

What Was The Orange Colour Called In English Before The Late 15th Century?.

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The vibrant hue we now know as orange has a rich and fascinating history, especially when exploring its linguistic and cultural origins in the English language. Before the late 15th century, the term used to describe this striking color was markedly different from the modern word "orange." Understanding what the color was called during this period offers insights into linguistic evolution, trade, and cultural exchanges that have shaped English vocabulary over centuries. In this article, we will delve into the historical nomenclature of the orange color, its etymology, and the broader context of color naming in medieval England.

The Origins of the Word "Orange" in English

Etymology and the Influence of Other Languages

The word "orange" as a descriptor of the color in English is relatively recent in linguistic history. Its roots trace back to the Sanskrit word *nāraṅga*, which referred to the fruit. From there, the term traveled through languages such as Persian (*nārang*), Arabic (*nāranj*), and Old French (*orenge*). The earliest recorded use of the word in relation to the fruit appears in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age, where *nāranj* denoted the sweet citrus fruit native to Southeast Asia and India.

When the fruit was introduced to Europe via trade routes, especially through the Arabic-speaking world, the term was adopted into Old French as *pomme d'orange* (orange apple) by the 13th century. This linguistic borrowing reflects the importance of trade and cultural exchanges in spreading both the fruit and its associated name.

The Transition from Fruit to Color in English

Initially, the word "orange" in English was primarily used to describe the fruit. The first recorded use of "orange" as a color descriptor in English dates from around the 16th century. Before this, the color was often referred to using other terms, which varied regionally and culturally.

Before the late 15th century, English lacked a specific word for the color orange. Instead, people described the hue using terms like:

- Yellow-red or red-yellow – a descriptive phrase indicating the spectrum.
- Gules – a term borrowed from heraldry, meaning red.
- Yellow – a broad term that occasionally encompassed shades close to orange.

The absence of a dedicated term meant that the color was often understood contextually, without a precise linguistic label.

Color Naming in Medieval England

The Vocabulary of Colors in Middle English

In medieval England, the vocabulary for colors was limited compared to modern standards. Common terms included:

- Red (rudd or rouge)
- Yellow (yelow)
- Green (grene)
- Blue (bleu or blau)
- Black (blak)
- White (whyte)

Descriptions of intermediate hues like orange, pink, or purple were often expressed through combinations of these basic terms or through descriptive phrases. For example, "reddish yellow" or "yellow with a tinge of red" were used to approximate what we now identify as orange.

The Role of Heraldry and Literature

Heraldry, the practice of designing coats of arms, played an important role in color terminology. Heraldic terms such as gules (red), azure (blue), vert (green), and or (gold/yellow) were standardized, but they did not include orange, as it was not recognized as a distinct color.

In literature, authors often described colors with poetic or metaphorical language. For example, in Geoffrey Chaucer's works, colors are described vividly but often in relative terms, emphasizing symbolism over precise color identification.

The Introduction of "Orange" as a Color Name in English

The Late 15th and Early 16th Century Shift

It was only in the late 15th and early 16th centuries that the term "orange" began to be used in English to describe the color itself. This shift coincided with increased trade with the East and the introduction of the orange fruit into Europe, which in turn influenced the language.

The earliest references to "orange" as a color appear in the context of textiles and dyes. To describe fabrics that had a reddish-yellow or reddish-orange hue, English writers started adopting the term "orange" directly from the French or other European languages.

Why It Took Time for the Term to Be Adopted

Several factors contributed to the delayed adoption of "orange" as a color name:

- Lack of need for specificity: Before the widespread availability of orange-colored dyes, there was less necessity to differentiate this hue from red or yellow.
- Linguistic conservatism: The English language was slow to adopt new terms, often relying on descriptive phrases rather than new words.
- Trade and cultural exchange: The increasing import of oranges and orange-dyed textiles from the Continent helped popularize the term.

Transition from Descriptive Phrases to a Distinct Color Name

From "Yellow-Red" to "Orange"

In early English texts, the color was often described as "yellow-red" or "red-yellow," indicating a hue between red and yellow. Over time, as the use of the word "orange" became more common, it gradually replaced these descriptive phrases.

By the 17th century, "orange" was firmly established as the name of the color in English, paralleling its use in other European languages. The adoption of the term was further reinforced by its appearance in art, textiles, and commerce.

Color Standardization and the Modern Usage

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the standardization of color terminology with the advent of color charts, paints, and digital displays. The word "orange" became a universally accepted term for the specific hue between red and yellow, characterized by a wavelength of approximately 590-620 nanometers.

Today, "orange" is recognized as one of the primary colors in the RGB and CMYK color models, and its name is deeply embedded in the lexicon of design, fashion, and everyday language.

Summary and Key Takeaways

- Before the late 15th century, English did not have a specific word for the orange color; it was described using phrases like "yellow-red."
- The term "orange" originated from the Sanskrit *nāraṅga* via Persian, Arabic, and Old French, initially referring to the fruit.
- The word was borrowed into English in the context of the fruit's trade, with the color being referred to by descriptive phrases for centuries.
- The adoption of "orange" as a color name in English gained momentum in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, coinciding with increased trade and

cultural exchange.

- The evolution of color terminology reflects broader patterns of linguistic change, trade influence, and technological advancements in dyeing and printing.

Understanding the history of the orange color in English reveals much about historical trade routes, cultural interactions, and linguistic development. It also highlights how language adapts and evolves over time to incorporate new concepts, objects, and visual experiences, enriching our vocabulary and cultural heritage.

References

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In conclusion, the word "orange" as a color in English is a relatively recent addition, emerging from trade and cultural exchange in the late medieval and early modern periods. Prior to that, descriptive phrases sufficed to convey the hue, reflecting a time when precise color names were less common and more context-dependent. The journey of the word from ancient Sanskrit to modern English exemplifies the interconnectedness of language, culture, and commerce across centuries.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the traditional English term for the color orange before the late 15th century?

Before the late 15th century, the color orange was often referred to as 'yellow-red' or simply described by terms like 'saffron' or 'geoluhread' in Old English, as the specific word 'orange' had not yet been adopted into English.

When did the word 'orange' begin to be used to describe the color in English?

The word 'orange' as a color name in English started to appear in the late 15th to early 16th centuries, borrowed from the Old French 'orenge,' which in turn came from the Arabic 'nāranj,' referring to the fruit and the color.

Why was the color orange not called 'orange' in English before the late 15th century?

Prior to the late 15th century, the term 'orange' was primarily used for the fruit, and the color was described with other terms like 'yellow-red.' The specific name 'orange' for the color was adopted later, influenced by the fruit's name after its introduction to Europe.

How did the introduction of the orange fruit influence the naming of the color in English?

The introduction of the orange fruit from Asia to Europe brought with it the name 'orange,' which gradually began being used to describe the hue of the fruit's peel and the corresponding color, eventually replacing older descriptive terms.

Are there ancient references to the color orange in English texts before the 15th century?

There are few, if any, direct references to the color orange in English texts before the late 15th century; descriptions of the color were usually conveyed through terms like 'yellow-red' or 'saffron,' as the specific term 'orange' was not yet part of the language.

How does the etymology of the word 'orange' reflect its journey from fruit to color in English?

The etymology of 'orange' traces back to the Sanskrit 'nāranj,' passed through Persian and Arabic, then Old French 'orenge,' before entering English, initially referring to the fruit. Over time, the term extended to describe the color of the fruit's peel, solidifying as the standard term for the hue in English.

Additional Resources

What Was The Orange Colour Called In English Before The Late 15th Century?

The vibrant hue we now associate with the fruit, the sunset, and a myriad of cultural symbols—orange—has a rich and complex linguistic history that predates its modern name in English. Exploring the origins of the term and its conceptual development reveals intriguing insights into medieval language, trade, and cultural exchanges that shaped how we perceive and describe colour. This investigation delves into what the colour orange was called in English before the late 15th century, examining linguistic roots, historical references, and the broader context of colour nomenclature in medieval Europe.

The Etymology and Early References to the

Colour Orange in English

Pre-Existing Colour Terms in Old English

Before addressing the specific term "orange," it is essential to understand the colour vocabulary available in Old English (circa 5th to 11th centuries). The Old English lexicon had a limited set of words for colours, largely descriptive or based on natural objects. For example:

- Blæc (black)
- Hæwen (white, pale)
- Read (red)
- Gielp or Gielp-lic (yellow, bright)
- Græg (grey)
- Seolfor (silver, sometimes used poetically for shining or greyish hues)

Notably, Old English lacked a specific term for the colour that would later be known as orange. Instead, descriptions of orange-like shades relied on compound phrases or comparisons to natural objects, such as "reddish-yellow" or "golden."

The Role of Natural Objects and Descriptive Phrases

In medieval English texts, colour descriptions were often rooted in tangible references. For example:

- The term "gold" (golden) was used to describe bright, yellow-orange hues.
- The word "sallow" or "sallowish" indicated a yellowish or pale hue.
- The phrase "red and yellow" or "reddish-yellow" was common to describe intermediate colours.

Therefore, before the late 15th century, the concept of a distinct "orange" colour was not encapsulated by a specific single word in English but instead conveyed through descriptive phrases linked to familiar objects—most notably, the fruit or the flame.

The Influence of the Fruit and the Term "Orange"

The Introduction of the Fruit and Its Impact on Language

The orange fruit (*Citrus sinensis*), originally native to Southeast Asia, entered Europe via trade routes in the medieval period, notably through the Arab world and later through Mediterranean trade. By the 10th and 11th centuries, oranges had begun to appear in European markets, although they

remained rare and luxurious.

The arrival of the fruit was significant not just economically but linguistically. The Latin term "aurantium" or "aurantium" (from Arabic "nāranj" or "nārang") influenced European languages.

- In Old French, the fruit was called "pomme d'orange" (orange apple).
- In Middle English, references to the fruit appeared as "orenge" or "orenge", borrowed from Old French or directly from Latin/Arabic sources.

This lexical borrowing laid the groundwork for the colour term's evolution in European languages.

Early English Terms for the Colour Derived from the Fruit

By the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the term "orange" began to be used in English not only to describe the fruit but also as a colour descriptor. This transition was gradual:

- "Orenge" or "orenge" (early spellings) appeared in Middle English texts.
- The first recorded use of "orange" as a colour in English dates to the late 15th century, around the 1470s.

Before this, English lacked a dedicated word for the colour itself. Instead, writers described the hue as "yellow-red" or "golden".

The Language Shift: From Descriptive Phrases to a Single Word

Why Was There No Single Word for Orange in English Prior to the Late 15th Century?

Several factors contributed to the absence of a distinct English word for the colour orange before the late 15th century:

- Limited Contact with the Fruit and Its Cultivation: Orange cultivation was initially confined to the Middle East and Asia. Only after trade expanded did the fruit and its associated terminology become more widespread.
- Linguistic Conservatism: Old English and early Middle English relied heavily on descriptive phrases rather than single-word labels for colours.
- Cultural Perception: The colour was perceived as a shade of red or yellow, not as a distinct hue requiring its own term.

Consequently, the colour was often described in relation to other colours, such as "reddish yellow" or "golden."

The Adoption of "Orange" as a Colour Name

The process of adopting "orange" as a colour name in English was gradual and influenced by several factors:

- The increasing availability and popularity of the fruit in Europe.
- The influence of trade languages, especially Latin, French, and Italian.
- The need for a specific term to describe the distinct hue, especially in art, textiles, and heraldry.

By the early 16th century, "orange" was increasingly used in English to denote the colour, especially in contexts involving textiles, painting, and description of natural objects.

Comparative Perspective: Colour Terms in Other European Languages

Understanding the English colour terminology also benefits from a comparative linguistic perspective. Several European languages had different timelines for adopting specific colour words:

- French: "Orange" as a colour term appeared in the 16th century, borrowed from the fruit's name.
- Spanish: "Naranja" originally referred to the fruit; the colour term "anaranjado" (orange-colored) became standard later.
- Italian: "Arancio" for the fruit; "arancione" for the colour emerged in the 16th century.
- German: "Orange" (from French) was adopted later; prior descriptions used "gelb" (yellow) or "rot" (red).

This cross-linguistic pattern underscores the influence of trade and cultural exchange in establishing the colour term.

Conclusion: The Evolution of the Word "Orange" in English

In summary, prior to the late 15th century, the colour now known as orange did not have a dedicated term in English. Instead, it was described using descriptive phrases like "reddish yellow," "golden," or "yellow-red." The advent of the fruit's introduction into Europe and subsequent trade relationships catalyzed the linguistic shift.

By the late 15th and early 16th centuries, "orange" began to be used as a colour name in English, borrowed from the Old French "pomme d'orange" or directly from Latin and Arabic sources. The term's adoption marked a significant expansion in the English colour vocabulary, allowing for more precise and nuanced descriptions.

This transition reflects broader themes in linguistic development—how trade, cultural exchange, and technological advances influence language and perception. The story of the word "orange" exemplifies how human interaction with natural objects and commodities can shape the very words we use to describe the world.

References and Further Reading

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In essence, the word "orange" as a colour in English is a relatively recent addition, emerging from the confluence of trade, cultural influence, and linguistic adaptation during the late Middle Ages. Before that, the hue was understood and described through descriptive phrases, illustrating how language evolves alongside human interaction with the natural world.

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