

COLOUR TERMS IN MICROTOPYNYMS: A CASE STUDY FROM KOMIJAN COUNTY, CENTRAL IRAN

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Abstract

This study examines the semantics and distribution of colour microtoponyms in Komijan County, a predominantly Turkic-speaking region situated in the western part of Markazi Province, Iran, between the cities of Arak and Hamadan. Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2023, the dataset comprises 230 colour microtoponyms. The analysis reveals that more than 90% of the colour terms used in local microtoponyms are of Turkic origin, while Iranian elements appear only marginally. The most frequently attested terms are *qara* (black, 73 instances), *ağ* (white, 68), and *sarı* (yellow, 28). The concept of “red” (38) is represented by two Turkic lexemes *qizil* (21) and *qirmizi* (14) and two Iranian lexemes *sur* (2) and *sorh* (1), reflecting a phenomenon of dual lexical representation. Contrary to earlier scholarship suggesting a symbolic correlation between colours and cardinal directions, no statistically meaningful relationship was observed in the Komijan data. Over 75% of the names belong to the descriptive category, and most distinctive names are formed through compounding. The findings highlight both the predominance of Turkic linguistic influence and the persistence of cultural symbolism embedded in colour usage, including extended semantic functions of *qara*. A distinctive feature of this study is the observation of reciprocal cultural and linguistic interactions between the Turkic- and Tati-speaking communities of the region, the effects of which are evident in some of the area’s microtoponyms.

Keywords: Colour microtoponym, Linguistic anthropology, Komijan County, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Toponymy, or the science of studying geographical names, is inherently interdisciplinary, intersecting with fields such as folklore, history, art history, archaeology, sociology, anthropology, geography, ethnology, geology, botany, and biology (Atmaça & Güzel, 2018). As a rich linguistic and cultural-spiritual heritage shaped over centuries, toponyms embody the observations, experiences, worldviews, and beliefs of communities from antiquity to the present (Ganiyeva, 2020; Fatkullina et al., 2022; Jiao & Lu, 2024). Far from emerging randomly, place names reflect both cultural memory and environmental context, functioning as linguistic expressions of the values and identities of the societies to which they belong (Yalınz, 2022).

Colours have long played a role in naming practices, extending from political entities and settlements to natural features such as rivers, mountains, and lakes, as well as species and objects. Their use in toponyms varies across societies, depending on language, cultural background, and tradition (Topal, 2024). Beyond describing the physical qualities of landscapes, colours operate as universal cultural symbols that shape perceptions of space and articulate collective worldviews. They carry layered associations that express cultural values and symbolic systems distinctive to each community (Abdrakhynova et al., 2025).

Colours play a central role in Turkish naming traditions, conveying cultural meanings that go beyond mere descriptive function. They are

frequently employed in word formation and compounding, and are especially prevalent in proper names, notably place names (Bayraktar, 2013). In the earliest written records of the Turkish language, the Orkhon Inscriptions, toponyms were formed using colour adjectives such as *ağ* (white), *qara* (black), *gök* (blue), and *yaşıl* (green) (Akar, 2006). Research indicates that the semantic patterns of colour toponyms in the epics of Turkic peoples exhibit remarkable similarities, reflecting both historical linguistic interactions among Turkic-speaking communities and their shared affiliation with a common linguistic and cultural sphere (Pangereyev, 2023).

Although Turkic microtoponyms, including colour-based ones, constitute a significant portion of Iran's toponyms, studies focusing specifically on Turkic microtoponyms in Iran remain exceedingly rare. This study represents one of the few toponymic investigations in Iran that concentrates on the colour microtoponyms of Komijan County, a predominantly Turkic-speaking region. Historically, Komijan County was referred to as the *Borchalu* or *Bozchalu* region (Ghasemkhani, 2025), located in the western part of Iran's Markazi Province. The population of this region primarily speaks Azerbaijani Turkish, except for three Tati-speaking villages (Komijani Bozcheloei et al., 2022).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The data used in this study were derived from fieldwork on the microtoponyms of Komijan County conducted between 2020-2021, and 2022-2023. Preliminary findings from a substantial portion of this dataset, comprising 2,678 microtoponyms, have already been published (Ghasemkhani & Bagherzadeh Karimi, 2023). In addition to the colour microtoponyms documented in earlier research, the present article incorporates examples from three Tati-speaking villages in Komijan County (Vafs, Chehreqan, and Fark) that were not previously addressed.

Microtoponyms were collected through interviews with elderly and middle-aged residents. To clarify semantic content, especially for Tati-origin words, relevant dictionaries were consulted. When multiple names existed for a single location (e.g. *Kähriz-e Espin/Ağ Su* (Vafs) and *Qara püşk/Siyah Püşk* (Milajerd)), each was recorded separately. All local names of oykonoms and colour microtoponyms were presented using

the ISO 9:1995-style universal transliteration system, ensuring a standardised one-to-one character correspondence. For oykonoms, the official name is accompanied by the local form given in parentheses. Readers interested in local pronunciations of Komijan's microtoponyms may refer to the earlier publication.

For statistical analysis, descriptive statistics (including frequency counts and percentages) were calculated for colour microtoponyms across oykonoms and geographic feature types. This approach allowed us to assess the prevalence of specific colour terms and their spatial distribution, highlighting villages with higher or lower occurrences.

RESULTS

Komijan County comprises 65 settlements, including the two towns of Komijan and Milajerd, three villages recently incorporated into these towns, 12 uninhabited villages, and 48 inhabited villages. Table 1 presents the colour microtoponyms associated with 50 oykonoms; in other words, no colour microtoponyms were recorded for 15 of the county's oykonoms during the field survey. Of the 230 microtoponyms analysed in this article, 206 are drawn from the previous study, and an additional 24 were added from the researchers' archives.

Analysis of the spatial distribution of colour microtoponyms reveals significant variation among villages. Meydanak (14 microtoponyms), Vafs (13), and Chal Mian (12) exhibited the highest numbers of colour microtoponyms, whereas Aliabad, Chalabi, and Jafarabad had only one each.

DISCUSSION

The colour terms in the microtoponyms of Komijan belong to two linguistic groups (Turkic and Iranian), each represented by five terms. The Turkic set includes *qara/qärä* for black concept, *ağ/ağja* for white, *qizil/qizilja/qirmizi* for red, *sari* for yellow, and *göy* for blue. The Iranian set, defined in Tati and related Iranian languages, includes *siyah* for black, *espin/esbin/esbi* for white, *sur/sorh* for red, *zärd* for yellow, and *kävä* for blue.

The number of colour-bearing microtoponyms in each locality can be influenced by regional geology and soil composition. In Komijan County, for instance, the villages of Meydanak, Vafs, and Chal Mian exhibit higher frequencies. This result can be attributed to their location in a mountainous

Table 1. The list of colour microtoponyms of Komijan County, organised by each microtoponym

Oykonym	Mictotoponym
Aaqcheh Kahriz (Ağça Kähriz)	Ağ Därbänd, Ağja Kähriz Qänäti, Ağ Därbänd Körpüsü, Ağ Därbänd Gölü, Ağja Kähriz Gölü
Aliabad (Äliabad)	Ağ Yerlär
Amereh (Amara)	Amara Sarısı, Göy Güney, Qara Qaşlı Yal, Ağ Torpaqlı, Sarı Qaya, Qırmız Töpä, Bala Sarı, Böyük Sarı, Ağ Arx
Anar (Änar)	Sarı Qätä, Qara Qaşlı, Qara Zämin, Qara Yal
Chalabi (Čäläbi)	Ağ Göl
Chal Mian (Čalmiyan)	Qara Bulaq, Qara Därä, Qara Boruq, Qara Däräsi, Qara Bayır, Ağja Qala Gädıyi, Sarı Qaya, Qara Yal Dalı, Qara Qaya Boynağı, Sarı Därä, Qara Därä, Ağ Güney
Chabar (Čabar)	Qara Yal, Qara Kämär, Baş Qara Kämär, Ağ Daş, Sarı Qaya, Sarı Qaya Üstü, Sarı Qaya Təxti
Cehreqan (Čalağan)	Ağ Gädik, Källä Qarä Quzey, Ağ Gänji, Ağ Daş
Darreh Sabz (Qurd Däliyi)	Göyjä, Ağ Daş
Emamzadeh Abbas (Imamzadä Abbas)	Ağ Yer, Qara Yer, Ağ Yerlär, Qara Burun
Esfandan (İsfändan)	Qızıl Düz, Qızıl Göl
Estahri (İseyri)	Qara Burun, Qara Bağ, Ağ Bağ, Sarı Qaya, Qırmızı Bulaq, Qırmızı Quzey, Qara Bulaq, Ağ Zämin, Ağ Çaylaq, Ağ Yal, Qara Burun Yolu
Famarin (Pamärin)	Qara Yonjalıq
Fark (Pärk)	Ha Esbiye, Ha Sure, Qızıl Güney, Arxaj-e Säbz Äli, Göyjäli Därä, Meydan Esbiye, Qırmızı Bulaq
Farisabad (Fersava)	Ağ Yal, Qarajalar, Göy Zäminlär, Ağ Çaylaq, Ağ Buğda Yeri, Ağ Duvar Däräsi
Fathabad (Fätävad)	Qara Töpä, Ağ Günbüz Bağları, Ağ Daş
Fazlabad (Pätlava)	Ağ Pan, Qara Ağajlı İçi, Ağ Pan Yolu, Qara Töpä
Hoseynabad (Hüseynabad)	Sarı Dağ, Qara Dağ, Qırmızı Yazı, Qara Çay
İsaabad (İsava)	Ağ Yerlär, Qızıl Kährizlär
Jafarabad (Jäfarabad)	Ağ Torpaqlıq
Kalvan (Kälvan)	Qızıl Düz, Qırmızı Zämin, Qaralıq
Khanabad (Hänabad)	Qızıl, Sarı Dağ
Khomar Baghi (Humar Bağı)	Qara Yal, Sarı Tikanlıq, Qızıl Düz
Khosrow Beyg (Hosro Bəy)	Qara Tunqalar, Siyah Püsklär, Qızılga Zäminləri
Komijan (Kumuzan)	Ağ Günbüz Bağları, Ağ Daş, Ağ Bulaq, Ağ Bulaq Bağı, Qızıl Kähriz, Ağ Kähriz, Qara Təxtälär, Qara Töpä, Qara Burun, Ağ Torpaq, Qara Qaya
Qaleh-ye Mohammadabad-e Shokrayi (Mohämmädabad Qalası)	Ağ Yerlär Zämini, Sarı Dağ, Ağ Yerlär Arxı
Qareh Gol (Qara Göl)	Qara Yal
Qazuq (Qaziq)	Ağ Göl Töpəsi, Ağ Bulaq
Mahmudabad (Mähmudabad)	Ağ Töpä, Qızıl Yal
Milajerd (Milägird)	Sarı Dağ, Göy Töpä Yolu, Qara Çay, Qara Püsk/Siyah Püsk, Qırmızı Töpä, Ağ Güdar
Meydanak (Meydänäk)	Qırmızı, Ağ Därä, Ağ Göl, Ağja Göl, Ağ Torpaq, Qızıl Güney, Aşağı Qızıl Güney, Qızılja Bana, Qara Gävänlik, Aşağı Qara Gävänlik, Yuxarı Qara Gävänlik, Qara Därä, Ağ Yal, Qızıl Bağ
Nahr-e Poshteh (Neyra Püšta)	Qırmızı Yeri, Ağ Töpä, Säbzabad Yolu
Parkak (Pärkäk)	Ağ Gädik, Qara Burun, Qırmızı Buğda Yeri, Sarı Tikanlıq
Rastgordan (Razgürdan)	Qızıl Bulaq, Qara Göl, Ağ Ziyärät Gädıyi
Rowshanai (Rüşnayı)	Ağ Bulaq, Qara Günäk, Sarı Günäk, Ağ Pan, Qara Ağaclıqlar, İsbän Bulağı
Sabzabad (Säbzabad)	Sarı Töpä, Qara Töpä, Qırmızı Töpä
Samqavor (Sumovur / Sumavur / Simavur / Suavär)	Qara Töpä Yolu, Qara Qoyun, Qara Gädik, Qara Yal, Qoja Sarı, Ağ Göl, Ağ Daşlı Çay
Seyjan (Seyzan)	Qırmızı Töpä, Qırmızı Bağ, Qara Yallar, Sarı Sərf, Qara Quzey, Qırmızı Quzey, Qara Buru, Säbz Äli Bulağı, Göy Därä, Sarı Qaya, Qara Yallar
Shad Qaleh (Şäqqälär/Şaqälä)	Ağ Zäminlär, Sarı Quyusu
Soluklu (Sülüklü)	Qızılja, Qara Dağ, Sarı Dağ, Qara Dağ Altı
Suran	Qızıl Xanimli, Ağ Töpä, Qızıl Yazı, Qara Çay
Takyeh (Täkyä)	Qara Gädik, Göy Zämin, Qara Bulaq, Sarı Altı, Enli Qara Yal, Qara Töpä
Tarlan (Tärlän)	Ağ Därä Därlärləri, Ağ Därä Meydanı
Ud Aghaj (İydä Ağajı)	Sarı Qaya, Qara Göl
Vafs (Bovus)	Käriz-e Espin/Ağ Su, Källä Räf-e Siyah, Qarä Quşi Därbänd, Siyah Pärçen, Därä Kävä, Därä Ha Esbiye, Ra Ağçe Qäle, Kuča Esbini, Zärdä Kävär, Qarä Quşi Därä, Ağ Silo, Duşa Ha Sure
Validabad (Vildava)	Ağ Därä, Ağ Töpä, Ağ Yallar, Qara Yallar, Qara Qaya, Ağ Därä Täräfi
Valazjerd (Väläzgar)	Qarajalar, Qara Gölä Bağan, Ağ Buğda Yeri
Yasavol (Yasavul)	Göyjäli Gädıyi, Därä Sorhä, Ağ Zämin, Sarı Qaya
Yasbolagh (Yasti Bulaq)	Sarı Qaya, Qara Burun, Ağ Bulaq, Ağ Daş Däräsi
Yusef Kahriz (Usub Kährizi/Yusuf Kährizi)	Qara Qaşlı, Ağ Torpaqlıq
Total No of microtoponyms	230

area characterised by diverse geological formations. At the same time, the distribution of such toponyms is also shaped by the cultural beliefs of local communities. Despite regional variations, a relatively consistent overall pattern in their frequency can generally be observed (Berlin & Kay, 1969). This same distribution is also evident in the microtoponyms analysed in the present study. The recorded colour terms in the microtoponyms, listed in order of frequency, are as follows: *qara/qärä* (73), *ağ* (68), *sarı* (28), *qizil* (21), *qirmizi* (14), *göy* (8), *espin/esbin/esbi* (7), *siyah* (4), *säbz* (3), *sur* (2), *sorh* (1), *zärd* (1), and *kävä* (1). So more than 90% of the colour terms found in Komijan County's microtoponyms are of Turkic origin.

It should be noted that although some studies have suggested a meaningful association between specific colour terms and cardinal directions in Turkic microtoponyms (Balıkcı, 2020), no meaningful correlation between colour terms and geographical directions was observed in the microtoponyms analysed in this study.

From the perspective of synonym usage in Turkish microtoponyms, each of the colour concepts "black", "white", "yellow", "blue", and "green" is represented by a single lexical item. At the same time, "red" is expressed through two distinct terms — *qizil* with 21 attestations and *qirmizi* with 14 — both of which are among the frequently used colour terms. Interestingly, despite the minimal presence of Iranian-origin colour terms, the phenomenon of dual lexical representation for the concept of "red" is also found in these microtoponyms, as evidenced by the occurrences of *sur* (2 instances) and *sorh* (1 instance).

Place names are generally structured into a specific element that identifies the location and a generic element that classifies the type of geographic feature (e.g., bay, river, mountain) (Tent, 2020). The microtoponyms examined in this study were analysed in relation to the presence or absence of a generic term. More than 93% of the microtoponyms contain generic terms. The most frequent generic terms are *därä* (valley, 19 instances), *täpä* (hill, 17), *yal* (ridge, 16), *qaya* (rock, 13), *bulaq* (spring, 12), and *göl* (lake, 10).

Another aspect of the grammatical and semantic role of colour terms in microtoponyms that warrants closer examination is whether the colour term is used directly to describe or qualify the referent object, or it functions within

a compound expression as part of the toponymic structure. For example, in the hydronym *Qizil Kähriz*, the colour term appears as an independent grammatical unit (in this case, an adjective) that modifies the referent (the noun). By contrast, in the oronym *Qizilga Zäminläri*, the term *qizil* enters the microtoponym as part of the compound *qizilga*. Notably, in more than 80% of the microtoponyms, the colour term appears in its simple form within the toponymic structure.

From the perspective of classifying microtoponyms as descriptive or distinctive, several points warrant attention. The study by Komijani Bozcheloei et al. (2025), which classified 225 oykonyms out of a total of 1,394 in Markazi Province according to the model of Tent and Blair (2021), reported that descriptive microtoponyms accounted for approximately 61% of the dataset. In the present study, which focuses on colour microtoponyms, the proportion of descriptive names exceeds 75%. On the other hand, most of the microtoponyms categorised as distinctive are linguistically compound forms. In these cases, the primary element is a descriptive microtoponym, which, upon the addition of another lexical item, becomes a compound belonging to the distinctive group. For instance, in the microtoponym *Qara Täpä Yolu*, "qara täpä" (black hill) functions as a descriptive microtoponym. At the same time, the addition of "yolu" (its road) transforms it into a distinctive compound, specifying that the reference is to the road leading to "Qara Täpä" rather than to the hill by itself or another object.

The influence of Komijan's local culture on colour microtoponyms can be observed in specific names that employ the colour term *qara*. The primary reason lies in the vast semantic range of *qara* across Turkic lexicons in different regions (Pritsak, 2021). In these cases, the term does not denote the colour "black" but instead carries alternative cultural or symbolic meanings. For instance, in microtoponyms such as *Qara Püšk/Siyah Püšk* and *Qara Tunqalar*, both "qara tunqa" and "püšk" are connected to the traditional irrigation system of the region, referring to places that receive their share of water last in the lottery-based water distribution system. Here, the colour term *qara* may symbolically allude to the inauspicious status of those lands or objects.

It is noteworthy that in one exceptional and intriguing case, a hydronym from the Tati-speaking village of Vafs is designated by two parallel names:

the Tati form *Kähriz-e Espin* and the Turkish form *Ağ Su*. What is particularly striking is that both microtoponyms, while belonging to different linguistic traditions, converge semantically. Literally, both mean “white spring” or “white qanat”, and figuratively they refer to the same concept of “clear water”.

Clear evidence of cultural interaction between the Turkic- and Tati-speaking communities of Komijan is reflected in hybrid microtoponyms, where one element is Turkish and the other Tati. These forms occur mainly in Tati-speaking villages, but also appear in some Turkic-speaking settlements. Examples include *Ağ Gânji* (Chehreqan), *Ağ Silo* (Vafs), and *İsban Bulağı* (Rowshanai).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Komijan County’s colour microtoponyms demonstrates that Turkic linguistic traditions dominate the region’s toponymic landscape, accounting for the overwhelming majority of recorded forms.

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