

Semantic Expansion of Primary Colour Adjectives: A Cognitive Semantic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the semantic expansion of primary colour adjectives *merah* (red), *biru* (blue), and *kuning* (yellow) within classical Malay texts using a cognitive semantic framework grounded in Prototype Theory. Drawing on 443 tokens extracted from the Malay Concordance Project (MCP) corpus, the research reveals that these adjectives function not merely as descriptive terms but as culturally embedded conceptual tools that encode emotion, ideology, and social identity. Through prototype mapping and semantic domain analysis, the study demonstrates how literal meanings evolve into symbolic and connotative expressions across genres such as *hikayat*, *pantun*, and *syair*. The findings affirm that meaning in classical Malay discourse is context-sensitive and culturally mediated, offering insights into the cognitive mechanisms that shape linguistic symbolism. This research contributes to the advancement of Malay cognitive semantics and highlights the relevance of Prototype Theory in analyzing culturally grounded lexical structures.

Keywords: Cognitive semantics, Prototype Theory, Malay Concordance Project, colour polysemy, cultural symbolism

INTRODUCTION

The polysemous nature of primary colour adjectives *merah* (red), *biru* (blue), and *kuning* (yellow) within classical Malay texts reveals that lexical meaning is not fixed but fluid, shaped by context, culture, and cognition. These adjectives, while originating as descriptors of physical attributes, evolve into symbolic carriers of emotion, status, and ideology. For instance, *merah* may signify courage, anger, or danger; *biru* may evoke tranquility, loyalty, or social stratification; and *kuning* may oscillate between royal authority and illness. Such semantic multiplicity is evident in the Malay Concordance Project (MCP) corpus, which captures the richness of classical Malay discourse. This phenomenon underscores the dynamic character of language as a system that reflects the interplay between linguistic form and cultural cognition (Kho Thong Eng, 2023).

From the perspective of cognitive semantics, Prototype Theory offers a robust framework for explicating this semantic expansion. Introduced by Eleanor Rosch (1975), the theory posits that categories are structured around prototypical exemplars, with peripheral meanings emerging through conceptual extensions shaped by cultural experience. In the context of Malay colour adjectives, literal meanings serve as cognitive anchors, while symbolic and connotative meanings unfold across semantic domains such as emotion, social hierarchy, and cultural values. Lakoff (1987) further asserts that prototypes function as default conceptual structures, enabling the mapping of meaning through culturally shared experiences. This theoretical lens reveals that meaning is not static but continuously negotiated through historical context, social norms, and symbolic conventions (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin & Rozaimah Rashidin, 2008).

The phenomenon of colour polysemy is not exclusive to Malay tradition but reflects a broader cross-cultural pattern. In Chinese culture, red symbolizes prosperity and celebration, whereas in Western contexts it connotes love, danger, or aggression (Berlin & Kay, 1991). Similarly, blue signifies sadness in European traditions but purity and harmony in Japanese society (Wierzbicka, 2008). In Indian culture, yellow is revered as a sacred colour linked to fertility and divine power, contrasting with its Malay associations with royalty or illness. These cultural divergences affirm that while sensory perception may be biologically universal, semantic interpretation is culturally contingent and historically situated. Such comparisons reinforce the importance of culturally grounded semantic analysis in understanding the symbolic dimensions of language.

Despite the theoretical richness of Prototype Theory, its empirical application within the MCP corpus remains limited. Existing studies tend to adopt descriptive approaches, often overlooking the cognitive mechanisms that underpin semantic evolution. This gap is particularly evident in the interpretation of layered meanings within classical Malay texts, which are saturated with metaphor and cultural symbolism. The interpretive challenges posed by colour polysemy

especially when adjectives diverge from their literal referents complicate efforts to ascertain authorial intent and semantic precision. Misreading symbolic constructs may distort textual meaning and compromise analytical validity, particularly in literary and cultural studies (Nur Nazira Nazrii & Hasmidar Hassani, 2021).

In classical Malay literature, colour adjectives function not merely as descriptive elements but as semiotic devices that encode ideology, emotion, and collective identity. Yellow, for instance, transcends its literal function to signify royal sovereignty and divine authority, while red often denotes bravery, lineage, and social prestige. These symbolic layers demand interpretive sensitivity, as their meanings are accessible only through a deep understanding of historical, cultural, and sociological contexts (Puteh Noraihan A. Rahman & Zahir Ahmad, 2023; Suhaini et al., 2023). The semantic elasticity of colour terms thus necessitates a methodological approach that can accommodate both linguistic structure and cultural nuance.

Accordingly, this study advances a cognitive semantic analysis of colour polysemy in classical Malay texts, aiming to unravel the mechanisms of semantic expansion and to critically examine how linguistic symbolism functions in shaping cultural identity and worldview. The research objectives are twofold: (1) to investigate the semantic expansion of primary colour adjectives in the MCP corpus using a cognitive semantic framework, with particular emphasis on prototype mapping and cultural domain analysis; and (2) to examine how literal and connotative meanings of colour adjectives evolve and influence the interpretation of classical Malay texts. These objectives are guided by the following research questions: (1) What forms of semantic variation (polysemy) are present in the use of primary colour adjectives within the MCP corpus? and (2) How do literal and connotative meanings of colour adjectives develop in classical Malay texts, and what are the cultural and emotional implications of these semantic expansions for discourse interpretation?

Prototype Theory has been widely applied in linguistic research, including semantic categorization of emotions, objects, and colour. Nurizzati Ismail (2014) demonstrated that colour terms in *Sulalat al-Salatin*, notably *kuning* and *merah*, carry deep cultural symbolism beyond their literal referents. Similarly, Puteh Noraihan A. Rahman and Zahir Ahmad (2023) showed that colour adjectives in classical Malay texts function as semiotic devices to convey social values and identity through implicit meanings. In this study, Prototype Theory facilitates the identification of core and peripheral meanings within the MCP corpus by aligning lexical usage with semantic domains. The 2025 Learning Guide further underscores the necessity of culturally informed semantic approaches to decode symbolic language in classical Malay literature. Thus, the application of Prototype Theory not only strengthens semantic analysis but also deepens the understanding of how language reflects cultural consciousness.

In sum, the semantic expansion of primary colour adjectives in classical Malay texts is intricately linked to both linguistic structure and cultural experience. The relationship between core and peripheral meanings opens avenues for exploring how language encodes emotional and social realities. By applying Prototype Theory within a corpus-based paradigm, this study contributes to the advancement of Malay cognitive semantics and offers a nuanced framework for interpreting symbolic language. It positions classical Malay texts as fertile ground for examining the intersection of language, cognition, and culture thereby enriching both regional linguistic heritage and global semantic discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Polysemy in Malay Lexical Semantics

Yop Othman et al. (2022) investigated polysemy in conversational discourse among young Malay speakers using Nida's Componential Analysis. Spontaneous speech data from respondents aged 28–34 revealed semantic shifts in words such as *madu*, *gaduh*, and *kurung*, demonstrating that meaning is not static but evolves in response to social, emotional, and interactional contexts. This study affirms that polysemy is not merely a linguistic phenomenon tied to semantic structure, but also a reflection of everyday communicative dynamics and social relationships (Yop Othman et al., 2022; Abdullah Hassan, 2005). It underscores the necessity of incorporating pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions into polysemy analysis to accurately interpret meaning in authentic discourse.

In a complementary study, Kho Thong Eng (2023) examined polysemy in adjectives such as *baik* and *mentah* through corpus-based analysis of Malay texts. The findings revealed that a single lexical item may carry literal, connotative, and metaphorical meanings depending on syntactic structure and contextual usage. For instance, *baik* may denote quality, health, personality traits, or social relationships highlighting the semantic elasticity of Malay. Accurate understanding of polysemy is thus essential for enhancing communicative competence, maintaining clarity, and ensuring interpretive precision in linguistic and literary contexts (Kho Thong Eng, 2023; Lyons, 1971).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that polysemy is not a formalistic linguistic issue but a cognitive and social phenomenon that reflects how language functions across diverse communicative domains. Semantic expansion is shaped not only by linguistic factors but also by cultural experience, social context, and human interaction. Therefore, polysemy

research must be situated within a broader cognitive semantic framework to elucidate the complex interplay between linguistic form, meaning, and cultural experience.

Symbolism of Colour in Classical Malay Texts

Nurizzati Ismail (2014) explored the symbolic function of colour in *Sulalat al-Salatin*, revealing that colours such as yellow, red, and blue transcend visual description to encode social status, political authority, and emotional expression. Using a qualitative textual analysis approach, the study demonstrated that colour operates as a semiotic system conveying ideology and cultural norms in classical Malay society. For example, yellow symbolizes royal sovereignty and dignity, while red is associated with bravery, honour, and lineage. These findings affirm that colour in classical texts is not merely aesthetic but serves as a cultural communicative tool that reinforces social hierarchy and preserves traditional values. The study highlights the need to interpret colour within a cognitive conceptual framework that links language, symbolism, and cultural experience (Nurizzati Ismail, 2014; Lakoff, 1987; Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin & Rozaimah Rashidin, 2008).

The 2025 Learning Guide further emphasizes the symbolic dimension of colour in classical works such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Majnun and Layla*, which are rich in implicit meaning and layered interpretation. Employing a hermeneutic approach, the study revealed that colour functions as a narrative device to convey emotion, internal conflict, and moral values. In this context, colour enhances not only the aesthetic quality of the narrative but also the intellectual and emotional engagement of the reader. Interpretation of colour symbolism thus requires deep cultural and epistemological understanding to access the intended meaning authentically. These findings underscore the complex interaction between text, culture, and reader, positioning colour as a mechanism of cultural representation operating within both aesthetic and ideological dimensions (Panduan Pembelajaran, 2025; Suhaini et al., 2023; Puteh Noraihan A. Rahman & Zahir Ahmad, 2023).

Critically, these studies offer complementary perspectives on colour symbolism. Nurizzati Ismail (2014) foregrounds the socio-political and hierarchical dimensions of colour, framing it as a symbolic instrument that structures social relations in classical Malay society. In contrast, the 2025 Learning Guide focuses on emotional and narrative dimensions, illustrating how colour drives internal conflict and moral messaging. This comparison affirms that colour symbolism cannot be interpreted monolithically; it must be analyzed through multiple lenses, political, social, emotional, and cultural. Colour in classical texts thus emerges as a complex polysemous phenomenon, reflecting not only literary aesthetics but also embedded systems of thought, ideology, and cultural values.

Application of Prototype Theory in Semantic Analysis

Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin et al. (2021) applied Prototype Theory to analyze the semantic expansion of the word *alim* in the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) corpus. Based on 470 concordance entries, the study found that the original Arabic-derived meaning—denoting religious scholarship—had expanded to encompass broader social and cultural dimensions in modern Malay usage. Prototype Theory enabled systematic identification of core and peripheral meanings, demonstrating that semantic expansion is not arbitrary but cognitively and culturally motivated. These findings reinforce the view that meaning evolves dynamically through the interaction of cognitive structures and shared cultural experience (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin et al., 2021; Rosch, 1975; Lakoff, 1987).

Ain Nadhirah Mohd Shah and Rozaimah Rashidin (2021) extended Prototype Theory to analyze lexical items related to sexual crime in tabloid media, specifically *Harian Metro*. Using a qualitative design and digital data analysis, the study revealed that readers interpret meaning based on culturally dominant prototypes shaped by media representation. Terms associated with sexual crime were understood not only in legal terms but also through emotional and moral lenses influenced by media framing. Lexical mapping via prototypes thus functions as a cognitive mechanism that helps readers structure complex meanings, highlighting the interdependence of language, media, and cultural perception (Ain Nadhirah Mohd Shah & Rozaimah Rashidin, 2021; Palmer, 1976).

Together, these studies illustrate the explanatory power of Prototype Theory in tracing semantic expansion across domains from religious and cultural contexts to contemporary media discourse. Despite differing corpora and analytical scopes, both studies affirm that meaning is fluid and contextually shaped through linguistic experience and social interaction. Prototype Theory emerges as a significant cognitive semantic approach for understanding polysemy and meaning dynamics in contemporary Malay language.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative text analysis design to investigate the semantic expansion of primary colour adjectives *merah*, *biru*, and *kuning* within classical Malay texts. The approach is grounded in cognitive semantics, which conceptualizes meaning as emerging from culturally shared human experience. Prototype Theory serves as the analytical

foundation, positing that lexical items possess core meanings that function as cognitive anchors, while peripheral meanings develop through conceptual extensions shaped by historical context, social norms, and symbolic conventions. This framework enables the identification of semantic domains such as emotion, social status, and cultural values within which colour adjectives operate, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of how language encodes symbolic meaning in classical Malay discourse.

Data for this study were extracted from the Malay Concordance Project (MCP), a linguistically rich digital corpus comprising classical Malay prose and poetry. A total of 443 tokens of primary colour adjectives were identified across genres including *hikayat*, historical chronicles, *pantun*, *syair*, and *gurindam*. The sampling strategy follows a corpus-driven lexical approach, which ensures authenticity and contextual validity by reflecting actual usage patterns rather than constructed examples. This method aligns with established practices in Malay corpus linguistics and has been validated in previous studies for its effectiveness in producing linguistically significant findings.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period using keyword-based searches within the MCP database. The dataset was then reorganized for semantic domain coding and prototype mapping. Cross-verification between concordance and full-text views ensured contextual integrity and analytical precision. This procedure reflects best practices in corpus-based research and supports the study’s objective of uncovering culturally embedded semantic structures in classical Malay texts.

The analysis employed a multi-layered approach combining quantitative descriptive analysis, corpus linguistics, and cognitive semantic interpretation. Each token was examined for frequency, syntactic environment, and semantic domain affiliation. Prototype mapping was used to distinguish core meanings from peripheral extensions, facilitating a structured interpretation of semantic variation. Validity was assessed through content validation, confirming that each token accurately represented its semantic context, while reliability was reinforced through triangulation across analytical layers. These measures ensure that the findings are both methodologically sound and aligned with the theoretical framework of cognitive semantics.

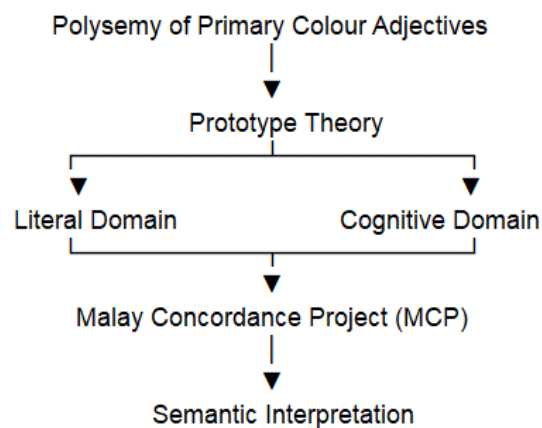


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings for RQ1: Semantic Variability (Polysemy) of Primary Colour Adjectives

The findings indicate that primary colour adjectives such as *merah* (red), *biru* (blue), and *kuning* (yellow) within the Malay Concordance Project (MCP) corpus exhibit a wide range of literal, connotative, and symbolic meanings, contingent upon the contextual framing of each sentence. The analysis was conducted on 443 tokens extracted from classical Malay prose and traditional poetry.

Primary Colour Adjective: *Merah* (Red)

Literal Meaning of *Merah*

Table 1 presents excerpts from classical Malay narratives where *merah* is used in its literal sense, referring to physical colour, character names, and geographical locations. Texts such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Hikayat Pasai*, and *Sejarah Melayu* demonstrate direct usage of *merah* without metaphorical layering. For instance, “matanya menjadi merah” (Mpt 193) denotes a physiological change, while “Encik Mat Merah” (Pah 21:6) and “Tanah Merah” (Njoh 25:1) function as identifiers within the narrative.

Table 1: Literal Meaning of *Merah*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Literal Category	Semantic Function
Mpt 193	"...matanya menjadi merah dan nafasnya memburu ..."	Physical colour	Physiological depiction
Pah 21:6	"...Encik Mat Merah ..."	Character name	Narrative identity marker
Njoh 25:1	"...peranglah di Tanah Merah ..."	Place name	Geographical reference

These literal usages indicate that *merah* serves as a visual or nominal marker, maintaining a descriptive or referential function. It does not carry additional semantic layers, reinforcing its role as a straightforward linguistic representation of physical reality.

Connotative Meaning of *Merah*

Table 2 illustrates the connotative use of *merah* to express emotional intensity, particularly anger. The data includes metaphorical expressions such as "*merah* padam mukanya seperti bunga raya" (INata 93:8), where the colour red transcends its physical referent to symbolize uncontrolled emotional states. In these instances, *merah* becomes a linguistic conduit for psychological depth.

Table 2: Connotative Meaning of *Merah*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Connotative Category	Emotion Represented	Semantic Function
INata 93:8	"... merah padam muka nya seperti bunga raya ..."	Visual metaphor	Anger	Emotional intensity via comparison
Tuah 287:38	"...warna muka Laksaman merah padam laku orang marah ..."	Facial expression	Anger	Emotional cue through physical change
SBima 64:9	"...terlalu marah merah padam mukanya ..."	Facial expression	Anger	Emotional escalation via colour

These findings demonstrate that *merah* is employed to convey emotion indirectly, using physical imagery to reflect internal states. The connotative dimension of *merah* thus reveals the language's capacity to encode psychological nuance and emotional resonance within narrative structure.

Symbolic Meaning of *Merah*

Table 3 highlights the symbolic deployment of *merah* in proverbs and cultural idioms. Expressions such as "*buah masak merah* belum tentu manis" (Zub 514:3b) suggest that external appearances may be deceptive. Here, *merah* functions as a symbol of visual illusion, false hope, or misaligned values.

Table 3: Symbolic Meaning of *Merah*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Symbolic Category	Symbol Represented	Semantic Function
Zub 514:3b	"...buah masak merah belum tentu manis ..."	Proverb	Deceptive appearance	Visual illusion / false expectation
Sikka 200	"...di luar merah di dalam pahit ..."	Cultural idiom	External falsity	Conflict between appearance and reality
Kosta 336a	"Yang merah saga, yang kurik kundi ..."	Cultural symbol	Heritage identity	Marker of tradition and collective values

The symbolic use of *merah* reflects cultural philosophy and collective worldview. It transcends descriptive and emotional functions, becoming a vehicle for transmitting moral values and societal critique. This semantic depth affirms the role of colour as a cultural semiotic device in classical Malay literature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In sum, the polysemous nature of *merah* from literal descriptors to emotional metaphors and cultural symbols, demonstrates its semantic versatility and cognitive richness. These findings validate the cognitive semantic approach, revealing how language encodes layered meanings shaped by cultural experience and conceptual framing. The adjective *merah* thus emerges not merely as a colour term, but as a dynamic linguistic construct that bridges physical reality, emotional expression, and cultural ideology.

Primary Colour Adjective: *Biru* (Blue)

Literal Meaning

Table 4 presents data extracted from classical Malay narratives in which the adjective *biru* is employed in its literal sense, referring to the physical colour of objects, garments, and natural phenomena. These instances, drawn from texts such as *Hikayat Inderaputera*, *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, demonstrate direct usage of *biru* without metaphorical or symbolic layering. For example, “langit pun kelihatan biru bersih” (Indera 112:4) reflects a naturalistic depiction, while “berbaju biru bersulam emas” (Tuah 56:2) and “kain biru yang dibawa dari Pasai” (Pasai 78:9) denote material and aesthetic attributes.

Table 4: Literal Meaning of *Biru*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Literal Category	Semantic Function
Indera 112:4	“...langit pun kelihatan biru bersih ...”	Physical colour	Depiction of natural environment
Tuah 56:2	“...berbaju biru bersulam emas ...”	Garment colour	Marker of status and aesthetics
Pasai 78:9	“...kain biru yang dibawa dari Pasai ...”	Object colour	Indicator of origin and trade value

These literal usages affirm *biru* as a visual referent within narrative structure, functioning descriptively without semantic augmentation. In this context, *biru* serves as a linguistic mechanism for representing physical and social reality, underscoring the foundational role of colour adjectives in classical Malay literature as direct markers of observable phenomena.

Connotative Meaning

Table 5 illustrates the connotative deployment of *biru* to evoke emotional states such as melancholy, introspection, and solemnity. These metaphorical expressions, e.g., “hatinya biru mengenang nasib” (Indera 145:7), demonstrate how colour transcends its literal referent to symbolize internal emotional landscapes. In this usage, *biru* becomes a linguistic conduit for psychological depth and affective resonance.

Table 5: Connotative Meaning of *Biru*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Connotative Category	Emotion Represented	Semantic Function
Indera 145:7	“...hatinya biru mengenangnasib ...”	Emotional metaphor	Sadness	Symbol of sorrow and reflection
Tuah 203:5	“...suasana biru menyelubungi balairung ...”	Mood setting	Gloom	Indicator of somber and tranquil ambience
Pasai 99:3	“...dengan wajah biru , dia tunduk diam ...”	Facial expression	Grief	Emotional cue via bodily expression

These findings reveal that *biru* is used to convey emotion indirectly, through atmospheric and corporeal imagery. The connotative function of *biru* reflects the cognitive semantic principle that language maps human experience into symbolic form (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), allowing for nuanced expression of internal states within literary discourse.

Symbolic Meaning

Table 6 highlights the symbolic use of *biru* in proverbs and cultural idioms, where it signifies noble lineage, social status, and traditional values. Expressions such as “darahnya biru, keturunan raja” (Kosta 412:6) exemplify how *biru* functions as a cultural emblem of aristocracy and inherited prestige. In these contexts, *biru* transcends descriptive and emotional functions to become a marker of collective identity and ideological positioning.

Table 6: Symbolic Meaning of *Biru*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Symbolic Category	Symbol Represented	Semantic Function
Kosta 412:6	“...darahnya biru , keturunan raja ...”	Lineage status	Nobility	Indicator of origin and honour
Indera 178:2	“...berpakaian biru , tanda kehormatan ...”	Honour symbol	Social status	Marker of dignity and reverence
Tuah 309:4	“...warna biru pada panji diraja ...”	Power symbol	Sovereignty	Indicator of authority and dynastic identity

The symbolic deployment of *biru* reflects its role in articulating cultural values and social structures within the Malay worldview. It operates as a semiotic device that encodes inherited ideologies and collective memory. This analysis affirms that colour adjectives in classical Malay texts function as layered semantic indicators, aligning with cognitive semantic approaches that emphasize the interrelation between language, experience, and culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Primary Colour Adjective: *Kuning* (Yellow)

Literal Meaning

Table 7 presents excerpts from classical Malay literary texts in which the adjective *kuning* is employed in its literal sense, referring to the physical colour of objects, garments, and human features. These instances, drawn from texts such as *Balai Keemasan*, *Panji Semirang*, and *M&B*, demonstrate direct usage of *kuning* without metaphorical or symbolic layering. For example, “atapnya dari papan bercat kuning” (BS.L 2/13:46), “perahu kenaikan kuning alatnya” (RJoh 149c), and “kuning langsung muka bujur” (Das 2:6a) reflect straightforward descriptive functions.

Table 7: Literal Meaning of *Kuning*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Literal Category	Semantic Function
BS.L 2/13:46	“...atapnya dari papan bercat kuning ...”	Physical colour	Visual depiction of architectural object
RJoh 149c	“...perahu kenaikan kuning alatnya ...”	Physical colour	Marker of ceremonial grandeur
Das 2:6a	“... kuning langsung muka bujur ...”	Skin tone	Character’s physical portrayal

These literal usages affirm *kuning* as a visual referent within narrative structure, functioning descriptively to represent physical reality. It serves as a linguistic mechanism for identifying objects and bodily features, without additional semantic layering. Thus, the literal meaning of *kuning* in classical Malay texts reflects its foundational role as a direct representational element.

Connotative Meaning

Table 8 illustrates the connotative deployment of *kuning* to evoke aesthetic qualities and physical allure, particularly in the context of feminine beauty. Metaphorical expressions such as “kuning langsung cantik agung” (Panji 13:15) and “kuning langsung... remuk redam hati hancur” (Das 2:6a) suggest that *kuning* transcends its chromatic function to symbolize softness, elegance, and emotional appeal.

Table 8: Connotative Meaning of *Kuning*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Connotative Category	Value Represented	Semantic Function
Panji 13:15	“... kuning langsung cantik agung ...”	Physical metaphor	Beauty	Aesthetic marker of feminine allure
Panji 191:35	“... kuning langsung...”	Physical metaphor	Gracefulness	Evocative physical imagery
Das 2:6a	“... kuning langsung, remuk redam hati hancur ...”	Physical metaphor	Charm	Emotional resonance through appearance

These findings reveal that *kuning* is used to convey aesthetic values indirectly, through physical imagery associated with emotional attraction. The connotative function of *kuning* reflects the language’s capacity to encode cultural perceptions of beauty and emotional depth. In this context, *kuning* becomes a symbol of tenderness and elegance within classical Malay narrative.

Symbolic Meaning

Table 9 highlights the symbolic use of *kuning* in ritual, social status, and cultural identity contexts. Expressions such as “serba kuning, bendera putih, tembak meriam” (Pah 97:4) and “ditaburi dengan beras kuning bercampur dengan duit” (M&B 245:10) demonstrate that *kuning* functions as a symbol of royal grandeur, ceremonial honour, and traditional authority. In these instances, *kuning* transcends descriptive and aesthetic roles to become a cultural emblem of power and reverence.

Table 9: Symbolic Meaning of *Kuning*

Citation Code	Text Excerpt	Symbolic Category	Symbol Represented	Semantic Function
Pah 97:4	"...serba kuning , bendera putih, tembak meriam ..."	Royal ritual	Sovereignty	Marker of formal ceremony
M&B 245:10	"...ditaburi dengan beras kuning bercampur dengan duit ..."	Cultural ritual	Honour	Symbol of blessing and generosity
Pat 54:8	"...Raja Kuning pun dipersuamikan ..."	Symbolic character name	Power	Indicator of identity and status

The symbolic deployment of *kuning* reflects its role in articulating cultural values and hierarchical structures within the Malay worldview. It operates as a semiotic device that encodes inherited ideologies and ceremonial significance. This analysis affirms that colour adjectives in classical Malay texts function as layered semantic indicators, aligning with cognitive semantic approaches that emphasize the interrelation between language, experience, and culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Findings for RQ2: Development of Literal and Connotative Meanings and Their Cultural-Emotional Implications in Discourse Interpretation

Tables 1 through 3 present data extracted from classical Malay texts that feature the primary colour adjectives *merah* (red), *biru* (blue), and *kuning* (yellow) in both literal and connotative contexts. These excerpts, drawn from historical narratives, hikayat, and traditional literary works, demonstrate the use of colour as a marker of emotion, identity, and cultural symbolism. The findings reveal that *merah* evolves from a literal descriptor to a connotative symbol of anger, bravery, and social status. For instance, in "merah padam mukanya seperti bunga raya" (INata 93:8), *merah* conveys emotional intensity, while "Tanah Merah" and "Merah Miru" reflect semantic expansion into geographical and aristocratic identity.

Table 10: Feature The Primary Colour Adjectives

Colour Adjective	Text Excerpt	Literal Meaning	Connotative Meaning
<i>Merah</i>	" merah padam mukanya seperti bunga raya" (INata 93:8)	Facial colour	Intense anger
<i>Merah</i>	"Tanah Merah " (Njoh 25:1)	Place name	Geographical identity
<i>Merah</i>	" Merah Miru" (Aceh 266:14)	Personal name	Aristocratic status
<i>Biru</i>	"haru biru di sini" (INata 149:26)	Colour	Social chaos
<i>Kuning</i>	"perahu kenaikan kuning alatnya" (RJoh 149c)	Royal colour	Symbol of grandeur
<i>Kuning</i>	"bangsa kuning itu tak akan malu ..." (M 6Feb33:5)	Ethnic label	Cultural stereotype

Similarly, *biru* undergoes semantic shift in expressions such as "haru biru" (INata 149:26), where it denotes social disorder and emotional turbulence. Meanwhile, *kuning* is employed in royal and cultural stereotype contexts, as seen in "perahu kenaikan kuning alatnya" (RJoh 149c) and "bangsa kuning itu tak akan malu ..." (M 6Feb33:5), indicating its function as a symbol of authority and collective identity.

Tables 4 through 6 further illustrate the semantic expansion of *biru* and *kuning*, revealing a more intricate relationship between language and cultural cognition. The phrase "haru biru" (INata 149:26) exemplifies how *biru* extends beyond its chromatic function to index collective emotional states and societal instability. This suggests that colour can serve as a linguistic proxy for communal atmosphere and socio-political tension.

In contrast, *kuning* is consistently used in royal contexts, such as "perahu kenaikan kuning alatnya" (RJoh 149c), where it symbolizes power and ceremonial prestige. The expression "bangsa kuning itu tak akan malu ..." (M 6Feb33:5) reflects how *kuning* operates rhetorically to construct cultural stereotypes and collective identity. These findings affirm that the semantic expansion of colour adjectives in classical Malay texts not only enriches narrative structure but also encodes the emotional and ideological values of historical Malay society.

Overall, the semantic expansion of colour adjectives in classical Malay literature reveals a dynamic interplay between linguistic form, cultural ideology, and emotional expression. Colour functions not merely as a descriptive element but as a semantic medium that bridges linguistic meaning with collective worldview and affective depth. These findings underscore the role of colour as a rhetorical and symbolic device that shapes reader interpretation through layered cultural and emotional resonance (Ahmad, 2020; Zulkifli, 2018).

Discussion of RQ1 Findings

The findings reveal that primary colour adjectives in the Malay Concordance Project (MCP) corpus, specifically *merah* (red), *biru* (blue), and *kuning* (yellow), exhibit polysemous and context-sensitive semantic variability. The adjective *merah* is used literally, as in “matanya menjadi merah,” to denote physiological change triggered by emotion. However, it also carries connotative meanings such as anger, and symbolic meanings such as bravery or visual deception, as seen in the proverb “buah masak merah belum tentu manis.” *Biru* appears in literal depictions of nature, such as “langit biru kelam,” but connotatively evokes sadness or serenity depending on narrative context. Meanwhile, *kuning* is frequently associated with nobility and power, as in “baju kuning berbenang emas,” yet also conveys symbolic meanings of anxiety or illness, as in “wajahnya kuning lesu.”

These findings affirm that all three primary colour adjectives function not only as visual descriptors but also as carriers of emotional, social, and cultural meaning. This argument is supported by Abdullah (2015), who asserts that colour in classical Malay texts is used to convey emotion and moral values implicitly, and Hassan (2018), who emphasizes that colour in Malay proverbs operates as a cultural code for symbolic meaning. Karim (2020) further notes that *biru* in classical texts is often associated with introspective melancholy, while *kuning* reflects ambivalence between grandeur and vulnerability.

Thus, the findings of RQ1 not only complement existing literature but also extend our understanding of the semantic functions of colour in Malay narrative texts. The semantic variability of primary colour adjectives in the MCP corpus reflects a dynamic and contextually embedded semantic function. The conclusion underscores the need for a holistic semantic analysis that accounts for the interaction between literal, connotative, and symbolic meanings, as well as the cultural frameworks that inform their usage. The discussion reinforces the argument that colour polysemy in classical texts is not merely linguistic but also reflective of the cognitive structures and cultural values of traditional Malay society. Ultimately, the semantic diversity of colour adjectives suggests that linguistic inquiry must evolve toward more reflective and interdisciplinary approaches to interpret implicit meanings with greater precision, authority, and cultural relevance.

Discussion of RQ2 Findings

The development of literal and connotative meanings of colour adjectives in classical Malay texts reveals a semantic expansion that transcends physical description and enters the realm of emotional expression, social identity, and ideological symbolism. The findings demonstrate that *merah*, *biru*, and *kuning* are dynamically employed across narrative contexts, not only to depict internal states or social atmospheres but also to structure power hierarchies and shape collective perception.

For instance, “merah padam mukanya seperti bunga raya” (INata 93:8) functions not merely as a physiological observation but as a metaphor for uncontrollable emotional intensity. Similarly, “haru biru” (INata 149:26) illustrates how *biru* undergoes semantic shift to represent social disorder and instability. In cultural contexts, *kuning* is used as a symbol of grandeur and ethnic stereotype, as in “perahu kenaikan kuning alatnya” (RJoh 149c) and “bangsa kuning itu tak akan malu ...” (M 6Feb33:5), indicating that colour operates rhetorically to convey ideologically charged meanings.

As argued by Zulkifli (2018), colour in traditional texts is often linked to hegemonic value systems that reinforce dominant social positions and sustain prevailing narratives. However, these findings also invite a re-examination of the assumption that colour functions as a fixed marker; instead, they reveal that colour meaning is fluid and contextually constructed. The conclusion of this section affirms that the semantic expansion of colour in classical Malay texts reflects a dialectical relationship between language, emotion, and culture, positioning colour as a semantically significant and strategically deployed medium in traditional discourse. This reinforces the claim that semantic analysis of colour adjectives enables researchers to uncover layered meanings that reflect collective experience and historical power structures.

The connotative expansion of colour adjectives also reveals narrative strategies employed by classical authors to convey meaning implicitly, multilayered, and at times subversively. In texts such as *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* and *Riwayat Johor*, the use of *merah* and *kuning* not only denotes physical traits or symbols of grandeur but also marks social status and power, either to affirm or to interrogate it. For example, “Merah Miru” (Aceh 266:14) refers to a noble figure, while “Tanah Merah” (Njoh 25:1) signifies a politically charged geographical identity. These findings align with Ahmad (2020), who contends that colour in classical Malay texts functions as a narrative marker that conveys cultural meaning both symbolically and ideologically.

Notably, colour is also used to challenge dominant stereotypes, as in “bangsa kuning itu tak akan malu ...” (M 6Feb33:5), which subtly critiques social assumptions through insinuating rhetoric. In this regard, colour enriches narrative structure and becomes a site of semantic contestation between dominant and marginal perspectives. The conclusion of this section affirms that the connotative expansion of colour in classical Malay texts opens interpretive space not only for deeper cultural and emotional analysis but also for understanding how classical texts construct, negotiate, and critique societal values and emotions through nuanced, layered, and at times critical linguistic strategies. This strengthens the position of semantic analysis as an approach that is not merely descriptive but also analytical and reflective of cultural discourse.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the semantic expansion of primary colour adjectives *merah*, *biru*, and *kuning* within classical Malay texts is deeply rooted in cultural cognition and genre-specific discourse practices. Through the integration of Prototype Theory and corpus-based analysis, the research reveals that these lexical items function not merely as descriptive terms but as symbolic constructs that encode emotion, ideology, and social identity. The Malay Concordance Project (MCP) corpus provided a rich empirical foundation for tracing how literal meanings evolve into connotative and metaphorical expressions across diverse textual genres.

The findings affirm that meaning in classical Malay literature is not static but emerges through layered, context-sensitive processes. Prototype mapping enabled the identification of core meanings and their peripheral extensions, illustrating how cultural experience shapes semantic domains such as bravery, royalty, illness, and emotional depth. The genre-sensitive distribution of colour adjectives further highlights the role of literary form in guiding semantic interpretation, with *hikayat*, *pantun*, and *syair* each exhibiting distinct patterns of symbolic usage.

By applying cognitive semantics to a corpus-driven study of classical Malay texts, this research contributes both theoretically and methodologically to the field of Malay linguistics. It advances the empirical application of Prototype Theory in a non-Western context and underscores the importance of culturally informed semantic analysis. The study also offers a framework for future research on symbolic language, metaphor, and cognitive categorization in Southeast Asian literary traditions.

Ultimately, this inquiry reinforces the view that language is a conceptual medium through which societies articulate their values, emotions, and worldviews. The polysemy of colour adjectives in classical Malay texts exemplifies how linguistic forms serve as vessels of cultural memory and collective identity. As such, the integration of cognitive semantics and corpus linguistics offers a powerful lens for decoding the symbolic architecture of language and for enriching our understanding of the cognitive-cultural interface in literary discourse.

Prototype Theory: Theoretical Implications

Prototype Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how colour adjectives in classical Malay texts evolve semantically. The literal meanings of *merah*, *biru*, and *kuning* serve as cognitive anchors or prototypes. From these anchors, peripheral meanings emerge through metaphor, cultural symbolism, and narrative strategy. For example:

- *Merah* transitions from a physiological descriptor to a metaphor for emotional intensity and a symbol of nobility or deceit.
- *Biru* shifts from naturalistic depiction to a marker of emotional depth and aristocratic identity.
- *Kuning* evolves from visual representation to a signifier of beauty, power, and cultural ideology.

This expansion reflects the cognitive flexibility of language and its capacity to encode collective experience. As Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin & Rozaimah Rashidin (2008) argue, Prototype Theory enables systematic mapping of meaning across semantic domains, revealing how cultural cognition shape linguistic structure.

Cultural and Emotional Resonance

The findings also demonstrate that colour adjectives function as rhetorical devices in classical Malay texts, used by authors to convey emotion, critique social norms, and reinforce or subvert dominant ideologies. For instance:

- *Merah Miru* and *Tanah Merah* encode political and aristocratic identity.
- *Haru biru* reflects social disorder and emotional unrest.
- *Bangsa kuning itu tak akan malu...* subtly critiques ethnic stereotypes.

These examples illustrate how colour operates as a strategic semantic tool, both expressive and ideological within traditional discourse. The adjectives serve not only as aesthetic elements but as conceptual bridges between language, emotion, and cultural worldview.

Table 11: Semantic Expansion of *Merah*

Text Excerpt	Literal Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Symbolic Meaning
“matanya menjadi merah ”	Physiological change	—	—
“ merah padam mukanya seperti bunga raya”	Facial colour	Anger	—
“Tanah Merah ”	Place name	—	Geopolitical identity
“ Merah Miru”	Personal name	—	Aristocratic status
“buah masak merah belum tentu manis”	—	—	Visual deception

Table 12: Semantic Expansion of *Biru*

Text Excerpt	Literal Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Symbolic Meaning
“langit pun kelihatan biru bersih”	Natural colour	—	—
“hatinya biru mengenang nasib”	—	Sadness	—
“haru biru di sini”	—	Social chaos	—
“darahnya biru , keturunan raja”	—	—	Royal lineage
“warna biru pada panji diraja”	—	—	Sovereignty

Table 13: Semantic Expansion of *Kuning*

Text Excerpt	Literal Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Symbolic Meaning
“atapnya dari papan bercat kuning ”	Object colour	—	—
“ kuning langsung cantik agung”	Skin tone	Beauty	—
“perahu kenaikan kuning alatnya”	Ceremonial colour	—	Royal grandeur
“bangsa kuning itu tak akan malu...”	Ethnic label	—	Cultural stereotype

CONCLUSION

The semantic evolution of the colour adjectives *merah*, *biru*, and *kuning* in classical Malay texts demonstrates their dual function as cognitively anchored yet culturally fluid lexical items. Through the lens of Prototype Theory, these adjectives reveal a layered interplay between linguistic form, emotional resonance, and sociocultural ideology, functioning not merely as descriptive tools but as conceptual instruments that articulate the symbolic and ideological contours of Malay society. This study contributes to the broader discourse on cognitive semantics by illustrating how language encodes collective identity, cultural memory, and emotional nuance through contextually embedded lexical structures. Building on these findings, future research is encouraged to expand its methodological scope by integrating digital corpus analysis with expert interviews in cultural studies to enhance semantic interpretation. Additionally, examining the use of colour adjectives in contemporary media such as advertising, film, and digital platforms may offer valuable insights into semantic continuity and transformation in modern Malay discourse.

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