

Idiom Variation in Colour Idioms in Economic Discourse: A Corpus-based Analysis

Marina-Cristiana ROTARU¹

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show that colour idioms in economic discourse manifest a fair degree of variability and perform various functions in discourse. Apparently fixed expressions, idioms in general and, colour idioms in particular, do behave creatively as indicated by corpora findings. Colours have considerable power to generate idioms in the economic field, giving birth to various idiomatic clusters. Colour idioms in economic discourse vary both lexically and syntactically. Their role is not only to convey information but, depending of the type of variation, they perform various functions in the economic discourse. As discourse reflects and is reflected by the surrounding reality, the economic discourse proves able to bring new colour idioms into use.

Keywords: economic colour idioms, idiom variation, internal variation of idioms

1. Introduction

Idioms, like metaphors, are a pervasive feature of both spoken and written language, and have come to colonize not only the everyday language but also various types of specific language. They develop from various domains of knowledge and once internalized, they turn into a linguistic marker of these domains. From the economic domain (money for jam, money laundering, black economy, bear market, venture capital, tax haven) to the medical domain (black out, clean bill of health, in labor, in the pink, on the mend) or from the domain of the media (surf the net, go viral) to the domain of technology and science (cutting edge, silver surfer, rocket science), idioms reflect and are a reflection of our surrounding reality, rendering it in vivid and figurative ways.

This article focuses on a particular subgroup of idioms: colour idioms in economic discourse. The aim of my investigation is to show that although idioms are generally considered rigid, almost ossified linguistic

¹ Marina-Cristina Rotaru, Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Romania, marina.rotaru77@gmail.com

constructions, they, in fact, manifest both lexical and syntactic creativity and that they are able to generate themselves when the surrounding social, scientific and economic reality gives birth to new elements. My analysis is circumscribed to A. P. Cowie's scheme on the degree of fixity of idioms (Cowie 1993) and on Andreas Langlotz's idiom variation schema (Langlotz 2006). In my analysis, I have used corpus data provided mainly by the British National Corpus (BNCWeb at Lancaster University), a 100 million-word corpus, henceforth referred to as the BNC. To extend my empirical investigation and confirm my findings, I have also used the Corpus of Contemporary American English, a corpus five times larger than the BNC, henceforth referred to as the COCA. The study rests on a selection of nine colours (black, blue, golden, green, grey, pink, red, white and yellow) and fifty colour idioms based on these colours.

2. Idioms: ossified or flexible structures?

There are two approaches to the definition of "idiom". Traditionally, defining idiomaticity revolves around the idea that the individual meanings of the parts of an idiom do not render the meaning of the idiom as a whole. For example, the Dictionary of English Language and Culture defines the term "idiom" as "a phrase which means something different from the meanings of the separate words from which it is formed" (Summers, 1992: 655). For example, the meaning of the colour idioms "white-collar", meaning "working in an office rather than in a factory" (Parkinson, 2006: 528) and "blue chip", meaning "the shares of the best-known companies on the stock market, which are considered to be a safe investment" (Parkinson, 2006: 44) cannot be inferred from the meaning of the individual components of each idiom. Additionally, some definitions point to the fact that the order of words in an idiom is fixed. Accordingly, an idiom is "a group of words in a fixed order having a particular meaning, different from the meanings of each word understood on its own" (Procter, 1995: 701). The definition can be illustrated by the idiom "to be in the black" which means "to be making a profit" (Parkinson, black) (Parkinson, 2006: 42). In short, idioms are "conventional multi-word units which are semantically opaque and structurally fixed" (Langlotz, 2006: 2).

This standard view of idiomaticity has been challenged by other approaches, such as the phraseological perspective (Cowie, 1993) or the cognitive linguistics perspective, which have underlined the complex

linguistic structure and grammatical behavior of idioms. Drawing on previous research on idiomatic structure and variability, Langlotz accentuates, on the one hand, the role played by metaphor and metonymy in the creation of idioms and, on the other hand, the role of the language in use, stressing that “the idiom as a whole can be manipulated as a mental configuration to adapt it (with its substructures) to the communicative demands emerging in the specific context of use” (Langlotz, 2006: 11). To put it in a nutshell, according to the cognitive linguistic approach, the idioms are “complex mental activation-sets with variable internal structures” (Langlotz, 2006: 12).

2.1. Grammatical patterns of colour idioms in economic discourse

Tabel 1. Grammatical patterns of colour idioms in economic discourse

	Determiner + Adjective + Noun	
Phrase Patterns (Noun Phrase)	the black economy blue-chip company golden handshake	
Clause Patterns	Verb + complement	be/go green
	Verb + prepositional phrase	be/remain in the black/ in the red move into/ return to the black/ the red

Economic idioms seem to fall into two categories of grammatical patterns: phrase patterns (namely noun phrases) and clause patterns. Noun phrases follow the structure determiner + adjective + noun + prepositional phrase/clause (Cowie, 1993: xxxv). Most economic idioms are noun phrases made of an adjective and a noun, preceded or not by a determiner (black economy, a blue-collar worker, golden handcuffs, etc). Other economic idioms, less numerous than the previously mentioned category, follow clause patterns. There two types of clause patterns for economic colour idioms: a verb + complement pattern (be/go green) and a verb + prepositional phrase pattern (be/remain in the black/ in the red, move into/ return to the black/ the red). These patterns also indicate the relative degree of variability which they manifest. Moreover, at first sight some types of variation can also be identified, mainly noun and verbal inflections.

3. Types of variation of colour idioms in economic discourse

For the purpose of this investigation, I will make use of Cowie's classification of idioms based on the number of words to choose from in order to give shape to a meaningful idiom (Cowie, 1993) and of Langlotz's definition of idiomatic variability, seen as "a certain openness to lexicogrammatical malleability (Langlotz, 2006: 176). In addition, I will employ the expression "the base form of an idiom" in the sense circumscribed by Langlotz as "the idiom's citation-form in idiom dictionaries" (Langlotz, 2006: 178).

3.1. *Cowie's classification of idiomatic variation applied to economic colour idioms*

On the basis of the number of words to choose from in order to give birth to intelligible idiomatic constructions, Cowie has identified four main kinds of idiomatic variation: 1) obligatory vs. optional choice, 2) limited vs. open choice, 3) 'lexical' vs. 'grammatical choice' and 4) choice of words vs. choice of inflections (Cowie, 1993: xxi-xxii).

As far as obligatory versus optional variation is concerned, obligatory variation implies that one word (from several alternatives) must be chosen so that the idiomatic expression can make sense (Cowie, 1993: xxi). Let us have a look at the idiomatic construction "be/remain in the black" (with the meaning of "to be profitable"). The meaning of the idiom cannot be preserved without one of the two verbs: be or remain. Another example is the idiom "blue sky laws", meaning "state regulations established as safeguards for investors against securities fraud" (investopedia, Blue Sky Laws). The idiom cannot make sense without the word "sky", for instance. Optional choice means that parts of an idiom can be removed without any loss of meaning. For example, the idiom "cut the red tape" can be used in its abbreviated form "red tape" referring to "the formalities of business, or administrative procedure" (Cowie, [cut the] red tape) (Cowie, 1993: 478) without blurring the meaning of the idiom.

The second type of variation, limited vs. open choice, refers to the number of words that can be swapped for a part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, etc) that is a constitutive element of the idiom (Cowie, 1993: xxi). Hence, "limited choice" refers to an idiom which allows only a few words to be substituted for one of its components. The idiom "cut the red tape"

manifests limited variation since the verb “cut” can be replaced by its synonyms “minimize” or “eliminate”. The idiom “golden goodbye” can also be replaced by its synonym, “golden farewell”. Open choice variation implies that one element of the idiom can be replaced by a multitude of similar elements. Corpora findings have shown that economic colour idioms are not characterized by open choice variation, but rather by limited choice variation.

The third type of variation implies a choice between lexical words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) and grammatical words (articles, pronouns and modal verbs) (Cowie, 1993: xxii). A few colour economic idioms manifest lexical variation: “golden goodbye” and “golden farewell”, for instance. Other economic colour idioms may manifest a variation with regard to grammatical words, for example articles. “Black market” can manifest a zero article variation or can be used with the indefinite article “a” as in “a black market”.

The fourth type of variation shows restrictions in verbal and nominal inflections (Cowie, 1993: xxii). The idiom “golden share” is restricted to its singular form by its very definition while the idiom “golden handcuffs” is restricted to its plural form when used in its base form. Some other idioms such as “black market” or “white sale” can manifest pluralisation. As far as verbal inflections are concerned, the few verbal idiomatic structures that are part of the economic discourse (be/go green; be/remain in the black/red or move into/return to the black/red; cut the red tape) do not manifest restrictions, being used in various tenses.

While Cowie’s classification of idioms shows that colour economic idioms do manifest some degree of variability, it fails to indicate various functions that some economic colour idioms perform in the economic discourse. For this purpose, a different distribution of types of idiomatic variation can be suggested, based mainly on Langlotz’s classification (2006: 179).

3.2. Another categorization of colour idioms in economic discourse based mainly on Langlotz’s classification

This classification of colour idioms in economic discourse includes the following types of variation: lexical substitution, morpho-syntactic variation, syntactic variation, lexico-syntactic variation, extension through inclusion of a concept.

3.2.1. *Lexical substitution*

Lexical substitution presupposes the replacement of one element of the idiomatic structure with another element. The substitute can be a synonym, a near synonym or even an antonym. Lexical substitution based on synonymy manifest in the pair of idioms “golden goodbye” and “golden farewell” while lexical substitution based on antonymy manifests in the idioms “golden hello” versus “golden goodbye/farewell”. These idioms exemplify the interpersonal function in economic discourse, revealing not only practices established by companies but the type of interpersonal relationship which companies and employees aim to build: a relationship based on mutual advantage.

3.2.2. *Morpho-syntactic variation*

Morpho-syntactic variation manifests in both nominal and verbal inflection as well as in the use of determiners and quantifiers. The two clause patterns of verbal idiomatic structures of colour idioms in the economic discourse, verb + complement (go green) and verb + prepositional phrase (be/remain in the black/red or move to/return to the black/red) manifest inflection. “Go green” may appear in a to-infinitive form (Industries prepare to go green) or in a present perfect form (TEA drinking staff at Regent’s House have gone green! – with reference to the recycling efforts) (BNC). Let us look at the idiom “return to the black”, which manifests both in verbal and noun forms. As a verb, the idiom displays tense inflection: “NMW Computers, the computer bureau which specializes in settlement systems for the City, has returned to the black with pre-tax profits of £48,000 [...]” (BNC). The two verbal idioms serve an experiential function in the economic discourse. As a noun, “return to the black” can appear with the indefinite article “a” as in “Wickes, the timber and building material merchanting and retailing chain, yesterday reported a return to the black, with pre-tax profits soaring to £6.57 million [...]” (COCA).

Another instance of morpho-syntactic variation is the use of quantifiers. Let us look at the example “[he] has a little blue collar in him” in the sense that he has “a little middle class in him”(COCA). The quantifier “a little” performs an evaluative function, evaluating the individual from the point of view of social class membership. Other creative uses of quantifiers involve hyperbolic or almost hyperbolic constructions such as

“a sea of red ink” as in “[...] states face a sea of red ink as they look at next year’s budgets” (COCA) or “a bowl of red ink”, respectively, as in “[...] drown the country in a bowl of red ink” (COCA). Here, the function of these quantifiers is to intensify the meaning for the sake of emphasis.

3.2.3. *Syntactic variation*

Syntactic variation presupposes a “syntactic permutation” such as passivization. Let us have a look at the idiom “pink slip”, metaphorical formulation for a letter of dismissal. “Pink slip” appears in verbal collocations such as “get a pink slips”, “give a pink slip”, “dodge a pink slip” in which “pink slip” is a direct object. However, “pink slip” manifests another base form: the past participle form “pink slipped” as in “to be pink-slipped”, a passive construction. Here, the idiom fulfills both an experiential function and an interpersonal function, underlining the relationship between an employer and an employee being fired. Another subtype of syntactic variation rests on extension through post-modification by a prepositional phrase: “the red tape of locating financial assistance” or “a black market in illegal weapons”. The two extended idioms perform an ideational function, signifying various processes (red tape) and entities (a black market) of the economic world. Extension of an idiomatic construction can manifest through the inclusion of a new concept. Let us look at the example “green marketing myopia” in which the idiom “green marketing” is extended through the inclusion of another concept, “myopia”, thus giving birth to a new idiom “green marketing myopia”, referring to an overemphasis either on the environmental impact of various products at the expense of customers’ satisfaction or vice versa.

3.2.4. *Lexico-syntactic variation*

Corpus-based data indicate that some verbal idioms reflect an event either as a static event or as a dynamic event. This is the case of the idioms “be in the black/in the red” versus “remain in the black/the red” and “move into/return to the black/the red”. “To be in the black/red” is a static event, expressing a state of being. The idiom performs a descriptive function. The other category represents the event as dynamic and the companies and businesses that remain in/move into/ return to the black/the red” are seen as agents. This set of idioms performs a textual function (based on the type

of verbs, stative and non-stative, the subject is construed as static or dynamic).

4. Clusters of colour idioms in economic discourse

4.1. *The fertile manifestation of the noun “economy” in colour idioms*

Colours have a rich potential in developing clusters of idioms. The noun “economy”, when used idiomatically, results in ingenious, newly-forged expressions, which enrich and colour the economic discourse, expressing already-known realities or subtly revealing economic and social changes in society. If the term “the black economy”, meaning “business activity or work that is done without the knowledge of the government or officials so that people can avoid paying tax on the money they earn” (Parkinson, the black economy) (Parkinson, 2006: 42), reflects an already established reality, “the blue economy” or “the brown economy”, for instance, illustrate new developments. Coined perhaps by specialists in their search for original and expressive terminology, these terms are distributed and made known through media channels. “The blue economy” refers to economic activities based on recycling. “The brown economy” includes highly polluting industries such as cement, iron smelting or coal mining industries. “The grey economy” refers to a kind of economic activity which, although not illegal, is considered an “informal activity which the government is unaware of”. “The green economy” makes reference to economic activities which are environmentally-friendly and which aim to protect or, at least, do the minimum harm to the environment. “The red economy” is used to express a political and economic reality: a communist economy, characterized by state control. “The white economy”, apparently coined by Professor Douglas McWilliams, a British economist, in the book “The Flat Economy: How the Digital Economy is Transforming London and Other Cities” (2015), reflects a major economic change: the emergence of digital industries (Anani, 2018).

4.2. Idiomatic manifestations of colours in economic idioms

4.2.1. Black

“Black” appears in well-known expressions, such as *black economy*, *black market*, *black money*, *black marketer*, *black payment*, *black knight*, *to be/remain in the black* or *to move into/ return to the black*. From this enumeration, only the following idioms have returned hits in the BNC: “black economy” (43 hits), “black market” (158 hits), “black marketer” (2 hits) and “black money” (2 hits). The expression “black knights” returns 22 hits in the BNC but none of them manifest the economic idiomatic meaning of “a company that tries to buy another company that does not want to be bought or offers too low a price” (Parkinson, 2006: 42). The prepositional phrase “in the black” displays the economic meaning “to make a profit or to start making a profit” (38 hits in the BNC). To use Cowie’s categorization, it can be maintained that “black” manifests neither a minimal, nor a limited variation, but rather a fairly open variation, collocating with nouns such as “economy”, “market”, “marketeer”, “money”, “night”, “payment”. The idiom “black market” can also be used with an indefinite and a definite article. As far as inflection is concerned, “black market” can also appear in the plural form “black markets” while the clause patterns “be/remain in the black” and “move into/return to the black” displays tense inflection since they can be used as finite verb constructions in various tenses.

4.2.2. Blue

Initially, “blue” manifests a restricted variation” being present in the fairly common expressions “blue collar” and “blue chip”. But if taken as phrases with an adjectival value, then “blue-collar” and “blue-chip” display a reasonably open variation. “Blue-chip” with an adjectival value (47 hits in the BNC) is often encountered accompanying the noun “company” (in both singular and plural forms). “Blue-chip” is used to define other nouns such as “equities”, “businesses”, “shares”, “stocks”, “convertibles”, “financial institutions”, “brands”, “clients”, “loan”, according to the BNC. Similarly, “blue-collar” also manifests an adjectival value as in “blue-collar worker(s)”. This value returns 39 hits in the BNC, the noun “worker(s)” being replaced by other nouns such as “labour”, “labour force”, “job(s)”, “work”, “voter(s)”, “organization”, “productivity”,

“patriotism”. Additionally, the two expressions, “blue-chip” and “blue-collar” manifest metaphorical extension. Initially, the meaning of “blue chip” referred to a chip, “a small piece of plastic used instead of money when gambling” (Rundell, chip) (Rundell, 2002: 236) of colour blue which, in the game of poker, represented the highest value (What is a ‘Blue Chip’). Now, “blue chips” is an informal name for “the shares of the best known companies on the stock market, which are considered to be a safe investment” (Parkinson, blue chip) (Parkinson, 2006: 44). Similarly, the original meaning of “blue collar” referred to the colour of shirts traditionally worn by workers who did physical labour (What is a ‘Blue Collar’). Today, “blue-collar” as an adjective is used to refer to “workers who do physical work in industry” (Parkinson, blue-collar) (Parkinson, 2006: 44).

4.2.3. *Golden*

“Golden” is an inventive colour that gives birth to imaginative idioms which manifest lexical variation. “Golden share”, “golden handcuffs”, “golden handshake”, “golden parachute” are some of the best known idioms to which one can add less frequent ones, perhaps, such as “golden hello”, “golden goodbye” and its synonym, “golden farewell”. “Golden handcuffs”, meaning “a large amount of money and other financial benefits that are given to sb. to persuade them to continue working for a company rather than leaving to work for another company” (Parkinson, golden handcuffs) (Parkinson, 2006: 214) manifests restricted plural inflection. The BNC returns 6 hits for “golden handcuffs”, one of which with an adjectival value: “Golden handcuffs share scheme” (BNC). With the same adjectival value, the idiom also appears in the singular form in one example in the BNC “£2m of ‘golden handcuff’ bonus payments” (BNC). It is commonly used in the verbal structures “to offer golden handcuffs” (also in the passive form, “to be offered the golden handcuffs”, thus showing some structural flexibility) or “to wear the golden handcuffs”.

“Golden handshake”, “a large amount of money given by a company to an employee when they retire or when they are forced to leave their job” (Parkinson, golden handshake) (Parkinson, 2006: 214) returns 24 hits in the BNC and manifests limited lexical variation. As a noun, it can be used with both the indefinite and the definite articles. With an adjectival

value, it appears in expressions such as “the golden handshake rules”, “golden handshake tax”, “golden handshake transactions” or “golden handshake payments”. It appears in the verbal structures “to be treated as a golden handshake” or “to get a golden handshake” (BNC). The idiom can also be used in its plural form, “golden handshakes”, the BNC returning 8 hits (BNC).

“Golden share”, meaning “a share in a company that gives the holder, usu. the government, the power to stop any changes to the company that they do not approve of” (Parkinson, golden share) (Parkinson, 2006: 214) returns 27 hits (in its singular form) and 4 hits (in its plural form) in the BNC, manifesting a flexible inflection. In the singular form, the idiom can be preceded by both the definite and the indefinite article and it often appears in the verbal constructions “to withdraw the golden share” and “to hold the golden share”. It can also be used with an adjectival value in “the golden share protection” (BNC).

“Golden parachute”, meaning “a part of a contract in which a company promises to give a large sum of money to a very senior employee if they have to leave their job, for example if the company is bought by another company; the money that is given” (Parkinson, golden parachute) (Parkinson, 2006: 214), returns 5 hits (in its singular form) and 2 hits (in its plural form) in the BNC. So, the singular/plural inflection is not a strict one. When used with an adjectival value, the idiom appears in expressions such as “golden parachute payments” or “golden parachute arrangements”, manifesting a limited lexical variation. It also appears in the verbal structure “to benefit from a ‘golden parachute’” (BNC).

Of the less frequent economic idioms based on the colour “golden”, namely “the golden hello”, “the golden goodbye” and “the golden farewell”, only “the golden hello” appears in the BNC where it returns 5 hits. The metaphorical extension that manifests in these three examples is also illustrative of the human resources policies of companies. The definition of “the golden hello”, “a large amount of money or other financial benefits given by a company to some new employees in order to attract good people” (Parkinson, golden hello) (Parkinson, 2006: 214) indicates a company’s recruitment policies in order to attract and retain talented employees. The definition of “the golden goodbye” or “the golden farewell”, “a large amount of money given by a company to a senior employee when they are forced to leave their job before they want to”

(Parkinson, golden goodbye) (Parkinson, 2006: 214) is illustrative of companies' retirement or redundancy policies.

4.2.4. *Green*

Green is another resourceful colour for idiom formation. "Green-chip stocks", "green-collar workers", "green consumerism", "green marketing", "be green" or "go green" are idioms that often appear in the economic news bulletins or in newspaper articles tackling environmental issues. The BNC returns one hit for "green chip" in the name of an investment fund, "the Green Chip Investment Fund"(BNC). "Green-chip stocks" is already present in the electronic media although not in the BNC. Investopedia.com defines "green-chip stocks" as "shares of companies whose primary business is beneficial to the environment"(What are 'Green Chip Stocks'). Furthermore, "green-collar worker", derived from "blue-collar worker" or "white-collar worker" is defined by Investopedia as "an employee of the environmental sector who focuses on sustainability and conservation" (What is 'Green collar'). "Green-chip" and "green-collar" manifest a minimal obligatory variation.

The idiom "green marketing", although not returned by BNC, is already defined by both specialized websites and business dictionaries as "marketing that tries to present a product or company as not harmful to the environment" (Parkinson, green marketing) (Parkinson, 2006: 217). The idiom "green consumerism", in contrast with the previous two idioms", is present in specialized business dictionaries and defined as an attitude of customers who "choose to buy and use products that cause the least harm to the environment" (Parkinson, green consumerism) (Parkinson, 2006: 216). The BNC returns 17 hits for "green consumerism".

The idioms "to be green" and "to go green" (based on the pattern verb + complement) are present in the BNC. "To be green" (as an attitude or lifestyle that is environmentally-friendly) returns 11 hits in the BNC. "To go green" returns 8 hits in the BNC. Both verb patterns manifest minimal obligatory variation and appear in the long infinitive form in verbal structures such as "claim to be green", "be seen to be green", "be thought to go green", "prepare to go green" or "promise to go green" (BNC).

4.2.5. *Grey*

Grey is a colour often present in the economic discourse dealing with issues which, although not considered illegal, are shrouded in a veil of mystery: “grey market”, “grey trade” or “grey knight”. “Grey market”, when circumscribed to the financial domain, is defined as “the buying and selling of new shares before they are officially issued on the stock market” (Parkinson, grey market) (Parkinson, 2006: 217). When circumscribed to the economic domain, it is defined as “the buying and selling of goods that have not been obtained from an official supplier, usu. at a lower price than the official price” (Parkinson, grey market) (Parkinson, 2006: 217). For both these meanings, the BNC returns 32 hits. The choice of words that collocate with “grey market” is fairly limited: “grey market trading”, “grey market price”, “grey market activity”, “trading on the grey market”, “the development of the grey market”, “unofficial grey market” (BNC).

“Grey knight” is another idiom with a suggestive metaphorical extension. It describes “a third company or person that is a possible buyer for another company. They are ‘grey’ because it is not known if they will be good or bad for the company” (Parkinson, grey knight) (Parkinson, 2006: 217). It is often used in newspaper articles dealing with financial and business news, but it is not returned by the BNC. Neither are “grey trade” and “grey goods”. It should be mentioned, however, that although it contains the colour “grey”, the idiom “grey goods” does not refer to goods that have been purchased from an unofficial supplier, but to “computer equipment” (Parkinson, grey goods) (Parkinson, 2006: 217).

4.2.6 *Pink*

Pink, as an element of an idiomatic construction, manifests a restricted choice of words. It appears in three constructions already confirmed by usage in specialized domains: “pink slip”, “pink-collar worker”, “Pink Sheets”. “Pink slip” is an informal term used in the human resources domain to refer to “a letter given to sb. to say that they must leave their job”. It is a metaphorical way of saying that somebody has been fired. It can manifest verbal inflection when used in the past participle form “to be pink-slipped” (Parkinson, pink slip) (Parkinson, 2006: 353). “Pink-collar” is another idiomatic element with an adjectival value used with reference to “jobs with low pay that are done mainly by women, for

example in offices”, for example, “pink-collar” workers (Parkinson, pink-collar) (Parkinson, 2006: 353). It displays a minimal choice of words. “Pink Sheets” is a financial term used in the United States to refer to “a list of the latest prices of OVER-THE-COUNTER shares, that is published every day” (Parkinson, Pink Sheets) (Parkinson, 2006: 353). It displays a restricted inflection, being used only in the plural form.

4.2.7. *Red*

When used in the economic discourse, the colour “red” mainly refers to loss of money in the balance sheets of companies. In such circumstances, the idioms “in the red”, “red ink”, “be/remain in the red” or “move into/ return to the red” are often used. “In the red” is used in connection with the financial situation of a company or person when “more money [is] being spent than there is available” (Rundell, red) (Rundell, 2002: 1182). The expression “in the red” returns 63 hits when used idiomatically, with the meaning of “being in debt”. “In the red” is also used in the verbal constructions “be/remain in the red” and “move/return to the red” (Parkinson, 2006: 394). As verbal constructions, they manifest an open choice of words as illustrated by the information provided by the dictionary entry: “be, remain, etc in the red” and “move into, return to, etc the red”. The abbreviation etc suggests an open choice of words. In addition, these expressions may manifest past tense inflection: “the company went into the red in 1984” (Collin, red) (Collin, 1986: 248). The idiom “in the red” also manifests minimal variation as far as prepositions are concerned. It can also appear in the expression “out of the red” (Collin, red) (Collin, 1986: 248).

“Red ink” is another idiom that illustrates the financial situation or people or businesses which are in debt. “Red ink” as an idiom returns 16 hits in the BNC, it can be preceded by the preposition “in” and is used in expressions such “be awash in red ink” or “to swim in red ink”(BNC), manifesting a minimal obligatory variation. “Red chip” is a term generally used in financial news bulletins or press articles. Derived from “blue chip”, “red chip” manifests a minimal choice of words being part of the idioms “red-chip company”, a Chinese company based in “Mainland China but incorporated internationally and listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange” (Definition of ‘Red Chip’) and the idiom “red-chip stocks”.

“Red tape”, meaning “bureaucracy” (Parkinson, red tape) (Parkinson, 2006: 395) appears in the idiomatic structure “(cut the) red tape”, which manifests an optional choice of words, as suggested by the dictionary entry (Cowie, 1993: 478). The structure can be used in a non-finite form (cutting the red tape” and may have a reversible order when used with the quantifier “a lot of” as in “a lot of red tape to be cut” (Cowie, 1993: 478).

4.2.8. *White*

As far as the colour “white” is concerned, perhaps the most familiar idiom is “white-collar worker(s)”, people who work “in an office rather than in a factory” (Parkinson, white-collar) (Parkinson, 2006: 528). The idiom returns 228 hits in the BNC and is characterized by an open choice of lexical words since the noun “worker(s)” can be replaced by many others such as: union(s), group(s), employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, staff, professional(s), occupation(s), services, job(s), crime(s), families, proletariat, elite, etc (BNC). As shown, the idiom manifests plural inflection.

“White goods”, “white knight” and “white sale” are other idioms, though not as common as the one above since they are circumscribed to specialized domains such as commerce and finance. “White goods”, defined as “large pieces of electrical equipment in the home” (Parkinson, white goods) (Parkinson, 2006: 528), always manifests plural inflection and returns 5 hits in the BNC. “White knight” is a specialized financial term which refers to “a person or an organization that rescues a company from being bought by another at too low a price” (Parkinson, white knight) (Parkinson, 2006: 528). It returns 17 hits in the BNC. “White sale” is a commercial term” that refers to “an occasion when a shop/store sells goods at a much lower price than usual” (Parkinson, white sale) (Parkinson, 2006: 528). It does not return any hits in the BNC and it seems that over time, the idiom has change meaning since it used to mean “sale of sheets or towels” (Collin, white sale) (Collin, 1986: 329).

4.2.9. *Yellow*

In economic discourse, idioms based on the colour yellow refer to the relationship between employers and employees in relation to union

membership. Such idioms include “yellow union”, “yellow-dog contract” or “yellow-dog clause”. “Yellow union” is defined as “a union set up and/or controlled by the employer to prevent the establishment of a genuine trade union” (International Trade Union Confederation, Glossary, yellow union). “A yellow-dog contract” is “an agreement between an employer and an employee in which the employee agrees, as a condition of employment, not to join a union during the course of his employment” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, yellow-dog contract). The idioms perform an interpersonal function, establishing the relationship between employers and employees in relation to a specific aspect. As far as variation is concerned, the idioms manifest morpho-syntactic variation since through nominal inflection as well as lexical substitution through synonymy: the element “contract” can be replaced by the element “clause”. The last two idioms also require an obligatory choice of words in order for the idioms to make sense: “yellow contract” or “dog contract” are not enough to make sense.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was twofold: to show that colour idioms in economic discourse are variable and to identify types of variation reflected by this subgroup of colour idioms and some functions they perform in economic discourse. Colour idioms in economic discourse manifest a relative degree of variability and prove that can be exploited creatively, giving birth to new concepts and idioms. The empirical investigation based on two corpora show that the base form of these idioms is a stable one, limited to two patterns: a noun phrase pattern and a clause pattern. According to Langlotz’s schema of idiomatic variation, these idioms are both lexically and syntactically relatively malleable. In addition, these idioms allow for an extension through post-determination, which further emphasizes their creative force. Many of them, especially when used with an adjectival value, display a surprisingly open lexical variation, such as, for instance “white-collar”. Some colour idiomatic structures are also characterized by both nominal and verbal inflection. Other idioms which are part of verbal constructions may also show a reversible order of words. The metaphorical extension which characterizes all of them proves the creative potential of this specific category of idioms, able to illustrate major changes in present-day society.

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