

On the origin of Italian adjectival colour compounds of the type *grigioverde* ‘grey-green’

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Abstract

Intersective Italian adjective-adjective compounds of the type *grigio-verde* ‘grey-green’ first became frequent in languages for specific purposes in the 18th century. In this paper, I intend to show that both the chronology and the genre restriction are naturally explained if we assume that these Italian compounds are adaptations of the corresponding Neo-Latin type, which was itself an innovation of the 17th century.

KEYWORDS: adjective-adjective compounds • colour terms • Neo-Latin • Italian • language history

1. Introduction

Colours have been at the centre of Maria Grossmann’s scholarly interest right from the start of her career in real-socialist Bucharest (cf. Grossmann & Mazzoni 1972). The chromatic climax was reached in the 1980s with her Tübingen dissertation on the semantics of colour adjectives in six languages (Grossmann 1988), but in more recent times she has returned to the subject area in a couple of papers coauthored by Paolo D’Achille, dedicated either specifically to the history of adjectival colour compounds (D’Achille & Grossmann 2013) or to adjective-adjective compounds more generally (D’Achille & Grossmann 2009, 2010). In their 2013 paper D’Achille & Grossmann point out that Old Italian preferred syntactic means for expressing intermediate colour shades, while compounds did not become frequent before the 18th century. They first appeared in languages for specific purposes and only later on in literary texts. Both facts made the authors think that these compounds follow “il modello dei composti classici” [the model of classical compounds] (D’Achille & Grossmann 2013: 2168), where ‘classical’ was meant to refer to Neo-Latin. In my contribution to the Festschrift for our colourful colleague I would like to corroborate this conclusion by tackling the problem from an onomasiological perspective.

2. The expression of intermediate shades in Classical Latin and in Neo-Latin

The Italian compounds expressing intermediate shades, of the type *grigioverde* ‘grey-green’, could not, in fact, be imitations of Classical-Latin models for the simple reason that Classical Latin had no established pattern of compounds of this type. In André’s (1949: 229–232) section on “Les composés”, several Latin compounds containing a colour term are listed, but none of the type adjective + adjective. D’Achille & Grossmann (2009: 145) mention *nigrogemmeus* (glossed as ‘resplending and dark’) from Solinus (3rd c.) and *albogilvus* ‘white-yellowish’ from Servius (4th/5th c.) documented in Bader (1962), but these examples are too marginal to be taken into consideration as potential starting points for the Italian or even the Neo-Latin pattern. When Roman writers wanted to express a shade that had no name of its own but was situated between two established colours, they resorted to syntactic patterns, for example, the construction type *ex nigro viridis* ‘black-green; lit. from black green’. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (OLD) registers this construction under 13c in the entry dedicated to the preposition *ex*: “(indicating a transitional stage between one quality and another) *cutis* [...] *colorem* [...] *habet ex rubro subnigrum* CELS.5.28.4.B [...] *basis* [...] *e uiridi rubentibus* PLIN.Nat.15.127.”

The writers of the Renaissance still followed this Classical-Latin usage. Gesnerus¹ (1565), however, preferred the preposition *in*, i.e. the pattern *in nigro viridis*; he did not use in his Latin adjective-adjective compounds any more than the writers of Roman Antiquity. I hereafter quote some of Gesner's examples together with his own German translations:

In rubro fuluum. Rothgelbes eckstein. (p. 22r)
'red-yellow; lit. in red yellow'²

In candido flauum. Gelblichter. (p. 23r)
'white-yellow; lit. in white yellow'

in rubro niger [...] bräunlicher (p. 34r)
'red-black; lit. in red black'

In viridi nigra. Schwartzgrün. (p. 51v)
'green-black; lit. in green black'

Hydrensis in rubro nigra [...] Ein schwarzroth quecksilber ertz auß Hidria (p. 65)
'red-black quick-silver from Hydria; lit. in black red'

Some of these examples are also valuable because they show that German, contrary to Latin (and Italian, as we will see), at that time already routinely expressed intermediate shades by means of adjective-adjective compounds (*rothgelb*, *schwartzgrün*, *schwartzroth*), a fact that is also amply documented in Jones (2013)³.

The situation we found in Gesnerus (1565) still obtains in Caesius⁴ (1636), whose expressive means are decidedly more varied than Gesner's but still ignore the adjective-adjective type. In the following enumeration, I provide a representative sample of passages from Section 4 of Chapter 3, entitled "De colorum divisione":

ex albo nigricans (169a)
'greyish; lit. from white being-black'

Rauus color, fuluus est, nigroris aliquid habens (169a)
'The colour *rauus* is a kind of orange with a touch of black'

ex caeruleo tendens in viridem (169a)
'blue (lit. from blue) tending towards green'

Luridus [...] ex viridi, & nigro intermixtus (171a)
'green-yellow, mixed with some black'

caeruleus virore permixtus (183b)
'blue mixed with green'

¹ Conradus Gesnerus [Conrad Gesner] (1516–1565), a Swiss doctor, naturalist and philologist.

² The English glosses of Latin colour terms are just meant to give a rough idea. The exact colour referred to by a Latin colour term is not always easy to fix, and the chromatic correspondences between Latin and English colour terms are quite intricate. Furthermore, the intransitive/stative Latin colour verbs are difficult to translate; in the literal glosses I render their participial forms with the formula "being + colour adjective".

³ I will only treat intermediate shades in this paper. Nevertheless, it might be of interest for future diachronic studies of the coordinative type to learn that alternate colors are also expressed syntactically in Gesner (1565), although with different patterns:

Lapis colore nigro & rubro, parens sulfuris. Ein schwarz unnd roth gemengt schwebelstein (p. 19r)

squamis [...] partim luteis, partim nigris (p. 41v)

Virides com luteis pellucidis striatim mixti. (p. 43v)

Purpurei viridibus striatim appositi & permixti. (p. 44)

⁴ Bernardus Caesius [Bernardo Cesio] (1581–1630), a Jesuit from Modena (Italy). His treatise on mineralogy was published posthumously.

Color [...] qui est inter rufum, & nigrum, [...] heluus dicitur (169b)
'The colour between red and black is called *heluus*'

Quidam tamen melinum colorem volunt esse medium inter album, & fuscum (170b)
'Some say *melinum* is a colour intermediate between white and dark'

croceus enim sensim flauescens transit in viridem (182b)
'(the colour) saffron gradually turns into golden yellow and then into green'

Things changed in the 17th century, especially in the second half. First adjective-adjective compounds started creeping into Neo-Latin texts. Here are some of the earliest examples which I could spot on Google Books (since they can easily be retrieved from the Internet, I simply quote the year of edition of the source, the name of the author, part of the title, as well as the page number):

atrovirens (1620, Gaspard Bauhin, *Prodromos theatri botanici*, p. 1)
'black-green; lit. black being-green'

nigro-purpureum (1641, Johann Schröder, *Pharmacopoeia*, p. 180)
'black-purple'

cinereo-fuscus (1657, Jan Jonston, *Historia naturalis*, p. 144)
'grey-dark'

luteo-viridis (1659, Denis Joncquet, *Hortus*, p. 97)
'yellow-green'

atro-fusca (1676, *Ornithologiae libri tres*, p. 100)
'black-dark'

nigro-luteum (1676, Pierre Magnol, *Botanicum Monspeliense*, p. 119)
'black-yellow'

Michelius⁵ (1729) shows that, by the beginning of the 18th century, the traditional syntactic means of the Antiquity and the Renaissance already lived together in harmony with the new type of compound in one and the same work. Syntax and compounding each provide more or less half of the expressions for intermediate shades in this work (it will be enough to quote the types of the first 70 pages):

atro-virens (p. 9)
'black-green; lit. black being-green'

nigro-purpureum (p. 10)
'black-purple'

ex obscuro virescens (p. 10)
'dark-green; lit. from dark being-green'

floribus ex viridi pallescentibus (p. 13)
'green-pale flowers; lit. from green being-pale'

colore [...] luteo-viridi (p. 16)
'yellow-green colour'

flore ex albo purpurascens (p. 23)
'white-purple flower; lit. from white being-purple'

è luteo virescentibus (p. 29)
'yellow-green; lit. from yellow being-green'

⁵ Petrus Antonius Michelius [Pier Antonio Micheli] (1679–1737), an Italian botanist.

spicis [...] *fusco-ferrugineis* (p. 56)
 ‘dark-rust-coloured ears’

capsulis [...] *spadiceo-viridibus* (p. 59)
 ‘brown-green capsules; lit. brown being-green’

squamis è spadiceo, vel fusco rutilante viridibus (p. 60)
 ‘brown-green or grey-dark red scales; lit. from brown or dark-being-red green’

Graminis nigro-lutei (p. 62)
 ‘black-yellow grass’

squamis [...] *atro-rufis* (p. 63)
 ‘black-red scales’

capitulis [...] *atro-fuscis* (p. 68)
 ‘black-dark heads’

cinereo-virescentibus ramulis (p. 75)
 ‘grey-green twigs; lit. grey being-green’

Lichen [...] *cinereo-rufescens* (p. 75)
 ‘a grey-red lichen; lit. grey being-red’

e glauco subvirescens (p. 75)
 ‘grey-greenish; lit. from grey being-greenish’

ex cinereo rutilans (p. 77; on the same page also: *ex cinereo-rutilans*, with a hyphen)
 ‘grey-reddish; lit. from grey being-reddish’

cinereo-fuscus (p. 78)
 ‘grey-dark’

ex cinereo virescens (p. 80)
 ‘grey-green; lit. from grey being-green’

e cinereo-viridi rufescens (p.80)
 ‘grey-green red; lit. from grey-green being-red’

e cinereo viridans (p.80; on the same page also: *e cinereo-viridans*, with a hyphen)
 ‘grey-green; lit. from grey being-green’

e viridi obsolete lutescens (p. 80)
 ‘green-yellow; lit. from green being-yellow’

It is this change in Neo-Latin that we have to bear in mind if we want to understand why Italian compounds of the type *grigioverde* originate in the 18th century, as correctly observed by D’Achille & Grossmann (2013)⁶.

3. The Italian usage up to the Renaissance

D’Achille & Grossmann (2013: 2160) claim that intersective⁷ colour compounds of the type adjective-adjective are already occasionally attested in Old Italian, but they remain somewhat hesitant about the

⁶ The Neo-Latin colour compounds of the type *atro-rufus* are a side-line of the adjective-adjective pattern *ethico-moralis*, which was itself a Neo-Latin innovation of the late 16th century, probably due to German-speaking humanists (cf. Hatcher 1951; Lindner & Rainer 2015: 1587; on the integration of this compound type into Italian, cf. Grossmann & Rainer 2009: 74–75).

⁷ I will not here take into consideration determinative compounds of the type *verde chiaro* ‘light green’, whose history seems to be quite different from that of intersective compounds. It seems to me that many of the older examples of determinative compounds quoted in D’Achille & Grossmann (2013) should probably be viewed more conservatively as syntactic constructions. A phrase such as “tremantina [...] bionda chiara” (14th c., Pegolotti) should probably be given the bracketing

exact usage and status of these compounds, as well as about the question of their potential origin. Since there are no Classical-Latin antecedents, one would probably have to think of such compounds as the result of an endogenous process of univerbation. The number of known examples, however, is still exceedingly small, and the interpretation of these is not without philological problems. As D’Achille & Grossmann (2161, n. 10) point out, the expression *verdegiallo* of Boccaccio’s “viso verdegiallo” [green-yellow face] (1354–1355) appears as “verde, giallo” in the edition used by the *OVI*, whose lexicographers probably used the edition that looked most authoritative to them from a modern perspective.

Whatever the correct interpretation of this expression may be, the fact remains that the univerbated form *verdegiallo* became established already in older editions of Boccaccio and therefore may have exerted some influence on the use of compounds with *verde* as a first member in the Italian literary language of the following centuries. D’Achille & Grossmann (2013: 2161) themselves mention that *verdegiallo* was taken up by Ariosto in 1532 and that it received the approval of the Accademia della Crusca. According to the *GDLI*, the compound was also used by Daniello Bartoli (before 1685) and Francesco Redi (before 1698). The *GDLI* also provides one example of *verdebruno* from the second half of the 14th century (“veste verdebruna”, Franco Sacchetti), one of *verdazzurro*, used as a noun (‘lapis lazuli’), from the end of the Middle Ages (*Ricettario fiorentino*, edited in 1498)⁸, one of *verdenegro* from around 1600 (Bartolomeo Crescenzio) and one of *verdenero* from before 1623 (Pantero Pantera). The suspicion that these *verde*-compounds might eventually have been sparked off by Boccaccio’s *verdegiallo* – whether apocryphous or not – is strengthened by the observation that for none of the compounds in the *GDLI* that have as a first member *bianco* ‘white’, *rosso* ‘red’, *bruno* ‘brown’, *grigio* ‘grey’, or *nero* ‘black’ examples prior to the 19th century are attested⁹.

Boccaccio’s example, however, might not be the only relevant case from Old Tuscan. Each example, however, will have to be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny as the case of Boccaccio just mentioned, in order to make sure that the univerbation is really in the original manuscript and has not been added by the editors on the basis of a more modern linguistic sensibility. D’Achille and Grossmann quote the following two additional examples in their article, both possibly amenable to alternative interpretations:

panni [...] due verdi kiari e due verdi bruni (Doc. fior., 1278–1279) (p. 2157, 2163)
 cianbellotto rosato biadecto (Ranieri Sardo, 1399) (p. 2161)

All things considered, it seems that intersective colour compounds may well have existed in Old Tuscan, at least as an incipient category, which, if this was indeed the case, must have arisen through an endogenous process of univerbation. Be that as it may, an analysis of Imperato (1599) shows that by that time such compounds had not yet made their way into ‘standard Italian’ (whatever that could have meant for a Neapolitan writer such as Imperato in 1599). The subject matter of Imperato’s book obliged him to speak continuously about intermediary shades of colours, but despite this fact he never resorted to a compound of the *grigioverde* type. All his expressions are syntactic. One such means of expressing intermediate shades that he cherished is an obvious calque of the Latin pattern *in nigro viridis* that we have already found abundantly in Gesnerus (1565):

[[trementina bionda] chiara], not [trementina [bionda chiara]], and similarly for other examples. This does not exclude the possibility that at some later moment in the history of the language a reanalysis may have taken place.

⁸ Note that the adjectival use is only attested in the *GDLI* in the second half of the 18th century. At first sight, the noun looks like a conversion of the corresponding adjective-adjective compound, but the following example from Imperato (1599: 95) could also point to another possible interpretation of the origin of the noun, namely as a colour name where the noun *verde* was specified by the adjective *azzurro*: “Minerali sono, la cerussa, gialolino, minio, cinabrio, biadetto, verde detto montagna, e verde azzurro: [...]”.

⁹ The only exception I have found is *rossinegro* (around 1600, Bartolomeo Crescenzio), which is also surprising because it contains a linking vowel *-i-* typical of Spanish, but not of Italian compounds.

marga [...] nel rosso nera, e colombina [...] nell'azzurro verdeggiante (p. 21)
'red-black marl, and a blue-greenish kind of mineral'

L'acque [...] di Auerno nereggiano nel celeste. (p. 162)
'The waters of hell are blackish-blue; lit. blacken in the blue'

fumi gialli nel rosso (p. 523)
'yellow-red smoke'

si veggono alcuni di essi nel biondo chiari ; altri oscuri, e nel biondo neri (pp. 654–655)
'some of these are blond-bright, others dark, blond-black'

sono per lo più di color bianco nel fumoso (p. 659)
'they are mostly white-smokey'

pulito rosseggia alquanto nel nero (p. 686)
'when polished it is somewhat red-black; lit. reddens in the black'

li fiorini, che nel bianco porporeggiano (p. 755)
'the florins, which are white-purple; lit. which purple in the white'

Despite its popularity with Imperato, this calque did not gain definitive citizenship in Italian, which a century later will rather opt for compounding as the main means of expressing intermediate shades. In the absence of this handy means a great number of somewhat roundabout circumlocutions had to be resorted to:

di color [verde] accompagnato con azzurro (p. 111)
'green accompanied by blue'

La terra paunazza è di color rossaccio & azzurro partecipe (p. 121)
'the purple earth participates in the red and blue colour'

di color fumoso tra il nero e cinereo mezzano (p. 141)
'of a smokey colour in the middle between black and ash-grey'

di color tra l'ochra e fuligine (p. 154)
'of a colour between ochre and soot'

al ceruleo & verde inchina (p. 394)
'tends towards blue and green'

di color giallo, che imita l'arancio (p. 431)
'of a yellow colour that imitates the orange'

di color che del celestino e del nero alquanto partecipa (p. 466)
'of a colour that participates both in blue and black'

fumo giallo & aureo (p. 472)
'yellow and golden smoke'

hanno il color rosso pendente al paonazzo agre, e crudo (p. 600)
'they have a red colour leaning towards purple'

accostandosi al color del vino, non pigliano interamente il suo colore, ma passa in viola (p. 617)
'coming close to the colour of wine, they do not match it entirely, but turn into purple'

di color bianco, che v'è al cinereo (p. 774)
'of a white colour going towards ash-grey'

These examples from Imperato (1599) probably are quite representative of the usage in Italian before the big change that the language witnessed in this area in the 18th century.

4. The establishment of intersective colour compounds in the 18th century

As already pointed out by D'Achille & Grossmann (2013), intersective colour compounds of the type adjective + adjective only became really current in Italian in the 18th century. In the light of what we have seen so far, this is perfectly to be expected if we assume that present-day compounds of the type *grigio-verde* are not descendants of those few Old Tuscan compounds – if indeed they can be called compounds – that have become known to date, but adaptations of the Neo-Latin type that established itself in the second half of the 17th century. Italian followed Neo-Latin with a delay of 50 to 100 years.

A source that permits us to observe this process of adaptation almost *in fieri* is the translation into Italian in 1778 of Giovanni Antonio Scopoli's *Principia*, which had first been published in Latin in 1772. As can be seen in the following examples, by that time Italian had fully adopted the Neo-Latin compound type, at least at the level of languages for specific purposes.

particulis [...] atro-plumbeis (§ 44) / di colore oscuro-piombino (§ XLIV)
'black-lead-grey particles'

vitrum fusco-rubens (§210) / di color fosco-rosso 164 (§ CCX)
'black-red glass'

color atro-fuscus (§ 212) / coloriti di un nero-fosco 166 (§ CCXII)
'black-dark colour'

cum flamma luteo-viridi (§ 225) / con fiamma giallo-verde 175 (§ XXXIV)¹⁰
'with a yellow-green flame'

[Pseudogalena] saepius tamen fusco-flava (§ 226) / per lo più però di giallo fosco (§ CCXXXVI)
'often also black-yellow'

substantia quaedam fusco-grisea (§ 227) / una certa sostanza fosco grigia (§ CCXXXVII)
'some black-grey substance'

cristallos nigras, aut fusco nigricantes (§ 237) / cristalli neri, o fosco-nerognoli (§ CCXXXVII)
'black, or dark-blackish crystals'

[Argentum] fusco-rubens (§ 278) / di color fosco-rosso (§ CCLXXVIII)
'black-red [silver]'

5. Conclusion

The foregoing considerations have highlighted once again the crucial role of Neo-Latin in the history of Italian adjective compounds. By and large, the history of intersective colour compounds is parallel to that of the *etico-morale* type described in Grossmann & Rainer (2009), of which they are a subtype. This Neo-Latin origin also explains why such compounds first established themselves in languages for specific purposes with an urgent need for expressions for intermediate shades of colours such as mineralogy or botany, and only with a certain delay spread to literature and the general language in the 19th century, as D'Achille & Grossmann (2013) already observed. D'Achille & Grossmann had reached these conclusions on the basis of a semasiological approach that consisted in extracting adjective-adjective compounds from historical dictionaries and corpora. In the present study, I have adopted an onomasiological approach, reading through Neo-Latin and Italian works where many expressions for intermediate shades of colours could be expected and observing how this expressive need was satisfied

¹⁰ The number of this paragraph is wrong.

linguistically. This onomasiological approach fully corroborated the generalizations reached by D'Achille & Grossmann in their paper.

A priori other possibilities than a Neo-Latin origin would be conceivable. Tollemache, for example, in his standard work on Italian compounds classified colour adjectives of the type adjective + adjective, such as *bianco giallastro* 'yellowish white' and *verde chiaro* 'light green', among the Italian compounds (1945: 235), rather than in the chapter "I composti di formazione latina" (1945: 250–254). In that way he implicitly claimed that this compound type – which in reality represents two different types, with different diachronic trajectories – had arisen through a process of univerbation. D'Achille & Grossmann also considered this possibility, but remained hesitant. The interpretation of the Old Tuscan examples, as we have seen, is riddled with philological problems and awaits closer study. But even if the existence of authentic colour compounds could be ascertained for Old Tuscan, the evidence adduced in this paper, notably their complete absence from Imperato (1599), clearly shows that the establishment of the intersective compound type in the 18th century was not due to these possible Old-Tuscan antecedents, but to an adaptation of the corresponding Neo-Latin type which had arisen one century earlier.

A third theoretically conceivable option would consist in attributing the rise of the Italian compounds to German influence. As we have seen, German already used intersective adjective-adjective compounds in the Renaissance, and the paramount importance of German scholars especially in mineralogy¹¹ would also provide a plausible channel of transmission. However, the international reception of the mineralogical or naturalistic works written by German scholars was based essentially on their Latin books, as was the case with Scopoli's *Principia* (Scopoli was born – and died – in what today is Italy, but his native Cavalese was then part of the Habsburg Empire, and he received a doctor's degree from the University of Innsbruck). If German had any influence on our area of compounding, it should be sought in the rise of the Neo-Latin type, which Hatcher (1951) had already attributed to German-speaking humanists. The desire to dispose of a handy compound type equivalent to the German intersective adjective-adjective compounds may well have had some catalyzing function in the early days of the Neo-Latin compound type.

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¹¹ Cf. Scopoli (1778: 140): "[...] de' Tedeschi, nostri Maestri nella Metallurgia" [of the Germans, our masters in metallurgy].

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