

## COLOR IN SYMPTOMATIC IMAGES OF HEALTH AND DISEASE IN THE CZECH LANGUAGE

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*Ivana KOLÁŘOVÁ*

**Abstract:** *General Educational Program for Basic Education posits that the student will not only receive information about health, its protection and inherent risks. An integral part of all educational programs has always been the intent to develop communication abilities, including the ability to communicate and express opinions on the subject of health. There is a rich vocabulary in Czech dealing with the issues of health, which includes words usable either in their basic or their symbolic sense, figurative expressions and phraseology.*

*Texts of different stylistic genres, especially those of artistic or journalistic nature, show how references to a person's color, or perhaps skin, are used to convey the symptoms of health and disease. For example, comparisons with yellow color are frequent in the images of sick people, whose face may be yellow as wax, or waxy yellow. Likewise, gray color tends to be associated with unhealthy, appearance (gray, as ashes, ashen-gray). At present, there is a wealth of linguistic materials we can access – a half-a-billion word collection of written texts in contemporary Czech. When explaining the use of color to characterize a healthy or an unhealthy individual, it is possible to draw on the knowledge gleaned from other studies (such as biology and medicine).*

**Keywords:** *development of communication skills, educational program, health, color references and symptoms of health and disease in the Czech language, comparison, figurative expressions*

If students are to acquire the ability to communicate about health in different contexts and articulate their own opinion about it as required by the General Educational Program for Basic Education (Czech abbreviation RVP ZV) within the educational module „Man and Health“ (in the subjects of health and physical education, see RVP ZV, 2007: 72 n.), it implies a development of their expressive capability, in other words a projection of the „health“ theme into the „Language and Verbal Communication“ module and the subject of Czech language and literature. Reading plays an important part. N. Siegllová (2008, 2009) a M. Šubrtová (2009) showed that reading of well chosen

literary works can advance the requisite knowledge and proficiency in the realm of health education. Health-oriented excerpts from literature, journalistic publications, art, even popular science articles tend to be included in the Czech language classes when discussing some area of interest from vocabulary or grammar, or possibly incorporated into foreign language instruction for purposes of translation or conversation in a foreign language on a given topic.

Reading is also considered an effective way to bolster both vocabulary and eloquence. To develop the students' expressive capability, it is important to cultivate their creative writing or reproduction skills, and sharpen their ability to understand what the text really means and signifies. This encompasses words in their primary (sometimes referred to as basic) sense as well as in their figurative sense – metaphor, metonymy, comparison – which are covered at length in classes of literature and literary education. The instruction in the Czech language and literature and others subjects within the educational modules „Language and Verbal Communication“, „Art and Culture“ and „Man and Society“ presumes that the textual analysis will focus on the interpretation of both conceptual and connotational meanings. These two come together especially in figurative phrases, emotionally charged words, individually conceived ideas and unconventionally applied expressions (see below for examples of yellow color used to describe the symptoms of a disease, or various references to the colors purple and green). In this manner, the students gradually learn to perceive why the author chose that particular expression and not any other. In doing so, they can draw on the knowledge from other subjects, like biology and civic education. The facility to comprehend the narrative and appreciate a diverse vocabulary in all shades of meaning may be reinforced by a recourse to authentic literary works and collections of folkloric writings. Also available are dictionaries of popular phraseology and idioms (a dictionary of comparisons, non-verbal phraseological connections and sayings, i.e. phraseologisms with verbs, has already been published), along with some dictionaries of popular sayings (e.g. the well-known publication by J. Zaorálek). Articles with symbolic and figurative expressions now appear in textbooks for the first grade of primary schools, and several college graduates have demonstrated the children's ability to understand the meaning of comparisons and other types of phrases, even their active knowledge of some comparisons.

In a paper from 2009, we examined the phraseology with the words *health* (a noun) and *healthy* (an adjective) as a good way to expand the vocabulary, discover the expressive power of the Czech language, and be inspired to ponder our views on health, sickness and the value of well-being. However, the *health/healthy* phraseology represents only one example of a rich health-oriented vocabulary that comes from the cultural history and traditions of this language, including the vernacular. The same sources provide another example of the linguistic richness as evident in the possibilities of verbalizing the vision of health, illness and their outward manifestations, which is the use of color to describe the symptoms of health and (more often) disease that characterize a person marked by physical indisposition, illness, or mental distress (mainly the signs of fear). Such usage of color terminology may be found in the works of prominent Czech authors like J. Čep a K. Schulz.

It is to be expected that the **color gray** is often used to evoke an oppressive atmosphere or even repulsive surroundings: *The first impression was the most*

*revolting. It was a dirty winter evening, the street from the railway station was gray.* (Schulz 1998, *Per amitia silentia lunae*: 55); *A putrefying puddle glistened by the road, the wind brought irritably acrid smoke from the factory chimneys, all was gray and dilapidated, nothing but evening darkness.* (Schulz 1998, *Madman in Front of a Mirror*: 99). Pallor could also be a pathological syndrome. In the Czech phraseology, somebody could be *ashen gray*, or *grayish*, or *gray as ashes* (cf. ŠČFI, Comparisons, 1984: 451), *chalky pale*, *morbidly/lethally/deathly pale* (cf. ŠČFI, Comparisons, 1984: 34–35). Remarkable are the variations on the shades of **yellow color** to depict somebody who looks unwell or actually sick. *He was a small, thin fellow of sickly yellowish complexion.* (Schulz 1998, *Madman in Front of a Mirror*: 100); *Rozárka was turning yellow and coughed.* (Čep 1991, *Rozárka Lukášova*: 56); *The pregnancy made Amálka ugly and yellow, she started to hate him.* (Čep 1991, *Man on the Road*: 299). However, the phraseology handbooks mention only *yellow as sulfur*, which could conceivably refer to an unhealthy countenance, but the others – *yellow as a lemon*, *yellow as a canary* – do not normally have the same negative impact.

A plethora of linguistic materials is now available from the Czech National Corpus. We utilize the SYN collection of written texts, containing half a billion words from actual texts of journalistic, artistic, technical, and informational nature. In the previous studies we looked at different color-based comparisons of various aspects, such as characteristics of a healthy or an unhealthy individual. We shall now examine another type, formed by a combination of adverbs with the words of color. Using a relatively simple sorting procedure, we can electronically select from the this large body of texts only the parts that are of interest to us, specifically those in which a person, his/her skin, or parts of the body (hands, eyes, hair...) are characterized by a certain color. Working with the Corpus is not complicated and it could be introduced into primary schools as early as in the second grade.

The appearance that signals illness, sickness, disease, fatigue, or mental stress (fear) is identified by the words of color in two ways:

- a) explicitly, by linking the word of color with adverbs like *sickly*, *unhealthily*, or otherwise with the words of exaggeration like *deadly*, *morbidly*;
- b) implicitly, by assigning the person a non-typical color (*gray*, *yellow*), often in conjunction with an adverb indicating a similarity of that color with the color of the object (*ashen-white*, *waxy yellow*), which creates an impression of a sick or diseased appearance because its abnormality.

It is obviously not surprising that a frequent term for a symptomatic image of a not completely healthy, or even sickly, individual is the word *pale*. As in literature though, we find that the symptoms of unhealthiness are frequently associated with the color *yellow*, more so than with *green* or *gray*. In addition to the combinations of these colors with the adverbs *diseasedly*, *sickly* or perhaps *deadly* and *morbidly*, the portrait of a not-quite-healthy, sick, or terrified person may be complemented by other symptomatic expressions (*stooped*, *scrawny*, *ruddy with fatigue*, *groaning*,

*sweating; watery eyes, sunken cheeks, empty stare in the eyes; to tremble, to be out of breath, to walk hunched over, to look old, to be scared to death).*

Examples of color association with the adverb *sickly*<sup>1)</sup>:

- She watches him: a nice man, but *sickly pale*, and walks with a terrible *stoop*.
- His face was *sickly pale*, the whole body *trembled* and he seemed to be scared *to death*.
- He looks *old*, his hair is almost white, the complexion *sickly gray*.
- The dark-red blood produces a striking contrast with the *sickly green* color of the body.

Examples of color association with the adverb *unhealthily*:

- I called him, elbowing my way through. Somebody gave him a shaft, and the eyes in his *gaunt, unhealthily yellow face* looked like two saucers to me.
- The man dying behind the transparent green curtain had a visitor once a week. Every Sunday, a sad, *unhealthily pale and obese* woman brought him a bouquet of flowers.
- Jakob Kahn was lying on a large double bed under a red blanket. His eyes were closed and *the cheeks sunken*. The skin of his face and hands was *unhealthily pale*.
- Heading for the door in the following moment was dr. Friss, a Danish philosopher and one of the translators of Schweitzer's works, who was visiting, and whose complexion now acquired *an unhealthily green hue* (from non-fictional literature).

Examples of the exaggeration usage:

Color association with the adverb *morbidly*:

- Flynn recognized the tracheal tube that was still sticking out of his mouth, *morbidly pale complexion* and the open eyes which looked alive...
- That radiant queen of pop is a total wreck today. Marked by drug use, *an empty stare in her eyes, morbidly pale skin*.
- Stephanie was *morbidly pale* and her eyes were shut. It seemed that she was not breathing.

Color association with the adverb *deadly*:

- There was one primitive stretcher after another, and all were occupied by *moaning, sweating, deadly pale people*, who were trying to *catch their breath* in a stifling smell of excrement and iodoform.
- Good gracious, mom, are you sick? *Her face was frozen and deadly pale*, the eyes as if *sunken deep in the sockets*, and the edges of eyelids were *reddish with fatigue*.
- She also met a robust, bright Persian with a pair of *deadly green* eyes.

The *yellow* color and other colors are perceived to epitomize the symptoms of poor health because they are not the normal colors of human skin, even without using the qualifying adverbs *sickly, unhealthily, morbidly, deadly*. They sometimes combine with comparison-serving adverbs, the so-called characterizing adverbs, derived from the material-type adjectives like *waxily, ashenly*. They are frequently coupled with the colors *yellow* and *gray*.

- Cashier Carter was a middle-aged man with an unexcited, permanently bored expression in his face, and *parchment-like yellow complexion*.

<sup>1)</sup> All examples are cited according to the Czech National corpus SYN, including. The corpore SYN 2000, SYN 2005 and SYN 2006 PUB. In the English version of the article there one all the texts translated from Czech in English.

- At the table sat a man with a *parchment-like yellow face* and *pale watery eyes* above his *sunken cheeks*.
- Artur was terribly nervous. He had been overworked since the Lonsdale case and put on a lot of weight lately. He was *ashen gray* in the face and *visibly aged*.
- ...and the custodian found what he was looking for in a man with *ashen grey complexion*, a graying beard, and quick, perceptive eyes.

Likewise, the addition of a shade of gray to a certain color tends to be perceived as a syndrome of physical or mental health:

- Those two guys looked the same. They must have been twins. They even moved alike. The skin, or whatever it was, had a *grayish yellow* tint, like rubber.

Assigning the color green or white to a human face often implies exaggeration, although the color encountered in serious writings was predominantly white.

- „I have not seen that many yet“ said Anežka. „One is almost afraid to breathe“. Now, in the twilight, her *face* appeared *rather white*, the lips were half-open and the eyes reflected long rays of light, as if turning a diamond...
- Father’s firm grip stopped me in my tracks. I looked at him. The sinews on his neck stood out and his *chalky white face* was distorted by fear. The expression of his face used to haunt me in my dreams for years.
- We had managed to take off our raincoats and look around a little before the future lady of the house stumbled down into the hall on her shaky legs. Her face was *ashen grey with fear*, her meandering gaze vacant.
- He paused again and pressed the knuckles to his mouth as if to suppress a sudden emotional rush. When he lowered the hand, *his lips were almost white*. Troy discretely placed the photograph on the table.

References to green color suggest a humorous exaggeration:

- If I want to please the children, their friends, and myself too, we go terrain riding in the Brdy woods. Although the boys’ *faces turn green* now and then, the Maverick with a four-wheel drive, a gear reduction and a lock can handle the slopes, the roughness, the mud, the snow, and the trenches without any damage to the car or its crew.
- „...Even though I tried to think about something else, I scarcely slept before the race“ reminisced Palouš, who represented AMK Hořice, after his landing in Prague. „But when I glimpsed, during the official lineup, how nervous was Hasenakua, who was *virtually green in the face*, I calmed down. From that point on I felt fine throughout the race.“

The color *purple*, sometimes in combination with other colors, is usually associated with a person in a moment of great physical exertion, or even critical condition:

- *Red eyes* and *dark-purple lips* glowed in the *face white as (whitewashed) wall*, the wheezing mouth catching breath, the body on the verge of collapse. Coxswain of the representative eight-oar boat Radek Zavadil looked like that after his boat came in fifth, the last in the qualification race for the Olympic Games on the Lake Lucerne.
- The monk did what he could. He sank heavily to one knee. His *face* was *starkly purple*, as if blood had coagulated under his skin. He moaned, grabbed his throat, and, being short of breath, drew his tunic open.
- They were clambering up, the old guy being almost *purple in the face*. He kept clutching at his heart. But on he went, crawling like a bug. Then he fell again, his face in a puddle. He groaned. The younger man picked him up.

Conversely, in other parts of the body (like teeth), the *white* color is a symbol of health:

- Clear eyes, *porcelain-white teeth*, pink tongue – those were the only human colors that stayed with her body.

Red color may be a symptom of health or a symptom of illness. It figures in folkloric writings as a symbol of soundness and freshness – see for example *to sleep in until red* (Zaorálek 2000: 36), the comparisons talk about healthy *cheeks (red) like apples, like roses* (SČFI, Comparisons, 1984: 419) – see the following quotes:

- But that only pleased her. When we were saying goodbye, her *cheeks* were *beautifully red* and her eyes shone.
- But, out of the blue, he meets a little girl who is not afraid of freezing or *sniffles*, and she has red cheeks.
- He had a *healthy red color*, brilliantine on his hair, and smelled of suede and clean tweed.

Of course phrases like *red as a burning fire, feverishly red, the eyes as red as a hare's* also appear in Czech comparisons. In papers on medical subjects, red tends to be a syndrome of a disease or disorder:

- Exanthema does not normally occur in the face but the *skin* here looks – with the exception of mouth and chin (circumoral pallor) – *diffused red*.
- Apis is indicated for allergic reactions to insect bites, when the *skin* swells quickly and becomes *bright red*.
- On the other hand, vitamin P, also present in carrots, contracts the unsightly *red enlarged blood capillaries* in the face and the décolletage.
- If somebody has a headache because of the heat, sweats abnormally, is sleepy and sluggish, and has pinkish-red skin with an orange peel look will be helped by a medicine called Apis Mellifica (five granules every 10 minutes), according to Vancůřikova.

The authors of fictional literature sometimes draw on their insights for images that are almost naturalistic:

- The cyclist who had a two-minute lead suffered terribly on account of painful sores. He sat almost on the small of the back. His neck was dark red and his fair hair was bleached by the sun.
- Eliska... typhoid... he moved it gently aside and burst in the room. The smell of medicine surrounded him – and there, in the corner on a bed, against the golden sun of a spring afternoon, a sharp silhouette of her head! She was lying on her back, the face burning red, with glassy eyes, groaning frightfully.

When working with texts containing these types of color references, it is possible to apply the knowledge gained in the Czech language and literature and other studies, for example in the module „Man and His Health“ (human biology) or „Man and Society“ (awareness of folk customs, ideas about colors as indicators of health or sickness) to explain (or judge) why the author invoked the specific quality of, say, white or yellow color to highlight a symptom of a disease. In learning foreign languages, the words of color are part of the basic vocabulary, but when translating a text in Czech into a foreign language, it is necessary to differentiate in what meaning and in what function is the color reference deployed, because it may have some bearing on the translation. The use of colors as medical symptoms is therefore a form of communication about health and disease that allows to interconnect the various educational areas.

## BARVA V OBRAZU SYMPTOMŮ ZDRAVÍ A NEMOCI V ČESKÉM JAZYCE

**Abstrakt:** Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání předpokládá, že žák nejen získá informace o zdraví, o tom, jak zdraví chránit, o rizicích pro zdraví.

Nedílnou součástí vzdělávacích programů však vždy byl požadavek na rozvoj komunikačních schopností včetně schopnost komunikovat o zdraví a vyjadřovat se k tomuto tématu. Čeština disponuje bohatou slovní zásobou k tématu zdraví, nemoci, péče o zdraví, její součástí jsou jak výrazy užitě v původním významu, tak přenesená pojmenování, obrazná vyjádření a frazeologie.

Texty z různých stylových oblastí, zejména texty umělecké, popř. publicistické, ukazují, jak jsou pro postižení symptomů nemoci a zdraví využívána označení barev člověka, jeho pokožky: např. přirovnání s barvou žlutou je často využíváno pro obraz člověka nemocného, který má obličej žlutý jako vosk, voskově žlutý, podobně bývá se zdravým či spíše nezdravým vzhledem spojována barva šedá (šedý jako popel, popelavě šedý). V současné době máme k dispozici bohatý jazykový materiál – půlmiliardový korpus psaných textů současné češtiny. Při vysvětlení využití barev pro obraz zdravého/nemocného člověka je možné opřít se o znalosti z dalších oborů (např. z biologie a zdravotních věd).

**Klíčová slova:** rozvoj komunikačních schopností, vzdělávací program, zdraví, názvy barev a symptom zdraví a nemoci v českém jazyce, přirovnání, obrazná vyjádření