirrors of perception, but active participants in the cultural organization of perceptual language. Seventh, the analysis has clear implications for translation. If a fixed color simile is translated literally into another language, semantic intelligibility may survive while

phraseological naturalness is lost. The problem is especially acute when the standard of comparison is not equally salient in the target culture or when the target language prefers a different simile for the same evaluative effect. Translation, then, involves more than finding a lexical equivalent for the color term. It requires identifying whether the target language has a corresponding fixed unit, a semantically parallel but culturally different simile, or only a descriptive paraphrase. Recent work on color idioms strongly confirms that this problem is structural rather than incidental.

V. Discussion

The findings support the claim that fixed color similes in English form a meaningful micro-system within phraseology rather than a random collection of colorful comparisons. Their organization is systematic at several levels. Structurally, they tend to rely on a recurrent comparative frame. Semantically, they intensify visible qualities while opening onto affective and evaluative meanings. Cognitively, they exploit highly accessible prototypes. Culturally, they encode community-shared standards of salience and interpretation. What unifies them is not merely the presence of a color term, but the way the color term is anchored in a conventional comparison object that has become semantically emblematic.

This perspective helps clarify a common misunderstanding. Because many fixed color similes are easy to paraphrase, they are sometimes treated as semantically “simple.” Yet simplicity of paraphrase is not the same as simplicity of linguistic structure. The phrase *as white as snow* can be paraphrased as “extremely white,” but such a paraphrase removes the expression’s prototype, cultural residue, and imagistic charge. The simile is effective precisely because it does not intensify abstractly; it intensifies through a visible, culturally remembered scene. For this reason, fixed color similes should be studied not only at the level of lexical substitution, but at the level of image-bearing conventionality.

The results also suggest that color similes are a productive testing ground for the relationship between universality and cultural specificity. On the one hand, many of the comparison standards used in English are grounded in broad embodied experience: blood is red, night is dark, grass is green. On the other hand, the phraseological privileging of particular standards over others is language-specific and culturally sedimented. Cross-linguistic studies of color terms, color idioms, and color-emotion associations all point in the same direction: there are broad regularities, but there is no single, culture-free figurative code for color. English fixed color similes thus illustrate how embodied perception and cultural conventionalization converge without collapsing into one another.

Another important implication concerns the relation between phraseology and cognition. Current research in figurative language increasingly treats conventional figures not as dead remnants of creativity, but as efficient cognitive tools. Fixed color

similes fit this model especially well. They reduce processing effort because they are familiar, but they still preserve enough imagery to make discourse vivid and socially meaningful. In practical terms, this means that such expressions are likely to remain resilient in both everyday communication and literary style. Their conventionality is not a sign of semantic weakness; it is the condition of their rapid interpretability.

Finally, the study confirms the value of bringing cultural linguistics into phraseological analysis. Color similes are never just about language-internal form. They depend on shared knowledge of weather, landscape, objects, bodily experience, material culture, and symbolic evaluation. A linguocultural reading therefore does not add an optional interpretive layer to the analysis; it clarifies why one phrase becomes fixed while another remains merely possible. From this perspective, English fixed color similes are compact records of how a speech community has learned to perceive, classify, and value recurrent features of experience.

VI. Conclusion

Fixed color similes in contemporary English are best understood as conventional figurative units that combine perceptual immediacy with semantic density. Their linguistic significance lies in the fact that they do much more than describe colors. They intensify qualities, encode emotional and axiological meanings, preserve culturally privileged prototypes, and provide speakers with efficient ready-made resources for vivid expression. In this sense, they belong at the core of English phraseological study rather than at its periphery.

The article has shown that these expressions can be productively analyzed from semantic, cognitive, and linguocultural perspectives at once. Semantically, they organize both denotative and connotative meaning. Cognitively, they rely on salient standards of comparison that support quick recognition and interpretation. Linguoculturally, they reveal how visible traits become stabilized as shared symbolic knowledge. Their partial transparency, far from making them trivial, is what makes them especially revealing: they remain understandable while still carrying traces of historical and cultural selection.

The broader implication is that color-based fixed similes offer a compact but powerful object of study for several disciplines at once: phraseology, cognitive semantics, cultural linguistics, stylistics, and translation studies. Future research would benefit from complementing qualitative analysis with corpus-based frequency work, discourse-based variation studies, and systematic comparison with Uzbek and other languages. Such directions would make it possible to trace not only what fixed color similes mean in English, but also how they circulate, shift, and resist equivalence across linguistic cultures.

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