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Semio-Pragmatic and Ideological Dimensions of "Green"

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Dimensiunile semio-pragmatice și ideologice ale lexemului „green”

Rezumat

Acest articol investighează dimensiunile semio-pragmatice și ideologice ale lexemului *green*, urmărindu-i evoluția de la un simplu descriptor cromatic la un semnificant polisemic, încărcat ideologic în discursul contemporan. Studiul demonstrează modul în care *green* funcționează ca un termen semantic flexibil și profund ancorat cultural, regăsindu-se în contexte care abordează teme precum ecologia, comerțul și politica. Folosind câteva postări de pe o pagină din Facebook ca date pentru un micro-corpus multimodal, analiza explorează structurile compuse, expresiile idiomatice și tiparele colocaționale, relevând modul în care *green* activează strategic multiple sensuri și implicaturi pozitive prin intermediul indiciilor contextuale, cunoașterii enciclopedice și al cooperării interpretative. Articolul propune un cadru interdisciplinar original pentru înțelegerea modului în care vocabularul ideologic saturat funcționează în discursul real.

Cuvinte-cheie: green, implicatură conversațională, discurs multimodal, semnificație pragmatică.

Abstract

This article investigates the semio-pragmatic and ideological dimensions of the lexeme *green*, tracing its evolution from a basic chromatic descriptor to a polysemous and ideologically charged signifier in contemporary discourse. It demonstrates how *green* functions as a semantically flexible and culturally embedded term across ecological, commercial, and political registers. Using some Facebook posts as multimodal micro-corpus data, the analysis explores compound formations, idiomatic expressions, and collocational patterns, revealing how *green* strategically activates multiple meanings and positive implicatures through contextual cues, encyclopedic knowledge, and interpretive cooperation. The article contributes an interdisciplinary

framework for understanding how ideologically saturated vocabulary operates in real-world discourse.

Keywords: green, conversational implicature, multimodal discourse, pragmatic meaning.

In the contemporary socio-cultural landscape, ecological concerns have become central to public discourse, influencing not only policies and consumer behavior but also patterns of communication and meaning-making. As environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss have moved to the forefront of global consciousness, language has responded dynamically, generating new terminologies and reconfiguring old ones to align with evolving values. The rise of ecological awareness has led to the proliferation of specialized vocabularies in advertising, politics, media, and education, where persuasive strategies are frequently employed to foster a sense of environmental responsibility and particular lexical items function as ideological markers in debates over sustainability and ethical consumption.

In recent decades, the lexeme *green* has undergone a semantic evolution, transitioning from a basic chromatic descriptor to a culturally saturated and ideologically potent signifier. This transformation reflects not only linguistic flexibility, but also broader shifts in public discourse, where environmental values, political agendas, and consumer ethics increasingly intersect. The word *green* is no longer anchored to its perceptual origins alone, but it operates as a discursive chameleon, adapting its meaning across genres, registers, and communicative goals.

In this study, I examine the semio-pragmatic and ideological dimensions of *green* through its polysemous structure, compound formations, and function as a vehicle of strategic ambiguity in contemporary discourse. Using Cruse's lexical semantics (2000) as a framework, green is shown to trigger a spectrum of context-dependent meanings – from its basic associations with vegetation and color to more abstract, metaphorical, idiomatic, and commercial applications. My analysis also integrates insights from Grice's theory (1975) of conversational implicature, Barthes' semiotics (1977), and critical discourse analysis, demonstrating how *green* functions both as a descriptive marker and an ideological instrument in multimodal texts.

This study uses a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis approach, focusing on a micro-corpus of Facebook posts (2018–2025) from Green Thumb Gardens (www.facebook.com). The posts were selected based on the recurrence of the lexeme *green* in idiomatic, metaphorical, and brand-related contexts, in which *green* is frequently used as a persuasive and symbolic element in ecological branding and community engagement. The compounds and idioms were examined for collocational patterns, polysemy, pragmatic implicature, and semiotic layering. With a community of 6.7K followers and a high level of engagement, the page provides relevant examples of ecological discourse with significant digital impact.

Idiomatic expressions (e.g., green thumb, green with envy), promotional materials, and compound structures (e.g., greenhouse, green energy, greenwashing) illustrate the lexical and pragmatic mechanisms that enable green to operate with significant semantic breadth. In doing so, it uncovers the contextual cues, collocational patterns, and pragmatic strategies that shape *green's* communicative force, particularly in eco-political and commercial discourse.

Green functions as a semantically open sign in Eco's (1976) sense, marked by interpretive flexibility and context-dependency. Rather than denoting a fixed referent, it operates within a shifting network of meanings shaped by intertextuality, ideological recontextualization, and semantic drift. As such, *green* exemplifies how a single lexeme can encompass literal, symbolic, commercial, and ideological dimensions in the fluid interplay of language, culture, and discourse.

Following Cruse (2000), the lexeme *green* exemplifies classic polysemy – that is, a single lexical form that carries a network of related but distinct senses, as opposed to homonymy, where unrelated meanings are attached to the same form. Polysemy, as Cruse explains, is structured around a core meaning with contextually modulated variants that maintain a family resemblance rather than complete identity. The semantic versatility of *green* is a paradigmatic case of this phenomenon.

At its most basic level, *green* denotes a chromatic property associated with a specific portion of the visible spectrum, as in *The leaves are green*. This is the literal, perceptual sense, grounded in physical experience. From this foundational sense, several extended meanings have emerged. In environmental discourse, *green* has acquired an ecological and ethical dimension, often used to signal sustainability and environmental responsibility – e.g., *green energy*, *green economy*. Here, the term operates within a value-laden ideological frame, where it no longer refers to color but to a set of social practices or political commitments.

Cruse's notion of contextual modulation is particularly salient here: *green* is sensitive to collocational patterns (*green tea* vs. *green politics*), discourse genre (scientific, journalistic, colloquial), and pragmatic context (whether the term is used sincerely, ironically, or euphemistically). Thus, the polysemy of *green* is not static but dynamically constructed in use, reinforcing Cruse's model of lexical meaning as a fluid, gradable phenomenon, rather than a fixed entity (2000). It is precisely this semantic flexibility, anchored in a network of sense relations and shaped by context, that allows *green* to function both as a descriptive term and as a symbolic signifier across ideological, environmental, and cultural domains.

Green functions within metaphorical constructions, such as *green with envy*, where the emotional state is mapped onto a physical color – a cognitive association that blends visual and affective domains. Furthermore, the word appears in idiomatic expressions such as *green thumb* (referring to someone skilled at gardening) and *greenhorn* (denoting an inexperienced or naïve person). These idioms display high degrees of semantic opacity, in that their meanings

are not inferable from the individual components – a key feature distinguishing idiomatic polysemy from compositional phraseology (Lakoff 1980).

In *A Theory of Semiotics* (Eco 1979) and later in The Role of the Reader, U. Eco distinguishes between the code, the encyclopedia, and the cooperative role of the reader. While the code governs basic linguistic structures and conventions, the encyclopedia encompasses the full cultural, ideological, and experiential knowledge associated with a sign, a knowledge base that readers draw upon when interpreting meaning. In the case of *green*, its ideological and affective resonances, ranging from nature, purity, and growth to envy, virtue, and sustainability, cannot be retrieved from the code alone. Instead, they reside within this vast, context-dependent encyclopedic network of cultural associations.

For instance, when a company markets a *green* product, it invokes not a literal color or botanical reference, but rather relies on the reader's encyclopedic understanding of environmental ethics, natural aesthetics, and eco-responsibility. This process depends on what Eco (1979) calls interpretive cooperation, whereby meaning emerges through the reader's active engagement with both textual cues and background cultural knowledge. Thus, the success of *green* as a branding and ideological tool lies precisely in its capacity to mobilize encyclopedic meanings, enabling companies, institutions, and political actors to strategically align their messages with socially valorized narratives of sustainability, wellness, and ecological virtue – often without referential precision.

A relevant multimodal example of *green's* pragmatic versatility appears in a social media post by Green Thumb Gardens on October 31, 2023, which combines visual, idiomatic, and metaphorical dimensions of the term in a compact advertising message.



Fig. 1, Source: https://www.facebook.com/gtgardenss

The caption, *We're not your average green thumbs. We can give any area a garden glow-up that will have your neighbors green with envy*, showcases at least three distinct uses of green: (1) *green thumb*, as a culturally specific idiom for gardening skill; (2) *green with envy*, as a metaphorical expression mapping emotion onto color; and (3) *green* as an overarching brand identity embedded in the company name and visual palette. This example underscores Cruse's (2000) notion of contextual modulation and polysemy, as the same lexeme activates multiple meanings depending on surrounding discourse and co-text. It also supports Barthes' theory of connotative layering, where visual signs (lush green plants) and verbal cues co-construct a symbolic message of growth, competence, and domestic prestige (1977).

From a pragmatic perspective, this post illustrates how *green* generates positive implicatures, health, domestic success, eco-consciousness, without requiring literal ecological content. The brand capitalizes on what Grice (1975) would classify as conversational implicature, suggesting benefits (aesthetically impressive gardens, neighborly admiration) that go beyond the literal meaning. Additionally, the humorous interplay of *green thumb* and *green with envy* strategically activates multiple interpretive frames, enhancing memorability and persuasive appeal.

In semiotic terms, this case reflects Barthes' (1977) model of connotative signification. At the denotative level, the images display lush produce and vertical planters. Connotatively, the greenery operates as a visual shorthand for life, care, productivity, and moral virtue, constructing a modern gardening narrative that blends environmental values with lifestyle aesthetics. The question *How does your garden grow?* further embeds the message within a participatory, almost pedagogical, discourse, encouraging identification and aspiration.

In this sense, image does not function merely as an illustration, but as a semiotic resource that builds meaning through visual choices such as colour, composition and modality (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006).

Crucially, this multimodal text underscores the thesis that *green* has become a floating signifier – capable of attaching itself to various semantic domains (nature, envy, skill, ethics, beauty) depending on genre, audience, and communicative intent. It does not rely on fixed referential content but operates through contextual modulation, allowing marketers to adapt its connotations fluidly to persuasive ends. This case thus exemplifies the strategic deployment of green as a semantically versatile and ideologically resonant tool within eco-branded consumer discourse.

This evolving and multidimensional behavior of the lexeme *green* aligns closely with Umberto Eco's (Eco 1976) theory of open-ended semiosis, in which signs are not closed systems with rigid, fixed meanings, but are instead *open texts* whose interpretations proliferate across cultural, discursive, and intertextual contexts. In Eco's view, meaning is never wholly stabilized by the signifier-signified bond; instead, signs function within what he calls an

unlimited semiosis, wherein each act of interpretation gives rise to further interpretive possibilities. The case of *green* perfectly illustrates this dynamic: while originally grounded in a perceptual, color-based referent, the term now circulates as a sign loaded with fluctuating ideological, ecological, emotional, and commercial values.

This perspective enhances Cruse's lexical theory by adding a semiotic-cultural dimension: *green* is not simply polysemous in a structural sense, but semiotically productive within an ever-expanding chain of culturally sanctioned meanings. The idiomatic, metaphorical, and multimodal uses of *green*, as in *green with envy*, *green energy*, *greenwashing*, or *greenthumb*, are not mere extensions of a core sense, but signifying practices shaped by socio-cultural codes. In Eco's terms, such expressions function as culturally embedded encyclopedic entries, rich in connotation and interpretive latitude.

Another example of *green's* lexical productivity and cultural embedment appears in a 2021 Facebook post by Green Thumb Gardens, which introduces gardening vocabulary in an educational and promotional format.



Fig. 2, Source: https://www.facebook.com/gtgardenss

Most compounds containing the lexeme *green* follow a standard, adjective + noun (noun morphological structure), such as *greenhouse* or *green tax*. According to Cruse (2000), such formations often rely on the principle of compositionality, whereby the meaning of the compound is assumed to derive in a predictable way from the meanings of its constituent parts. In this view,

green tax may be interpreted as a tax related to environmentally sustainable practices, aligning directly with the core meanings of *green* (ecological) and *tax* (financial levy).

However, many *green* compounds demonstrate semantic opacity, non-compositionality, or metaphorical extension, thus challenging strict compositional readings. For instance, *greenhouse* effect does not refer to a literal glass house but to a scientific phenomenon involving atmospheric heat retention – a meaning accessible only through domain-specific conceptual knowledge, not surface-level lexical analysis. Similarly, *greenwashing* presents a case of semantic innovation and pragmatic enrichment. The term implies a form of deceptive marketing wherein environmental claims are exaggerated or fabricated, and its interpretation involves evaluative judgment, affective stance, and implicature, aligning with Cruse's treatment of expressive meaning and meaning extension.

Another notable example is *green energy*, which blends literal chromatic association (*green* = nature) with ideological value attribution, signaling a commitment to renewable, sustainable energy sources. Its interpretation is context-dependent, culturally situated, and often ideologically motivated. In such cases, green functions as a semantic pivot, anchoring compounds in both descriptive content and ideological connotation. These examples illustrate how lexical compounds involving *green* frequently transcend compositional expectations, where compositionality is a tendency rather than a rule, and that meaning is often constructed dynamically through context and use.

On the paradigmatic axis, *green* enters into oppositional relationships with other lexical items that occupy similar syntactic positions but contrast in meaning. For instance, in environmental discourse, *green energy* stands in contrast to *brown* or *black energy*, terms often associated with carbon-intensive, non-renewable sources such as coal or oil. This opposition is not merely descriptive but ideologically loaded, situating *green* as a marker of sustainability and progress, while its antonyms connote environmental degradation and backwardness.

In metaphorical and idiomatic usage, *green* is also paradigmatically opposed to concepts such as experienced or mature, as in the common expression *He's still green*, which denotes naïveté or inexperience. Here, *green* participates in a metaphorical network where color encodes emotional or cognitive states, reinforcing Cruse's view that paradigmatic relations are both lexically encoded and culturally embedded.

On the syntagmatic axis, *green* demonstrates a high degree of collocational predictability, frequently combining with nouns that belong to specific conceptual domains. Phrases such as *green initiative*, *green party*, *green policy*, *green technology*, and *green jobs* reflect not only recurring lexical patterns but also institutionalized semantic associations. These combinations are semantically

coherent because they respect what Cruse refers to as selectional preferences –constraints on which types of lexical items can naturally co-occur (2000). For instance, *green* readily modifies nouns related to social programs, employment, governance, and innovation, but would be semantically odd or contextually incoherent if paired with nouns outside this semantic field (e.g., green scandal or green algebra, unless deliberately metaphorized).

Contextual cues, pragmatic inference, and speaker intention play a central role in shaping utterance meaning beyond what is conventionally encoded in lexical forms. This perspective is particularly relevant to the analysis of *green* in political and corporate discourse, where the term often functions not merely as a descriptive adjective, but as a pragmatic and ideological tool. When a product, initiative, or brand is labeled as *green*, the utterance typically triggers positive implicatures – associations with environmental responsibility, ethical production, sustainability, and moral virtue. However, these associations are rarely precise or verifiable at the lexical level. Instead, they rely on what Cruse refers to as non-propositional meaning, carried through expressive tone, evaluative framing, and context-driven inference.

The ability of *green* to carry favorable connotations, without committing to specific referential content, makes it a powerful instrument of strategic ambiguity. In branding contexts, expressions such as *green product*, *green lifestyle*, or *green brand* are frequently used as persuasive discourse acts, where the illocutionary force is not to inform, but to shape perception and induce trust. Here, green functions ideologically, embedding itself within consumer values and social ethics while suppressing epistemic precision. Such usage aligns with Grice's discussion of conversational implicature (1975), whereby meaning is inferred rather than entailed, leaving ample room for deliberate vagueness and manipulative intent.

In the Facebook advertisement by Green Thumb Gardens (December 16, 2019), the phrase «Give Green this Season» demonstrates a strategic nominalization of the adjective green. Traditionally an adjective denoting color or environmental connotations, *green* is here repurposed as a mass noun, functioning as a metonymic substitute for plant-based or ecologically conscious gifts. This linguistic shift reflects a broader discursive trend in eco-marketing, where *green* becomes a commodified, ideologically loaded signifier.

Syntactically, *green* occupies the object position of the verb *give*, which typically demands a countable or mass noun. Its use without a determiner or plural marker (e.g., a green, greens) aligns it with other abstract mass nouns such as *hope* or *peace*, positioning *green* not just as a product but as a value-laden concept. Semantically, it encapsulates a range of meanings – sustainability, nature, health, responsibility – while pragmatically appealing to gift-giving.

Thus, "Give Green" is not merely an imperative marketing call but a discursive act. It encodes ideological positioning (eco-responsibility), constructs

a desirable consumer identity (the *green* giver), and indexes the symbolic capital of sustainability within late capitalist culture.

In the phrase *our green followers* (posted on July 17, 2017), the adjective *green* modifies *followers*, forming a compound nominal group that functions both descriptively and ideologically. On the surface, *green* appears to reference gardening enthusiasts – those interested in horticulture, herbs, and vegetable cultivation. However, the semantic reach of green extends beyond its literal sense. It becomes an index of ecological identity, labeling followers as environmentally aware, ethically aligned with sustainability.

This use exemplifies what Fairclough (1995) terms the ideological interpellation of subjects – here, *followers* are discursively positioned not just as consumers, but as agents of ecological practices. The adjective *green*, therefore, serves as a symbolic marker of group identity, one rooted in shared values and performative eco-consciousness. Pragmatically, *green followers* performs a relational function – it establishes solidarity between brand and audience by invoking a sense of communal belonging.

The word *green* in Green Party has become an ideological label rather than just a color – standing for a comprehensive worldview that intertwines environmental protection with progressive socio-political reform. It reflects what Barthes (1975) might call a mythologized sign, where the term *green* connotes purity, nature, ethics, and a better future.

The lexeme *green* exemplifies an exceptional case of semantic expansion, contextual modulation, and ideological recontextualization in contemporary discourse. Anchored in Cruse's theory of polysemy and enriched by Eco's model of open-ended semiosis, the analysis revealed how *green* operates not only as a color term but as a semio-pragmatic construct, capable of activating a wide range of meanings, from ecological integrity to emotional states and marketing strategies.

The compound formations (*greenhouse, greenwashing, green energy*), idiomatic expressions (*green thumb, green with envy*), and collocational patterns (*green jobs, green lifestyle*), illustrate how *green* has become a culturally embedded, ideologically flexible, and pragmatically strategic lexeme. Its capacity to carry evaluative force while avoiding propositional precision makes it particularly powerful in eco-branding and persuasive discourse, where connotation often outweighs denotation.

By foregrounding *green* as a cultural sign that draws on shared encyclopedic knowledge, this paper contributes an innovative perspective to the study of semantic drift in ideologically loaded vocabulary, offering both a theoretical and methodological models for analyzing similar floating or open signifiers.

The analysis builds on theoretical frameworks that highlight how meaning emerges through interpretation shaped by both textual context and the interpreter. Signs do not function in isolation but participate in complex networks of

meaning, shaped by socio-cultural environments and individual cognition. These insights support and extend existing theoretical approaches that examine the intricate structure of signs within broader processes of cultural and social interpretation, reaffirming their applicability to the analysis of contemporary discursive phenomena.

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