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Some students of linguistics have come to the conclusion that our ancestors were color-blind. Max Muller, for example, points out that there is no Sanskrit root with reference to any definite color.

The earliest colors recorded are the red and black of chess men. About the time the Rig Veda was composed, yellow was recognized. Then came white, followed by green.

Xenophanes knew of only three colors of the rainbow -- purple, red and yellow. Aristotle also spoke of the tri-colored rainbow. Democritus knew only four colors -- black, red, white and yellow.

The Bible mentions the sky more than four hundred times. There are long passages in the Rig Veda describing the sky. The Odyssey and the Iliad have sky references. None of them describe it as blue. Homer does use the word glaukos which can mean blue, green or grey. Indeed, the Old Teutonic root blawo seems to mean grey.

In any event, today blue is the second most frequently used color word (after red), according to Kucera and Francis's Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English.

Perhaps the oldest reference to blue is in the Hittite story of Kessi, the Huntsman. His mother gave him a skein of blue wool for protection when she sent him on a perilous journey. Even today, brides wear for good luck 'something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue'.

Blue is the color of virtue (true blue). It was the color adopted by the Scottish Presbyterian Whigs as opposed to the Royalist Tory red. Our blue laws are a direct descendant from them. And blue stockings, now meaning intolerant, came from the same period when God-fearing persons wore blue worsted stockings in contrast to those of black silk worn by royalty.

To be blue is to be despondent. This comes from seeing blue devils when very drunk. And a blue Monday is a bad Monday when we return to work with perhaps a touch of hangover. (In Germany, a blue Monday is an extended weekend, a holiday Monday.) It also refers to the eighteenth century naval practice of noting offenses during the week and arranging floggings for punishment the following 'black and blue' Monday. The Germans would use the term 'green and blue' for this effect on skin.
But in France, to be blue is to be amazed. In German, a blue wonder is an amazing event, something that happens once in a blue moon.

To us, a blue story is an off-color story. To a Frenchman, a blue story is simply a tall tale.

In German, a blue eye is a black eye, a blue haze is a swindle, a blue letter is a letter of dismissal written on blue paper and in a blue envelope, blue cabbage is our red cabbage, and to be blue is to be drunk.

In Italian, a blue voice is a crooning voice. In both French and Bengali, you become blue with rage. 'Til all is blue' was an old English expression describing the effect to drink on the eyesight.

Blue blood is royalty. This originated in Spain where some Castilian families asserted they had sangre azul, meaning that in them was no Moorish or Jewish admixture. Why blue blood? Because the veins stand out blue when the possessor is fair-skinned.

When two people start to say the same thing simultaneously, they sometimes go through a little ritual of hooking their little fingers together and reciting in alternation:

Needles
Pins
Triplets
Twins
When a man marries, his troubles begin
What goes up the chimney?
Smoke
May our friendship never be broke

When this happens to the Shona (a Bantu tribe in central Africa), they say 'touch blue' and they both touch some blue object. I find this a delightful custom.

Touch blue!