Linguistic Aspects of Colour in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement'

O. Ladnytska*, M. Tsurkan

Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Lviv, Ukraine
*Corresponding author. E-mail: doolesya@gmail.com

Abstract. The article analyzing the semantic, structural and stylistic peculiarities of colour-naming words and phrases in Ian McEwan's celebrated novel 'Atonement' is an attempt to deal with the issue of colour continuum in fiction from the point of view of the author's input and readers' perception alike. Thus it is a contribution to the linguistic colour studies by virtue of dealing with the types and imagery of colour and colour-related words and phrases in the English literary discourse of the XXIst century in particular.

Keywords: colour, colour-naming word/phrase, basic colour term, the [+colour] seme, 'Atonement'

The issue of colour being quite interdisciplinary, its linguistic research quota is represented among others by the seminal work in the worldwide colour palette by B. Berlin and P. Kay [1], numerous works on various aspects of English colour continuum, namely pragmatic, social-cultural, psycholinguistic, translational and comparative, semasiological and onomasiological in general, by the research of O.V. Demenchuk devoted to the cognitive and onomasiological aspects of English colour-naming compounds [3] and the research of T.V. Venkel on the syntagmatic, paradigmatic and epigmatic characteristics of colour adjectives [2] in particular.

Qualifying colours linguistically actually reflects the extralinguistic three-way distinction between hue, lightness, and saturation. These three dimensions correspond to how people describe the experience of colour, and how they categorise colours, verbal means included. Given that the borderline between different colours is rather fuzzy and since every person has his/her own colour experience and colour memory it is only obvious that every author has his/her own style of resorting to colour words and images, which makes the colour phenomenon in fiction **the object** worth researching, as the writer's input and from the point of the perception by the reader alike, both presenting **the subject matter** of this article. Respectively, colour words and phrases are perfect means of foregrounding or attracting attention to something and good material for developing and extending the ground of co-creating. As to the latter and in relation to the topic under study, the readers' contribution includes their perception of the colour sensations triggered by the writer's use of colour-naming words as well as the readers' freedom and ability to be guided by their own experiential and discourse-dependant parameters of literary communication. In terms of the postmodern contextualist approach in linguistics whose **methodology** this article draws on, this could be one of the things presupposed by the reader's alleged feedback to the text, his or her ability to co-produce, determine, and even generate meanings in the process of reading, rather than merely decoding and consuming a ready-made text.

Topical as the issue of investigating the impact of colour words and images on the readers constantly is, it is reinforced by the ever-growing popularity of the contemporary British writer Ian McEwan. **The material** for this study is his celebrated novel 'Atonement' (2001) which received a number of honours and was adapted for the eponymous award-winning film version of the book. The novel itself is quite conducive to be interpreted in terms of the poststructuralist paradigm. A story within a story, it

leaves open the question of whose story it actually is. Part One is all about perception and misperception. It is interestingly also the richest in colour and light, presumably for the reason of still being the most optimistic one, with the tragedy just looming ahead. A lot of the action in Part One takes place in a state where some senses are obstructed or absent while others are available. Briony can "see" the incident between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain, but she can't hear it. Briony "reads" the tragedy-provoking word in the letter, but she doesn't "know" what it means. Briony "sees" the sex in the library, but nobody "says" anything about it. And finally, Briony "hears" Lola being raped, but can't completely "see" who it is because it is dark, which will lead to fatal results for the protagonists. The narration of the whole novel plays on this idea, the interplay or lack of senses assuming the colour continuum variety. The author continuously has to go back and repeat the same episode through different eyes so the reader can get the whole picture. By doing this, Briony (as author) is trying her best to make up for what she did not understand as a child and what she struggles with as an author, that is, present the story from every single angle, and not just the writer's point of view. In achieving this, Briony hopes to atone for her misconception of events as a 13-year-old girl caught in between worlds. As a novel that stretches over a sixty-five year period observing the characters go through periods of change and development "Atonement" naturally features the identity theme. The confusion of identity points out the confusion of coming into oneself at the golden age of lost innocence as well as what a nation is during war. Part Two, set in the wartime France, is the least colourful one. Remorse and atonement represented by black colour is the central notion in Part Three. Another theme that colours that part mostly set in a military hospital in London is death. In the last part of the book all the colours have almost disappeared: Briony is now an old woman and her life has become colourless.

According to S. Wyler and G.N. Verlag, on average we may find "...1 colour term per 841 words' [5, p. 161] in literary texts, which in their own calculation makes one colour term "on every 3rd page..." [5, p. 161]. Quantitatively Ian McEwan's 'Atonement' featuring about 300 cases of using colour words approximates the "1 colour case : 1 page" ratio. Qualitatively they are of various semantic and structural types, different stylistic and aesthetic value.

The most numerous in the novel (135 samples) are **basic colour terms** (**BCT**s), monolexemic and almost devoid of any stylistic effects of themselves: *black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, orange, pink, purple* and

grey. Ubiquitous in human colour memory they do not require a lot of efforts to imagine them and usually coincide in the speakers' mind and treatment. This way such phrases as '*red crepe paper'*, '*pink ribbon'* or '*green eyes'* immediately create a certain picture of these objects due to the primary denotational meaning of the colour word. Beside BCTs, there are about 10 examples of *abstract colour words* (*ACW*s) rather considered to be the hues of the basic colour terms. Such words as '*vermilion'*, '*tan'*, '*ochre'*, '*scarlet'*, '*indigo'* or '*crimson'* demand more efforts to imagine them and may result in a different picture than the one intended by the author. But at the same time they are more specific than the basic ones, which could provide the reader with more exact characteristics of the colour, foregrounding as they do the very concept of colour: "Her sandals revealed an ankle bracelet and toenails painted *vermilion*" [4, p. 11],"... cutting her hand so badly that a spray of blood had made a *scarlet* bouquet on the white muslin dress of a nearby child…" [4, p. 138].

As far as dresses are concerned, even BCTs do a perfect job, or rather the abundance and emotional intensity of both within three pages of the text. Selecting an evening dress for the supper on the first night of the book Cecilia first considers black (with its 'air of invulnerability' [4, p. 90]) but on the ground of the resulting simile, namely for the reason of looking like 'a woman on her way to a funeral, an austere, joyless woman moreover, whose *black* carapace had affinities with some form of matchbox-dwelling insect' [4, p. 90-91] she reconsiders her choice triggering the repetition of the lexeme 'black': 'She did not linger – she turned on her heel, which was also *black*, and returned to her room" [4, p. 91]. The obsession about her look at the dinner reveals Cecilia's unconscious as of that time desire to produce a favourable impression on Robbie – a needless endeavour since the man is already desperately in love with her. She thinks against her 'latest and best piece, bought to celebrate the end of finals, before she knew about her miserable third, … the figure-hugging dark *green* bias-cut backless evening gown…*"* [4, p. 91] considering it "Too dressy to have its first outing at home" [4, p. 91]. Having decided for the pink which in terms of epithets was "muted and musty enough for the evening wear" [4, p. 92] she later discards it too because "the *pink* was in fact innocently pale…" and "the dress flared like an eight-year-old's party frock" [4, p.92]. This is when Cecilia returns to her famous due to the film backless post-finals green gown and the description of her look is stylistically loaded and finally involves an abstract colour word as well, now negatively connoted: "… she felt sleekly impregnable, slippery and secure; it was a mermaid who rose to meet her in her own full-length mirror… Her immediate, reeling perception was of radical, Picasso-like perspective in which tears, rimmed and bloated eyes, wet lips and raw, unblown nose blended in a *crimson* moistness of grief" [4, p.93]. Interestingly, the other three cases of the ACW 'crimson' also occur in the pessimistic context of the war setting or the hospital with soldiers dead or wounded beyond recognition:

A *crimson* stain on the back of his white shirt spread from neck to waist [4, p. 211];

This was all ruin, *crimson* and raw [4, p. 284];

Below the jagged line of bone was a spongy *crimson* mess of brain, several inches across, reaching from the crown almost to the tip of his ear [4, p. 290].

Besides, the complex colour-naming phrase 'crimson and black' proves the derogatory meaning of the first element in the case of Ian Mc Ewan: "The soldier had a sergeant's stripes. He was without his boots and his bluish toes stank. His head was wrapped in a bandage soaked to *crimson and black*. On his thigh his battle dress was mangled into a wound" [4, p. 274].

In the novel one can also find words which denote only partial colouring. These are mainly colour words with the suffix –*ish* added to BCTs (*bluish (4), purplish (3), reddish (2), brownish, grayish, greenish*) mainly found in Part One providing it with the feeling of vagueness or dimness in correspondence with the identity and misperception themes dwelt upon above: "...sky and ground took on a *reddish* bloom" [4, p. 73]. Besides, there are other cases of vague colour nominations: 'pink muted and musty' [4, p. 91], 'opaque muddy green' [4, p. 217], 'blurred red glow' [4, p. 97] etc. Related to the affixed dim colour words and to the *descriptive colour words* ahead are the colour-naming words with the suffix –y (*milky*, *fiery* (2), *dusky*).

Descriptive colour words (*DCW*s) in their turn denote a colour with the help of *association* with a certain object. For example, the word '*asphalt'* easily suggests a '*greyish'* colour. There are 12 simple cases in the novel: *ginger, emerald, silver (5), sepia, khaki (2), cream, ochre,* and 3 samples with the intensifier preceding the DCW ('*bright ginger* heads*'* [4, p. 94], '*pale gold'* [4, p. 98], 'names in *faded silver and gold'* [4, p. 316]. Reading such words readers recall the colour of the corresponding objects and cannot avoid the implied connotations inherent in them. They can be mostly found in the first chapter, full of play on light and colours. Besides, there is a case involving two DCWs within a complex structure, again to describe the colour of the dress, this time Briony's ('...but what of the antique *peach and cream* satin dress that her mother was looking out for her...' [4, p. 14]), one BCT and one DCW ('*blue and gold*' [4, p. 23], and a case of an ACW and a DCW ('*beige and olive* wallpaper' [4, p. 81]). The associations at work in the DCWs may also result in compound words and complex and double-step structures like the following colour-naming ones from 'Atonement': *powder-blue* carpet [4, p. 18], *blood-orange* light [4, p. 81], dress in *dove grey* [4, p. 340], *leonine-yellow* (2), *nacreous brown* [4, p. 98], *bamboo green* [4, p. 50], etc with the first element establishing the shade of colour by way of allusion or implication. Interestingly, sometimes the modifying word follows the colour word itself: *brown-ink* copperplate [4, p. 140], the 'oily' descriptive component may specify the hue (*oily blue* water [4, p. 49]), or merely provide another characteristic of the coloured object (*oily black* foliage [4, p. 73]), and *leonine-yellow* features twice – at the beginning of the novel in Briony's inner represented speech while watching the fountain scene from her nursery window –

"Then, nearer, the estate's open parkland, which today had a dry and savage look, roasting like a savanna, here isolated trees threw harsh stumpy shadows and the long grass was already stalked by the *leonine yellow* of high summer. Closer, within the boundaries of the balustrade,

were the rose gardens and, nearer still, the Triton fountain, and standing by the basin's retaining wall was her sister, and right before her was Robbie Turner. There was something rather formal about the way he stood, feet apart, head held back. A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised" [4, p. 36]

and at the end of the novel reappearing as a praised quote from Briony's later novella in the letter of rejection from the editor of the publishing house to which Briony had contributed her work for consideration –

"We found Two Figures by a Fountain arresting enough to read with dedicated attention. I do not say this lightly. We cast aside a great deal of material, some of it by writers of reputation. There are some good images—I liked "the long grass stalked by the *leonine yellow* of high summer"— and you both capture a flow of thought and represent it with subtle differences in order to make attempts at characterization. Something unique and unexplained is caught" [4, p. 294].

There are also some cases involving colours of limited use prompted by collocation demands: "He turned out to be a very handsome fellow, nineteen years old, more than six feet tall, with *blond* hair that flopped over his forehead" [4, p. 200]; "Gather up from the mud the pieces of burned, stripped cloth, the shreds of his pyjamas, than bring him down, the poor *pale* boy..." [4, p. 247]. These two examples illustrate objects of roughly similar colour, but with different colour words.

Besides, there feature some lexemes derived from colour words but not denoting colour, nor actually having the component [+colour] in their semantic structure (bluebells [4, p. 198], bluebottles [4, p. 231], blackbird [4, p. 272]). The same holds true for the cases of words where colour is merely 'a distinguishing marker' [5, p. 38] specifying which kind of object is actually referred to: red wine [4, p. 241], red grapes [4, p. 279], green tea [4, p. 335]. Contrary to these few, the rest of the colour samples under study contain stems or morphemes denoting colour and possess the [+colour] seme which is either easy to recognize or allows establishing a colour notion by way of allusion or implication.

Naturally, it is adjectives that underlie colour words. When nouns, colour words and phrases (compound and derivative, too) would come as part of constructions with prepositions like *in, of, from* or *to*: "*the greyish-blue* of the western sky" [4, p. 151], "shell of *drab green*" [4, p. 58], 'rectangle of *bluish-black*' [4, p. 201], '*grey-blue* of a jacket' [4, p. 235], "patches of *healthy pink*" [4, p. 255], "I decided on a shirtwaisted cashmere dress in *dove grey*" [4, p. 340], some possessing highly expressive and emotive connotations. Sometimes, though, a noun colour word is triggered by a verb not needing a preposition to follow: "Her sandals revealed an ankle bracelet and toenails painted *vermilion*" [4, p. 11], 'a merry-go-round painted *red, white and blue*' [4, p. 234]. Other nouns are more obvious as to the part of speech due to the affixes within their structure: except for '*greenery*' [4, p. 224]; derivative nouns include 3 cases of '*whiteness*' and '*blackness*' each. Among other parts of speech denoting colours the stem '*black*' features most and solely: *blackened* edges [4, p. 179], *blackened* faces [4, p. 277], *blackened* arm [4, p. 285], *blackout* (v) [4, p. 266], [4, p. 324],

blacked-out city [4, p. 253], all but one appearing in the war and post-war parts of the novel.

As to the adjectives themselves and adjectival phrases, the novel "Atonement" provides a variety of structural patterns of colour words and phrases. After the most numerous monolexemic basic colour terms (135), ACWs (8), DCWs (12) and derivatives (17) described above, there comes the most frequent group of colour phrases of an adjectival colour word preceded by an intensifier or modifier (25) of which the most productive are *dark* (7 cases including 6 intensifying *green*), *bright* (5 cases for bright colours as it were – orange, ginger, blue, red (2)), *deep* (4 cases), *pale* (2) and its superlative *palest* modifying the noun phrases to be analysed further, the participial *faded* (*faded blue* chair [4, p. 66] and also modifying the noun phrase 'names in *faded silver and gold*' [4, p. 316]), *soft* (*soft yellow* glow [4, p. 86]) and the only hyphenated one: '*mid-blue* touches of dawn' [4, p. 168]. A group of 'adj+n+ed' complex derivatives (14) describing people's appearance, objects and places is presented in the novel again by the most numerous colour component 'black' (*black-roofed, black-furred, black-stained, black-faced* and *black-tiled*) and 'white' (*white-painted* (2), *white-sheeted, white-faced*) and some other BCTs ('*blue-edged* kidney bowl' [4, p. 281], '*grey-veined* lozenge' [4, p. 311]) and a DCW '*ginger*'- component (*ginger-haired* (3 cases)). Due to their structure simultaneously combining composition and affixation such lexemes are highly expressive.

Quantitatively there follows the 'adj and adj' combination (14) involving mostly two basic colour terms or one BCT and another an ACW ('*crimson and black*' [4, p. 274]), one involving an ACW and a DCW (a *peach and cream* dress' [4, p. 15]). These are not to be confused with the structures containing only adjectives without the conjunction 'and' (with derived adjectives, too – *bluish-green, yellowish-orange, bluish-grey*) which are characterised by merging of two components while the colour-naming components with the conjunction 'and' do not create a new colour, but only indicate the combination of different patches of colours involved. Similar to the latter are the samples of 'n and n' constructions functioning in the same way: 'the unblended mix of *orange and green*' to describe Cecilia's impression of the eyes of her beloved [4, p. 24], and another time, when their eyes met 'what she saw in the bilious mélange of *green and orange* was not shock, or guilt, but a form of challenge, or even triumph' [4, p. 28], twice occurring '*blue and gold*' [4, p. 35], [4, p. 235]), landscape-pertaining 'wash of *grey and blue*' [4, p. 182], and another containing a superlative modifier as well ('broken sky of *grey and palest blue*' [4, p. 140]). Concerning the latter and the noun colour phrase 'jam of *palest pink*' [4, p. 311] Ian McEwan expresses the extremity of the colour hue. Sometimes the effect is produced by mere cumulation of basic colour terms or by mixing them with descriptive ones, by resorting to epithets. All of these, for instance, are at work in the noun colour phrase describing a group of people '*fresh white, blue and gold*' [4, p. 235] whose structure adj+n, n+conj+n makes the description richer. Another mixed structure within a sentence makes use of a double-step epithet to describe the colour noun subject: "... the *pink* was in fact *innocently pale*, the waistline was too high, the

dress flared like an eight-year-old's party frock" [4, p. 92]. Had the author written this another way, for instance, "the pink dress looked childish", the effect would be completely different. Observing these two examples we may make a conclusion that colour words and phrases of mixed structure add stylistic colour to the phrases in addition to the abundantly presented colour palette of the novel as such.

All in all, the frequency of colours in the novel may be illustrated in the following diagram:
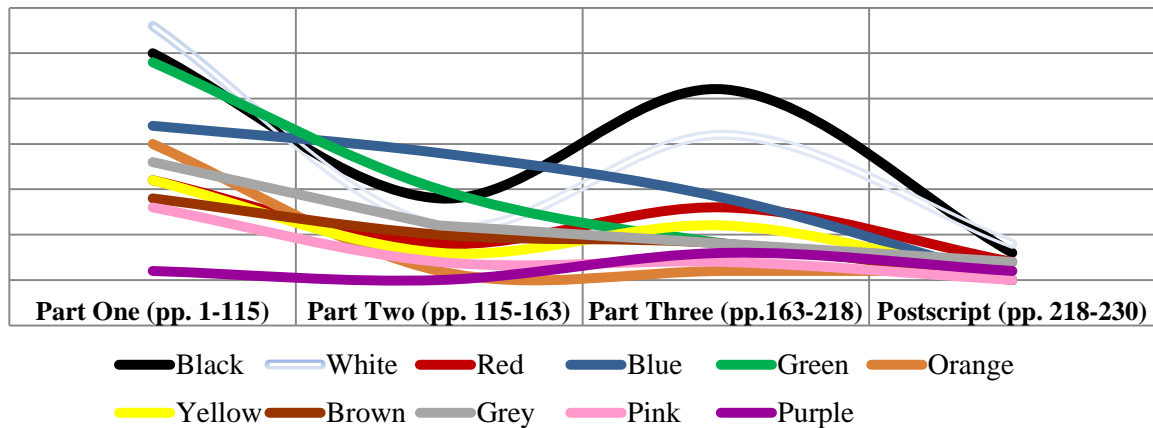
Frequency of Colours in the Novel
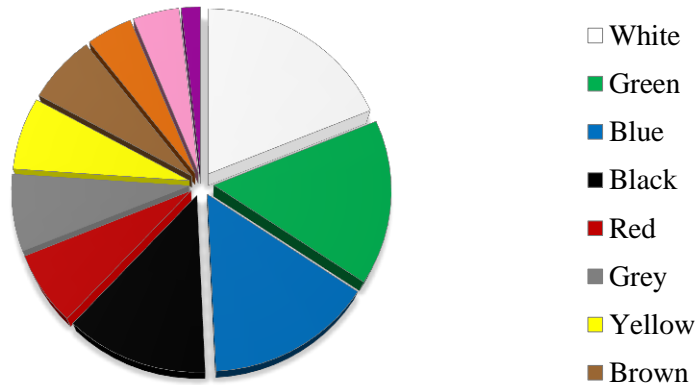
Diagram 1. Frequency of Colours in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement'

White, green, blue and black are the colours most frequently used in the novel. Paradoxically enough, the reader does not feel their lavishness. They are here to create a particular mood, to evoke certain feelings. Among the minor colour words there are a lot of bright colours, though. The story of 'Atonement' being far from happy, the contextual meanings of these colour lexemes have been changed to rather pejorative. Hope, enthusiasm and love are the feelings associated with yellow, orange and red. They create a kind of thin but strong rope, which unites all four parts from the first page up to the last.

The frequency and quantity of colour words and phrases differ with every chapter:

Dynamics of Colours in the Novel

Diagram 2. Dynamics of Colours in Ian McEwan's 'Atonement'

It is obvious that Part One has the highest frequency of colours despite the fact that the events portrayed there happen during one summer day in 1935 – the hottest in the decade (which is the case of pathetic fallacy weather – nature coinciding with human emotions). Half of all the colour words used in the novel feature in this part, making it luminous, bright and colourful. The mood here is still optimistic and all the descriptions are full of colours and illumination. The white colour represents successful beginning and metaphorically stands for innocence and purity. But the black colour of grief is also abundantly present here, presumably standing for precaution. Green and blue are dubious colours. They may symbolize safety and stability as well as misfortune due to some common semes in the corresponding lexemes. In Part Two, where the author describes Robbie at the war there is obviously the least quantity of colours. But the same colours are proportionally the most frequent. The green here may be a metaphor of misfortune, while blue stands for trust and hope. The sea represents the final goal, a chance to get free; it becomes the only aim for soldiers, a way of retreat from Dunkirk. Black is still present in this chapter. On the one hand, it still symbolises power, but here far more topical are other contextual associations with this colour – these are death and fear. Part Two actually ends with Robbie's death but just like with descriptions of colours without colour words to be mentioned below the dying scene does not make use of the appropriate vocabulary, the reader

may not even understand that one of the protagonist leaves the story. His last words to his colleagues actually were: "Wake me before seven. I promise, you won't hear another word from me" [4, p. 250]. It is the sense of hearing together with the pervasive throughout the part sense of colour that trigger the reader's assumption as to the true state of facts about Robbie. Not surprisingly, many readers still being under the impression that Robbie is alive, take his appearance by the end of Part Three quite naturally and only later do they realise that the final episodes in that part were concocted by Briony for the sake of her fictional story to have a happy end, rather as an act of atonement for the childish sin she made in 1935 at the age of 13 (Part One). Remorse, thus, is the central notion in the third part. It is mainly represented by black colour. Another theme that is still present here is death. Actually, Briony is now situated in the centre of it, since she is a nurse in the hospital, which accounts for the frequency of white, but it is no longer a metaphor for innocence and cleanliness. Here it denotes hospital, paleness and death, too. Bright colours are almost absent in the chapter, apart from blue and red, which are here to describe horrible wounds of suffering soldiers. And finally in the last part of the book all the colours have almost disappeared: Briony being 77 years old, her life has become colourless. Everything is different now that Cecilia and Robbie are dead and Briony has allegedly atoned.

Another issue worth discussing is the presence of phrases aiming at conveying some colour notion without the colour words themselves. These are different descriptions where the colour words may be absent, but the colour evocation is available through implication, association or otherwise: "The desiccated grasses took on *the colours of the sky*" [4, p. 73]*; "*The upward bluish gleam gave everything around the pool *a colorless, moonlit look*, like a photograph" [4, p. 149];"*All the colour had gone* from his face" [4, p. 209]; "...her unpainted lips were *rich in natural colour*" [4, p. 249] etc. On the border with these and those describing some unidentified, vague or modified colour analysed above one can place the following colour phrases: "The swollen trunks of elderly oaks became *so black they began to look blue*" [4, p. 73]; "...*whiter than mist*" [4, p. 249]. The author literally painted those images in front of the reader, showing the power of verbal means to denote the issues of colour.

Definitely, in terms of imagery it is mostly epithets in all their variants that colour words and phrases assume in the novel: purely descriptive ("She had *green eyes* and sharp bones in her face..." [4, p. 10]; "Its spherical stone eyeballs, as big as apples, were *iridescent green*" [4, p. 28]), metaphorical ("...a floral scarf was tied across her *silver hair*" [4, p. 240]), synaesthetic but gone trite and hence used to convey a certain degree of intensity ("...the *soft yellow glow* at the windows on the far side of the lake..." [4, p. 86]) and tautological ("...the huge cumulus clouds piled against *a pale blue sky*" [4, p. 269]), some of them being simultaneously double-step epithets in their structure. The latter create stunning images throughout the novel: 'dirty green battle' [4, p. 273], 'dirty yellow light' [4, p. 330], 'soupy brown light' [4, p. 330].

Basically, colour words appear engaged in various stylistic devices proper in the course of the novel, sometimes resulting in retrievable images, often juxtaposing the usual with the unexpected. The following simile quite incongruously mixes the dreadful and the pleasant, the negatively connoted with the positively connoted: "...patches of uneven *sunburn* on his shoulders and legs – *pink and white like a strawberry and vanilla ice-cream*" [4, p. 234]. On the narrative level, the abundance of descriptions and colours in the novel is partly due to the desire of the main heroine Briony to describe everything. This longing for total description first embraced Briony half an hour before her crime was committed. Looking for the lost twins, trying to describe everything she sees, Briony lost control of her imagination, enjoying its enormous power: "There was nothing she could not describe: the gentle pad of a maniac's tread moving sinuously along the drive, keeping to the verge to muffle his approach. ... She could describe this delicious air too, the grasses giving off their sweet cattle smell, the hard-fired earth which still held the embers of the day's heat and exhaled the mineral odor of clay, and the faint breeze carrying from the lake *a flavor of green and silver*" [4, p. 146]. Unable to explain adult scenes properly to herself, Briony gave way to her imagination which left her no choice but to commit the crime by lying, since for Briony all her fantasies seemed absolutely real.

Highly expressive by their nature, colour words and phrases are welcome in fiction. Not available physically, invisible as wavelength frequencies in literary texts colour sensations in the brain are to be evoked by the colour names and their variations in terms of structure and stylistic virtuosity. 'Atonement' is rich in the quantity, structural variety, semantic and stylistic load of colour words and phrases. It seems expedient to research the colour continuum issues in other novels of Ian McEwan investigating their literary, ideological and social interpretative potential for different readings of the novels.

REFERENCES

1. Venkel, T.V. Syntagmatic, paradigmatic and epidigmatic characteristics of colour-naming adjectives in English [Text] : abstr. dis. cand. filol. sc.: spets. 10.02.04 / T.V. Venkel. – Lviv National Ivan Franko University. – Lviv, 2004. – 20 p.
2. Demenchuk, O. Colour Composites in English : Cognitive-Onomasiological : abstr. dis. cand. filol. sc.: spets. 10.02.04 / Oleh Demenchuk. – K., 2003. – 20 p.
3. Berlin, B., Kay, P. (1969) Basic Colour Terms / URL: https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/all-about-linguistics/branches/semantics/example-research
4. McEwan, I. Atonement / Ian McEwan. – Doubleday, 2002. – 357 p.
5. Wyler, S., Verlag, G.N. Colour and Language: Colour Terms in English / Siegfried Wyler, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992. – 203 p.