

## COLOUR NAMES AND NUMERALS AS A SOURCE OF METAPHORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN JAPANESE

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The Asian languages and cultures always present fertile ground for cross-cultural research due to the differences in history and development in comparison to the Western countries. In this article we will analyze the perception and usage of colour names and numerals in the Japanese language and compare it to some aspects of the Western perception.

Let us revise the structure of Japanese colour names and their significance within the language and culture.

Most words denoting colours in Japanese are built using the following pattern:

[noun] + 色(iro),

where 色(iro) means *colour*. The noun in this construction usually denotes an object from which the colour name can be derived. For example:

灰色 (hai + iro; 灰(hai) = ash; literally “ash-colour”)

水色(mizu + iro; 水(mizu) = water; literally “water-colour”)

However, there exist several colour names which are not constructed in this way. Instead, they have their own specific names:

赤(aka; red) and 青(ao, shade of blue)

黒(kuro; black) and 白(shiro; white)

緑(midori; green) and 紫(murasaki; purple)

In modern Japanese there also exists a tendency of borrowing English words to denote some colours. For example, the most commonly used one is “orange” オレンジ(orenji). There also exist mixed pattern colour names, usually following the scheme:

[English borrowing] + 色(iro),

such as オリーブ色(oribu + iro; olive green colour).

Japanese perception of colour has some peculiarities. For example, 青(ao) is considered both blue and green, and can take on either meaning depending on the context (although the meaning of “blue”, especially “light blue” is most prevalent). Because of this many traffic lights in Japan have the colours of blue, yellow and red (as opposed to Russian and European green, yellow and red).

Most notable expressions in Japanese linked to colours involve the four primary colours: red, blue, white and black. The word for “blue” 青(*ao*) is used to denote something unripe (used more or less literally) or an inexperienced person (used figuratively). The word for “red” 赤(*aka*) is figuratively used in referring to babies: 赤ちゃん(*akachan*; literally “little red one”). White and black retain similar meanings to their western equivalents, with black often denoting negative concepts and white positive. The one notable difference is the reversed order of the expression “black and white”: in Japanese it is 白黒(*shiro + kuro*; white and black) and is considered a separate word rather than an expression with “and”. This word is also used as a synonym for “right and wrong”.

Numerals are widely used in the Japanese language for different types of metaphors and wordplay. Let us revise the general information about Japanese numerals.

The kanji characters for numerals are borrowed from Chinese and possess two types of pronunciation: the original Chinese reading (*on’yomi*) and the Japanese reading (*kun’yomi*).

零[*rei/zero*]  
 一[*ichi/hito*]  
 二[*ni/futa*]  
 三[*san/mi*]  
 四[*shi/yon*]  
 五[*go/itsu*]  
 六[*roku/mu*]  
 七[*nana/shichi*]  
 八[*hachi/ya*]  
 九[*kyū, ku/kokono*]  
 十[*jū/tō*]  
 百[*hyaku/momo*]  
 千[*sen/chi*]

Japanese utilizes Arabic numerals alongside its native *kanji* numerals. Arabic numerals are mostly used in horizontal text, especially on electronic devices, while Japanese numerals are used in the traditional vertical writing.

The possibility of double reading is the reason why numerals are used in wordplay and metaphors so often. Many numerals are capable of replacing syllables in words, especially when read in *on’yomi*, or creating new words when read together. The tendency towards this kind of wordplay has increased since the introduction of the Internet, and is especially popular on the web. For this purpose, Arabic numerals are used. For example, it is possible to write down the borrowed expression “Thank you” (サンキュー, *sankyū*) as 39 (*san+kyū*). This kind of phonetic pun predominantly uses the Chinese *on’yomi* reading of the numerals.

This reading also gave rise to a widespread superstition and fear of the number four in Japanese. Much like 13 in the Western society, the number four in Japan is associated with death and bad omens. This is explained by the fact that the on'yomi reading of four 四 (shi) is homonymous with 死 [shi] (death). For this reason four is often skipped as a floor number in buildings or elevators, apartment block numbers or even phone numbers. There exists an unspoken prohibition of presenting someone with four gifts, similar to the Russian tradition of never giving someone an even number of flowers. Such “gifts of four” are sometimes used in the underworld as a death threat.

In conclusion we see that it is possible to draw some parallels with the Western perception of colours and numerals in the Japanese language and culture. However, there also exist perceptions and usage of these words specific to the Japanese language and culture, such as usage of numerals for wordplay and different types of colour names as well as colours perception.