

The Semantics of Colors in Old Turkic Runic Inscriptions (Based on The Lexeme Qara)

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Abstract: This article examines the semantics of color terms in Old Turkic runic inscriptions, with particular emphasis on the multifaceted meanings of the lexeme qara. The study demonstrates that, beyond its primary function as a color term denoting "black," qara served important social, symbolic, and pragmatic functions. The compound qara baš in the Tayhar-Chuluu inscription is selected as the principal object of analysis, and its determinative role in denoting a particular social stratum is explored. In addition, the article investigates the use of qara to designate common people, lower social classes, and, in certain contexts, as an epithet preceding the names of high-ranking individuals. The findings confirm that qara constitutes a significant linguistic unit reflecting the complex relationship between language and social structure in Old Turkic society.

Keywords: Old Turkic runic writing, qara, connotation, epithet.

Introduction: In Turkic runic inscriptions, particularly in the Orkhon–Yenisey corpus, the lexeme qara functions not only as the designation of a color but also as an important socio-semantic marker. Accordingly, the present study takes the expression qara baš found in the Tayhar-Chuluu inscription as its primary object of investigation in order to reveal the nature of this distinctive function. To clarify the attributive meaning of qara in Old Turkic and its determinative role in identifying social groups, the discussion also refers to ethnolinguistic units containing this lexeme in other inscriptions of the same period.

The analysis demonstrates that qara denoted the common people, ordinary subjects, lower social strata, and the broader population of Old Turkic society. At the same time, in certain contexts it appears before the names or titles of eminent individuals, functioning as an attributive epithet that conveys prestige or elevated status. Such usage is closely associated with Turkic traditions of color symbolism and the ethnosocial mechanisms of lexical formation, revealing the metaphorical, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic

dimensions of the lexeme.

The compound qara baš is examined from comparative-historical and lexical-semantic perspectives. The evidence suggests that this expression designates a specific social group representing the common or non-elite segment of a broader social organization. Parallel attestations of qara in other Old Turkic sources likewise indicate that the lexeme developed into a stable archaic determinative marker. The findings therefore suggest that in Old Turkic society qara signified not merely the color black but also functioned as a linguistic indicator of social stratification, the common populace, and the differentiation of political and social roles. Consequently, its determinative function should be regarded as an important reflection of the mechanisms through which Turkic runic inscriptions encoded social hierarchy and ethnosocial organization.

The lexeme qara is among the oldest and most frequently attested lexical items in the Turkic vocabulary. According to some scholars, it derives from the Sanskrit word *kāla* ("black," "dark blue"), which is

assumed to have developed into qara in Turkic through the phonological transformation of l to r (Aksozluk 2020: 1). Although the word has been attested in Turkic since the Orkhon–Yenisey inscriptions, some researchers maintain that it may ultimately have originated from certain Indo-Aryan languages of South Asia.

In Old Turkic, qara primarily denoted the color black, darkness, or gloom; however, its semantic range extended well beyond color designation, encompassing numerous metaphorical, symbolic, and social meanings. Indeed, among the ethnonymic nomenclature of the Turkic peoples, five color terms occur most frequently: qara ("black"), aq ("white"), qizil ("red"), yaşil ("green," corresponding in some contexts to kök "blue"), and sarıy ("yellow"). Other color terms referring primarily to animal coats, such as ala ("piebald"), boz ("gray"), and qır ("brown"), occur less frequently (Gabain 1962: 112–113).

Throughout the historical development of Turkic, qara acquired a wide range of meanings. In the Orkhon and Yenisey inscriptions it appears primarily as a color term with broad semantic scope. For example, in the following passage it functions as an epithet denoting the darkest shade:

"qizil qanım: töküti: qara tärım: yügürti: işig küçüg bärtım ök: "Having shed my red blood and poured out my black sweat, I devoted all my labor and strength" (Tonyukuk, 52).

Similarly, in the expressions:

"ädgü: özlük: atın: qara: kışın: kök: täyänin: sansız: kälürüp: qop: qottı: "He brought countless fine horses, black sables, and blue squirrels..." (BX TX, 12),

and

"sarıy altunin: ürün: küm(ü)şin: qırıyaylıy: qutayın: qıl(i)y: äşgıtisin: özlük atın: adyırın: qara kışın "Yellow gold, white silver, bordered silk, fermented drink, select horses, stallions, black sables, and blue squirrel pelts..." (BX North, 11–12),

qara retains its literal meaning as a designation of color.

This primary sense remained the most productive semantic component of the word in later stages of Turkic. In the *Dīwān Luġāt al-Turk*, qara is defined simply as "black" (DLT III, 240–241), while its intensive form appears for the first time in the

Kutadgu Bilig:

"Qizil ayzi qan tög qaşı qap qara "Her lips are red as blood, and her eyebrows are jet black." (QBN, 189)

It should be noted, however, that whereas qara in the runic inscriptions generally lacked negative connotations and functioned chiefly as a color term and socio-ethnic designation, in the Old Turkic literary period it also came to denote concepts such as "evil" or "low status." Examples include:

"Köni ägri farqi ürünli qara "The difference between right and wrong is like the difference between white and black." (QBK, 3928)

And

"Qamuy tägsürüldi törü öndilär, qaralı ürünli bir-ök boldılar "The entire social order changed; black and white became the same." (QBK, 38410)

This period also witnessed the emergence of verbal derivatives formed from qara-:

"Qarayurma dünjakä soqluq qılıp "Do not darken yourself by becoming attached to this world." (QBK, 36512)

"Baru attı soqluq qoradı sävinč "Greed increased, while joy diminished." (QBK, 3843)

"Bayışlasu täñri anıñ žanını, qoratmasu andın äti qanını "May God forgive his soul and not bring darkness upon his body and blood." (QBK, 37411)

In these examples, qarayurma conveys the meaning "do not defile or morally corrupt yourself"; qoradı expresses the intensification of inner vice, particularly greed, resulting in moral decline; and qoratmasu means "may no harm or misfortune befall him," carrying a pragmatic sense of blessing or protection against physical or spiritual damage. Thus, these verbal formations derived from qara- function metaphorically to express deterioration, corruption, or harm. In contemporary Uzbek, the lexeme qora has developed nearly twenty distinct connotative meanings (O'TIL IV, 335–337).

The findings of the present study demonstrate that the lexeme qara in Old Turkic runic inscriptions functioned not merely as the designation of the color black but also as an important socio-semantic unit. It served to express social stratification, designate the common people, and, in certain contexts, function as an epithet marking elevated social status. Moreover, its

connotative, metaphorical, and pragmatic meanings reflect the close interrelationship between linguistic structure and the cultural worldview of the Turkic peoples.

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