

Usage and Significance of Manipuri Colour Terms: Taking Cues from Imphal Children

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Abstract: There are four basic colour terms in Meiteilon or Manipuri. There are also secondary colour terms, which are derived from objects. The associated objects are used with the term 'mæcu', which means colour in Meiteilon. For instance, həŋamapalmæcu is the colour term for yellow where həŋamapal means the mustard flower. Thus the yellow colour term is derived from the yellow colour of the mustard flower and is used with mæcu to give an equivalent term for yellow in English. This paper seeks to explore the colour terms in Meiteilon in their possible forms and terms related to their states and their cultural salience, if any, with a holistic approach. As a pilot survey, the use of Manipuri colour terms in the speeches of 8 children (five 8-year-olds and three 5-year-olds, who lived in a particular locality of Imphal) was observed in their home environment. These children seem to know the colour terms in English well compared to the Manipuri colour terms. The initial observations hint at the diminished use of native terms compared to the use of English equivalents, which is not an ideal situation for the retention of native language at large. It is still to be checked if similar situations are prevalent in other home environments, and if such cases are on the rise then consequences could be far reaching in terms of indigenous languages losing out to English.

Keywords: Colour Term, Meiteilon, Derived, Basic Colour



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1. INTRODUCTION

A study on colour terms was carried out by Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir to demonstrate the concepts of 'linguistic relativity' or the 'linguistic determinism', which came to be known as the Whorf and Sapir Hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, cognition is determined by language – implying that linguistic categories shape the way people perceive the world around them (Nordquist, 2020). This view was refuted by Berlin and Kay (1969), suggesting that when it comes to 'basic colour terms', many variations can be found in all the languages of the world. Thus, they set out to check the influence of presence or absence of a specific colour term on the speech of the language speakers and their perception of colours in general. It was during this extensive survey that they discovered a general universal tendency in the world's languages regarding the use of colour terms (Gerrig & Banaji, 1994).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND- BERLIN AND KAY'S HYPOTHESIS

Berlin and Kay (1969) conducted the experiment on basic colour terms using standardised colour stimuli, which consisted of 329 colour chips made by Munsell Color Company. Initial experiments were conducted on 20 genetically unrelated languages, where informants were asked by Berlin and Kay (1969, Page:5) "to map both focal point and the outer boundary of each of his basic colour terms on the array of standard colour stimuli given to them". To assist the speakers in figuring out what constitutes a basic colour term, Berlin and Kay gave three basic guidelines.

- a. The colour term must be a simple word; that is, combined words like greenish-yellow cannot be a basic colour term.
- b. The term must be applicable to a whole range of word domain and must not have a limited use (like the term *blonde*).

- c. The term must not be a ‘kind of a particular colour’, just like *emerald* is a kind of green. (Berlin and Kay 1991: Page 6)

Berlin and Kay (1969), working on about 98 languages, were able to arrive at a universal form of basic colour terms by stating that if a language has only two colour terms, they will refer to black and white. They went on to show that if a third term is added, then it would be red. Likewise, they found that the fourth colour term will be either yellow or grue (a colour term which includes blue and green, developed by Kay). If a seventh colour term is found, then they suggested that it would be brown and then purple, pink, orange and grey subsequently (Berlin and Kay, 1999, Page:2-3). Thus, this particular pattern that emerged can be shown as:

Black and white > red > grue or yellow > yellow or grue > blue and green > brown > purple, pink, orange or grey. (Berlin & Kay, 1999, Page-4)

Berlin and Kay (1999) also found that people would choose the same focus colour for yellow and orange when the term for orange was absent in their own language. Overall, they found that people usually chose the same focus for the basic colour terms across different languages, implying a universal perception of development of colour terms in their own languages. This went against the stronger version of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on language shaping the thoughts of a person. According to Sapir (1912), the structure of reality is due to diversity found among languages but he did not further explain how these linguistic differences affect the thinking process of a person. Thus, Whorf gave this idea a proper shape through a series of articles published between 1925 and 1941. This is the reason why the Whorfian Hypothesis is also sometimes known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, to acknowledge the role of Sapir as Whorf’s mentor, (Whorf, 1952), which states that ‘language shapes thought’.

The study carried out by Berlin and Kay (1969) provides a universal basis for the core meanings of colour terms and also points out that culture does play an important role in setting the wider range of meaning of colour terms and also in developing new terms for non-basic colour terms. This paper will demonstrate how the cultural aspects of the Meitei society determine certain new non-basic colour terms, which eventually change their forms again following popular cultural trends. Anything that

catches the attention of the masses becomes a trendy term for as long as the trend lasts. This was seen with a typical blue colour, which was coined after a ‘Centre Fresh’ chewing gum in the late 1990’s in Manipur. The details of the trend and colour term will be discussed in the later sections. It is one of the reasons why in most cultures a particular colour term may be metaphorically associated with similar objects. For instance, there may be cases where the colour yellow is associated with fire in some cultures, and in others red colour may be used for the same purpose. There are cultures which have elaborate colour systems and there are some which use only a few basic colour terms that play an important role in their daily lives.

3. MANIPURI BASIC COLOUR TERMS

Berlin and Kay (1969) determined basic colour terms based on whether they exhibited the following four characteristics, (Berlin and Kay, 1999, Page-6):

“It is *monolexicmic*,” implying that the meaning of the term is not predictable from the meaning of its parts (Conklin, 1955). According to this criterion, “terms like blackish, chocolate-coloured, are not monolexicmic.

1. The meaning is not included in that of any other colour term. This criterion eliminates terms like crimson, scarlet.
2. The term must be applicable to all classes of objects. This implies that the colour terms like blonde, commonly used for hair, does not qualify as a basic colour term.
3. The term must be psychologically significant for the speakers of the target language. Psychological significance includes, (a) a tendency to occur at the beginning of highlighted lists of colour terms, (b) stability of reference across all the informants and across various situations of use, and (c) occurrence in the idiolects of all informants. This particular criterion eliminates terms like rust colour.
4. If in case a form is doubtful, then it can be checked with various permissible patterns which is available with the already established basic colour terms. For example, in English, when adding the suffix *-ish*, bluish, greenish etc. are English words but *scarletish isn’t.
5. For a subsidiary criterion, if any colour term is also used as a name of an object, then that term does not qualify as a basic colour term. For example, colour terms like gold, silver and ash, belong to this category.

This subsidiary criterion would exclude orange, in English, if it were a doubtful case on the basic criteria (1-4).

6. Further, any new foreign loan words must be avoided.
7. In cases where lexemic status is difficult to evaluate, then the morphological complexity is considered as a secondary criterion. The English term blue-green might be eliminated by this criterion.”

4. INFERENCE

Based on the criteria described by Berlin and Kay, we can draw the inference that Manipuri has four basic colour terms namely:

- a. *amubə* meaning black.
- b. *əŋəubə* meaning white.
- c. *əŋənbə* meaning red.
- d. *əsəŋbə* meaning green.

All the given terms are monolexemic, their significations are not included in that of any other colour term, their application is not restricted to a narrow class of objects and they are psychologically salient for the native speakers. Even though there are terms for the rest of the basic colour terms in Manipuri, they are ‘derived’ from things present in the environment. The terms are as follows:

- a. The term for yellow colour is *həŋaməpalməcu* where *həŋam* means mustard, *məpal* means flower and *məcu* means colour. One thing to be noted here is that for such derived colour terms, the term should occur with the word *məcu*.
- b. The term for blue is *higokməcu* where *higok* means blue. The meaning of this particular term is described in detail in a later section of the paper since there is no real meaning of the term *higok*.
- c. The term for brown colour is *unsaməcu* where *unsa* means skin. Here too, the term *məcu* must occur together with *unsa* to give the term for brown colour.
- d. The term for purple colour is *məikhetməcu* where *məikhet* means a matchbox (which had only purple colour box in the earlier times). This implies that this term seems to have come about from the colour of a popular matchbox or only this type of matchbox was available earlier. However, this term in English is now derived from the English term for many native speakers coming up with the term *purple məcu* or *khamenməcu*. The term ‘khamen’ means ‘brinjal’ or ‘eggplant’ in English.

- e. The term for pink colour is *ləiməcu* where *ləi* means flower. The detailed explanation is in later sections.
- f. The term for orange colour is *komlaməcu* where *komla* means orange.
- g. The term for grey colour is *utməcu* where *ut* means ash.

These terms can be used as attributive as well as predicative adjectives. Examples are given below:

1. Attributive

əŋəŋ-bə	Ləi
Red-NOMZ	Flower
‘The red flower..’	

2. Predicative

Phurit-se	ŋəŋ-i
Shirt-PDEF	Red- PRES
‘The shirt is red.’	

The term for red cannot be further divided. The first sentence shows the attributive use of the term and the second one demonstrates the predicative use of the term. These terms are not derived terms therefore they essentially mean the colour they represent.

3. Predicative

əŋəŋ-se	ŋəw-le-e
Child- PDET	White-PERF-ARST
‘The child became fair.’ (The child became fair)	

The term *ŋəubə* in the sentence given above is used as a stative predicate which is subcategorised as a theme in sentence (3) (Cheliah, S, 1997 (Pg 107). Verbs in Meiteilon can be duplicated by using a set of roots which are exclusively used to indicate an expression of something that has been undertaken excessively or to emphasise the degree of a particular state (Cheliah, S. 1997). There seems to be no particular system or rule on how these roots are chosen by the verbs. The roots are *-srok*, *-trik*, *-droŋ*, *-suk*, *-rok*, *-throk*, which appear only with duplication of verbs. The colour terms also are used to duplicate using these roots to indicate the state or the fastness of that particular colour.

Colour terms in Meiteilon use emphatic roots like *-suk*, *-sang*, *-sok/rok*, *-trik* to emphasise the colour features of a particular colour term. For instance, the basic colour terms take the given emphatic markers in the following manner:

- a. *amubə* will take the marker *-suk* and form the term *musukmubə* meaning really black.
- b. *əŋəubə* will take the marker *-sok/rok* to form the term *ŋəusok/rokəubə* meaning really white.

- c. *əŋaŋbə* will take the marker *-səŋ* to form the term *ŋaŋsəŋŋaŋbə* meaning really red.
- d. *əsəŋbə* will take the marker *-trik* forming the term *səŋtriksəŋbə* meaning really green.

The markers are not interchangeable implying that their occurrences in such constructions are fixed and therefore, terms like *musok/rokmubə*, or *musəŋsəŋbə* are not permissible terms in Meiteilon.

The quantifier ‘*pum-nə*’ which means ‘all’ is affixed to the basic colour terms and the base form of the colour term is reduplicated to give the emphatic forms.

- a. *Pum-mu-mu-i* which is all-black-black-PRES, ‘It is all black’
- b. *Puŋ-ŋəu-ŋəu-i* which means all-white-white-PRES, ‘It is all white’ (due to the velar nasal of the word *ŋəu* (white) the bilabial nasal of *pum* changes to *puŋ*)
- c. *Puŋ-ŋaŋ-ŋaŋ-i*, which means all-red-red-PRES, ‘It is all red’.
- d. *Pum-saŋ-saŋ-i*, which means all-green-green-PRES, ‘It is all green’

For constructions like reddish or greenish type of colour terms Meiteilon colour terms take markers like *-dəŋ*, *-ru*, *-tək*, *-ban* to denote the -ish sense.

- a. *əmu**b**ə* takes the marker *-dəŋ* giving the form *mudəŋnəbə* meaning blackish.
- b. *əŋa**u**bə* takes the marker *-ru* forming the term *ŋaurunəbə* meaning whitish.
- c. *əŋa**ŋ**bə* takes the marker *-tək* for the term *ŋaŋtəknəbə* meaning reddish.
- d. *əsə**ŋ**bə* takes the marker *-ban* giving the term *səŋbannəbə* meaning greenish.

These terms, like the emphatic colour expressions, do not take any other markers except for the ones they occur with. For instance, the term *ŋoudəŋnəbə* is not acceptable as compared to *ŋourunəbə* to describe the whitish nature of that specific colour.

5. NON-BASIC COLOUR TERMS OF MEITEILON (MANIPURI)

For non-basic colours like, *həŋamməpalməcu* ‘yellow’, *ləiməcu* ‘pink’, *komlaməcu* ‘orange’, *unsaməcu* ‘brown’ and so on, the term *məcu* (which means colour) must obligatorily occur to denote that one is talking about colour terms and not otherwise. These are derived from the objects associated with the colour terms. For example, *həŋamməpalməcu* is derived from mustard flower which is yellow in colour, where *həŋam* means mustard plant, *məpal* is the flowering bud and *məcu* is colour. In Tangsa-Nocte language, which is a Tibeto-Burman language

spoken in the Patkai mountain range and the surrounding lowlands in North East India and North West Myanmar, the term for yellow is *mjen* and this term has been added by the younger generation (below 30 years) but rejected by the older generation (above 70 years) because the reference for yellow was done by using turmeric colour. In this particular language, the four basic colour terms are placed as dark with black, light and white, warm and red and cool with green (Van Dam, K.P, 2018).

However, there is still a problem while dealing with the term for blue which is *higok*. It is still to be found out whether it is a derived word or not because it essentially means the colour ‘blue’ and does not follow the nominalisation rule. For instance, there is no term called *əhigok* ‘be blue’ like we have *əŋaŋbə* ‘be red’. Following Lehrer, there may be a lexical gap here, but when the incorrect form *əhigok* is generated, the native speaker can figure out that it is about the term blue. Much work needs to be carried out in this area to actually decide the case of *higok* or ‘blue’. The term may have come about due to two reasons. The first one is that it may have been derived from some particular object which used to exist in the past but is non-existent in the current times. That object may be a bird, animal or plant, which was prevalent during olden times. The other way to determine or rather solve the mystery behind this particular term is to divide the word ‘*higok*’ into *hi* and *gok* where *hi* can be related to some particular colour and *gok* means fading (*kokpa*) (Prof S. Imoba Singh contributed to this part of the explanation). It may thus mean that a colour after it’s faded gives something like a blue colour which is why it is called *higok*. Indigo, which is also referred to as ‘*kum*’ occupies a very important place in the Meitei traditional clothes, especially while dyeing and it was extracted from the newly sprouted leaves of a plant called ‘Kumna’ (*Strobilanthus flaccidifolius*) (Singh, R.N. et. al, 2008). The extract from the plant which is called *kumhi*, a short form of *kum-gimahi* meaning *kum*’s liquid is used to dye the handloom cloth. The *hi* of *kumhi* when faded gives the blue colour which is how the term *higok* was derived. The second explanation seems like a more plausible option to figure out how the particular term came about even though it may still be a debatable issue.

Another source of this colour is from the flower of Kombirei which changes its colour from blue to white as it withers, and according to this source *hi* also is referred to as showing divine values and *higok* meaning withering of divine values (this particular piece of information was given on an All India Radio programme, aired on 24th December

2020 on the topic ‘Shingel Leirang Laktagi, 7th edition).

It is interesting to note that this particular colour term in Tankhul, a Sino-Tibetan language spoken in Ukhrul district of Manipur, has also come from an unknown origin. The term for blue is *məyiy* and when used with the Tankhul intensifier *-rik* gives the term *məyiyrik*, which only means ‘blue as the clear evening sky’. (Victor, A. 1997).

6. OTHER RELATED COLOUR TERMS

The colour terms in Meiteilon also include expressions for light and dark, faded and deeper shade. These terms are *əməmbə* for dark, *əŋanbə* for light or bright, *əwaobə* for faded/lighter shade and *əyakpə* for deeper shade. These terms also have duplicated emphatic and the lesser intensified forms.

The emphatic forms are as follows:

- əməmbə -məm-trik-məm-bə* (dark-INSTF-dark- NOMZ, meaning ‘really dark’)
- əŋanbə- ŋan-trik-ŋan-bə* (bright/light-INTSF-bright/light-NOMZ) meaning ‘really bright’
- əwaobə-wao-trik-wao-bə* (fade-INSTF-fade-NOMZ), meaning ‘really faded’
- əyakpə- wao-trik-wao-bə* (deep-INSTF-deep-NOMZ), meaning ‘really deep/fast colour’
- əmeŋbə- meŋ-trik-meŋ-bə* (gentle-INSTF-gentle-NOMZ, meaning ‘really gentle’)

The quantifier *pum-nə* can also be used with the (descriptive verbs of colour) terms given above to give the emphatic forms of expressions. The rule of reduplication of the base forms of the terms given above will be applied when *pum* is affixed to them. The structures of the emphatic forms are as follows:

- Pum-məm-məm-i*, which is all-dark-dark-PRES, ‘It is very dark’
- Puŋ-ŋan-ŋan-i*, which is all-bright-bright-PRES, ‘It is very bright’ (the present tense marker *-i* has two allomorphs, *-i*, and *-li*, where *-li* occurs with verb stems ending with sounds like [t], [l]).
- Puŋ-wao-wao-i*, which means all-fade-fade-PRES, ‘It is very faded’.
- Puŋ-yak-yak-i*, which means all-fast/deep colour-fast/deep colour-PRES, ‘It is very fast/dark colour’
- Puŋ-meŋ-meŋ-i*, which is all-gentle-gentle-PRES, ‘It is very gentle (colour)’.

The less intensified forms are given below:

- əməmbə - məm-tək-pə* (dark-MODF-NOMZ), meaning ‘slightly dark’
- əŋanbə- ŋan-tək-pə* (bright/light-MODF-NOMZ), meaning ‘slightly bright’
- əwaobə- wao-tək-pə* (fade-MODF-NOMZ), meaning ‘slightly faded’
- əyakpə- yak-tək-pə* (deep-MODF-NOMZ), meaning ‘slightly deep/fast colour’
- əmeŋbə-meŋ-tək-pə* (gentle- MODF-NOMZ), meaning ‘slightly gentle’

The colour terms given in this group take the roots *-tək* and *-trik* to indicate the state of the colour, i.e., the fastness of the colour. These particular terms do not occur with any other roots given above.

7. SPECIFIC TERMS EXPRESSING CHANGES IN THE STATE OF COLOUR

The process of change happens with skin tone and there are, thus, specific terms for describing the state of change in the colour tone of skin expressing the state of becoming a lighter shade or darker shade of skin. The term for skin tone or colour is ‘*kucu*’ and with this term the following colour expressions are permissible.

- Kucu mu-sən-bə*, is skin colour-dark-MODF-NOMZ, ‘to become darker (skin)’
- Kucu-ŋəu-thok-bə*, is skin colour-fair-MODF-NOMZ, ‘to become fairer (skin)’
- Kucu-taiphet-ta-bə*, is skin colour-pale-fall-NOMZ, ‘to become pale, where the blood is drained from the body’.

For changes in state of colour in general the following terms are used which occurs with the modifier ‘*jhən*’ which expresses the meaning of bringing about change or to become something.

- ŋaŋ-jhən-bə*, which means red-become-NOMZ, ‘It is becoming red’.
- səŋ-jhən-bə*, which means green-become-NOMZ, ‘It is becoming green’
- ŋaŋ-jhən-lək-pə*, which means red-become-process-NOMZ, ‘It is in the process of becoming red’.
- səŋ-jhən-lək-bə*, which means green-become-process-NOMZ, ‘It is in the process of becoming green’.

For changes in non-basic colour terms, *cəŋ- bə* (to enter) and *jhən-bə* (to become) are used to describe the change in the colours

- yellow məcu - cəŋ- jhən-bə*, which means yellow-enter-become-NOMZ, ‘it is becoming yellow’. However, the form *yellow-məcu-jhən-bə* is not permitted in Meiteilon.

- b. pinkmæcucəŋ- jhən-bə, which means pink-enter-become-NOMZ, ‘it is becoming pink’.
- c. yellow mæcu - cəŋ- jhən-lək-pə, which means yellow-become-process-NOMZ, ‘It is in the process of becoming yellow’.

8. CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CERTAIN MANIPURI COLOUR TERMS

The term *mæcu* itself refers to turmeric which is a yellow coloured spice widely used in preparing all kinds of food in India. The actual term for turmeric in Meiteilon is *yaiŋəŋ*, which is not used after sundown in Manipur. The term *mæcu* is used instead of *yaiŋəŋ* after sunset as it is considered a bad omen following an old belief system in the Meitei society. Thus, when a person says “*mæculaitre*” after sunset, it means that there is no turmeric, which is needed while cooking food. During the day, the expression, “*yaiŋəŋlaitre*” is used to convey the same message. This implies that when such an expression is used, the term *mæcu* in *mæculaitre* will only mean the spices turmeric and not any colour in general. It is also interesting to note that at any local grocery store in Imphal city of Manipur, customers can be found using expressions like, “*mæcu packet amaləuge*” in the evenings where it means ‘Can I get a packet of turmeric (spices)’ and during the day the same is expressed using the sentence, “*yaiŋəŋ packet amaləuge*”. With a taboo related to term *yaiŋəŋ*, it is interesting to note that the term for non-basic colour term for yellow in Manipuri is not associated with the turmeric spice called *yaiŋəŋ*.

The term for fire in Manipuri is ‘*məi*’ and the colour associated with it is the colour red called ‘*əŋəŋbə*’. The expression usually found among the speakers of Manipuri (Meiteilon) related to ‘*məi*’ is as follows:

“*məi do ŋəŋ-səŋ-ŋəŋ-nəcakhəu-i*” meaning the fire was really burning hot.

In the above expression, the emphasis on the fire really burning bright or hot is brought about by using the modified superlative form of really red *ŋəŋ-səŋ-ŋəŋ-nə*.

Expressions like *ləicil (əpaibə)*, which means fog, when used in relation to colour, gives a sense of ever changing colour or a sense of being colourless. It was interesting while collecting such information related to various colourful expressions from the faculty members of the department because the responses given by them were not immediate -- they had to brainstorm together to come up with expressions like *əpaibə* (floating) and *ləicil* (fog). Terms like *əmeŋbə*, which means ‘soft’, are also associated with soft colour or soft voice. The term

əmeŋbəmæcu is used to express soft or gentle colour, and for gentle voice the term used is *əmeŋbəkhonjel*, where *khonjel* means someone’s voice. This particular term, *əmeŋbə*, thus, seems to describe the pleasant/soothing feeling that one gets while seeing a particular coloured object or listening to something nice.

The dyeing culture of the Meitei society has an indigenous non-toxic dye called ‘*urəirom*’, which is also widely used to dye traditional clothes of the women of Manipur. The scientific name of ‘*urəirom*’ is Annatto tree and the dye is extracted from the pulp and it is used to dye a traditional towel called ‘*khudəi*’, and upper traditional garment of women called *phənek* and upper garment called *phidup*. The *urəirommæcu* is unique to the Meitei society, which is why it is difficult to give the exact equivalent term for it in English. The dye gives the colour of light shade of orange. A point to be noted here is that, the Manipuri speakers refer to the non-basic colour term for orange as ‘*komlamæcu*’ and not *urəirommæcu*. It may be due to the culture specific connotations included in the *urəirommæcu*. These specific items are used in all the important ceremonies of the Hindu people of Manipur which is why this particular term does not figure anywhere else except when it is used for dyeing the specific traditional garments. For orange colour, *komlamæcu* is more widely used in other contexts. The cultural information comprises the description of the lower garment of the women, which is dyed by this particular colour and is worn in solemn religious ceremonies and funerals only. The traditional clothes mentioned above are first woven in white colour and the *urəirommæcu* is used to dye them. These types of clothe are called ‘*urəirommæcu-nəsəŋ-bəphi*’, which means clothes coloured with *urəirom* colour. (The verb *səŋ* here means to colour or to dye and not the colour green).

9. MEITEILON COLOUR TERMS IN SPEECH OF EIGHT MANIPURI-SPEAKING CHILDREN

The brief discussion on various ways of describing colour terms in Manipuri, therefore, led to a brief observation of the colour knowledge of the children at a locality in Imphal called Ahanthem Leikai. The aim was to check how much of the indigenous colour terms the children had managed to retain as compared to their English equivalents. It was conducted as a pilot survey among 8 children in the locality while they were playing. The age range in years of the children was between 5 and 8. Three children were 5 years old (one girl and two boys), five of them were 8 years old (three boys and two

girls). All of them, who attended English medium schools, seemed to know more of English colour terms than Manipuri colour terms. An extensive data survey can reveal the real picture of how the education system affects the colour terms development in the young children. The next section can be a prelude to this kind of study. With diminishing use of native terms as compared to English colour terms in our daily lives, it has, thus, become crucial to properly assess the prevailing language status of Manipuri colour terms.

The researcher observed the colour lexicon of five children, the 8-year-olds, while they were playing ‘UNO Card’ game, which is related to matching colours of the cards that they were using. The cards used were red, blue, green and yellow. Of these colours used, red and green are part of basic colour terms in Meiteilon (Manipuri), i.e., *əŋaŋbə* (red) and *əsəŋbə* (green). The children when asked to name red and green in Meiteilon could give the correct terms but for the non-basic terms, such as blue and yellow, they gave the terms *blueməcu* and *yellow məcu* respectively. They did not know *higokməcu* and *həngamməpalməcu*.

The three younger children of age five knew only English colour terms -- the education system introduces English terms at a very early age (during their pre-school). This may also be because of a lot of exposure to various kinds of learning videos that children watch online. They however, know two terms in Meiteilon, which they picked up from the Manipuri nursery rhyme called ‘Thambal Koubi Leinungshi, which they learned last year (2020). This particular rhyme is about the lotus flower which is described as ‘*əŋoubəthəmbal*’ where *əŋoubə* means white and *thəmbal* means lotus flower, and

‘*əŋaŋbəthəmbal*’ meaning red lotus literally, even though the colour of the red lotus is actually pink.

The sentences from this particular rhyme containing the colour terms are as follows:

‘*əŋoubəthəmbal, əŋaŋbəthəmbal,*
pomsatnəbəthəmbal,
(white lotus, red lotus, budding lotus)
əidiloinəpamjəido
(I like all kinds)

The term for pink in Meiteilon is derived from *ləi*, which means flower in general, and the word *məcu*, which means colour is added to *ləi* to come up with the term *ləiməcu* to describe pink colour. However, *ləiməcuthəmbal* is not used for the pink colour lotus. (The term *əŋaŋbə* usually occurs with *thəmbal*.) Therefore, the children should know at least two Meiteilon colour terms namely, *əŋoubə* and *əŋaŋbə*, but they seem to know them as the naming term for different kinds of lotuses found around them. It is yet to be checked if they are able to apply *əŋaŋbə* and *əŋoubə* terms to other objects. They would always use English colour terms when asked by their caregivers. For instance, ‘pink cycle’, ‘red ball’, ‘yellow car’ and so on.

During preliminary observations made by the researcher during the Maths online classes of the 5–year-old children, it was found that they are able to give colour terms very easily in English but find it difficult to give the Meiteilon counterparts when they were asked to choose colours while colouring the various shapes (square, triangle, rectangle and circle). The instructions given by their teacher was also in English. One of the tasks was to colour all the squares given in the lesson with the colour green. The sentence spoken by the teacher is:

1. Sentence Spoken by the Teacher

Sigi- page-tə	yaobə square	Loinə	Green məcu	Səŋ-o
This-page-LOC	Exist square	All	Green colour	Colour-IMPER
‘Colour all the squares in this page with colour green’.				

2. Sentence Spoken by the Teacher

Sigi- page-tə	yaobə square	Loinə	əsəŋbəməcu	Səŋ-o
This-page-LOC	Exist square	All	Green colour	Colour-IMPR
‘Colour all the squares in this page with colour green’.				

Sentence 1 given above was the actual sentence spoken by the teacher because the students could not understand the instruction given in Meiteilon (like sentence 2).

If the teacher asks the students using sentences like Sentence 2, the students usually reply seeking more clarity on what kind of colour they should use. A sample conversation that goes during such a session is as follows:

- Teacher: ‘lariktəyaobəŋaŋbə pot se ubra?’
(Can you see the red pot in the book?)
 Students: ‘Miss, kari no yeŋdoino?’ (What do we have to look at?)
 Teacher: ‘Red pot əmayaoriseubro?’ (Can you see a red pot here?)
 Students: ‘Hoi, ure, Miss.’ (Yes, Miss, we can see it.)

together to teach the children the Meiteilon basic colour terms, the use of which seems to be diminishing from the children’s vocabulary today.

The 8-year-olds knew all the basic colour terms but found it difficult to give the derived colour terms for various other colour terms in English. In their speech they were found using the emphatic expressions like *səŋtriksəŋe* while looking at green fields but could not give the terms for blackish or reddish type of forms in Meiteilon. Sample sentences from the 8-year-old children:

The teacher rarely uses Manipuri colour terms during class as using these terms often creates confusion. In such situations, it has become crucial both for the parents and the school teachers to work

3. Sentence spoken by 8-year-olds

mamai-se	mu-suk	mu-i
Face-DEF	Black-EMPH	Black-PRES
‘His face is really black’ (referring to a cartoon character whose face is covered in black ink).		

4. Sentence spoken by 8-year-olds

si-di	səŋ-trik-səŋ-i
This-DEF	Green-EMPH-green-PRES
‘This (place) is really green’.	

5. Sentence spoken by 8-year-olds

screen-se	ŋəu-sok-ŋəu-re
Screen (TV)-DEF	White-EMPH-white-PERF
‘The (TV) screen has become really white’(expressing that something is wrong with the TV screen).	

6. Sentence spoken by 8-year-olds

noŋmei-se	ŋaŋ-səŋ-ŋaŋ-e
(toy)gun-DEF	Red-EMPH-red-PERF
‘The (toy) gun has become red’ (when his brother painted the toy gun with red colour)	

When one of the boys was asked to bring a greenish clothe from the cupboard, he could not

follow the instruction. The sentence given to him follows:

7. Sentence spoken by the Researcher

Upu-dagi	Səŋ-ban-nəbə	Phi-du	Purak-o
Cupboard-from	Green-ish-NOMZ	Cloth-DEF	Bring-IMPER
‘Bring the greenish coloured clothe from the cupboard’.			

The sentence was modified into the following sentence so that the boy could follow the

instruction properly

əŋəbə (məcu) dəuna-təuba	phi-du	ne
Green (colour) just like	Cloth-DEF	be
‘It is that cloth which is like green colour’.		

In sentence 8, the Meiteilon word *dəuna-təuba* which means just like can be also replaced with *-gəmannəbə* where the morpheme *-gə* means with and *mannəbə* means ‘to be similar’. The child could follow the instruction only when the specific colour term was modified using verbs meaning or indicating similarity.

the very beginning. The increase in use of videos posted online seem to be one of the reasons that may have added to the diminishing use of indigenous colour terms in spontaneous speeches of the young children in general.

Even the 8-year-old children used English colour terms more comfortably. This might be due to the type of education that they are exposed to from

Another interesting observation that was made during the course of this particular study was that the adults who contributed to verifying the colour terms in Meiteilon were unable to give a spontaneous

response when asked about the derived Meiteilon colour terms. Such a term was the term for purple in Meiteilon. The two adults asked to give this particular term were of the age group of 30-35 years and they were teaching in Manipur University. The spontaneous response was ‘purple məcu’ and upon thinking hard about an object from which they could derive this particular colour term, they came up with *khamenməcu*, which is mentioned in the earlier section, where *khamen* means brinjal or eggplant, which is generally purple in colour. It became crucial to identify more derived forms of this particular colour term as ‘*məikhətməcu*’ seems to be no longer understood as purple colour now. It also further implies that it is becoming convenient for native speakers of Meiteilon (who have a good knowledge of English) to rely on using English colour terms for derived forms. The traditional attire of the women of Manipur is usually made in a variety of colours, which lead to derivation of new or specific colour terms. In the late 1990’s, the chewing gum brand ‘Centre Fresh’ was very popular in Manipur. Owing to its popularity, a new type of colour started trending during that time. This term called ‘*centre fresh məcu*’ was popular while choosing this specific colour for the traditional outfit. This particular colour was more or less equal to the specific blue colour that the chewing gum had. Slowly this trend faded away and so did the term. The colour term trend seems to hint at the idea of basic terms remaining among the speakers of the Meitei community and the other trendy derived terms seemingly fading when another trend sets in. This is particularly true of the traditional handloom attire of the womenfolk of Meitei society. For the male traditional attire of Meitei society, the colour used is white and *mugaməcu*, which literally means silk colour (which looks like beige colour). It will be interesting to check these terms in the traditional market places in Imphal, the capital city of Manipur, to check for the kinds of terms that are being used by the women who sell colourful traditional attire.

10. CONCLUSION

According to Berlin and Kay, European languages with high industrialisation and Asians have higher number of basic colour terms compared to languages with small number of speakers who also have simpler technological know-how. Manipuri society was less industrialised and therefore had fewer basic colour terms. The other reason is that Manipuri (Meiteilon) is spoken by a small population. Most of the other colour terms are derived from the objects which depict a particular colour term. This implies that with fewer basic

colour terms, the children should find it easy to learn and retain these terms but certain terms may cause a confusion such as in the case of red lotus, where the children already know the equivalent terms in English, and hence they are dealing with the confusing image of pink colour of the flower while calling it red. Further research can be conducted to give various interesting insights into how these colour concepts unfold in a larger sample.

Through the course of this research, based on the indigenous colour dye called ‘*urəirom*’, it was found that, the *urəiromməcu*, even if it is not a basic colour term, plays a crucial role in the traditional clothing of the Meitei society. This term may emerge in the lexicon of younger people only later when they understand the nuances of all the cultural ceremonies held in the society. This further leads to the idea of a kind of gap among the younger generation and the older generation when it comes to understanding various colour terms, mostly the non-basic ones, of Meiteilon. The study also found that the basic colour terms seem to be retained in the lexicon of the adult speakers of Meiteilon, but the non-basic colour terms may vary according to their age. The role of education of the young children may also have an influence on the acquisition of basic colour terms of Manipuri (Meiteilon). It can be further investigated to ascertain the amount of influence education may have on the learning capacity of young children when it comes to colour terms.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DEF	Definite marker
EMPH	Emphatic marker
IMPER	Imperative marker
INSTF	Intensifier
LOC	Locative marker
MODF	Modifier
NOMZ	Nominalizer
PRES	Present tense marker