Diagnostic colours of emotions

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Diagnostic colours of emotions

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of colour in the cognitive processing of emotional information. The research is guided by the effect of colour diagnosticity which has been shown previously to influence recognition performance of several types of objects as well as natural scenes. The research presented in Experiment 1 examined whether colour information is considered a diagnostic perceptual feature of seven emotional categories: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise and neutral. Participants (N = 119), who were naïve to the specific purpose and expectations of the experiment, chose colour more than any other perceptual quality (e.g. shape and tactile information) as a feature that describes the seven emotional categories. The specific colour features given for the six basic emotions were consistently different from those given to the non-emotional neutral category. While emotional categories were often described by chromatic colour features (e.g. red, blue, orange) the neutral category was often ascribed achromatic colour features (e.g. white, grey, transparent) as the most symptomatic perceptual qualities for its description. The emotion 'anger' was unique in being the only emotion showing an agreement higher that 50% of the total given colour features for one particular colour - red. Confirming that colour is a diagnostic feature of emotions led to the examination of the effect of diagnostic colours of emotion on recognition memory for emotional words and faces: the effect, if any, of appropriate and inappropriate colours (matched with emotion) on the strength of memory for later recognition of faces and words (Experiments 2 & 3). The two experiments used retention intervals of 15 minutes and one week respectively and the colour-emotion associations were determined for each individual participant. Results showed that regardless of the subject’s consistency level in associating colours with emotions, and compared with the individual inappropriate or random colours, individual appropriate colours of emotions significantly enhance recognition memory for six basic emotional faces and words. This difference between the individual inappropriate colours or random colours and the individual appropriate colours of emotions was not found to be significant for non-emotional neutral stimuli. Post hoc findings from both experiments further show that appropriate colours of emotion are associated more consistently than inappropriate colours of emotions. This suggests that appropriate colour-emotion associations are unique both in their strength of association and in the form of their representation. Experiment 4 therefore aimed to
Diagnostic colours of emotions

investigate whether appropriate colour-emotion associations also trigger an implicit automatic cognitive system that allows faster naming times for appropriate versus inappropriate colours of emotional word carriers. Results from the combined Emotional-Semantic Stroop task confirm the above hypothesis and therefore imply that colour plays a substantial role not only in our conceptual representations of objects but also in our conceptual representations of basic emotions. The resemblance of the present findings collectively to those found previously for objects and natural scenes suggests a common cognitive mechanism for the processing of emotional diagnostic colours and the processing of diagnostic colours of objects or natural scenes. Overall, this thesis provides the foundation for many future directions of research in the area of colour and emotion as well as a few possible immediate practical implications.
Diagnostic colours of emotions

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: COLOUR AND RECOGNITION MEMORY

1.1 THE ROLE OF COLOUR IN OBJECT RECOGNITION:.................................................................12.
  1.1.1 EDGE-BASED MODEL FOR OBJECT RECOGNITION..........................................................12.
  1.1.2. SURFACE-PLUS-EDGE-BASED MODEL FOR OBJECT RECOGNITION................................14.
  1.1.3 COLOUR CONTRIBUTES TO RECOGNITION MEMORY AT A LOW LEVEL OF VISION...........15.
  1.1.4 COLOUR CONTRIBUTES TO RECOGNITION MEMORY AT A HIGH LEVEL OF VISION...........17.
  1.1.5 A MULTIPLE MEMORY SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK OF OBJECT RECOGNITION.......................22.
1.2 COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY:..........................................................................................24.
  1.2.1 COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY IN OBJECT RECOGNITION.....................................................24.
  1.2.2 COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY IN THE BRAIN.................................................................27.
1.3 STUDY RATIONALE I .................................................................................................28.

CHAPTER 2: MEMORY OF EMOTIONAL INFORMATION

2.1 THE ROLE OF EMOTION IN MEMORY...........................................................................31.
  2.1.1 THE USE OF SIX BASIC EMOTIONS AS EMOTIONAL STIMULI........................................32.
  2.1.2 EFFECT OF AROUSAL ON MEMORY...........................................................................33.
  2.1.3 EFFECT OF VALENCE ON MEMORY...........................................................................38.
  2.1.4 BIOLOGICAL AND NEUROLOGICAL MECHANISM OF EMOTIONAL MEMORY................42.
2.2 STUDY RATIONALE II.................................................................................................44.

CHAPTER 3: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLOUR AND EMOTION

3.1. COLOUR AND EMOTION ASSOCIATIONS........................................................................47.
  3.1.1 PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO COLOUR.................................................................48.
  3.1.2 EFFECT OF COLOUR ON MOOD, PERFORMANCE AND OTHER BEHAVIOURS...............49.
  3.1.3 COLOUR PREFERENCE.................................................................................................51.
  3.1.4 EMOTIONAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH COLOUR.................................................................53.
  3.1.5 COLOUR-EMOTION ASSOCIATIONS AT DIFFERENT DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES.............55.
  3.1.6 CROSS-CULTURE EVIDENCE FOR COLOUR-EMOTION ASSOCIATIONS.........................56.
  3.1.7 SYNAESTHESIA (ASSOCIATIONS WITH COLOURS IN THE BRAIN).................................57.
  3.1.8 AN ASSOCIATIVE NETWORK THEORY FOR COLOUR AND EMOTION..............................62.
3.2 STUDY RATIONALE III.................................................................................................63.
Diagnostic colours of emotions

CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY OF THE STUDY RATIONALE AND MAIN HYPOTHESES

4.1 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY RATIONALE ................................................................. 67.
4.2 MAIN HYPOTHESES ......................................................................................... 70.
  4.2.1 STUDY 1 (HYPOTHESIS 1) .......................................................................... 70.
  4.2.2 STUDIES 2 AND 3 (HYPOTHESIS 2) ............................................................. 70.
  4.2.3 STUDIES 2 AND 3 (HYPOTHESIS 3) ............................................................. 71.
  4.2.4 STUDY 4 (HYPOTHESIS 4) .......................................................................... 71.
  4.2.5 STUDY 4 (HYPOTHESIS 5) .......................................................................... 72.
4.3 OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION ................................................................. 73.

CHAPTER 5: EXPERIMENT 1: THE FEATURE LISTING TASK AS A TEST OF COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY OF EMOTION

5.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 75.
5.2 METHOD .............................................................................................................. 77.
  5.2.1 PARTICIPANTS ............................................................................................. 77.
  5.2.2 THE FEATURE-LISTING QUESTIONNAIRE ................................................. 77.
  5.2.3 PROCEDURE AND APPARATUS ................................................................. 78.
5.3 RESULTS ............................................................................................................ 79.
5.4 DISCUSSION ..................................................................................................... 82.

CHAPTER 6: EXPERIMENT 2 AND 3: COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY IN RECOGNITION MEMORY OF EMOTIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 85.
6.2 EXPERIMENT 2: COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY FOR SHORT-TERM RECOGNITION MEMORY OF EMOTIONAL INFORMATION ......................................................... 90.
  6.2.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................ 90.
  6.2.2 METHOD ...................................................................................................... 90.
  6.2.2.3 PARTICIPANTS .......................................................................................... 90.
  6.2.2.4 STIMULI .................................................................................................... 90.
  6.2.2.5 APPARATUS .............................................................................................. 90.
  6.2.2.6 PROCEDURE .............................................................................................. 92.
  6.2.3 RESULTS ...................................................................................................... 97.
  6.2.4 DISCUSSION ................................................................................................ 101.
6.3 EXPERIMENT 3: COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY FOR LONG-TERM RECOGNITION MEMORY OF EMOTIONAL INFORMATION ......................................................... 102.
  6.3.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................ 102.
  6.3.2 METHOD ...................................................................................................... 104.
6.3.2.3 PARTICIPANTS ................................................................................................. 104.
6.3.2.4 STIMULI ........................................................................................................ 104.
6.3.2.5 APPARATUS AND PROCEDURE .................................................................. 104.
6.3.3 RESULTS ....................................................................................................... 104.
6.3.4 DISCUSSION ................................................................................................. 108.
6.4. EXPERIMENTS 2 AND 3: POST HOC FINDINGS ............................................. 110.
6.4.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................ 110.
6.4.2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ....................................................................... 111.
6.4.3 CONCLUSIONS ............................................................................................ 117.

CHAPTER 7: EXPERIMENT 4: STROOP TEST FOR COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY OF EMOTIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 120.
7.2. METHOD ........................................................................................................... 122.
7.2.1 PARTICIPANTS .............................................................................................. 122.
7.2.2 APPARATUS AND MATERIAL ...................................................................... 122.
7.2.3 DESIGN AND PROCEDURE ........................................................................... 123.
7.3 RESULTS ........................................................................................................... 127.
7.3.1 STANDARD STROOP TASK ....................................................................... 127.
7.3.2 STROOP TASK FOR COLOUR DIAGNOSTICITY ......................................... 128.
7.4 DISCUSSION ..................................................................................................... 133.

CHAPTER 8: GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1. GENERAL DISCUSSION .................................................................................... 137.
8.1.1 MAIN FINDINGS AND FUTURE DIRECTION OF RESEARCH ...................... 138.
8.1.1.1 COLOUR IS A TYPICAL PERCEPTUAL FEATURE OF EMOTION ............... 138.
8.1.1.2 COLOUR IS DIAGNOSTIC FOR RECOGNITION MEMORY OF EMOTIONS . 139.
8.1.1.3 ASSOCIATION PATTERNS FOR COLOUR AND EMOTION COMBINATIONS . 141.
8.1.1.4 FASTER NAMING LATENCIES FOR APPROPRIATELY COLOURED EMOTIONAL INFORMATION THAN FOR INAPPROPRIATELY COLOURED EMOTIONAL INFORMATION AND NEUTRAL INFORMATION ........................................................................................................ 142.
8.1.2 RECOGNITION MEMORY PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL INFORMATION ARE IN LINE WITH EXISTING MODELS AND NEUROLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF OBJECT RECOGNITION ........................................................................................................ 143.
8.1.3 IMPLICATIONS .............................................................................................. 146.
8.1.3.1 THE USE OF COLOUR AS A MEMORY AID FOR THE ELDERLY WITH ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE . 147.
8.1.3.2 THE EFFECT OF CHILDREN’S DRAWINGS AND SPECIFIC COLOUR CHOICES ON MEMORY .... 148.
8.1.3.3 THE USE OF COLOUR IN EYEWITNESS MEMORY .................................... 151.
8.1.3.4 EDUCATION .............................................................................................. 153.
Diagnostic colours of emotions

8.1.4 LIMITATIONS………………………………………………………………………………… 155.

8.2 CONCLUSIONS…………………………………………………………………………………..156.

REFERENCES:
REFERENCE LIST……………………………………………………………………………158.

APPENDIX:

EXPERIMENTS 1-4: DETAILS OF COLOURS USED IN EXPERIMENTS 1-4…………………185.
EXPERIMENT 1: AN EXAMPLE OF THE FEATURE LISTING TASK……………………………185.
EXPERIMENT 2: MEAN % AGREEMENT FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF EMOTIONAL WORDS TO SIX BASIC EMOTIONS AND NON-EMOTIONAL WORDS TO THE NEURAL CATEGORY (N=9)………..188.
EXPERIMENT 3: MEAN % AGREEMENT FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF EMOTIONAL WORDS TO SIX BASIC EMOTIONS AND NON-EMOTIONAL WORDS TO THE NEURAL CATEGORY (N=12)……..189.

All research presented complies with the Human Ethics guidelines as set by the University of Sydney:

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Diagnostic colours of emotions

**Figures and Tables:**

Figure 1.1: A model for object and colour naming (Davidoff, 1991)………………..18.

Figure 1.2: The 'Shape + Surface' model of object recognition (Tanaka, et al. 2001)………………………………………………………….20.

Figure 4.1: An Illustration of the Study Rationale…………………………………..66.

Figure 4.2: Overview of the dissertation………………………………………………72.

Table 5.1: Mean % of the total colour features given for each emotional category in the feature-listing questionnaire …………………………………………………………….79.

Figure 5.2: Mean % of colour information mentioned for each slot and for each emotion in the feature-listing questionnaire …………………………………………………………….80.

Table 5.3: Mean % of the specific colour features given for each emotional category in the feature-listing questionnaire…………………………………………………………….80.

Table 6.1: Sample size per cell for the between subject design (Experiment 2)…………………………………………………………………….92.

Figures 6.3 and 6.4: Example of the two stimuli types as they appear in the induction-appropriate colour and test-appropriate colour conditions (Experiment 2 and 3)…………………………………………………………………………….93.

Figures 6.5 and 6.6: Example of the two stimuli types as they appear in the induction-inappropriate colour and test-inappropriate colour conditions…………………………………………………………………………………………….93.

Figure 6.7: Example of an induction trial (Experiment 2 and 3)………………………94.

Figure 6.8: Example of a test trial (Experiment 2 and 3)………………………………..95.

Figure 6.9: Mean percentage correct recognition for Appropriate versus Inappropriate presentations as a function of consistency level (Experiment 2)…………………………………………………………………………….96.

Figure 6.10: d’ values as a function of colour condition and level of consistency (Experiment 2)………………………………………………………….97.

Figure 6.11: Bias (β) in recognition memory performance as a function of experimental condition (Experiment 2)…………………………..97.
Diagnostic colours of emotions

Figure 6.12: Mean percentage correct recognition as a function of stimulus type and colour Condition (Experiment 2)………………..98.

Figure 6.13: d’ values as a function of colour condition and stimulus type (Experiment 2)……………………………………………………98.

Figure 6.14: Mean percentage correct recognition for emotional versus neutral information as function of stimulus type (Experiment 2)………………99.

Figure 6.15: Mean reaction time as a function of stimuli type and colour conditions (Experiment 2)………………………………………99.

Figure 6.16: Mean percentage correct recognition as a function of colour conditions (Experiment 3)………………………………………104.

Figure 6.17: d’ and β values as a function of colour condition (Experiment 3)….105.

Figure 6.18: Mean percentage correct recognition for emotional vs. neutral information as a function of stimulus type (Experiment 3)…………………………………………………………105.

Figure 6.19: Mean percentage correct recognition as a function of stimulus type and colour condition (Experiment 3)………………106.

Figure 6.20: d’ values as a function of colour condition and stimulus type (Experiment 3)…………………………………………………106.

Figure 6.21: Mean Reaction Time as a function of stimulus type and colour conditions (Experiment 3)………………………………………107.

Table 6.22: Relationship between high agreement level and recognition memory of Appropriate and Inappropriate colour-emotion associations (Post hoc findings, Experiments 2 and 3)………………..112.

Figure 6.23: Percentage agreement of Appropriate colour choices for each of the seven emotional categories in Experiments 2 and 3 (N = 66)…………………………………………………………113.

Figure 6.24: Percentage Agreement of inappropriate colour choices for each of the seven emotional categories in Experiments 2 and 3 (N = 66)…………………………………………………………113.

Figure 6.25: % Correct recognition differences for Appropriate colour-emotion associations (which had 20% agreement or more in Experiments 2 and 3) as a function of % Agreement……114.

Figure 6.26: % Correct recognition differences for Inappropriate colour-emotion associations (which had 20% agreement or more in Experiments 2 and 3) as a function of % Agreement……115.
Diagnostic colours of emotions

Table 7.1: Sample size per cell for Experiment block 1 (Experiment 4)..............124.

Table 7.2: Sample size per cell for Experiment block 2 (Experiment 4)..............124.

Figure 7.3: Example of an inappropriate emotional Stroop trial (Experiment 4)....124.

Figure 7.4: Mean reaction as a function of task condition for each of the 10 participants in the Standard Stroop Task (Experiment 4)......................126.

Figure 7.5: Mean reaction for each of the four Stroop tasks as a function of task position, in Stroop Task (Experiment 4)..................127.

Figure 7.6: Mean reaction for each of the four Stroop tasks conditions in Stroop Task 1 (Experiment 4)........................128.

Figure 7.7: Mean reaction for naming emotional and neutral colours in Stroop Task 1 (Experiment 4)..............................129.

Figure 7.8: Mean reaction for each of the four Stroop tasks as a function of task position, in Stroop Task 2 (Experiment 4)......................130.

Figure 7.9: Mean reaction for each of the four Stroop tasks conditions in Stroop Task 2 (Experiment 4).............................131.

Figure 7.10: Mean reaction for naming neutral colours of words and neutral colours of non words, in Stroop Task 2 (Experiment 4)..............131.