The description of “an orange” in the standard and widely-used unilingual (Irish-to-Irish) dictionary An Foclóir Beag (1991) is “a sweet juicy fruit with a ‘yellow’ (bui) skin.”1 The few short words of that description raise a question for Irish teachers and, broadly, for every Irish speaker, even though this issue is barely addressed in academic literature. The structure of the statement appears to be straightforward enough, but to anyone except a very traditional native Irish speaker or someone who has studied this particular topic, it is strange to describe the skin of an orange as bui, the word most commonly translated as “yellow.” And this is especially true since in many other languages, the fruit (oráiste) has actually given us the name of the color involved, as “lilac” has done in English and “taupe” (mole, the animal) has done in French. It is not simply a matter of deciding what color or shade of color the fruit is as one might attempt to distinguish “pale blue” (báinbormh) from “sky-blue” (speighbormh). Naming the color of the skin of an orange “yellow” would appear to ignore the very word “orange” itself, at least at first glance.

This situation presents three main dilemmas that will be discussed here. The first deals with the traditional way of naming colors in Irish. These days the word oráiste (orange) is used as a color term fairly often, even though this was not considered an acceptable usage years ago. Orange was simply the name of the fruit, not a color. Most of the time, the word bui (yellow) was used for things that an English-speaker would describe as “orange,” such as a “marmalade” cat, as well as for those that would be called “yellow” in English (= An Mhùin Bhui, the Yellow Sea; an fiaubhais bui, yellow fever).

The second question involves the future. What is the situation for young children today in the Gaeltacht or children anywhere who are being raised as Irish speakers or bilingually? What happens when they read the books about colors that are being published today, such as Bran agus na Dathanna?2 The children will not be using bui (yellow) to describe things that are the color of an orange, the way their ancestors did. In these books, yellow and orange are not at all the same. If each color has its own page, as is usual in such picture books, there will be one page for the color yellow (bui), with illustrations such as the sun or bananas. There will be another page for the color orange (oráiste) with pictures such as oranges or pumpkins. Of course, of the few such picture books focusing on color that exist for Irish, most were originally written in English and were translated into Irish. The basic book design and layout must stay the same because of publishing costs. Therefore, the translator has no other option than to adhere to the color distinctions of the English version. That strengthens the misleading notion that color distinctions in English and color distinctions in Irish are the same. And anyone who has learned the basic Irish phrase, fear gorm (literally, a blue man), used for a black man, knows that color distinctions are not always the same within any pair of languages.

The third main question is very specific, but a noteworthy one nevertheless: what are the names of the colors of the Irish flag? Every Irish person or every person interested in Ireland or the Irish language should be aware of this topic. It is basic cultural knowledge for a person to know the names of the colors of his or her own country’s flag. It is even a question that may arise in citizenship tests. This issue is discussed in the Irish Constitution, in which it is stated that the colors of the flag are uaine (green), bán (white), and flannbhui (orange, literally red-yellow). It is true that

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2 Bran agus na Dathanna (Bran and the Colors) is the Irish translation of Spot Looks at Colors (1986) in the top-selling picture book series about Spot, the puppy, by Eric Hill.

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the first two colors present some terminological issues. In Irish, the color for green manufactured items is generally \textit{uaine} while the word \textit{glas} is used for green in the natural world, such as leaves or grass. For white, there are three choices: \textit{bán} (white, empty), \textit{fionn} (white, bright, clear, fair, blond) and \textit{geal} (white, bright, pure), depending on the context. But it is the last term, \textit{flannbhuí} (orange-colored), that most concerns us here. Despite being specified in the Irish Constitution, there is no reference to the word \textit{flannbhuí} in nearly thirty important and representative Irish language textbooks that were published between 1922 and 2005 and that were examined for this essay. The survey started with Máire Ní Cheallacháin’s \textit{Irish at Home, or, Gaedhilg sa mBaile, Book 1} and finished with Annette Byrne’s \textit{Gaeilge agus Fáilte: A First Course in Irish Language and Culture for Adults}.

“Is this an important question?” one might ask. One might wonder, “What is the importance of the name of one color or of the minutia of dictionary definitions or the layout of pictures in children’s books?” Some people might think it would be far more important to create new terms for technology and computing (such as \textit{laomhuimine}, the new word for flash memory); or perhaps to increase and clarify European Union terminology (for example, to pick one of the two phrases, \textit{taistead gan phas} or \textit{taistead gan phasanna} for “passport-free travel,” instead of having two nearly-identical terms). Of course, these are also very worthwhile questions, but the issue of color terminology is also important in its own way.

To start with, naming colors is one of the first things that children learn. There are many children’s books about color in English and at least a few in Irish. These books influence the children’s outlook on color categories. If the residents of the Gaeltacht once used \textit{bui} to describe “marmalade cats” or orange-colored clothing, or even oranges themselves, that is not what children will learn from the books available to them today.

Secondly, there are many terms and concepts that involve the color orange, as discussed in English, today that are man-made and that are not inherently orange in color. In some of these cases, the color use is symbolic and in some cases, it is based on human physiology (that, for example, to the human eye, the color orange is highly visible against a blue background and so is useful for safety signage). Certainly one must be specific and consistent in discussing these issues. Some of the situations involved are the recent Ukrainian Orange Revolution, the color “Safety Orange” for international signage, and the pesticide “Agent Orange.” Despite constant searching through dictionaries and online databases, no Irish term for these was found. What term should be used when they are eventually translated into Irish? \textit{Bui} or \textit{oráiste} or \textit{flannbhuí}?

Perhaps the situation will evolve such that word \textit{bui} (yellow) will be used for terms from nature for flora and fauna, but that \textit{oráiste} will be used for man-made terms and items. There are plenty of samples suggesting that \textit{oráiste} itself is rarely used in scientific taxonomy, especially for zoology and botany, even for some well-known orange items in English. The term \textit{an péacán buí} (the orange or fire lily) illustrates this. Literally, the Irish name means “the yellow sprout” or “the yellow plumule.” The Latin name is \textit{Lilium bulbiferum supsp. croceum} and it is native to continental Europe, especially Eastern Central Europe. It has a strong connection to Ireland, of course, since this is the most symbolic plant in the history of Ulster because of its connection to William of Orange (William III). But notice that the Irish flower name uses \textit{bui}, not \textit{oráiste} or \textit{flannbhuí}. There are also samples of terms with \textit{bui} for orange within the native fauna of Ireland and the United Kingdom, for example, \textit{an barr buí} (the orange-tipped butterfly).

Only occasionally does one see the word \textit{oráisteach}, based on \textit{oráiste} and with an adjective ending (-each) for flora or fauna. One of the few such samples is \textit{froga oráisteach nimhshaighid} for the Orange Poison-Arrow Frog, found in the Amazon. This is certainly a newly created word. Often such terms are created when their absence is noted either for a textbook or specialized dictionary, or when such works are translated from English. In Old Irish society, such a frog would not have been known and a term for it would not have been needed. In Irish, the word \textit{oráisteach} is almost always a noun and capitalized, \textit{Oráisteach}, meaning an Orangeman (member of the Orange Order). Ironically, another term for an Orangeman is \textit{Fear Bui}, literally “yellow man,” although \textit{bui} is not used for other terms connected to the Order, such as \textit{oráisteachas} (orangism).

\footnote{Máire Ní Cheallacháin’s \textit{Irish at Home, or, Gaedhilg sa mBaile, Book 1} (Dublin: Maunsell and Roberts, 1921); Annette Byrne’s \textit{Gaeilge agus Fáilte: A First Course in Irish Language and Culture for Adults} (Dublin: Linguistics Institute of Ireland, 2002).}
It is the third point, the colors of the Irish flag, which is more relevant to the concerns of Irish learners and teachers than Ukraine’s Orange Revolution or Safety Orange. As will be seen, in a survey of about thirty Irish language textbooks, an Irish learner would not be able to name the colors of the Irish flag even if he or she knew every lesson in these thirty books, since there is no reference to the word flannbhui (orange-coloured) in any one of them. Even though the word is specified in the Constitution, it is not in any of the textbooks examined and it is only rarely used in everyday speech.

To round out this discussion, one more term for the color orange will be discussed, one which is heard even more rarely than flannbhui, namely ruadhbhuidhe. It is given here in the old spelling; no instance of the word could be found since the Irish spelling reform of the 1950s which changed the ending -bhuidhe to -bhui. Before the spelling reform, flannbhui was spelled flannbhuidhe, with the same ending of -bhuidhe. Ruadhbhuidhe literally combines “coppery-red” (ruadh, rua) with yellow (buidhe, buí) whereas flannbhuidhe combines “blood-red” (flaith) with yellow.

In the final run-down then, there are five words in Irish with similar meanings and that have implied rules connected to their usage. An interesting lexicographical history pertains to each of the five: buí (yellow), oráiste (orange), oráisteach (orange), flannbhui (blood-red-yellow) and ruadhbhuidhe (coppery-red-yellow), but there is really only time to talk about one of them here in depth, oráiste, which is also the one whose use is most controversial and complicated. There is a sixth term, one with some bearing on the issue, but whose use can be summarized fairly straightforwardly. The color used traditionally to describe carrots in Irish is dearg (red) as seen in the term meacan dearg (literally, red tuberous root). However, this phrase, though common enough as recently as the twentieth century, is quickly being replaced by cairéad, a borrowing from English that (handily) eliminates any confusing issues of color. A parallel term to meacan dearg exists for parsnip (meacan bán, white tuberous root), which has not been replaced by any English borrowing, at least not in a way that is attested lexicographically. It is not simply important that people tend to use cairéad rather than meacan dearg these days, but also to note that with the gradual loss of the term meacan dearg, one more traditional Irish way of classifying color is disappearing. Meacan bán for parsnip seems to be holding its own, perhaps partly because there is less discussion of parsnips in general, and, if there is, the color does not raise questions. So, while the color dearg (red) could be important in discussion about carrots themselves, it is not really an issue in discussing the background of the word orange.

The History of the Word “Orange” and the Structure of Color Terms

At first, the word orange only had one meaning, the fruit itself, and that was also true in English. If one looks at the early dictionaries for the Irish language, from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, this dichotomy is constantly reinforced. One sees the word oráiste defined only as the fruit, and various other terms, such as ruadhbhuidhe, are used for the color, if the color is even listed.

The first dictionary in which the adjective ruadhbhuidhe could be found is A Galic [sic] and English Dictionary, published by William Shaw in 1780. Shaw defines ruadhbhuidhe as “reddish-yellow,” not as “orange” or “orange-colored.” This is significant in its own way. For almost every color except the basic ones, such as red or blue, both English and Irish have two approaches to naming them. One can make a compound word from two colors, like ruadhbhuidhe (reddish-yellow) or liathcorcra (purple-gray). This was also done in Old English, with geoluhread (yellow-red) as the earliest citation of this color. Or one can compare the color to a well-known object that inherently has that color, so one can say “orange-colored,” for example, using either the sentence, Tá dath an oráiste is on the color of an orange or Tá dath an oráiste air (the color of an orange) for oráiste defined only as the fruit, and various other terms, such as ruadhbhuidhe, are used for the color, if the color is even listed.

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in the genitive or possessive case, a process that most learners do not find easy. For example, for salmon-colored and lark-colored, the word bhradáin changes to bhradán (of salmon) and fuiseog changes to fuiseoige (of lark) with the resulting phrases, dath an bhradáin (color of the salmon) and dath an fuiseoige (color of the lark). In Irish, a certain category of nouns, fourth declension, do not change for the genitive case and so are easier for learners to manipulate; orange-colored would be dath an oráiste, with no change to the word oráiste.

In English, in many cases, words that are actually nouns can be used as adjectives to describe color. Since English has few inflectional endings other than a handful, such as -s, -ed, and -en, it is easy enough to create meaningful sentences describing color, such as “It is salmon,” “It is teal,” or “It is lime.” No grammatical endings are needed; one simply needs to be sure that the color reference is understood.

**Color Terms in Present-Day Irish**

In Irish today, statements with this grammatical structure are being made, with the color orange as an adjective, regardless of how ungrammatical they might have been viewed in the past. Orange is the main problematic color since it is the only one of the seven or so usually in children’s books, like Bran agus na Dathanna, where the main meaning is an object (the fruit), not the color itself.

To say, Tá sé oráiste (it is orange, referring to the color) would be common enough these days. But the situation might change if a less common word is used, and, in fact, such a sentence might be quite misconstrued by a listener. If a learner says, Tá sé bhradán, to attempt to say something is salmon-colored, a fluent Irish-speaker is likely to think the speaker meant to say that something is a salmon. It is common enough for learners to mix up the two forms of the verb “to be” in Irish, much like ser and estar in Spanish. The verb tá is used for describing (Tá mé ard, I am tall) and the copula, with forms such as is or ba, is used for linking two things (Is dochtúir mé, I am a doctor). Likewise, with other color comparisons that would be less frequently made, one would end up with meaningless or seemingly incorrect statements in Irish: Tá sé praslacha for “It is teal” and Tá sé teile for “It is lime.” For these descriptions, it would make more sense to say, Tá dath na praslachan air (The color of a teal duck is on it) or Tá dath na teile air (The color of a lime is on it). So, while Tá sé oráiste has made inroads into the language, the same structure with less commonly used colors has not, or is only barely present.

But in the book Spot Looks at Colors, the question comes around again, full circle. The English version says, “The pumpkin is orange. So are Spot’s oranges.” In a way, one could think that even the English is a little strange, to say “the pumpkin is orange.” But English-speakers are quite used to that sort of thing. As the old ad for Swan Vesta Matches said, “Familiarity breeds content,” and so once a pattern of using oráiste as an adjective is established, it starts to seem familiar and acceptable. The sentence “The shoes are teal” does not mean that they are made from teal-duck leather. Teal is simply a fashionable color term these days and the description means that the shoes are the color of teal-duck wings.

For the Irish version of this little book, the translator wisely says on one page, “Cén dath atá ar na horáistí seo?” (What color are these oranges?) instead of a sentence like Tá na horáistí oráiste (the oranges are orange), which would be somewhat clumsy in Irish. The translator does not provide an answer in the text. In the other picture, it is not a full sentence that is involved, but simply a noun-adjective phrase, puimcín oráiste (orange pumpkin). That is much better for a child or a learner because a sentence like Tá an puimcín oráiste would be misleading, though partly sensible. To say Tá an puimcín oráiste would be like saying Tá an líomóid teile, i.e. the lemon is lime-colored), if one were perhaps talking about an unripe lemon. But, oddly, how would one say “lime-green”? There is no entry for it in any major dictionary or the main online databases, at least not under any predictable key-word listing (lime-green, lime, green). Therefore, one would most likely have to say, “the color of a lime is on it” for this purpose. This could also be used if one were describing clothes or a handbag.

**Suggestions for the Future**

And what would be the connection between these issues and the Irish Flag? Even though the word flannbhui is specified in the Irish Constitution, many people do not use this word regularly and it is not in many textbooks. Even though it used be said that
oráiste shouldn't be used as an adjective, it is used as an adjective now, and children will learn this usage from books like Bran agus na Dathanna. Regarding the other possible words for orange discussed above (oráisteach, ruadhbhuidhe, buí), it is unlikely that a learner would think of using one of those to describe the flag. Oráisteach is very rare as an adjective and ruadhbhuidhe is quite archaic and obscure. Sometimes it is said that the outermost panel of the flag is gold, but there is no evidence of buí (yellow) being used to describe it.

But if we accept the adage horror vacui (nature abhors a vacuum), oráiste will be used to describe the flag in Irish, unless the situation is well understood and unless people know the word flannbhui. And it is not necessary to do an exhaustive search to find the word oráiste replacing the Constitution’s intended flannbhui in describing the flag. At the time of this writing, the use of oráiste could be seen in a new, controversial, sometimes untrustworthy, but very widely read source, Vicipéid, the Irish language version of Wikipedia, where it says, “Is iad glas, bhin, agus oráiste, na dáthanna.” It is not just the word oráiste which is not according to the Constitution, but also the choice of green as glas, instead of uaine as specified in the Constitution.

Of course, Vicipéid, like Wikipedia in general, is full of both accurate and inaccurate information, but many people read it, perhaps more who are learning Irish than who are fluent speakers. The article on the Irish flag is an example of the inaccurate information. But in the vacuum that this confusing situation regarding, orange, yellow, coppery-reddish-yellow and blood-red-yellow has created, it is not surprising that oráiste would come in as the term in a place where it was unintended. One thing that teachers and textbook writers can do is to be certain that the word flannbhui is at least mentioned for the necessary context, even if Bran's pumpkin or other items not related to the Irish Tricolor Flag are still described as oráiste. I once asked a native speaker of Irish if one could use the word oráiste to describe the Irish Flag. We were speaking in English, following an Irish language workshop, and he replied, “Ye could be murd(h)ered for that!” Presumably the warning was clear enough even though it is unlikely that the threat was as strong in reality as it was in intent.