I. It has been argued that the human eye can distinguish no fewer than 7.5 million color differences (Brown and Lenneberg 1954: 457; *Science of Color* 1953: 129). This enormous range of visible colors has three basic components. One is hue, the wavelength of reflected light. Another is luminosity or tone, the amount of white or black that is mixed with a hue. And the third is saturation or chromatic purity, the amount of grey that is mixed with a hue. Since each of the three components constitutes an even continuum, there is no physical foundation for the boundaries between distinct color categories. Nonetheless, distinct color categories are perceived and identified, though languages differ greatly with regard to the number of color terms they possess and with regard to the manner in which they classify the color continuum (Taylor 1995: 3). Bassa, a language of Liberia, has only two terms for classifying colors, *hui* (covering black, purple, blue, and green) and *ziza* (covering white, yellow, orange, and red) (Gleason 1961: 5; McNeill 1972: 21). Zunian, the language of the Zuni (a tribe of North American Indians of western New Mexico), to cite another example, uses the...
same term for yellow and orange (Brown and Lenneberg 1954: 461). And Homeric Greek (as well as the Greek spoken by the majority of the current inhabitants of Cyprus), to cite a third example, has no word equivalent to brown (Berlin and Kay 1969: 28), whereas French has two: brun and marron. Several linguists have drawn attention to the fact that each language seems semantically arbitrary relative to every other language in the way it segments the three-dimensional color continuum. Ray (1952), for example, claims that “there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ division of the spectrum. Each culture has taken the spectral continuum and has divided it into units on a quite arbitrary basis” (258). And in what is (or was) one of the most widely used linguistic textbooks, Gleason (1961) writes:

Consider a rainbow or a spectrum from a prism. There is a continuous gradation of color from one end to the other. That is, at any point there is only a small difference in the colors immediately adjacent at either side. Yet an American describing it will list the hues as red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, or something of the kind. The continuous gradation of color which exists in nature is represented in language by a series of discrete categories. . . . There is nothing inherent either in the spectrum or the human perception of it which would compel its division in this way. (4)

In 1969, however, the linguist-anthropologists Berlin and Kay challenged and contradicted this view with their publication Basic Color Terms. In this, they argue that “semantic universals do exist in the domain of color vocabulary”, and that “these universals appear to be related to the historical development of all languages in a way that can properly be termed evolutionary” (1). Berlin and Kay’s theory is based on an experimental study of 20 genetically diverse languages and an investigation of the literature on color-term semantics for 78 additional languages. The analysis focuses on the categorization of terms for focal colors or what Berlin and Kay call “basic color terms”. The characteristic features of a basic color term, according to Berlin and Kay, are that a basic color term

(i) is monolexemic and its meaning is not predictable from the mean-

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1 The 20 languages are: Arabic, Bulgarian, Catalan, Cantonese, Mandarin, English (U.S.), Hebrew, Hungarian, Ibibio (Nigeria), Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Pomo (California), Spanish (Mexico), Swahili, Tagalog (Philippines), Thai, Tzeldal (Southern Mexico), Urdu, and Vietnamese.
ing of its parts. (Color terms like "reddish", "yellowish-brown", and "salmon-colored" are excluded.)

(ii) is not subsumed under another color term. (Color terms like "crimson", "scarlet", or "vermilion" are excluded, since they are all hyponyms of red.)

(iii) is not restricted to a narrow class of objects. (A color term like "blond" is contextually restricted, since it is used only about human hair, and so it is excluded.)

(iv) must be of frequent use and psychologically salient for informants. (Rare color terms like "puce" and "mauve" are excluded.)

In Berlin and Kay's report, a total of eleven basic color terms are identified, located in the color space where English speakers place the most typical examples of black, white, red, orange, yellow, brown, green, blue, purple, pink, and grey. They further determine that the languages do not select randomly from this inventory, but that in the history of a given language, encoding of perceptual categories into basic color terms follows a fixed partial order. The two possible temporal-evolutionary orders are:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{black} & \quad \text{purple} \\
\text{white} & \quad \text{pink} \\
> \text{red} & \quad > \text{green} \\
> \text{yellow} & \quad > \text{blue} \\
> \text{brown} & \quad > \\
\text{orange} & \quad \text{grey} \\
\text{grey} & \quad \text{grey}
\end{align*}
\]

According to this rather simple rule,

(I) if a language contains only two color terms (and no language supposedly has fewer than two), these are terms for black and white.\(^2\)

(II) if a language contains three terms, then it contains a term for red.

\(^2\) Witkowski and Brown (1977: 50–51) argue that glossing these terms by use of "black" and "white" is misleading and that the terms label macrocolors (see n. 34).
(III) if a language contains four terms, then the fourth term will be either yellow or green (but not both).

(IV) if a language contains five terms, then it contains terms for both yellow and green.

(V) if a language contains six terms, then it contains a term for blue.

(VI) if a language contains seven terms, then it contains a term for brown.

(VII) if a language contains eight or more terms, then it contains a term for purple, pink, orange, grey, or some combination of these.

Berlin and Kay conclude that “color lexicons with few terms tend to occur in association with relatively simple cultures and simple technologies, while color lexicons with many terms tend to occur in association with complex cultures and complex technologies (to the extent that complexity of culture and technology can be assessed objectively)” (104).

It is the aim of this article to give an overview of Old Norse-Icelandic color terms, which, with the exception of Arthur Laurensen’s *The Colour-Sense in the Edda* (1882), have not been the object of comprehensive analysis; more specifically, it seeks to assess the applicability of Berlin and Kay’s theory to Old Norse-Icelandic as an evolutionary stage in the history of the Icelandic language. The data for Old Norse-Icelandic are drawn from Fritzner’s *Ordbog over Det gamle norske sprog*; Hødnebø’s supplement to Fritzner’s *Ordbog*; Cleasby and Vigfusson’s *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*; Heggstad, Hødnebø, and Simensen’s *Norrøn ordbok*; the three volumes of The Arnamagnaean Commission’s *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* that have appeared so far; the slips of the Arnamagnaean Commission’s *Ordbog* for color terms identified in Cleasby and Vigfusson’s, Fritzner’s, and Hødnebø’s dictionaries; and Finnur Jónsson’s *Lexicon Poeticum*. In the following, translations of the Old Norse-Icelandic color terms into English are given (with the help of the above-mentioned dictionaries), though with the understanding that what is intended is the spectral loci of the range to which the English

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3 I am grateful to Eva Rode for making xeroxed copies of these slips available to me.
color term refers and not the English color term as such.⁴

II. Although Old Norse-Icelandic color (litr) appears to denote hue alone, the three-dimensionality of human color perception is given verbal expression.

Luminosity or tone is indicated by the adjectives døkk/myrk ('dark'), ljós ('light'), and bleik ('pale').⁵ These adjectives qualify adjectives of hue to produce descriptive phrases, such as døkkblár/myrkblár ('dark blue'), ljósuglur ('light yellow'), and raudbleikr ('light/pale red'). Old Norse-Icelandic does not have different single lexemes to indicate and differentiate luminosity, and the data suggest that the above adjectives are used only with the following adjectives of hue: blue (døkkblár, myrkblár, ljósblár), brown (døkkbrún, myrkbrún, døkkjarpr, ljósjarpr), fawn (ljósbleikr), green (døkkgrænn), red (døkkraudr, raudbleikr, raudljós, ljósraudr), and yellow (ljósuglur). It is likely that also svartr ('black') in the compounds svartblár, svartbrúnn, and svartjarpr, hvitr ('white') in the compound bláhvítr ('bluish white'), and fagr ('fair') in the compounds fagrblár, fagrgrænn, fagrgulr, and fagrraudr are indications of luminosity and should, perhaps, be translated as 'dark' (= svartr) / 'light' (= hvitr, fagr), respectively.

Saturation or chromatic purity seems less clearly defined. The adjectives bjartr/bjarti/litbjartr ('bright') and skírr ('clear/pure') are not used in combination with a hue adjective. The adjective fagr, which, as noted above, is used to qualify blue, green, yellow, and red, may be translated as 'bright', but in combination with hue adjectives it is generally believed to translate 'fair' or 'light'. The adjective heíd'r ('bright'), which is used to qualify blue (heídblár), would seem to indicate a fully saturated hue. The prefix al- ('completely'), which is used to qualify black (alsvartr), white (alhvítr), red (alraudr) green (algrænn), and grey (algrár), may also indicate a fully saturated hue, though in most cases it seems to imply that no other colors are present. Its use with grey suggests that al- does not refer to saturation, but it may possibly refer to other optical variables, such as lustre or texture. Unsaturated hues are expressed by the prefix i- ('-ish'), conveying a diminutive notion, which

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⁴ As McNeill (1972) points out: "Since colour names in various languages are not easily translatable, non-English colour names should ideally be expressed in terms of some non-linguistic system of notation, e.g., Munsell colour numbers or spectral wavelengths" (23).

⁵ For a discussion of bleikr, see below. The adjective fól ('pale') / fólitad 'pale-colored') is not used with adjectives of hue.
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is used to qualify the following adjectives of hue: blue (íblár), grey (igrár), green (ígrœnn), and red (írauðr). In the case of ígrœnn, however, the prefix may convey intensity or iteration; Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v., translate ígrœnn as ‘evergreen.’ In the case of blue, an unsaturated hue is also indicated by compounding it with the hue adjective grey: gráblár (‘greyish blue’).

In order to determine the number of basic color terms in Old Norse-Icelandic, the four primary criteria suggested by Berlin and Kay for recognizing focal color terms need to be considered.

(i) One is that the term is monolexemic. This requirement excludes the following color terms (the translations given in parentheses are only approximate):

- varieties of black: alsvartr (‘completely black’), blásvartr (‘bluish black’), hrafnsvartr (‘raven-black’; occurs in poetry only), kolsvartr (‘coal-black’; occurs in poetry only), and sótsvartr (‘soot-black’);
- varieties of white: bláhvítr, blikhvitr (‘gleaming white’), blómhvítr (‘flower-white’), drífhvitr (‘snow-white’; occurs in poetry only), fann-hvítr (‘snow-white’), gullhvítr (‘gold-white’; occurs in poetry only), lin-hvítr (‘linen-white’; occurs in poetry only), mjallhvítr (‘snow-white’; occurs in poetry only), silfrhvítr (‘silver-white’), skjallhvítr (‘white as the white membrane of an egg’; occurs in poetry only) snjóhvítr (‘snow-white’), sölvhvítr (‘sun-white’; occurs in poetry only), and svanhvítr (‘swan-white’; occurs in poetry only);
- varieties of red: blóðraudr (‘blood-red’), brandraudr (‘fire-red’; occurs in poetry only), dreyrraudr (‘blood red’), fagráuðr (‘light red’), glóðráuðr (‘fiery red’; occurs in poetry only), írauðr (‘reddish’), mórauðr (‘peat-red’), mosráuðr (‘moss-red’), raðbleikr, raðljóss (‘light red’), sótrauðr (‘soot-red’; occurs in poetry only), tandrauðr (‘fiery red’; occurs in poetry only), and valraudr (‘blood-red’; occurs in poetry only);
- varieties of green: algrœnn (‘completely green’), døkkgrœnn (‘dark green’), eigrœnn (‘ever-green’), fagráuðr (‘light green’), grasgrœnn (‘grass-green’), idjagrœnn (‘ever-green’; occurs in poetry only), ígrœnn (see above), laufgrœnn (‘leaf-green’), raufgrœnn (‘reddish green’), smar-agdigr (‘emerald-like’, a non-color lexeme involving color by implication; occurs in poetry only), and vetrgróenn (‘winter-green’; occurs in poetry only);

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6 Cf. also Finnur Jónsson in Lexicon Poeticum (s.v. ígrœnn).
varieties of yellow: fagrgulr ('light yellow'), fótgulr ('foot-gold' [that is, with yellow feet]; occurs in poetry only), ljósgulr, and rauðgulr ('reddish yellow');

varieties of blue: døkkblár, fagrblár ('light blue'), gráblár, heitðblár, hel­
blár ('Hel-blue'), himinblár ('sky-blue'), hrafnbólar ('raven-blue'; occurs in poetry only), íblár ('bluish'), indíblár ('indigo'; a dye term), kolblár ('coal-blue'), ljósblár ('light blue'), myrkblár, rauðblár ('reddish blue'), and svartblár ('blackish blue');

varieties of brown: døkkbrúnn ('dark brown'), gulbrúnn ('yellowish brown'), möbrúnn ('peat-brown'), myrkrünn ('dark brown'), rauð­brúnn ('reddish brown'), skolbrúnn (swarthy; literally 'scullery-brown' or 'sculp-brown', see Cleasby and Vigfusson s.v.), skjólbünn (occurs only twice and is probably an error for skolbrúnn), sólbrúnn ('sun-brown') svartbrúnn ('blackish brown'), døkkjarpr ('dark brown'), hvítjarpr ('light brown'; occurs in poetry only), and svartjarpr ('blackish brown');

varieties of grey: algrá ('completely grey'), apalgrá ('dapple-grey'; literally 'apple-grey'), ígrá ('greyish'), järngrá ('iron-grey'; occurs in poetry only), kinngmr ('cheek grey' [that is, pale]; occurs in poetry only), and ulfgrá ('wolf-grey');

and some other color terms compounded with names of objects or substances or feelings that are less easily identified in terms of hue: blöðslitr ('blood-color'), brennusteinslogicalit ('color of a sulphur flame'), döggslitr ('dew-color'; occurs in poetry only), eirligr ('copper-like', a non­color lexeme involving color by implication), éldslitr ('fire-color'), fóstulit ('fasting-color'; translated by Heggstad, Hødnebø, and Simensen as 'facial color during fasting'), gullslitr ('gold-color'), hermodarlitr ('color of anger'; occurs in poetry only), hórunslitr/hórunarlit ('flesh-color'), járnslitr ('iron-color'), sænaudalit ('sea-cow color'), váðablár ('danger­blue'), and vatnslitr ('water-color').

(ii) A second requirement is that the color is not subsumed under another color term. Here it is difficult to determine if rjóðr is synony­mous with the more frequently used rauðr ('red'), or if it is a hyponym of red. Certainly, rjóðr seems contextually more restricted than rauðr in that it is used almost exclusively about facial color as in, for example, the following phrases: "hun var bædi vitur og væn lios og riod j andliti þúlikast sem en rauda rosa væri samtempred vid sniohuita lileam" (Nittóða saga [ed. Loth 1962-1965], 5:3.7-9]) and "guðs engill stendr aa annan veg riodr ok riodr af meingiorðum þessa mannz" (Michaels saga

\[5\] Eva Rode, personal correspondence (19 May 2005).
Indeed, of the 20 occurrences listed by the Arnamagnaean Commission's *Ordbog*, only one does not refer to facial color or complexion: “allr þeirra búnaðr var rjóðr af gulli” (*Karl-lamagnúss saga*, 181.2).8

(iii) A third requirement is that the term is not collocationally restricted. This excludes *jarpr/jarplitaðr* (‘brow n’) (as well as, of course, *dækkjarpr* and *svartjarpr*), which is used only about hair; *litforrótt* (translated by Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v., as ‘strawberry-colored’ and by Heggstad, Hødnebø, and Simensen as ‘dappled, red mixed with white hairs which shed during the summer’), *ljósbleikr* (see below), and *móskjótt* (translated by Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v., as ‘piebald’), which are used about horses only;9 *mókollóttr* (translated by Cleasby and Vigfusson as ‘of dusky colour’ and by Heggstad, Hødnebø, and Simensen as ‘greyish brown and without horns’), which is used about sheep only;10 and most likely *rjóðr* (see above). This category also includes some of the terms listed in the previous categories: *apalgrár*, which is used about horses and oxen only;11 and *skolbrúnn*, which is used about facial color or skin tone only.12

(iv) A fourth requirement is that the term is of frequent use. This excludes *høss* (‘grey’, especially the color of a wolf), which occurs in poetry only, *purpuralitr* (see below), *blakkr* (in the Arnamagnaean Commission’s *Ordbog* translated as ‘pale, tawny’),19 as well as several of the terms listed in the above categories, including *brandrauðr*,14 *brennustein*

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8 The occurrences listed in Finnur Jónsson’s *Lexicon Poeticum* also suggest that *rjóðr* is used mostly about facial color.

9 *Litforrótt* occurs only once: “þat var litforót hestr med liosum rosvvm” (*Gull-Þóris saga* [ed. Kålund 1898], 21.6-7).

10 The term occurs only once: “Ein ær mókollót var þar með dilki, sú er honum þötti mest afbragð i vera fyrir vaxtar sakar” (*Grettis saga*, 200.6–9).

11 The term occurs only twice: “Par finnz ok sa steinn sem abston heitir hann hefr iarns lit” (*Stjórn* [ed. Unger 1862], 86.1–2) and “Hann [adamas] er af kyne kristallo, iarns litr er a a honum” (*Alfræði islenzk* 3 [ed. Kålund 1917–18], 84.7–8).

12 As Biggam (1997) points out: “The most common semantic areas in which colour sub-sets occur are human hair, human skin, and economically important animals such as horses and cattle” (19). Cf. also Barley (1974), 21–22.

13 The *Ordbog* lists eleven occurrences. Several of these are by-names, two describe the color of horses, one describes the color of vellum, and one describes the color of brass. Finnur Jónsson (*Lexicon Poeticum*) notes that in poetry it is once used about a horse, once about a wolf, once about a ship, and once about blood.

14 The term occurs only once: “Ilr er í borghlið baugi / brandrauðum framm standa” (*Ragnars saga lodbrókar* vi:1 / *Skjáldedigtning* [ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912–1915], B:2, 257.
slogalitr,15 dogglitr,16 eigrœnn,17 eldslitr, fosulitr,18 indiblår,19 járnslitr, lit-forötr, ljósbleikr, mjállhvitr, mókkollótr, móskjótr, smaragaligr, sólhvitr, sótraudr, svanhvitr, sænautalitr,20 váðablår,21 and vatnsliitr (see n. 15).

Having eliminated all secondary or non-basic color terms according to Berlin and Kay’s definitions,22 we are left with the following eight color terms:

(i) svartr. The term is monolexemic and not subsumed under another color term. It is of frequent use and not contextually restricted. The approximately 180 occurrences listed by the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog cover a very wide range of objects, including animals (in particular horses, but also cows and bears),23 birds (ravens), fish, supernatural beings (especially devils, but also elves, giants, and spirits), eyes, shields, water, clothing, sails, tents, and textiles in general, and it is also used about the sun and the darkness of the night. It is frequently used about human hair and complexion, as in, for example, “Manna var hann svartastr bæði á brýnn ok hár” (Svarfdæla saga [ed. Jónas Kristjánsson 1956], 162.16-17) and “Eysteinn konungr var svartr maðr ok døkklistaðr” [Heimskringla [ed. Finnur Jónsson 1893-1901]: 3:379.12). It is probably for this reason that it often appears as a by-name. Svartr is equated with

15 The term occurs only once: “A Regn boga ero þrir litir. vatnz litr oc ældz litr oc brenno steins loga litr” (Hauksbók [ed. Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson 1892-1896], 174.30–31). Cf. Edda Snorra Sturlusonar (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1931), in which the rainbow is also said to have three colors: “Honi er med iii. litvin.”
16 The term occurs only once: “Nú em ec svá fegin fundi ocrom / sem átsfreur Óðins haucar, / er val vito, varmar bràôir, / eða dogglitir dags brún siá” {Helgakvida Hundingsbana // (ed. Neckel 1962), st. 43).
17 The term occurs only once: “þar falla hunangflotande lóker. a Æi grønom vælom” (Old Icelandic Homily Book [ed. de Leeuw van Weenen 1993], 66r11).
18 The term occurs only once: “Deir ryggvasc sva sem skimenn er fyrring manna augliti syna fæsto lit a sér. til þes at þær röse goð-gerninge sinum fyrir mænum” (Old Norwegian Homily Book [ed. Indrebø 1931], 76.27–77.1).
19 The term occurs only once: “pund sinopur fyrrig 6 aura, meniu fyri 2 aura ok brunt ok indiblatt, hvit fyri 5 aura, gult 3 aurum (Alfræóð íslenszk 3 [ed. Káland 1917–18], 74.5–8).
20 The term occurs only once: “þá reis upp í Krossavík þjórr nókkurr, ok var sænautalitr á” (Vápnfirðinga saga [ed. Jón Jóhannesson 1950], 48.26–27).
21 The term occurs only once: “Þeir verda hræddir og felm z fullir, og villdi huer giarnan leita sier lijfz; enn þad er þó ecki hoglegt, þuiad vôtn voru tueim m eign, en vôda blár síor fjírr framan” (Pjalar-Jóns saga [ed. Tán-Haverhorst 1939], 29.20–22).
22 No doubt, more secondary color terms will emerge with the publication of the remaining volumes of the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog, and the above list does not presume to be exhaustive.
23 Cf. Viðar Hreinnson et al. (1997): “the Icelandic word svartur which nowadays means ‘black’ seems at this period to have referred mainly to a brown-black colour, as when it is used to describe horses” (5:406).
tar in, for example, “honum lýndisk hann svart sem bik” (Njáls saga [ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954], 321.2); with soil in, for example, “hví ertu svá bleikr, en stundum svart sem jóð” (Heimskringla [ed. Finnur Jónsson 1893–1901], 1:353.16–17); with coal in, for example, “hann uar suartur sem kol” (Hektors saga [ed. Loth 1962–1965], 1:107.10); with ravens in, for example, “þat it boluada kuikendi uar suart sem hrafn” (Duggals leidsla [ed. Cahill 1983], 75.6–7), and with the darkness in a house on a midwinter night in “myrkr sua mikit enn fyrsta dag vti sem þa er suartazst er i humus a hævetri vm nætr” (Flateyjarbók [ed. Guðbrandur Vigfusson and Unger 1860–1868], 3:559.20–22). It is contrasted with bjart, bleikr, hvit, rauðr, grænn, gulr, blár, and brúnn.

(2) hvit. Like svart, the term is monolexemic and not subsumed under another color term. The roughly 200 occurrences listed by the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog cover a wide range of objects, including human hair, teeth, eyes, and skin, horses, sheep, clothing, fur, armor, weapons, wine, flowers, and bread. It is used about silver to designate that it is pure (as opposed to grey silver) and about food (matr) to describe religious fasting, that is, a diet of milk, curds, and the like (as opposed to a diet that includes meat). The term is commonly used as a by-name, and Christ is often referred to as “Hvita-Krisfr”. It is equated with snow in, for example, “hann [hestrinn] var hvitr sem snior” (Strengleikar [ed. Cook and Tveitane 1979], 224.12) and “þær systr satu a þverpalli, ok la linklæbi nysaumat a meðal þeira, hvitt sem faunn” (Orkneyinga saga [ed. Sigurður Nordal 1913–1916], 126.6–7); with a dove in, for example, “Mikill er hann oc gamall hvitr sem dvfa með langv hari oc siðv skeggi” (Þiðriks saga af Bern [ed. Bertelsen 1905–1911], 223.9–11); with the white membrane of an egg in “allir lvtir, þeir er þar koma íbrvinn, verþa sva hvitir sem hina sv, er skiall h(eitir)” (Edda Snorra Sturlusonar [ed. Finnur Jónsson 1931], 24.24–26); with costly stuff in “grausin huit sem purpur” (Eiriks saga vidførla [ed. Jensen 1983], 74.3); and with quartz in “sæ uar þéði har og digur. hofudit þújliht sem hraunklettur. augun hvítt sem hiegeitlar” (Hektors saga [ed. Loth 1962–1967], 1:111.15–17). It is contrasted with svart, rauðr, grænn, gulr, blár, and grár.

(3) rauðr. The term is monolexemic and not subsumed under another term. The roughly 210 occurrences listed by the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog show that it is used to describe facial color, hair color, as well as, for example, the color of blood, honey, silk, cows, horses, fire, weapons, clothing, fabric, gold, wine, and the color of the sun and
the rose. It is commonly used as a by-name. It is frequently equated
with blood, as in, for example, “Erlingr var þá rauðr sem blóð í andliti”
and “var þá rauðr sem dreyri” ([Heimskringla [ed. Finnur Jónsson 1893–1901],
2:259.13 and 3:27.16], and once it is equated with the color of a
carp: “hon sá á honum mikla reiði fyrir því at hann var rauðr sem karfi”
(Flóress saga ok Blankiflúr [ed. Kolbing 1896], 11.2–3). It is contrasted
with svartr, bleikr, hvítr, grœnn, gulr, blár, and grár.

(4) grœnn. The term takes Old Norse-Icelandic beyond a stage II lan-
guage, according to Berlin and Kay’s definitions. The approximately 65
occurrences listed by the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog shows
that it covers a wide range of objects, including grass, trees, fruit, fields,
fabric (silk), clothing, tents, swords, helmets, ale, and bodily fluid and
wounds. It is also used about meat and fish, but obviously in the mean-
ing “fresh”. Grœnn is equated with grass in, for example, “hjálmr þinn 
er grœnn sem gras, gerr af inu bezta stáli ok settr gimsteinum” (Kar-
lamagnúss saga [ed. Unger 1860], 311.8–9), with the sea in “vm haustet 
er hann grœn sem sior” (Hauksbôk [ed. Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur 
Jónsson 1892–1896], 151.25), and with leeks in “var sú hin auma [sála] 
grøn sem graslaur” (Old Norwegian Homily Book [ed. Indrebø 1931],
148.21–22). However, it seems that emerald is the ultimate representa-
tive of grœnn: “gimstçiN, er smaragdv heitir, ok sigrar með si ni fegrd 
alan bloma grasa, þeirra er grenst erv ok fegrst” (Konráðs saga keisara-
sonar [ed. Cederschiöld 1884], 78.35–37). The term is contrasted with
svartr, hvítr, rauðr, gulr, blár, and brúnn.

(5) gulr. The term is monolexemic and not subsumed under another
color term. The roughly three dozen occurrences listed by the Arna-
magnaean Commission’s Ordbog show that gulr is used especially to
describe human hair color, and in this connection it is often likened
to silk, as in “hann var alra manna friðastr, hárit mikit ok gult sem 
silki” (Orkneyinga saga [ed. Sigurður Nordal 1913–1916], 41.5–6). It is
also used about, for example, shields, clothing, stones, tents, chapels,
teeth, and eyes.24 It is contrasted with svartr, hvítr, rauðr, grœnn, and
blár.

(6) blár. The term takes Old Norse-Icelandic to a stage V language in
which, according to Berlin and Kay, “the focus of blue emerges from
the GREEN area” (19). In the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog, it

24 Yellow eyes are likened to the eyes of a cat in, for example, “augun gul sem i ketti”
(Sprla saga sterka [ed. Rafn 1829–1830], 3:411.9).
is translated as "blue, blue-black, black" with the comment that "a distinction between the two can often not be drawn." The approximately 90 occurrences listed by the *Ordbog* cover a wide range of objects, including eyes, bruised flesh, skin color, clothing and tapestries, stones and marble, armor and weapons, smoke and flames. The flower Iris is described as blue in "Yris hefir blann lit" (*Medicalia* [ed. Larsen 1931], 95.12), and the term is equated with Hel in, for example, "Hann var dauðr ok blár sem hel, en digr sem naut" (*Grettis saga* [ed. Guðni Jónsson, 1936], 112.9–10), with cold iron in "tennr bláar sem nætkalt jarn" (*Blómstrvalla saga* [ed. Möbius 1855], 20.22–23), and with a flame in "sam ver elld brenna ... hann var blär sem einn logi" (*Hemings þátr Áslakssonar* [ed. Fellows Jensen 1962], 41.18–20). It is contrasted with *svart*, *bleikr*, *hvít*, *raudr*, *grœnn*, *gulr*, and *brúnn*.

(7) *brúnn*. The term takes Old Norse-Icelandic to a stage vi language, the last at which a single focus appears. In the Arnamagnaean Commission's *Ordbog*, it is translated as "brown, dark brown, ?brownish-violet". The 40 occurrences listed by the *Ordbog* concern mostly the color of horses and clothing, but *brúnn* is also used about human hair, weapons, and armor. The term is further used to describe the color of flowers in, for example, "Uiola ... ma kenna af sino blome. firir þvi ath sumar ero brunar. sumar hvitar. enn sumar svartar" (*Medicalia* [ed. Larsen 1931], 93.5–7) and "Napaver er svefn gras. valmuga frær a a norrænu ... þat er þrenna kyns. eitt hefir hvit blomstr. enn annath rautt. hit þridia er minst ok vex j okrum. ok hefir bruntt blomstur" (*Medicalia* [ed. Larsen 1931], 84.18–20). It is contrasted with *svart*, *hvít*, *raudr*, *grœnn*, *gulr*, and *indíblár*.

25 Cf. Viðar Hreinsson et al. (1997): "Nowadays, the Icelandic word *blár* means 'blue'. However, it is clear that the sense of the word has changed over time. The closest translation for *blár* as it was used at the time of the sagas is 'black', as can be seen from the fact that the word was used to describe, amongst other things, the colour of ravens. It should be borne in mind that at this time it was impossible to create a dye that was jet-black. The nearest thing was a very dark blue-black colour, and it is clearly this colour that *blár* refers to. Translating this with the word 'blue' would create the wrong impression, especially in those cases in the sagas when a man intending to slay somebody deliberately dressed in *blá* clothes" (5:406). Cf. also Finnur Jónsson (*Lexicon Poeticum*), s.v., *blár*. My study of *blár*/svart in Old Norse-Icelandic literature is forthcoming in *Scripta Islandica*.

26 Interestingly, in his study of the color terms in the *Poetic Edda*, Laurenson (1882) makes the observation that brown appears only in the younger poems: "In the Elder Edda we find mention of the following specific colours: – (1) black; (2) white; (3) red; (4) gray; (5) blue; (6) green; (7) golden; and (8) (in one or two instances only, and these in poems of the later period) brown" (2–3).
(8) grár. With grár, representing, according to Berlin and Kay, "simply the encoding of mid-brightness neutral hues between black and white" (22), the Old Norse-Icelandic color lexicon has expanded beyond stage VI. The approximately five dozen occurrences listed by the Arnamagnaeans' Ordbog show that it is used about a fairly wide range of objects, including skin, cloth, clothing, human hair, cats, oxen, horses, steel (armor), silver (see above), stones, and boulders. The term is used as a by-name, and it is contrasted with svart, hvit, bleik, and raud.

Berlin and Kay argue that "[w]hen the color lexicon expands beyond Stage VI, there is a rapid expansion to the full roster of eleven basic color categories ... Apparently, at Stage VII, the remaining basic categories, purple, pink, orange, and grey are quickly added to the lexicon and ... in no particular order" (20, 22). In the case of Old Norse-Icelandic, it seems safe to maintain that purple (purpuralitr), which, according to Berlin and Kay, arises from red and occasionally black, succeeds grey (grár) in the temporal-evolutionary order proposed by Berlin and Kay (see, however, n. 27), although, as argued below, purpuralitr does not fit the criteria for a basic color term. Purpuralitr is a Latin (ultimately Greek) loan word, and Berlin and Kay argue that "[c]olor terms that can be shown on linguistic grounds to be loan words are likely to be more recent additions than native color terms" (37). They further maintain that "[c]olor terms that are analyzable are likely to be more recent additions than unanalyzable terms" (37). Analyzability can, in their view, take five forms, four of which apply to purpuralitr. One is that the term contains more than one stem (which makes it a more recent addition than a color term containing a single stem). Another

27 Witkowski and Brown (1977) emend Berlin and Kay's evolutionary sequence. They alter it so that grey, the only achromatic basic color term added from stage II onwards, is made a 'wild card' that can be placed at any point after the early stages.

28 Cf. McNeill (1969): "Originally, purple derived from shells (Purpura) found on the coast of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The animals gathered into shoals in springtime; abrasion produced a milky white fluid from which purple dye was obtained. When the shells were broken, the white substance oozed out. Upon exposure to the air and light this substance passed through a series of colours: first citron-yellow, then greenish yellow, then green, and finally, purple or scarlet. The juice obtained from Murex brandaris, a kind of Purpura, changed photochemically into a deep blue-violet, but that of Murex trunculus, another kind of Purpura, gave a scarlet red hue ... According to O[ld] E[nglish] D[ictionary], in the middle ages purple applied vaguely to various shades of red but now it applies to 'mixture of red and blue in various proportions'. The purple dye industry goes back into the preclassical period. However, its heyday was reached during the classical period" (27–28). It is difficult to know when purpuri was adopted and if the meaning "purple" precedes the meaning "costly stuff".
is that the term has an analyzable stem and/or affix (which makes it a more recent addition than a color term containing an unanalyzable stem and/or affix). A third is that the term contains an affix whose gloss is "color/colored/color of" (which makes it a more recent addition than a term not containing such an affix). And a fourth is that the term is also the name (or contains the name) of an object characteristically having the color in question (which makes it a more recent addition than a color term which is not or does not contain such a name).²⁹

Purpuralitr appears not to have been widely used; it is not listed in Fin­nur Jónsson's Lexicon Poeticum, and the Arnamagnæan Commission's Ordbog has only five occurrences. In three of these, the term is used about precious stones, all non-native objects. One concerns the jacinth: "margar huitar byflugur sem snior flugu ok foru utan af seiminum. enn sumar af þeim hofdu raudan purpura lit sem iacinctus" (Stjórn [ed. Unger 1862], 210.117–19). Two concern the amethyst, and in both pur­puralitr is equated with the color of a drop of wine, also a non-native item: "Ematistvs hefir pvrpvalit sem vindropi" (Hauksbók [ed. Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896], 227.1) and "Amatistus hefir purpura lit sem vin-dropi" (Alfræði íslenzk [ed. Kålund 1908], 1:81.1). Although purpuralitr still exists as a color term, it is archaic and rare; Orðabók Háskólans lists only six occurrences dating from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.³⁰ The current term for purple in modern Icelandic is fjólublár ('violet-blue'), a secondary color term, which first occurs in the late eighteenth century.

Orange, according to Berlin and Kay, "usually becomes isolated from YELLOW but there is some evidence to indicate that in some cases it may have arisen from RED" (22). In Old Norse-Icelandic, it appears that this isolation did not take place; there is no basic color term for orange. The term raudgulr appears not to have been widely used; indeed, the Arnamagnæan Commission's Ordbog lists only three occurrences.³¹ The term still exists in Icelandic, but, like purpuralitr, it is now rarely used. The current term for orange in modern Icelandic is appelsinugulur ('orange-yellow'), a secondary color term, which, like purpuralitr and fjólublár, is derived from a concrete object, here

²⁹ The fifth criterion for analyzability is that "color terms containing derivational affixes are more recent additions than color terms not containing derivational affixes" (37).

³⁰ Here and in the following, the references to Orðabók Háskólans are to the dictionary's website: http://www.lexis.hi.is/cgi-bin/ritmal/leitord.

³¹ In one of these, raudgulr is used to describe the color of cloth; in the other two, the term is used to describe human hair color.
a (non-native) fruit. According to Orðabók Háskólans, appelsinugulur first occurs in the mid-twentieth century.

The modern Icelandic term for pink is bleikur. Old Norse-Icelandic has no term for pink; yet bleikr certainly exists but denotes different colors according to its context. Although the term appears most frequently in the meaning “pale (o: of weak or reduced color), wan, ?bleached” (the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog, s.v., bleikr), as in, for example, “gevr hon [sólín] af ser litit lios oc bendir firir med bleikum lit margz mannz feigð” (Alexanders saga [ed. Finnur Jónsson 1925], 70.32–71.1) and “stundum var hann raudr sem blod en stundum bleikr sem bast edr blarr sem hel edr fôr sem nárr suo at ymsir þessir litir færduzt j hann suo bra honum vid” (Flateyjarbók [ed. Guðbrandur Vigfusson and Unger 1860–1868], 2:136.35–37), the term appears not uncommonly in the meaning “blond, fair, light-coloured” (translation offered by the Ordbog) as in, for example, “Alexannder s(on) Priami var huitr ahaurunnd hár madr herdimilkil. sterk oc storadr harid bleikt oc bla augun” (Trójumanna saga [ed. Louis-Jensen 1963], 66.11–12) and “Fçgr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefr hon aldri jafnfrýg sírzn, bleikir akrar ok slegin tú ð n” (Njáls saga [ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954], 182.20–22).

When used to describe the color of horses and cows, the term seems to mean “light-coloured, ?fawn, ?pale yellow, ?dappled” (translation offered by the Ordbog) as in, for example, “Því næst riðu fram or konungs fylking Riker ok Marant, annarr á bleikum hesti en annarr á grám” (Karlamagnúss saga [ed. Unger 1860], 302.38–39) and “ek sá hér upp rísa at Hofi uxa bleikan, mikinn ok skrautligan” (Vâpnfirdinga saga [ed. Jón Jóhannesson 1950], 48.18–19).32 In two instances (both in Stjórn), bleikr may, according to the Arnamagnaean Commission’s Ordbog, denote “?(light) red”: “fyrir þann skylld er ertrnar þær sem hann keypti uar raudar edr bleikar. þa uar hann þar af kalladr Edom” and “Hafdi hann .iii. nófn ... hann het Esau sua sem raudr. ok Seyr þat er lodinn. ok Edom þat er bleikr edr blodligr” (Stjórn [ed. Unger 1862], 161.4–6 and 161.7–9).33 It is quite possible that bleikr should be regarded as a macrocolor covering, at least partly, the category of pale or light colors.34 Evidently, the term lost some of its semantic portfolio in the

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33 For a discussion of the meaning of bleikr in this passage, see Wolf (2005).
34 Biggam (1997) describes macrocolors as follows: “Not every language has a single colour lexeme per colour category, that is, a word such as N[ew] E[nglish] green for the green category. To Modern English speakers, red, orange, brown and purple are separate categories with separate lexemes denoting them, but speakers of other languages, although perfectly capable of seeing these four colours, may denote them with a single
course of the history of the Icelandic language. It is difficult to determine when the semantic change took place. The 88 occurrences listed by *Orðabók Háskólans* suggest that it was not until the mid-twentieth century that *bleikur* appears in the meaning pink and that it continued to denote also pale until the late twentieth century, though here it is, of course, important to bear in mind that writers — and especially Icelandic writers — often have a tendency to archaize. Certainly in the spoken language, *bleikur* is no longer used in the meaning pale, but it continues to be used to describe the color of horses and cows.

III. Berlin and Kay’s groundbreaking study has not been immune to criticism. McNeill (1972), for example, outright rejects the implicational hierarchy, arguing that “there is no universal sequence in which colour terms arise, because this order is determined by the function of colour terms in a culture” (22). Using the linguistic communities of Navaho, Pukapuka, and Japanese, she maintains that “the development of colour names and their foci are specific to the culture in which the name developed and have much to do with the available natural resources and the range of colours they provide” (28–29). Kay and McDaniel (1978) are less severe in their judgement; they call for a reinterpretation of the evolutionary sequence of basic colors and view “the development of basic color-term lexicon not as the successive encoding of foci, but as the successive differentiation of previous existing basic color categories” (640). Similarly, Crawford (1982), who maintains that “Berlin and Kay’s criteria for defining basic color terms pose insoluble problems for scholars trying to apply their model”, only goes so far as to propose a new definition of the basic color term concept “in order to eliminate contradictory and ambiguous criteria” (338). He suggests the following definition:

A basic color term occurs in the idiolects of all informants. It has stability of reference across informants and across occasions of use. Its signification is not included in that of another color term. Its application is not restricted to a narrow class of objects. (342).

Wyler (1984) is one of the scholars for whom Berlin and Kay’s criteria pose problems. He examines “whether Berlin and Kay’s theory of basic colour terms can be verified in the case of Old English” and con-

lexeme. Such a colour concept is a macrocolour” (18).

cludes that the formula is only "partly applicable" (55). Finally, Taylor (1995), who is favorably disposed towards Berlin and Kay's study, argues that the proposal that all languages in the world select from a universal inventory of just eleven focal colors needs "relaxing" (12). He also notes that there are languages whose inventory of color terms do not conform to Berlin and Kay's generalizations about the distributional restrictions of color terms. He mentions, for example, that "[l]anguages which do not have separate terms for blue and green, but which nevertheless have terms to the right of blue [i.e., brown, grey, orange, purple, or pink], are by no means infrequent" (13).

Despite these and other criticisms, which have led to some modifications of Berlin and Kay's two basic claims, subsequent research has largely substantiated their findings and supported their arguments. Indeed, as demonstrated above, Berlin and Kay's theory is eminently applicable to Old Norse-Icelandic as an evolutionary stage in the history of the Icelandic language, and it seems unnecessary to turn to Crawford's revised definition of "basic color term" as, for example, Biggam (1997) chose to do in her study of the color blue in Old English. The analysis reveals that Old Norse-Icelandic has eight basic color terms: svartr, hvitr, raudr, grœnn, guir, blår; brúnn, and grár. For lack of data, it is, of course, impossible to assess the evolutionary sequence of these terms. With its eight basic color terms, Old Norse-Icelandic may be designated a stage VII language, which in Berlin and Kay's study is represented by 20 of the 98 languages in their sample. The most frequently occurring stage VII systems exhibit all eleven basic color terms, but at least two of the languages in the experimental sample, Urdu and Cantonese, possess, like Old Norse-Icelandic, only eight basic color terms. Urdu has terms for black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, and purple, but lacks terms for orange, pink, and grey, and Cantonese has yet to add brown, purple, and orange to its basic inventory. Berlin and Kay treat these languages as early stage VII systems,

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36 He claims that "the absence of a generic term for blue and the position of grey and the existence of non-specified abstract colour terms make it much less strong a rule than it might be supposed to be" (55). In his view "[i]t is therefore doubtful whether basic colour terms can be semantic universals or are a reliable means to characterize the evolutionary processes in the history of a language or of civilizations" (55). Cf., however, Biggam (1977), who maintains that "Wyler shows evidence of major misunderstandings of Berlin and Kay's theories" (71).

37 He draws attention to Russian, which, with its terms for light and dark blue, has twelve basic color terms.

38 Berlin and Kay further note that "Tagalog lacks a term for orange as does Vietnamese" and that "Catalan lacks pink and orange terms" (35).
noting that most of the stage VII languages tend to possess all of the four remaining color terms, that is, purple, pink, orange, and grey. In modern Icelandic, one additional basic color term — bleikr — has been added. With its nine basic color terms, Icelandic therefore differs from most of the stage VII languages examined by Berlin and Kay, which have basic color terms also for orange and purple.

Bibliography


Some Comments on Old Norse-Icelandic Color Terms


