

“Blue-black caves of shade”.
The Language of Colour in Juliet’s Trilogy by Munro

Abstract: Using a socio-semiotic multimodal stylistic approach, this article inspects the language of colour in “Chance”, “Soon”, “Silence”, three interrelated stories by Alice Munro. Far from expressing abstract, universal and idealised concepts to be inscribed within a generative system of hues, it claims that colour language is meta-functionally conceptualised and socio-semiotically configured. First, it draws a map of verbal chromatic expressions by considering chromisms, compounds, adjectival and verbal patterns. Second, and in line with van Leeuwen’s (2011) “semiotics of colour”, it retrieves colour expressions according to a graded system (including the parameters of colour value, saturation, differentiation, modulation, mixing, purity, transition, hue), and, as such, as carrying symbolic and emotive implicatures. Third, it argues the metafunctional potential of the language of colour in ideational, interpersonal and textual terms for descriptive, emotional and cohesive concerns respectively. Ultimately, it claims that the language of colour, consciously, meticulously and systemically adopted, is functional in expressing Munro’s indeterminacy and elusiveness. Generally modulated, mixed and fluid, colours are, indeed, captured and rendered in their shaded, dynamic and transitory manifestations.

Keywords: *Alice Munro, colour, language, parameters, modulation, transition*

Because of the woman at the cleaners, the sick child,
she wore the wrong green dress.
(Alice Munro, “Tricks”)

1. Introduction

The penultimate story of the collection *Runaway*,¹ “Tricks”, opens with Robin, waiting for her avocado-green dress from the laundry. Through a flashback, the reader meets the 26-year-old nurse on the train to Stratford, Ontario, where she plans to watch a performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* by Shakespeare. After the play, she loses her handbag in the theatre’s toilet. Luckily, the young woman happens to meet Danilo, originally from Montenegro, who offers to pay for her rail ticket. He brings her to his clockmaker’s shop to take the money; they eat and spend a good time together. As she wants to give the money back, Danilo invites her to come back in a year’s time, to the same place, with the same green dress. The meeting ends with a kiss on the railway platform.

One year later, Robin leaves to Stratford to attend *As You Like It*. The dress is not ready at the laundry, so she buys another dress, yet, of a different type of green, a lime green. After this second play, she goes to the shop to meet Danilo and give back the money. Surprisingly, the man does not recognize her, after she desperately tries to grab his attention; he rudely shuts the shop’s door in her face.

It is only after many years, at the hospital where she is working, that Robin discovers that the man in the shop was probably Alexander, Danilo’s deaf-mute twin brother. Upset, the nurse thinks about tricks in life, but cannot avoid blaming her “wrong green dress” for her unlucky destiny (269). Thus, “Tricks” narrates of the irreducibility of green-colour shades (as well as of the implacability of green

¹ Alice Munro, *Runaway* (London: Vintage, [2004] 2006). All quotations from “Tricks” and from the *Trilogy* are taken from this 2006 Vintage edition of *Runaway*, with page number in parenthesis.

dresses). It expresses the author’s awareness of and concern for specific and distinct colour hues, and invites considering multifarious implicatures of colour conceptualization and configuration.

Drowning on these insightful references to colours, this work concentrates on the use and function of the language of colour in “Chance”, “Soon”, “Silence”, three stories by Alice Munro, collected in the same volume which includes “Tricks”, *Runaway* (2004).² The three texts are closely intertwined, weaving together the threads of the same female character’s life, Juliet. “Chance” captures the personal growth of a young woman, born in a small town near Toronto: after a B.A. and M.A in classics, she lives her first professional experience as a temporary teacher in British Columbia. Set in Whale Bay, North of Vancouver, “Soon” revolves around a young mother of the 13-month-old baby Penelope, living with Eric, a fisherman she had met on a Toronto-Vancouver train. Some months later, Juliet pays a visit to her parents in Ontario, to let them know about the child, and to check her mother’s frail health condition. She also discovers that a painting by Chagall she had bought for her parents has been left in the attic, as her father found the artwork embarrassing. The protagonist travels back to the North and her mother dies. Years later, Eric finds his death during a violent storm and his body is burnt on the beach. “Silence” opens the secrets of a middle-aged person, abandoned by her daughter who avoids any contact and denies any explanation. For years, Juliet keeps looking for Penelope, obsessively but vainly. Juliet’s stories have been turned into a film by Pedro Almodovar, *Julieta*, shot in Spain and in Spanish, and presented at the 2016 Cannes film festival.

Using a socio-semiotic multimodal stylistic approach, this paper inspects the language of colour in the *Trilogy*. Far from identifying abstract, universal, idealised concepts to be inscribed within a generative system of hues, it claims that colour language is, instead, metafunctionally conceptualised and socio-semiotically configured. First, it draws a map of verbal chromatic expressions, by considering chromisms, compounds, adjectival and verbal patters. Second, it outlines a discourse of colour in the short stories, postulating the predominance of the parametric system of modulation, and inscribing dynamism within a multimodal stylistic framework. Third, it argues the metafunctional potential of the language of colour, in ideational, interpersonal and textual terms, for, respectively, descriptive, emotional, and cohesive concerns. It concludes that the language of colour, consciously, meticulously and systemically adopted, is functional in expressing Munro’s indeterminacy and elusiveness.

2. Literature Review

Literature on the language of colours is rich and encompasses a wide range of disciplinary domains perspectives. This section briefly outlines some studies moving from generative to semiotic approaches to colour discourse. The seminal study on colour names, *Basic Colour Terms*, by Berlin and Kay, is based on a universal classificatory vocabulary.³ The authors have postulated the existence of 11 universal basic colour categories: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and grey. They have mapped the presence of such categories in 98 languages, identifying different stages of the evolution of colour vocabulary: some languages at a first stage, such as Ngombe in Congo and Dugum Dani in New Guinea, only contain a term for white and a term for black, whereas some other languages at a seventh stage, such as American-English and Hungarian contain all the above eleven terms. In their interviews Berlin and Kay had rigid rules for colour name validity: they only considered monolexemic words (thus excluding compounds like ‘lime-green’, for instance), or colour terms, which could be applied to a wide range of fields (thus excluding ‘blond’, for instance).

² The three short stories were first published, together, on the *New Yorker*, between 14 and 21 June 2004: *Chance* (130-142), *Soon* (142-9, 150-7), *Silence* (157-8, 160, 163-4, 166, 168-172, 175-6, 178-80, 183).

³ Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

Alongside Berlin and Kay’s study, other contributions from a range of disciplines have enriched the critical and scientific debate on colour discourse. In his extended and notorious inspection of colours, the French historian and anthropologist Michel Pastoureau argues that colours carry deep symbolic meanings, of which we are often unaware.⁴ Language itself epitomises such meaning potentials, in its pervasive ‘colourful’ idiomatic expressions. It is not by chance that we commonly refer to ‘the black market’, to ‘a black sheep’, as well as to ‘the blue blood’; or that we say that something happens only ‘once in a blue moon’, or makes us become ‘green with envy’, or ‘to see red’. Symbolic meanings profoundly impact human life in its multifarious expressions, ranging from art, politics, religion, psychology, and sociology.

In this vein, van Leeuwen’s socio-semiotic theory rejects abstract and universal colour concepts, and addresses authentic instantiation of colours. Van Leeuwen’s theory is, then, a socio-semiotics of colour, accounting for how society “uses colour for the purposes of expression and communication”,⁵ that is, addressing how colours have been used and are being adopted to express and communicate feelings, thoughts, ideas, as well as to socially interact. The aim of this theory is, thus, the study of semiotic resources, semiotic practices, as well as semiotic change. Attention is devoted to how new colours and colour names have been introduced, manipulated and developed across history after the discovery of new pigments through how colours have been symbolically used in political, religious and folklore events, to how colours express feelings, ideas and perspectives in art, architecture and fashion. The following section outlines the theory for the present work.

3. Metafunctions, Reality Principles and Modality

In order to analyse the language of colour in its behaviour and function, this article adopts a socio-semiotic multimodal stylistic approach, which combines socio-semiotics,⁶ visual analysis⁷ and functional stylistics.⁸ The integration of socio-semiotic multimodality and stylistics for the methodological framework is related to both content and form. It responds to Munro’s narrative being concerned with multisensoriality and materiality, and as being shaped by the semiotics of modes and modal resources. Moreover, it acknowledges that the Canadian writers’ style profoundly challenges the borders between written and oral modes.⁹

Kress and van Leeuwen have addressed colour as a mode, claiming its availability, as a resource for making meaning in a socio-cultural group.¹⁰ As such, colour serves the three Hallidayan metafunctions or lines or strands of meaning, which embrace the main general purposes language is used for:¹¹

⁴ Michel Pastoureau, *Le Petit Livre des Couleurs* (Paris: Éditions du Panama, 2005).

⁵ Theo van Leeuwen, *The Language of Colour* (London: Routledge, 2011), 1. See also Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, “Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar of Colour”, *Visual Communication*, 1.3 (2002), 343-368, and Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), Chapter 5.

⁶ M.A.K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Third edition (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Patricia Canning, “Functionalist Stylistics”, in Michael Burke, ed., *The Routledge Handbook to Stylistics* (London: Routledge, 2014), 45-67.

⁹ On Munro’s conversational style, see Linda Pilliere, “Alice Munro’s Conversational Style”, *Études de Stylistique Anglaise*, 8 (2015), 37-56; Isla Duncan, *Alice Munro’s Narrative Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Lynn Blin, “Conversationality and the Infraordinary in Alice Munro’s ‘The Shining Houses’”, in “*With a roar from underground*”: *Alice Munro’s Dance of the Happy Shades*, *Études de Stylistique anglaise*, 8 (2015), 127-143; Michael Toolan, “The Intrinsic Importance of Sentence Type and Clause Type to Narrative Effect: Or, How Alice Munro’s ‘Circle of Prayer’ Gets Started”, in Dan McIntyre, ed., *Language and Style* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 311-327.

¹⁰ Kress and van Leeuwen, “Colour as a Semiotic Mode”, 346.

¹¹ Halliday, *Functional Grammar*, 29-31.

1. The first is the ideational metafunction, which sees the clause as representation, and is concerned with depicting the world, the content of the narrative. Colours can, accordingly, fulfil ideational meanings, and be used to denote things, entities and processes, such as, in flags or brands.
2. The second is the interpersonal metafunction, enacting interpersonal relations among participants, establishing social relations and perceiving the clause as exchange. Colours, indeed, act upon participants, impact on characters, as they express, inspire or generate feelings and emotions.
3. The third is the textual metafunction, concerned with the construction of the text, in terms of organisation, cohesion and coherence, and conceiving the clause as message. Like in webpages, magazine or brochure covers, colours are used to create textual organization, coherence and/or foregrounding.

In this vein, language behaviour and language function negotiate reality conceptualisation and configuration, e.g., how reality is perceived and represented. Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework (2006) identifies main reality principles or orientations: the naturalistic, sensory and abstract ones.

1. In the first case, reality is depicted in the most faithful possible way, with naturalistic colour modulation and differentiation, and a naturalistic distribution of light and shade.
2. In the case of sensory reality principle, feelings, emotions and moods are expressed, and the pleasure principle plays a dominant role.
3. Finally, the abstract modality principle entails processes of decontextualisation, idealisation and essentialisation: the visual configuration achieves an analytic dimension and impersonal stance.

The three reality principles are encoded by the grammar system of modality, “an expression of indeterminacy”¹² in reality representation, whereby language enables one to temper a proposition by communicating degrees along a continuum. In verbal language, modality can be expressed via a range of items, such as modal verbs, adverbs of probability or of frequency. This article is specifically concerned with verbal configurations of the parametric system of colour, as projecting the grammar of modality, reality principles, metafunctions, and, ultimately, style.

Hence, colours can be perceived as a continuum, where one colour flows gradually into another. For instance, green is not a rigid and fixed colour, but gradually flows into other colours, running from almost yellow on the one hand, to almost blue on the other hand. As such, hues can be located within colour schemes, which show graded and shaded colour instances, and their “complex and composite meaning potential”¹³ can be analysed accordingly. Various modality markers frame modality within the semiotic system of colour, namely, colour value, saturation, differentiation, modulation, mixing, purity, transition, hue. Colour features are not mapped in terms of binary choices (e.g., ‘saturation’ vs ‘desaturation’; ‘modulation’ vs ‘flatness’), but according to a graded system, as a matter of degree.¹⁴

Exploring the tension between a level of content and a level of expression, this article examines a socio-semiotic conceptualization and a functional configuration of the discourse of colour in the *Trilogy*.

¹² Ibid., 148.

¹³ Kress and van Leeuwen, *Colour as a Semiotic Mode*, 355.

¹⁴ Van Leeuwen, *Colour*, 57.

4. Text Analysis

In this section, text analysis first observes the presence, frequency and behaviour of colour-related terms and expressions, then maps parametric configurations of the language of colour, and, finally, discusses its metafunctional component and potential.

4.1 *Presence and Frequency of Chromisms*

The *Trilogy* shows 100 colour-term occurrences, including 37 in “Chance”, 36 in “Soon” and 27 in “Silence”. The proportion of absolute terms is coherent: 17, 13, and 14 respectively.

	Chance	Soon	Silence	Tot.
terms	17	13	14	44
occurrences	37	36	27	100

The most frequent chromisms are ‘black’ (17), followed by ‘white’ (14), ‘green’ (10), ‘yellow’ and ‘brown’ (8), ‘red’ and ‘gray’ (6), and ‘blue’ (5). Especially used in the central story, the black colour qualifies Juliet and Sarah’s dresses (“black minidress” (90) for Juliet; the “black linen skirt down to her calves and a matching jacket” (89) for Sarah), as well as Irene’s appearance (her “thick, springy black hair, pulled back from her face into a stubby ponytail”, (91) as well as her “thick and rather hostile black eyebrows” (91). In “Chance”, it is used to depict the landscape, like the “dark gray or quite black” rocks (51), the “black spruce” trees (52) and the “black water, black rocks, under the wintry clouds, filled the air with darkness” (65).

The white colour is present in Chagall’s ekphrasis opening “Soon”, in “the profile of a pure white heifer” (87), with “the whites of his eyes shining” (87). It also appears, later in the same story, in the “blistered and shabby white paint” (91) of Sam and Sarah’s house, in Sarah’s “white hair flying out in wisps” (98), whereas, towards the end of “Silence”, it resonates with the “white baby” (151), generated by the Queen of Ethiopia.

The third recurring colour is green, with 10 occurrences. “Chance” features “dark-green, zipped shrouds” (52), “dark-green curtains” on the train (79), and the “bright-green” pie Ailo had cooked for Ann’s wake (76). If “Soon” writes of the “green-faced man” of Chagall’s painting (87), the “shiny lime-green cloth” of Sarah’s turban, collar and cuffs (89), in “Silence”, the green colour is almost absent.

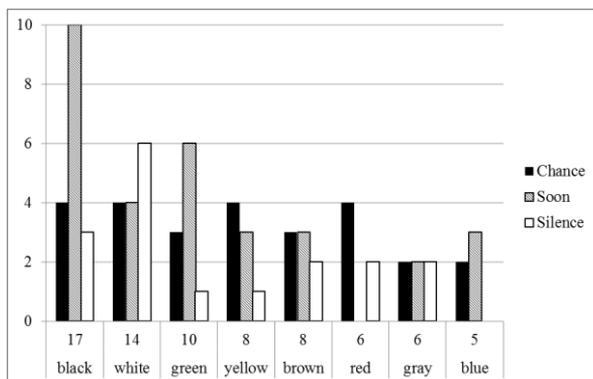
The fourth recurring colours are yellow and brown, with 8 occurrences each. The two items of vocabulary co-occur in the modulated “brownish-yellow light” (98) of Sara’s room, generated by bamboo shades hung on all the windows of the former sunroom. In “Chance”, yellow is the colour of the “large yellow dog” (74) welcoming Juliet before entering Eric’s house, and Ailo’s “yellowish-white hair loose over her shoulders” (75). Towards the end of “Soon”, a saturated yellow colour marks Penelope’s “duck-shaped yellow soap” and the “well-pressed yellow skirt” of the minister (117). The only occurrence in “Silence” is used to mark its absence, as in: “[a]ll wore ordinary clothes, not yellow robes or anything of that sort” (129).

Brown signals the status and change of Juliet and Sam’s hair: readers first meet Juliet’s “light brown hair” (52), then Sam’s “light-brown floppy hair” (89) in the second story, and finally, know that “[d]uring the years that it had been dyed red it had lost the vigor of its natural brown—it was a silvery brown now, fine and wavy” (150). Worth-mentioning are also the man on the train’s “tan and brown checked jacket” (54), as well as the “reddish-brown dog” (75), the second of Eric’s dogs, in “Chance”.

The same number of occurrences, 6, is shown by red and gray. Red appears in the “dark red” of the station building (58), in the “Dreary Railway Red” (64) Juliet mentions in her letter to her parents, as

well as in the “red-limbed arbutus” (82) in “Chance”. “Silence” mentions the fact that Juliet’s colour, over the years, had been “dyed red” (150), and captures a red sky, in the portion “where the sun had gone down” (147). As for the gray colour, the narrator in “Chance” reports “dark gray” rocks (51), and “some gray at the sides” on Eric’s dark and curly hair (71). In “Soon”, the car’s paint had “faded to gray” (91), while Sara’s hair is “going gray”; a woman Juliet meets in “Silence” has “[l]ong black hair streaked with gray” (127).

Blue only has a frequency of 5, including the “dark-blue shirt” and the “flecks of blue and gold” on the “maroon tie” worn by the suicidal (54), Ailo’s “green or blue eyes” (91), “the original blue paint” (91) of Sam’s car in “Soon”, and the “blue-black caves of shade” (94).



Acknowledging the relevant frequency and distribution of colour terms, the following section looks more specifically at modal configurations of colour discourse, addressed as a graded system, and, as such, as carrying multifarious emotional implicatures.

4.2 The Parametric Configuration of Colour Discourse

Within a socio-semiotic approach to the language of colour, various parametric systems can be envisaged – value, saturation, differentiation, modulation, mixing, purity, transition, hue – which are verbally articulated through chromisms, compounds, adjectival and verbal patterns.

Adjectives like ‘light’ and ‘dark’ express respectively tints or shades of a hue, and configure the parametric system of value. The scale of value is the gray scale, the scale from maximally light (white) to maximally dark (black). The following excerpts show adjectives pre-modifying the hue term and framing the system of value:

Most of the berths were already made up, the **dark-green** curtains narrowing the aisles, when he walked her back to the car (79).

Juliet had described Sam as looking like her – long neck, a slight bump to the chin, **light-brown** floppy hair – and Sara as a frail pale blonde, a wispy untidy beauty (89).

As epitomised by the two instances, the adjectives ‘light’ (“light-brown floppy hair”) and ‘dark’ (“dark-green curtains”) represent the two extremes of the parameter of value. In-between them are a range of light-related adjectives, which may simultaneously be ascribed to colour intensity, as in the following:

[Ailo] sets before Juliet, with the coffee, a piece of pie – **bright** green, covered with some shrunken meringue (76).

The jacket’s collar and cuffs were of a **shiny** lime-green cloth with black polka dots (90).

Albeit also related to the presence of light, green-related adjectives like ‘bright’ and ‘shiny’ mainly configure the parameter of saturation, which expresses chromatic vividness and vibrancy.

The semiotic system of colour differentiation can be measured on a scale that goes from a wide and varied palette of colours, through a reduced palette, to monochrome, and is generally expressed via the conjunction ‘and’, in order to juxtapose colour names, as in the following:

Tasselled loafers, tan slacks, **tan and brown** checked jacket with pencil lines of maroon, dark-blue shirt, maroon tie with flecks of blue and gold (54).

Perhaps in Heather’s house, in the **white and green and orange sunroom**, with Heather’s brothers shooting baskets in the backyard, news so dire could hardly penetrate (144).

The first instance (“tan and brown”) is non-problematic, as it adopts an unmarked ‘A and B’ solution. Differently, the three colour names in the second instance (“white and green and orange”) are divided by two conjunctions ‘A and B and C’. Being isolated, separated, dissociated by the conjunction, the three items of vocabulary project, following Pilliere,¹⁵ an analytical approach, a “dissociative point of view”. This is contrasted to an unmarked A, B and C solution (absent in the *Trilogy*), whereby readers are invited to cast an overall, synthetic gaze, and capture chromatic associations and echoes.

The syntagmatic combination of colour expressing the system of differentiation can be slightly modified by a paradigmatic combination of colours, verbally articulated through the conjunction ‘or’. If syntagmatic differentiation is achieved through a ‘both-and’ pattern, paradigmatic differentiation projects an ‘either-or’ tension, as in the following:

[Irene’s] eyes were **green or blue**, a light surprising color against this skin, and hard to look into, being deep set (91).

This second solution (“green or blue”) relies on choice between two options and, on a narrative level, highlights the narrator’s and the focaliser’s perceptive limits: she *does not know* whether the eyes’ colours were blue or green. More than colour-based description, what readers are left with are the narrator’s and/or focaliser’s uncertainties.

Colour modulation refers to the adoption of tints and shades of the same colour, in opposition to flat colours. In the following instance, the predeterminer ‘silvery’ (defined by the *OED* as “grey-white and lustrous”, when related to hair) modifies the brown colour, creating a unique tint:

During the years that it had been dyed red it had lost the vigor of its natural brown – it was a **silvery brown** now, fine and wavy (150).

¹⁵ Linda Pilliere, “Alice Munro’s Conversational Style”, *Études de Stylistique Anglaise*, 8 (2015), 37-56. See also Lynn Blin, “Alice Munro’s Naughty Coordinators in ‘Friend of My Youth’”, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 55 (2010), 85-108.

However, more frequent in Munro is the -ish suffix, adding a negative connotation to the modifying colour, and inscribing an emotional component within colour discourse:

And now a small **reddish-brown dog** arrives to join in the commotion (75).

Ailo is a tall, broad-shouldered woman with a thick but not flabby body, and **yellowish-white hair** loose over her shoulders (75).

Bamboo shades had been hung on all the windows, filling the small room – once part of the verandah – with a **brownish-yellow light** and a uniform heat (98).

The modulation process is performed by two colour terms (“reddish-brown”, “yellowish-white”, “brownish-yellow”): the second is modulated by the first, and the first is modulated by its connoting suffix. Colour modulation – is, elsewhere, expressed with some locutions:

His hair was dark and curly **with some gray at the sides**, his forehead wide and weathered, his shoulder strong and a little stooped (71).

Long black hair **streaked with gray**, no makeup, long denim skirt (127).

Tasselled loafers, tan slacks, tan and brown checked jacket with pencil lines of maroon, dark-blue shirt, maroon tie **with flecks of blue and gold** (54).

Through a variety of verbal expressions (“some gray”, “streaked with”, “flecks of blue and gold”), excerpts differently configure colour modulation, whereby the language of colour disrupts colour flatness. Elsewhere – and on rare and less relevant occurrences – the opposite of modulation, a flat, homogeneous and undifferentiated colour is achieved by the means of locutions or premodifying items, as follows:

Wide hips, strong arms, long hair – **all** blond with **no** white – breasts bobbing frankly under a loose shirt (81).

The pews and other church furnishings had been removed, and **plain** white curtains had been strung up to form private cubicles, as in a hospital ward (129).

Overall, colour modulation is the most relevant parameter in Munro’s narrative, both in terms of a) frequency of modulated colour expressions and in the b) complexity and variety of their articulation. Notably, modulation is functional in expressing coding orientation and/as modality in the *Trilogy*, related to the credibility and reliability of propositions. As such, the language of colour can be related to previous studies on Munro’s language.

Somacarrera¹⁶ addressed linguistic modality in three of Munro’s stories, owing that they convey the narrator’s attitude towards the truth of the narrated events. The Spanish scholar specifically observed epistemic modality, whereby the narrator indicates the confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed. Results showed that the predominant system is that of epistemic *possibility*, expressing a low degree of speaker’s commitment, via modal adverbs like ‘perhaps’, ‘maybe’, or modal

¹⁶ Pilar Somacarrera, “Exploring the Impenetrability of Narrative: A Study of Linguistic Modality in Alice Munro’s Early Fiction”, in *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne*, 21.1 (1996), 79–91.

auxiliary verbs like ‘would’, or expressions, such as, ‘she could not tell if’, ‘she did not know’, ‘she could not remember’. Observations on this article seem to be consistent with Somacarrera’s results: a ‘brownish-yellow’ colour term may, semiotically and epistemically, correspond to ‘perhaps’, ‘maybe’ and ‘would’ in her analysis. (On the opposite side of the cline, fully saturated colours – a ‘vivid’ or ‘vibrant red’ – may express epistemic certainty and correspond to patterns, such as, ‘surely’ and ‘must’).

In-between modulation and differentiation is colour mixing, whereby two distinct colours are dis/connected by a hyphen:

The hardwood trees were humped over the far edge of the fields, making **blue-black caves of shade**, and the crops and the meadows in front of them, under the hard sunlight, were gold and green (94).

Verbally expressed by compound colour names, where the hyphen both dis/joins the two equally important lexemes, mixedness pertains to the criterion of purity in colour theories,¹⁷ highly valued in antiquity, and developing a scale from maximally pure, undiluted colours, to mixed, hybrid colours. If the previous instance epitomises mixed colour (“blue-black”), the following instances feature pure colour (“pure white”), on the other extreme end of the purity cline:

Two profiles face each other. One the profile of a **pure white** heifer, with a particularly mild and tender expression, the other that of a green-faced man who is neither young nor old (87).

Interestingly, the latter excerpt refers to the description of Chagall’s painting from Juliet’s perspective. As she herself reveals to a friend in a dialogue, the young woman loved the artwork, as it reminded her of her parents and their simple and genuine life. This is why she had bought a printed copy for them (88).¹⁸

Overall, the language of colour in Munro seems to challenge determination and stability both synchronically and diachronically; the stories features dynamic transitions, intended as natural or artificial colour transformation:

[Irene] had thick, springy black hair, pulled back from her face into a stubby ponytail, thick and rather hostile black eyebrows, and the sort of skin that **browns** easily (91).

Rooms in [Sam’s] mind closed up, the windows **blackened**—what was in there judged by him to be too useless, too discreditable, to meet the light of day (114).

Diachronic chromatic modulation is either achieved through intransitive transformative processes of colour, such as, “browns”, “blacken”, “fade”, or through go + chromism syntagm:

The original blue paint showed in streaks here and there but **was mostly faded to gray**, and the effects of winter road salt could be seen in its petticoat fringe or rust (91).

Sara’s soft, fair, flyaway hair, **going gray and then white** (150).

¹⁷ Van Leeuwen, *Colour*, 61.

¹⁸ See Robert Thacker, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005, revised in 2011).

During the years that **it had been dyed red** it had lost the vigor of its natural brown – it was a silvery brown now, fine and wavy (150).

Both concerned with colour fluidity and transition, the first two instances indicate natural transformation (“faded to gray” and “going gray and then white”), whereas the third expresses an induced transformation (“it had been dyed red”). Transition may also be tempered, as in the following:

When the professor read that word (which she could not now remember), his forehead had gone **quite** pink and he seemed to be suppressing a giggle (81).

The adverb ‘quite’ operates as a modifier and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means “fairly, rather, somewhat, a bit, a little”. It then expresses that the transformation into the pink colour is moderate, relative, to a certain degree. This hedging strategy is consistent with observations made as for modality, and seems to integrate the system of dynamism and the principle of indeterminacy.

As instances show, the systemic and meticulous language of colour is functional in expressing Munro’s indeterminacy and elusiveness. This is epitomised by the following passage, showing an in-between solution between static and dynamic, where a tension is generated, between the progressive form of the intransitive transformative verb suggesting a diachronic movement (shading) and the still semantics of the utterance.

His fur was long, **silvery shading into white** (57).

The last parameter is hue, encompassing the scale from red to blue. In line with a socio-semiotic approach, Munro explores a wide range of highly specific hues, consistent with a naturalistic view. The more conventional and stable red is replaced by a composite and layered system, including ‘raspberry’, ‘crimson’, ‘maroon’, as in the following:

Yesterday, at the station, with her pencilled eyebrows and **raspberry lipstick**, her turban and suit, she had looked to Juliet like an elderly Frenchwoman (not that Juliet had seen many elderly Frenchwomen), but now, with her white hair flying out in wisps, her bright eyes anxious under nearly nonexistent brows, she looked more like an oddly aged child (98).

She saw that the water and urine in the bowl was **crimson** with her blood (61).

Tasselled loafers, tan slacks, tan and brown checked jacket with pencil lines of **maroon**, dark-blue shirt, **maroon** tie with flecks of blue and gold (54).

Instances show that the system of hue rejects general and abstract definitions of colours, in favour of specific and irreducible ones. This is also reminiscent of the green colour in “Tricks”, perceived and represented as an abstract green, but a specific and distinct type of green, such as, avocado, lime, vivid, deep, bright, dark, light green. Not confined to the red colour (with ‘raspberry’, ‘crimson’ and ‘maroon’), a multifarious declination of a hue can be also found in the *Trilogy* with reference, for instance, to ‘brown’, with the following colour terms: ‘tan’, ‘copper’ and ‘auburn’.

Acknowledging a seemingly paradoxical grammar of colour complexity and ungraspability, the following table sums up the proposed parameters, and their verbal configuration in the stories. This is to be intended as an open framework, to be constantly developed and honed.

Parameter		Verbal strategy	Example
Value		light-related adj. + colour term	dark-green curtains
Saturation		shiny + colour term	shiny lime green
Differentiation	syntagmatic	colour term and colour term	tan and brown
	paradigmatic	colour term or colour term	green or blue
Modulation		CTish colour term	yellowish-brown
Mixing		colour term - colour term	blue-green
Purity		purity-related Adj. + colour term	pure white
Transition		colour process	blacken
Hue		colour term	crimson

5. Discussion

After checking frequency, outlining and illustrating the parametric systems for the analysis of the language of colour in the *Trilogy*, the following section discusses their metafunctional role within the narrative and addresses the ideational, interpersonal and textual lines of meaning.

As for the ideational metafunction, colour discourse is used for the description of characters, space, and things, as in the following two instances:

Tasselled loafers, **tan** slacks, **tan and brown** checked jacket with **pencil lines of maroon, dark-blue** shirt, **maroon** tie with **flecks of blue and gold**. (54)

The **original blue** paint showed in **streaks here and there** but was **mostly faded to gray**, and the effects of winter road salt could be seen in its petticoat fringe or rust. (91)

In the first instance, readers meet the character of a man, on the train from Toronto to Vancouver, who is going to sit in front of Juliet, try and start a conversation, before she leaves for the toilet. Later, the man would commit suicide and Juliet would feel guilty. This character is depicted through a carefully composed palette of dark and homogeneous colours, including ‘tan’, ‘maroon’, ‘brown’ and express the parameters of differentiation and value. In the second excerpt, the language of colour signals the passing of time and its effects on the old Pontiac, Sam’s car. It used to be blue but it is now gray, with marks of rust. Through the use of lexemes, such as, ‘flecks’ and ‘streaks’, both excerpts adopt strategies which disrupt colour flatness.

Beside ideational value, colours have interpersonal meanings, act upon participants, impact on characters, as in the following instances about characters and setting, respectively:

She had thick, springy black hair, pulled back from her face into a stubby ponytail, thick and rather **hostile** black eyebrows, and the sort of skin that browns easily. (91)

This morning we stopped at some godforsaken little settlement in the northern woods, all painted **Dreary Railway Red**. (64)

The two colour-related adjectives (“hostile” and “dreary”) clearly connote the red and black colours expressively, and signal how they act upon viewers. Darkness in Irene depicts her introvert, uncanny attitude, while the Railway Red expresses a gloomy atmosphere and seems to anticipate the tragedy Juliet is going to witness. A further example of emotion-loaded colour language can be found in the already quoted and negatively connoted “brownish-yellow light”. Colour terms in Munro, then, project emotional values among represented participants (characters) and interactive participants (readers and represented participants). Hence, analysis of colour has cast light on the sensory representation of reality, based on emotional and affective concerns and on psychological implicatures.

Colours also project textual meanings, related to coherence and cohesion. The following instances show colour combination in terms of congruence or dissonance:

Her eyes were green or blue, **a light surprising color against this skin**, and hard to look into, being deep set. (91)

Then she figured it out—Sara was wearing **a black linen skirt down to her calves and a matching jacket**. The jacket’s collar and cuffs were of a shiny lime-green cloth with black polka dots. A turban of the same green material covered her hair. She must have made the outfit herself, or got some dressmaker to make it for her. **Its colors were unkind to her skin**, which looked as if fine chalk dust had settled over it. (89-90)

In the first instance, Irene’s eyes are of an unexpected, “surprising” colour, with her skin (“the sort of skin that browns easily”). The narrator points out the dissonant colour combination. In the second instance, Sara’s clothes are captured in their internal cohesion (“matching jacket”) but in their incoherent, dissonant effect when colours are seen in relation to her skin (“unkind to her skin”). Munro’s narrative is, thus, concerned with effects and implicatures of colour co-occurrences and mutual relations.

After observing the metafunctional value of the language of colour in terms of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, attention should be devoted to the reality principle underlying the texts, as affected by parametric systems. How is reality perceived and represented in the *Trilogy*? In a faithful, realistic, naturalistic way? Or in a sensory, affective, emotional one? Or, differently, in an abstract and idealised modality? On the one hand, Munro profoundly relies on the system of hue and adopts highly precise colour terms, such as, ‘raspberry’ and ‘crimson’. On the other hand, she frequently adopts a range of strategies of modulation – often emotionally charged – such as ‘flecks’, ‘streaks’, ‘lines of’ or ‘brownish-yellow’. This twofold concern for what is specific and affective creates a tension, in the *Trilogy*, between naturalist and sensory coding orientations.

If the *Trilogy* shows a naturalistic-sensory interaction, within “Soon” we find an embedded tension towards the abstract reality principle, expressed by Chagall’s painting. In opposition to modulation and dynamism manifested in her narrative and privileged by her narrators, Chagall’s painting is indeed based on saturation (“the whites of his eyes shining”) and purity (“pure white heifer”), as well as on white-

green colour contrast.¹⁹ This is not surprising: very often does Munro’s layered narrative embed, evoke, project other systems, horizons in a constant deferral of meaning. Chagall’s green is not ‘tricky’, unlike the one dressed in “Tricks” by Robin, the specialist in psychiatric nursing with “greenish-gray eyes” (240). A green, in Munro’s narrative, may be a “dark green”, a “bright green” a “lime green” or a “green or blue”, because shades and grades matter and make meaning. And because the language of colour, carefully and parametrically configured, expresses and celebrates the elusiveness of Munro’s art.

6. Conclusions

This article has outlined a seemingly paradoxical grammar of colour complexity and ungraspability operating within Munro’s *Trilogy*. Consciously, meticulously and systematically adopted, the language of colour in Munro is indeed multifaceted and multifarious and rejects simplistic and conclusive theoretical and analytical grids. First, and from the viewpoint of form, it is polymorphic and uses a variety of solutions at the level of expressions, such as similes, prefixes, suffixes, adjectives, compounds. In their verbal configurations colours are generally modulated, mixed and fluid, that is they are often captured in their shaded, dynamic and transitory manifestations. Second, and from the viewpoint of content and function, colour discourse is polysemous, and fulfils simultaneously ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. The language of colour, indeed, operates at the level of affect, generates emotional feelings, and delineates the horizon of epistemic modality for the writer’s narrative. A fluid and layered semiotic system, ultimately; it casts light on Munro’s aesthetics, on her narrative ungraspability and elusiveness.

This essay is limited in extent and scope. Further research should: first, integrate the language of colour analytic framework with parameters deriving from the language of light; second, expand the scale of research to the whole corpus of 14 Munro’s story collections and through the adoption of a software-based analysis, in order to check the frequency and validity of hypotheses; third, examine the language of colour in an intersemiotic process of film adaptations of literary texts.

¹⁹ Héliane Ventura, “Le village Chaosmique d’Alice Munro”, *Études Anglaises*, 67.3 (2014), 318-331.