

The Book of General Ignorance
by John Lloyd and John Mitchinson
Published by Faber + Faber Limited
2006

What colour was the sky in ancient Greece?

Bronze. There is no word for 'blue' in ancient Greek.

The nearest words – *glaukos* and *kyanos* – are more like expressions of the relative intensity of light and darkness than attempts to describe the colour.

The ancient Greek poet Homer mentions only four actual colours in the whole of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, roughly translated as black, white, greenish yellow (applied to honey, sap and blood) and purply red.

When Homer calls the sky 'bronze', he means that it is

dazzlingly bright, like the sheen of a shield, rather than 'bronze-coloured'. In a similar spirit, he regarded wine, the sea and sheep as all being the same colour – purply red.

Aristotle identified seven shades of colour, all of which he thought derived from black and white, but these were really grades of brightness, not colour.

It's interesting that an ancient Greek from almost 2,500 years ago and NASA's Mars rovers of 2006 both approach colour in the same way.

In the wake of Darwin, the theory was advanced that the early Greeks' retinas had not evolved the ability to perceive colours, but it is now thought they grouped objects in terms of qualities other than colour, so that a word which seems to indicate 'yellow' or 'light green' really meant fluid, fresh and living, and so was appropriately used to describe blood, the human sap.

This is not as rare as you might expect. There are more languages in Papua New Guinea than anywhere else in the world but, apart from distinguishing between light and dark, many of them have no other words for colour at all.

Classical Welsh has no words for 'brown', 'grey', 'blue' or 'green'. The colour spectrum is divided in a completely different way. One word (*glas*) covered part of green; another the rest of green, the whole of blue and part of grey; a third dealt with the rest of grey and most, or part, of brown.

Modern Welsh uses the word *glas* to mean blue, but Russian has no single word for 'blue'. It has two – *goluboi* and *sinii* – usually translated 'light blue' and 'dark blue', but, to Russians, they are distinct, different colours, not different shades of the same colour.

All languages develop their colour terms in the same way. After black and white, the third colour to be named is always red, the fourth and fifth are green and yellow (in either order), the sixth is blue and the seventh brown. Welsh still doesn't have a word for brown.