



COLOUR IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC: THEIR MEANING AND COLOUR ASSOCIATIONS

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Abstract:

This study aimed at investigating the cross-culture variation when comparing idiomatic expressions related to colour in both English and Arabic languages. Also, it tries to identify the challenges encountered by language learners in understanding the color idioms in both Arabic and English languages. Because colour idioms in English and Arabic have some commonalities in meaning as well as differences in the association. Both languages make rich use of them for which several examples are given and explained. The meanings of transparent idioms are easily logical, but more opaque ones are pure idioms that can confuse foreign language learners in case of different associations. Cross-cultural comparisons are then drawn, and an attempt is made to identify some universal colour associations and highlight stark contrasts between the two cultures. For example, the colour gray is shared in both English and Arabic as unclear and vague situations, while the colour yellow in English indicates “coward” while in Arabic refer to “fake”. It is also shown that many of the colour idioms arose from historical events, but all serve to enrich languages as long as the intended meaning is clearly understood. It is recommended that English teachers and Arab learners of English consider this cross-cultural variation between English and Arabic, which is a double-edged weapon. This could confuse learning these idioms or, as a distinguished difference, it could help in enhancing the learning outcome.

Keywords: semantic association, idioms, colour idioms, and cross-culture

1. Introduction

We are surrounded by a very colourful world, so it is quite understandable that colours obtained their position in several idiomatic expressions. These idioms are of both, artistic and popular origin, and are, more or less, extensively used in English and Arabic languages by native speakers and are often heard in videos and TV. As non-native

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English language speakers we have heard and read many times and we tried to compare with our own language meaning and usage of these colour idioms that is the goal why this study focuses on this kind of idioms. An idiom is a form of speech or an expression that is unique to itself. Grammatically, it cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements. Culture plays an important role in the course of the idiom interpretation can only be conducted by having a solid foundation in the culture of the target language (Oualif, 2017).

Furthermore, (Langlotz, 2006, p. 2) stated that "*idioms have been described as conventional multi-word units that are semantically opaque and structurally fixed*". Moreover, Healey (1968, p.71) defined an idiom as "*any group of words whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of the individual words*". Therefore, the chief goal of this study is to identify the underlying semantic properties of the colours as used in such idioms, i.e. how the meaning ascribed to the colours are expressed. Also, (Davidson, 1996, p. 27) defined idiom as "*a combined word or phrase whose meaning is not deducible from the meaning of the words of which it is composed*". Furthermore, the term 'colour idiom' as used in this paper refers to an idiom in which one or more words describe or refers to a certain colour. A colour idiom, therefore:

- is comprised of at least one word that either is or refers to a certain colour
- has a meaning that is not apparent from the colour and the colour itself is not directly implied.

As idioms are by nature vague as to their actual meanings unless they are known, it is worth examining the association between a colour and its intended meaning in an idiom and to recognize possible patterns that could assist in picking the meaning. This is easier if there is at least some degree of clearness, i.e. it is possible to guess the meaning of the whole from the meaning of the parts, as opposed to being covered in which there is no similarity. Fascinating information can also originate from obtaining how the usage arose and understanding why specific colours are ascribed certain attributive associations and, in the way, these are similar or differ between languages. The use of colours in English and Arabic idioms is an international sharing aspect between the two languages, i.e. both languages exhibit this phenomenon albeit with usually somewhat differing semantic associations. Idiomatic expressions are therefore unusual compared to ordinary language because they convey a sense of feeling that is often unique to particular cultures (Dumitrascu, 2007).

Idioms are also interesting due to the potential complications they cause for foreign language learners due to their meanings not being clear unless known. For the same reason, this could make difficulties in understanding because a person unacquainted with the intended meaning of the whole will take the literal meaning of its parts. This is further compounded by the permissibility of rearranging or substituting the parts of some (non-petrifiable) idioms, the need to know the appropriateness of using some idioms in certain formal and informal contexts, and by the aforementioned possible differences in their usages between languages. Also, Idioms are used a lot in the English language by native speakers, sometimes as a simpler way to express a complicated idea, sometimes to be more creative in using language.

Some studies on idioms have tried to classify them based on their perceived degree of 'idiomaticity'. This is “*the result of a diachronic process of axiomatization, interpretation of context meanings and the communicative functions of a set phrase compared to its possible variants*” (Dumitrascu, 2007). It is a subjective measure of how transparent or opaque the idiom is as to the meaning it conveys. Greater transparency makes the meaning easily deducible and greater opacity does not enable the meaning to be derived. The former is better described as transparent expressions as they are not true idioms by definition whereas the latter is pure or full idioms. Alternatively, idioms have been distinguished as pure/figurative idioms and restricted/open collocations, which is considered to be a 'top-down' approach, and by grading them based on the semantic relationship of their constituents having either a transferred, idiomatic or literal meaning (see Figure 1) (Dumitrascu, 2007, p. 3). In this scheme, the three classes are unilateral idioms in which there are single self-explanatory constituents, as in 'black market', bilateral idioms in which there are two constituents and the meaning is transferred, as in 'white lie', and multilateral idioms, which deal with nominations and propositions, as in 'once in a blue moon'. (Glaser, 1988, cited in Dumitrascu, 2007)

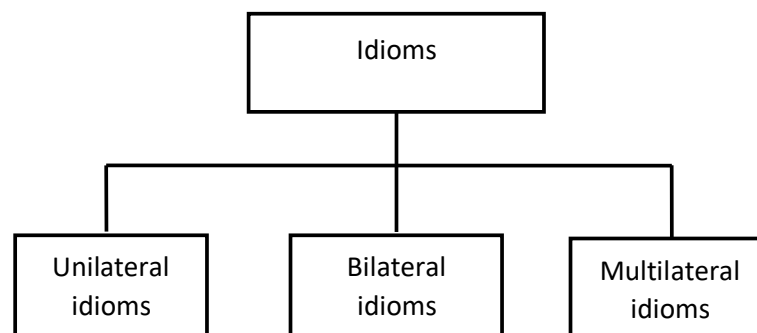


Figure 1: Types of idioms based on the semantic relationship of their constituents

The different classification schemes solely provide labels to group similar kinds of idioms together according to a particular commonality, but they do not indicate the semantic associations of key components of idioms as this paper attempts to do for colour idioms. Colour idioms are often good examples of energetic expressions used in languages that show its speakers' feelings, emotions, ideas, and symbolic associations. For the same reasons, a study of these idioms is interesting to draw cross-cultural comparisons. Commonalities could indicate shared human experiences that are beyond the language but are manifested through it such as the association of red with love and white with purity.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Understanding the idiomatic expressions represents a real challenge to many people around the world, especially colour idioms when they occur in two distinct languages like English and Arabic which are linguistically and culturally different. Because it is not easy to guess idiomatic expression related to colour or to find an equivalent one to that of the source language. Thus, the researcher decided to investigate the challenges that

several people may encounter in understanding the idiomatic expressions associated with the colour in the two different languages mentioned above. Also, the researcher tries to find draw a kind of comparison and contrast between the colour idioms within the Arabic and English Language.

1.3 Research Objectives:

- 1) To identify some universal colour idioms associations within Arabic and English.
- 2) To examine the relationship between a colour and its implied meaning in an idiom.
- 3) To identify possible patterns that could aid in guessing the meaning of colour idioms.
- 4) To identify the challenges that face language learners in understanding the idiomatic expressions associated with the colour in both Arabic and English Languages.
- 5) To highlight stark contrasts between the two cultures.

1.4 Significant of the Study

There is no denying the fact that colour idioms can be found in different languages and cultures for they help speakers to express their feelings and emotions not directly but, in a metaphorical way, which makes the language and speech more vivid and expressive. This criterion of colour idioms inspired the researcher to find out the challenges which may face language learners in comparing the colour idioms in Arabic and English languages. Moreover, to the best knowledge of the researcher, there is a lack of studies that have dealt with the investigation of idiomatic expressions related to colour in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the current study attempts to fill a gap in the literature. Moreover, the finding of this study will help researchers and other individuals interested in this field. This study may benefit the students in the linguistic field particularly in contrastive linguistics departments and may give them additional information when they come across idiomatic expressions related to colour.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Colour Idioms

2.1.1 Colour Idioms in English

English makes rich use of colour idioms and there is a great variety of them. Whilst some are transparent, such as 'green light', many of them tend to be opaque or semi-opaque, which makes them challenging for learners of EFL. A selection of some popular colour idioms and idiomatic expressions used in English is given in Appendix A with the colour word or phrase and key association underlined in each row. Idioms related to the same colour are grouped together.

Black is a popular colour, rather 'non-colour', used in English idioms, generally in a negative sense with the exception of 'in the black'. Its main association seems to be with darkness. Many of these can be traced to historical events. For example, a 'blackout' originally referred to the act of darkening in a theatre, and to darkening of windows

during the World Wars so as not to be seen by enemy aircraft during an air raid. Regardless, black retains the association with something 'dark' or tainted in some way, as in 'black market' and 'blacklist'. The term 'blackboard' as was traditionally used in classrooms is very transparent, but it is now also used for a commercial online learning management software for which it could be construed as an idiom because it is not always clear which blackboard is being referred to. This shows that words can become idioms when previously they were not, just as with blackout. Furthermore, (Meier and Robinson, 2005, p. 242) mention that multiple distinct religions pair goodness with brightness. This implies that the opposite is associated with darkness, or more specifically: black. Empirical evidence actually supports the point that such associations are culturally universal. However, the opposition of dark and light does not only appear in examples referring to religion. On the contrary, black is often contrasted with white in numerous other domains

The **red** colour is also often associated with things that are naturally red. Thus, even in the expression 'caught red handed', which means to be caught doing something wrong, the red alludes to blood that would be found on the hands of a person just having committed murder. But red also denotes more emotional qualities such as embarrassment in 'red faced' and love generally. Being 'red faced' could be linked with embarrassment because some people actually tend to get red cheeks when embarrassed. This shows there can be perfectly good explanations for many idioms and that they are based on reality. Similarly, others are based on actual events which can be discovered when the origin is found, as in a 'red letter day' being memorable owing to the Christian tradition of marking Saint's days in red (Mazurova, n.d.). In his research on compounds and classifying phrases in the OED, Steinvall (2002: 113) found that this third basic colour name has a privileged status among the chromatic terms because it occurs more than three times as often in compounds and classifying phrases than any other chromatic term. Even though he included literal as well as non-literal uses of red, his remark nevertheless confirms the statement made before about black, white and red being the three most basic colour terms and thus providing most of the data used in my study. The OED defines red as: *"having, or characterized by, the colour which appears at the lower or least refracted end of the visible spectrum, and is familiar in nature as that of blood, fire, various flowers and ripe fruits"* (OED). Red is also used in various nonliteral meanings, some of which are: 'of people who have, or are regarded as having, a reddish skin', 'anarchistic', 'revolutionary', 'communist', etc.

Golden has the connotation of something valuable and this is no doubt due to the gold as a precious metal. Thus, a 'golden opportunity' is a valuable chance and a 'golden handshake' is a valuable departing gift from the workplace. Similarly, the associations of silver (except for silver screen) have connotations of value too. The expression 'born with a silver spoon in one's mouth', which refers to being born into a wealthy family, probably originated from the English custom of godparents christening a child using a silver spoon (Phrase Finder, 2011). The meaning of 'go ahead' or to proceed by 'green light' could be due to the green light traffic signal if it is not the other way around. Green is thus seen as the opposite of red, which means to stop, and which is its complementary colour anyway.

White has a complex range of possible meanings in English idioms. Carter (1998, p. 22) showed that “*even a very ordinary and widely used word can have a complex relationship with its ‘referents’ and with other words with which it exists in a structural semantic network*”. This word thus needs to be considered together with the word that appears with it. The white as in 'white elephant' seems to have the meaning of emptiness. The elephant is probably used in the expression due to its large size so that any large sized construction described as a 'white elephant' is one that is regarded as useless though it may look big and expensive. A 'whitewash' is more transparent, but here white has a more useful role of concealing something, albeit something that perhaps should not be concealed. The general colour idioms which do not specify a particular colour show the word colour itself has a deep meaning and its lacking takes that liveliness away, even describing the state (as in off colour) as 'not normal'.

2.1.2 Colour idioms in Arabic

Arabic also makes use of numerous idioms, and there are reported to be several thousands of them (Maxos, 2003) including colour idioms. The table in Appendix B mentions some Arabic colour idioms for comparing with their English colour associations. The translations are those of the writer. As before, the colour word and key association is underlined in each idiom or idiomatic phrase.

Arabic tends to especially have many idioms for white and most have positive meanings. For example, 'whitening the face' means to do a favour, to have a 'white day' is to have a good one, and a 'white heart' is one that is kind. Also, 'raising the white flag' indicates surrender and forgiveness or calling for peace. However, the opposite of a white heart, i.e. a 'black heart' is to be mean so it is opposite in meaning. In the idiom 'It is painted by 60 nila', which is used in the Egyptian Arabic culture, the word 'nila' refers to a cleanser that gives white clothes a blue shade.

The Holy Quran also makes use of colour idioms (Fatani, 2006). Seven colours are mentioned: black, white, green, yellow, red and blue, and some have either positive or negative associations. With the exception of blue, they are used to refer to natural phenomena and emotional states. For example, white has connotations of purity, pleasure and prosperity but also means 'to lose one's eyesight', as in the case of the prophet Jacob after losing his son Joseph (peace be upon both of them). In addition, a deep green colour is also mentioned in describing the “*luscious foliage of paradise*” (Fatani, 2006).

3. Methodology

3.1 Analysis of Colour Idioms

A. Cross-cultural comparisons

The associations identified for English and Arabic idioms are summarised below. The additional associations marked with an asterisk are taken from (Oktem, 2000). The associations are therefore reflective of a much wider range of colour idioms than those

mentioned earlier. The blank cells indicate no attempt at ascertaining the association because no popular idiom for that colour could be found.

Table 1: Colour associations in English and Arabic

Colour	Key association(s) in English	Key association(s) in Arabic
Black	Dark, Suspect, Profitable, Threat, Disgraced, Illegal	Darkness, Bad, Mean, Sadness, Illegal, Shame
Black-White	Clearly contrasted	Strict , Clear
Gray	Vague	Vague (same as in English)
Red	Excessive, Respect, Crime, Debt, Embarrassed, Misleading, Great Honour, Memorable	Anger, Blood, Forbidden
Rose	Unreal	-
Pink	Health	Optimistic, Love, Health
Yellow	Coward	Not true, Ill
Yellow-Green	-	Shocked/Scared
Gold	Special, Valuable, Perfect	Same as in English
Green	Jealousy, Go-ahead, Greenery, Better	Life, Luck
Blue	Unexpected, Extremely rare, Vain	Sky, Bad
Silver	Valuable, Rich, Assets	Valuable (same as in English)
White	Harmless, Useless, Professional, Cover up	Purity, Kind, Favour, Good, Peace

Both languages share some common associations, especially the generally positive and negative associations for white and black respectively. However, there are exceptions, as in “in the black” in English, which means to be profitable or successful, but this is contrasted with “in the red”, which carries the opposite meaning of being in liability. The semi-opaque phrase 'white lie' has the same meaning in both languages too. The expression that mentions both black and white in the same idiom, i.e. 'black and white', probably means 'very clear' in both languages because either of the two colours on the other can be clearly contrasted, as with black ink on white paper or white chalking on a blackboard. This capability of being contrasted is therefore universally applicable irrespective of language. The gray coloured area which occupies the middle ground between black and white is thus 'unclear' or 'unpositioned' in both languages as well because it is neither black nor white, so 'neither here nor there'. A Venn diagram (Figure 2) can be used to illustrate the meanings that are similar in both languages (within the overlap) and meanings that appear to be peculiar to one of the two languages. This has been drawn for the colour black for which there are many peculiar associations as well as some similarities.

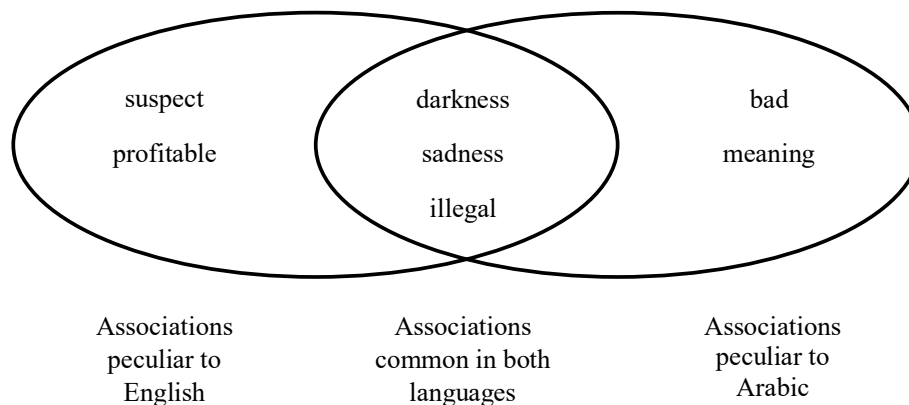


Figure 2: Key associations of the colour black in English and Arabic

Other similarities between the two languages are in the meanings attributed to gray, pink, gold and silver. For example, there is a connotation of something valuable for gold and silver, as in 'golden opportunity', and pink is associated with good health. On the other hand, there seems to little common ground for red, yellow and blue except that 'excessive' compared to 'anger' for red are somewhat similar.

Stark differences in the meanings of some of the idioms between the two languages can often be explained by fundamental differences in beliefs for which green colour idioms provide a perfect example for illustration. Green is the favourite colour of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), so naturally many of the Arabic green colour idioms have positive meanings. In English, some green colour idioms also have positive meanings but this is due to green being the natural colour of the ground and vegetation, as in the English 'the grass is always greener on the other side' (cf. 'your path is green' In Arabic). On the other hand, many green colour idioms in English convey negative meanings, as in 'green with envy' in which green is linked with jealousy and in the more explicit and epitomic 'green eyed monster' in which jealousy is personified. Not surprisingly, there is no green-eyed monster in Arab culture as far as the writer is aware. Strangely though, 'turning yellow and green' does make one scared! In Arabic, green is seen as a colour of life, balance and harmony. It is 'balanced' by virtue of its frequency/wavelength being in the middle of the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. As for the 'evil eye' which results from jealousy, in Arabic, this is associated with black instead, as in 'his heart is black'.

B. Universal colour associations

With a larger sample of idioms and a more thorough investigation of their origins, the key associations identified above could perhaps be simplified to more fundamental natural associations, as suggested in the table below for five basic colours. (Wierzbicka, 990) describes these as "*universals of human experience*" because they transcend language although they are expressed through it. The semantic qualities of colour idioms and colours expressed in language therefore generally reflect "*pan-human neural response*

categories" (Kay & McDaniel, 1978, p. 621). It is also not surprising therefore that many colours in idioms share similar if not the same meanings in different languages across cultures.

Table 2: The fundamental association of colours

Colour	Fundamental natural association
Black	Night/Darkness
Red	Fire
Green	Ground/Vegetation
Blue	Sky/Water
White	Day/Light

The fundamental natural associations for black and white are obvious because nights are dark, and days are full of light. Black might also have connotations of emptiness or void as white has of purity. The elements of fire, ground and sky are also naturally red, green and blue in colour respectively. With few if any exceptions, the meanings of all the colour idioms can be traced to some extent to these fundamental associations and the dual positive and negative meanings of the colours can also be explained. For example, fire gives warmth and energy in its positive role, but it also burns things. A 'red carpet treatment' would fit the positive role while a 'red herring' would fit the negative role. Similarly, being 'in the red' can be construed as being (figuratively) burnt while someone 'in the black' is probably safe due to inactivity during the night although this contradicts the association of black with misfortune in other idioms. The link of red with love could be explained by a burning passion and the Arabic idiom 'to show the red eye' can be explained as meaning angry because anger does physically increase blood pressure. The link between the 'green belt' and greenery is more transparent. But if you 'eat the green and the dry' then no doubt, there is no more ground or basis left, so being 'wiped out totally' is understandable.

Something coming 'out of the blue' or occurring 'once in a blue moon' may not seem to be linked with the sky but they are. People have naturally looked up at the sky (because that is where it is physically) so something appearing in the sky before modern day inventions as the aeroplane, would be considered as a surprise or unusual. Idioms with emotional meanings indicate another mood aspect of all the colours. For example, one is 'green with envy' when one does not make the same kind of progress as the other person being compared to, i.e. the person is 'grounded'. A lie is probably 'white' because no feelings are hurt so there is no 'stain' on the 'white sheet'. Blue is linked with various moods because of the association between the sky and the water with thoughts and feelings respectively, whereas red is more energetic.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, colour idioms are unusual because they are lively expressions that convey a sense of feeling that is often unique to the culture. Acquaintance with an idiom one comes across is therefore necessary in order to know its intended meaning. This tends to

pose difficulties for foreigners, especially the more opaque or pure idioms. A number of both English and Arabic idioms were listed, examined and discussed with respect to their intended meaning and their specific colour associations. Cross-cultural comparisons were also drawn, and similarities and differences were highlighted. This then led to identifying more universal colour associations that transcend languages but are expressed through using it. Some of the aforementioned idioms were explained further in light of these associations. It was also shown that besides the fundamental natural associations, many idioms are also based on actual historical events, as was explained for 'blackout'. All the idioms enrich our languages as long as they are used wisely to ensure the intended meaning would be known.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Selection of colour idioms in English

(Mazurova, n.d.; Hismanoglu, 2006; Dumitrascu, 2007; Hasan et al., 2011)

Colour	Idiom	Actual meaning
Black	Blackmail	Making a threat to reveal something in order to take advantage of someone (such as demanding money)
	Blackout	To darken by dimming or putting out the light (or power failure); to lose consciousness
	Black sheep	An outcast or disgraced member of a family or group
	In the black	Successful or profitable
	Black market	A market where illegal trading takes place
	Blacklist	A list of disapproved people, targets or suspects
	Black eye	A bad reputation
	Pitch black	Very dark
	Black and white	Very clearly contrasted/distinct; straightforward
Gray	Gray area	A vague, disputed or 'murky' area (not clearly defined)
Red	Red faced	Embarrassed
	In the red	To be in debt
	Caught red-handed	Caught in the act of committing a crime or other wrongdoing, usually theft
	Red herring	A purposely misleading path
	Red tape	Excessive bureaucratic paperwork or delay
	Red carpet treatment	To greet someone arriving with great honour like royalty
	Shown the red card	Dismissed from work
	Red letter day	A memorable day due to some significant event
Rose	See through rose coloured spectacles	To have an overly optimistic, untainted, or unreal perspective
Pink	In the pink of health	Very healthy, excellent physical condition
Yellow	Be yellow	To be a coward
Golden	Golden opportunity	A special or perfect chance (with all the right conditions)
	Golden handshake	A large sum of money given to a person retiring from work
Green	Green with envy	Full of jealousy, wishing to have the same
	Green light	Go ahead or permission to start or do something
	The grass is always greener on the other side	The distant place appears to be better than this one
	Green belt	A countryside or area of greenery (greater trees and fields) surrounding a town or city
Blue	Out of the blue	To happen suddenly or unexpectedly usually after a long time
	Blue in the face	A vain attempt to win someone's agreement
	Once in a blue moon	An extremely rare occurrence
Silver	Silver screen	The cinema
	Born with a silver spoon in one's mouth	Born into a rich family
	The family silver	National economic assets
White	White elephant	A useless possession (expensive but of no value)
	White lie	A harmless lie (eg. To avoid hurting someone's feelings)

General	White-collar worker	Professional (non-manual) worker
	Whitewash	A cover up of a truth to conceal some wrongdoing
	In the dark	Unaware
	Colourful	Lively; exciting
	True colours	The real self or true nature
	With flying colours	With distinction or great success
	Off colour	Not as normal, ill or not at one's best
Colourless	Lacking in personality	

Sources: Listed at end of list of references (meanings original).

Appendix B: Selection of colour idioms in Arabic

Colour	Idiom (literal translation)	Actual meaning
Black	His heart is black	He is mean/evil
	A black day	A bad day (on which something bad happens)
	Black market	Same as in English
	He blackened our faces	He made us ashamed or saddened
	Black or white	A very strict person with a clear vision
Gray	Gray position	Same as in English
Red	Show the red eye	Being strict or angry with someone
	Red face	Angry
	By a red ink	Very important or forbidden
Pink	Having a pink life	Being optimistic or in love
	Pink cheeks	Healthy
Yellow	Giving a yellow smile	Not giving a true smile
	Having a yellow face	Being ill
	Turning yellow and green	Being shocked or scared
Gold	Golden opportunity	An opportunity not to be missed
Green	Green heart	Loving life
	Green path	Wishing to have luck in future
	Ate the green and the dry	Wiped it out totally
Blue	It is painted by 60 nila	It is bad (Egyptian Arabic)
White	He whitened our faces	He did us a favour or made us proud
	His heart is white	He is kind or naïve
	A white lie	A white lie (As in English)
	Make your day white	Have a good day
General	Face turns in colours	Confused or embarrassed

Note: The translations of the Arabic idioms are those of the author.

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