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What Was Old is New Again: Markedness and Photography

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## What Was Old is New Again: Markedness and Photography

### Abstract

This research applies the linguistic construct of *markedness* to photography to demonstrate that due to time and technology color photography has changed from the marked to unmarked object within a thirty-year span. A sample of articles from 1940 to 1970 from the weekly photography column in the New York Times was analyzed to trace color photography as it moved from its *marked*, or out-of-the-ordinary, status to an *unmarked*, or normal or expected status. Analysis finds that as of 1970 the distinction of the color photograph as ‘new’ was no longer a significant topic in the newspaper column, suggesting that color photography became *unmarked* at that time. This research uses the construct of *markedness* to suggest that due to the changing meanings and importance of photographs over time the development of a bibliographic structure that allows for updates and changes over time may be an appropriate consideration.

Key words: color photography, digital photography, black-and-white photography, linguistics, New York Times, Jacob Deschin, marking, markedness

### **What Was Old is New Again: Markedness and Photography**

Image professionals responding to the grayscale portion of a photograph Web survey in 2004 described the grayscale photographs as ‘black-and-white’ in about one-third of the total survey responses, although those participating in the color portion of the survey did not describe color photographs with a corresponding descriptor. That the respondents chose to distinguish some of the photographs as black-and-white may suggest that they are out of the ordinary, when compared to color photographs. Black-and-white photographs, invented before color photographs, were the historical norm, or unmarked object, at some point. When did the shift occur in which color photographs supplanted black-and-white as the norm, making black-and-white the marked object? This paper examines the topic of markedness related to photography, to determine if there is evidence of a cultural shift in how photographs are discussed.

Something may be considered ‘unmarked’ if it is assumed to be normal or usual, or ‘marked’ if it is out of the ordinary or the exception to what is expected (Radford, 1988: 39). The models for marking fall into two general categories: either/or or type-of. The either/or, or antonymous, model, suggests exclusivity, such as noting that two terms are in opposition. An illustration of this is found in the terms *like* and *liked*. Term-1, *like*, is the norm/unmarked in English because the present tense is the assumed tense, whereas term-2, *liked*, is past tense, less commonly used, and therefore marked. The type-of, or hyponymous, model, suggests a hierarchy or superordinate structure. In this model, term-1 would be considered a kind of the root. In the same way, term-2 would also be a kind of the root. *Days of the week*, as an example of this model, could be considered the root, with *workweek* as term-1 and *weekend* as term-2 (Battistella, 1990).

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The concept of a marked or unmarked object is traditionally used in the field of linguistics to distinguish verb tenses and assist with noun-verb agreement, though the concept may also be useful when applied to the humanities in order to signify change. Identification of an object as marked that once would have been considered unmarked suggests that some sort of change within a context has taken place. The type-of model of markedness will be used for this discussion, applying the construct to black-and-white, color, and eventually digital photography, in relation to time and technology.

### **Identifying Change through Marking**

Marking can signify change when what used to be the norm is supplanted by something new. Using the type-of model of markedness, terms -1 and -2 may be considered equal nodes in the hierarchy. In this way, *photograph* would act as the root, *black-and-white* as term-1, and *color* as term-2. As equals in the hierarchy, choosing to mark one of the terms and not the other would be dependent on the context of its use. In the history of photography, *black-and-white* (term-1) begins as the unmarked object because it is not distinguished from any other kind of photograph; it is all there is and is therefore simply described as a photograph. At the inception of *color* (term-2) this new type of photograph is seen as different from the black-and-white photograph and is therefore the marked object. Due to its popularity in the United States, the use of the color photograph eventually becomes more common than the black-and-white photograph, making it the normal mode of photography. During this transition *color* shifts from its marked status to become the unmarked object and *black-and-white* reverts to the marked object. The common interpretation of the 'photograph' shifts from black-and-white to color. Both *black-and-white* and *color* retain their identities as a kind of photograph, but one supplants the other as the norm.

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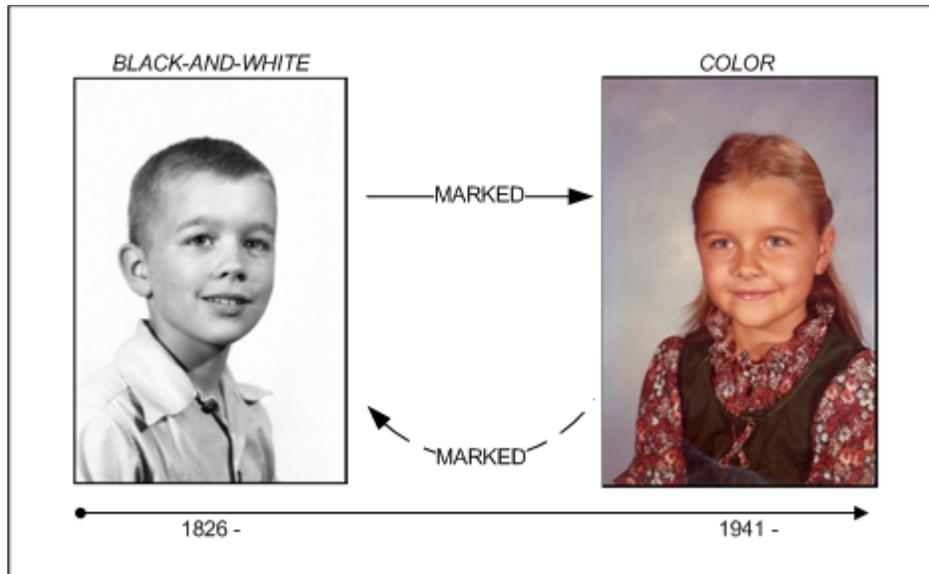


Figure 1: Marking the transition from black-and-white to color photography

As illustrated in Figure 1, color photography immediately becomes the marked object at its invention, as described by the straight line pointing from *black-and-white* to *color* in order to mark it as new. It is immediately marked because its obvious characteristics distinguish it from black-and-white. As this new kind of photography (color) becomes the norm, the old kind of photography (black-and-white) eventually becomes less common, or marked, in a gradual process, demonstrated by the curved, dashed line linking the kinds of photography. Identifying change in this way assumes that a length of time has occurred between the past, unmarked object and the new, marked object. One may also assume some sort of technological advancement has occurred to bring about the new object, whose improvements eventually make the older object obsolete. In the case of photography the advent of color photography signifies both temporal and technological changes.

### **Markedness and Time in Photography**

In order to identify when the color photograph became the marked object one could simply reference the date of its patent or public announcement of its creation. Identifying when the color photograph became the unmarked object, however, has a less specific reference point. The shift from the color photograph as a new object to when it became common occurred within the context of an American photographic cultural change. Tracking this transition may be best accomplished in the language used to talk about and describe photographs. A popular topic--considered a 'nationwide preoccupation' in the 1960s--photography was frequently discussed in the New York Times newspaper (Deschin, 1962: 19 August). Analyzing the content of the language used in the newspaper column devoted to photography from 1940 to 1971 may provide evidence of both the temporal and technological changes in photography that would have impacted color photography's transition from being the marked object to its eventual unmarking.

For thirty years the New York Times published a weekly column called 'Camera View' that was specifically devoted to the topic of photography. Written in its entirety by Jacob Deschin, the column discussed a range of interests related to photography, from a listing of exhibits and courses offered to critiques on photographers' works and in-depth discussions of the impact of photography on art culture. Deschin, himself a photographer (Fellow in the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain and associate of the Photographic Society of America) and author, wrote from the perspective of an informed participant. From the corpus of over 1500 articles, a convenience sample from the thirty years of publication was collected by the researcher for content analysis. In all, 114 articles that discussed some aspect of color photography were reviewed for this research.

### **Markedness and Technology in Photography**

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The first successful attempt at photography was completed in 1826 by Nicéphore Niépce. From this image on metal, photography quickly moved to paper and then to glass, all within a fifteen-year span (Gernsheim, 1986: 13). From glass plates came film, which changed their corresponding camera structures from heavy construction to hand-held models, making the practice of photography immensely more accessible to a public audience. Gernsheim cites that by 1900 ‘every tenth person in Britain—four million people—was reckoned to own a camera’ (Gernsheim, 1986: 24). Color positive film became widely available in the early 1930s and by the 1940s color negative film was offered. It is at the point of invention of color negative film that the Jacob Deschin column in the New York Times began.

1940s. In 1941 Deschin described the release of Kodak’s color negative film and prints as ‘no denying the pleasure it will give the man in the street, to whom in the main color prints have until now been a closed book’ (21 December). In 1946 Deschin noted that ‘exhibitions of color slides are rapidly approaching a status similar to that of black-and-white print salons’ (6 October). Technical innovations in color photography are included in Deschin’s articles in the 1940s, noting gradual improvements in color negative film, techniques, and products that photographers could use in their darkrooms to gain more control over the process. In 1948 two books were published by experts in color photography, geared toward ‘mature’ photographers interested in learning about color photography fundamentals and other practical aspects of working in color (Deschin, 1948: 25 July). An annual convention, the National Photographic Show, was founded in the 1940s in order to provide workshops, demonstrations, exhibitions, and contests in all areas of photography.

1950s. In the 1950s photography was discussed in the ‘Camera View’ column from an artistic, as well as technical, perspective. In a 1950 article Deschin implored photographers to

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consider the role color plays in their photographs, stating that ‘the photographer must develop a sensitivity to the nuances and meanings of color’ (1950: 3 September). Judges in a photographic salon encouraged photographers ‘to see pictures in their own way and to communicate them in a new and unique manner’ rather than ‘[making] the photograph resemble something else, a painting or drawing or a clipping from a movie, or somebody else’s photograph’ (Deschin, 1950: 5 February). In May of 1950 the Museum of Modern Art mounted its first exhibit of color photography in order to illustrate color photographs, transparencies, and reproductions (Deschin, 1950: 14 May). The Museum’s photography curator, Edward Steichen commented on the exhibit by noting ‘in spite of fine individual attainments and rich promise, color photography as a medium for the artist is still something of a riddle’ (Deschin, 1950: 14 May).

In a 1953 article titled ‘The Rush to Color’ Deschin stated that ‘with each succeeding season color’s growing domination of the American amateur photographic scene would appear to be gradually justifying earlier predictions that color photography would one day supplant black-and-white’ (1953: 17 May). In the same article Deschin noted that most amateur photographers were still not sophisticated enough to master photography in color as had been accomplished in black-and-white. In September of 1953 Deschin noted that some amateur photographers photographed in color ‘merely because of color,’ though some pictures ‘could have been taken just as well, if not better, in black-and-white’ (1953: 6 September). Deschin encouraged photographers to gain ‘an adequate grounding in the principles’ of photography in order to make informed decisions about whether to photograph in color or in black-and-white (1954: 7 November).

Amidst the value-laden decisions about color versus black-and-white, the 1950s continued to see improvements in color photographic technology and its acceptance in

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photographic culture. In 1955 Kodak released a color film with a speed equivalent to black-and-white negative film. A home processing kit in 1955 made film development at home a possibility. In 1959 at the National Photographic Show Kodak sponsored a series of lectures on photography, all on the topic of color photography. Widening interest in photography was confirmed in the number of applications competing in the First International All Color Print Exhibition, for which 'the total of entries is the largest ever assembled for an amateur show' (Deschin, 1959: 21 June).

1960s. In an article in 1961 (9 April) Deschin drew a close comparison between color darkroom printing and that of black-and-white. He noted that the techniques were closely paralleled, with color printing requiring 'no extra gadgets' than black-and-white. The processing time for both kinds of photography was similar as well. Deschin summarized the results of a photographic industry survey in 1962, citing an increase in sales of color negative films compared to color slide film (1962: 19 August). By 1963 sales of color slide film had been raised another 5% (Deschin, 1964: 29 December). In 1963 Kodak announced a competition just for color photographers on the same theme as was done in 1931, but was then limited to only black-and-white prints.

The color photographs shown in exhibits received mixed reviews throughout the 1960s, with Deschin noting that the 'mastery of color printing continued to be an elusive and demanding art for the amateur' (1964: 22 March). Though the techniques for color printing matched that of black-and-white, Deschin discussed in 1966 that the visual debates between color and black-and-white had not subsided, as evidenced by two publications that year. Deschin saw the continued debate on this topic as 'almost as archaic as the futile and continuing discussion of whether photography is an art' (1966: 5 June).

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Initially viewed as a novelty, new technology eventually becomes familiar to its users and becomes the norm. This acceptance of color photography as the norm is evidenced in the articles written in the New York Times subsequent to Deschin's column (ends in 1970). After 1970 there is a noticeable lack of discussion in the New York Times articles about whether a photograph should be made in color or black-and-white. Two new New York Times columns emerge in place of Deschin's, tailored to two developing communities of photographers; the artists and the hobbyists. An untitled monthly column on photography (written by different authors) spoke to those interested in photography as an art, and dealt with the conceptual issues at stake, such as incorporation of photography into the art world, the meanings and interpretations behind photographs, and the 'museumization' of photography (Kramer, 1976: 4 July). The other column, 'Camera World,' appealed to the hobbyist interested in photography workshops and conventions around town, and to those interested in the small technical improvements within photography. It is the researcher's suggestion, therefore, that it is at this point in photographic history—when the distinction between color and black-and-white was no longer important to those writing about photography—that color photography became the unmarked object.

### **Marking the Next Transition**

As photographic technology continues to evolve, the next transition in photography is already occurring with the shift toward digital imaging. The year 1991 marked the beginning of this new photographic transition when Kodak introduced the first digital camera, which was initially aimed at professional photographers. Within 14 years of its introduction to the market it was predicted that "half of all US households will have digital cameras by 2006, which will effectively end the dominance of silver-based photography" (Hirsch, 2005).

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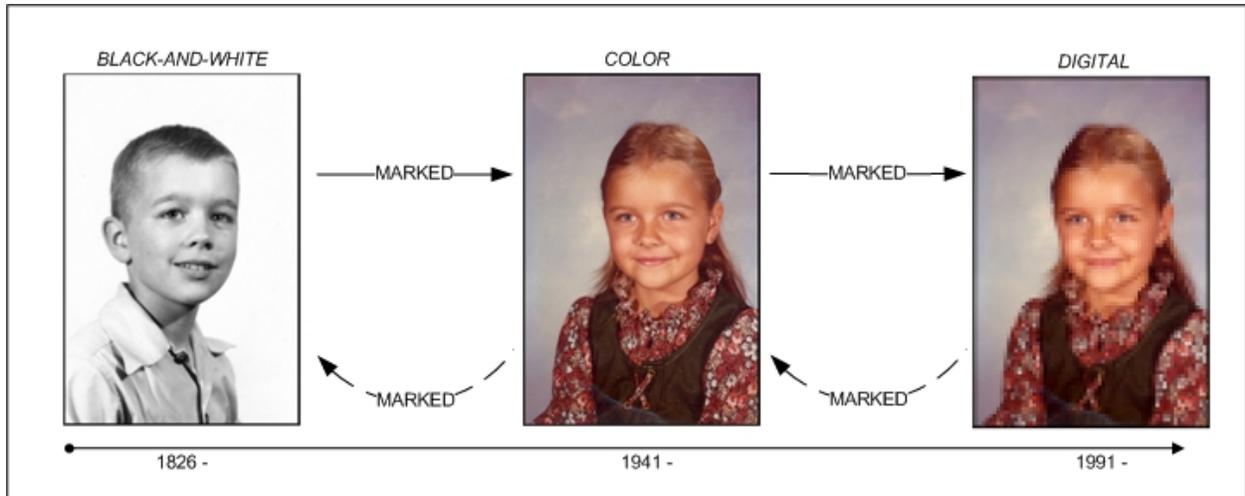


Figure 2: Figure 2: Marking the transition from analog color photography to digital photography

As shown in Figure 2, digital photography follows the same marking pattern as black-and-white and color photography. At its invention in 1991 the digital photograph immediately became marked as a new kind of photograph. As term-1 is *black-and-white* and term-2 is *color*, we can now include term-3, *digital*. This expanded use of the root term, *photograph*, is appropriate as long as the types of images are ‘drawn with light.’

The digital revolution is moving quickly to become the norm due to the rapid improvements in technology. Photographers no longer require the traditional training in darkroom or processing techniques in order to participate in the craft of photography, making it accessible to a wide audience. This ease of use is making the transition of digital as the unmarked object more quickly than did the transition from black-and-white to color. In this way analog color photography is likely to revert to the marked object more quickly than did black-and-white, but history will tell us this for certain within a few years. Further analysis of another

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body of literature such as used to discuss the transition from black-and-white to color could be done to distinguish this span of time.

### **The Changing Communities of Photographers**

The discussion thus far has been restricted to time and technology as related to photography, but it must be noted that as these things change, so too does the community of photographers. As each new photographic technology is unveiled it is first aimed at professionals in the field, and then as the technology and price is simplified it becomes available to the casual/hobby user. This professional-to-hobbyist transition was relatively long for analog photography when compared to digital photography.

The inception of analog photography had no pre-history in order to assist in its development. Until its invention all that had been observed was that light filtered through an aperture replicated the scene in front of it, the traditional *camera obscura* that was sometimes used to assist draftsmen and painters. Thus, photography was at first limited to the chemists committed to permanently fixing the scene that was the result of the light passing through the opening of the *camera obscura*. As the chemistries and technologies behind photography improved image professionals adopted photography as a money making venture. Over a period of years the technology behind photography improved from heavy glass plates to lightweight film, from thirty-pound cameras with tripods to simpler hand-held models. As these developments made things smaller and more affordable photography became accessible to the hobbyist.

The evolution to the digital photograph has the wealth of experience of analog photography behind it, in addition to the rapidly improving computerized technologies. The process of merging the knowledge about analog photography with the computer to produce the

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digital photograph occurred more quickly than the original invention of analog photography. As digital photography was unveiled to the public professional photographers were the first consumers of the new technology. As digital cameras became more standardized and less costly it became more attractive to the hobbyist. The span of time for the transition from professional to hobbyist was shorter with the digital camera than with the analog camera because Americans already understood the culture of photography and were therefore able to embrace the new technology with little transition time required. They were likely to have seen photographs, discussed pictures they had seen in magazines and newspapers, and perhaps even had film cameras in their homes.

In addition to digital photography building upon the known entity of analog photography it also has the advantage of hiding its technology, which makes it available to the casual user in a way that analog photography has not been able to equal. To use a digital camera one does not have to understand the entire process of traditional photography in order to make a photograph. It is therefore able to exist in the worlds of both artist and hobbyist, with neither having to be knowledgeable about the history of the technology in order to use it.

### **Implications of Photographic Culture Transition via Image Descriptions**

As cultural objects, photographs reflect a snapshot of a point in historical time. If the photograph is described when it is created, that description is indicative of the meaning it has to its culture at that time. As time advances, however, the image does not stay inexorably linked to that point in time. In this way, the meanings of photographs change as time advances. The implication of these changing meanings of photography is specifically related to how photographs—and by extension, other art objects such as paintings, prints, and slides—are cataloged and described in image databases.

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As demonstrated by the previous discussion of marking, what was historically important about color photographs has changed dramatically in a relatively narrow span of time. The photograph that may have been an important technical achievement at the time of its creation has a different purpose and meaning thirty years later. This use and description of images as having changing cultural meanings over time suggests that a bibliographic structure that allows for updates and changes over time is an appropriate consideration.

There are some inherent weaknesses with the way images are currently described in bibliographic databases. The obvious issue is that choosing specific descriptors--even from a controlled vocabulary--is subjective, and an image cataloger may respond differently to an image over time (Markey, 1984). Images have historically been indexed only once by one cataloger, however, and the indexer's choice of keyword assignment will determine the future retrieval possibilities of that image. In addition, a single image may serve a variety of purposes (art, visual resource, archives), though not one descriptive schema exists to address all possible purposes (Greenberg, 2001; Shatford, 1986).

A more robust model for image description may be to construct a system that allows updates over time in order to change the descriptions as aspects about those images change importance over time. In addition to the temporal changes of description an expert system would also embrace the variety of uses one image may provide. This type of model may be best suited for a collaborative effort, which would make the description process malleable instead of fixed, transparent rather than opaque. This type of public participation facilitates general distributed knowledge among organizations that had previously been isolated from each other (Jørgensen, 2004). In addition, information-sharing in the digital arena has the potential for profoundly impacting the 'scholarly information life cycle' (Wilensky, 2000).

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An existing program of such collaboration is championed in the Union Catalog of Art Images (UCAI), founded at the University of California, San Diego (Union Catalog of Art Images, 2002). The UCAI project has incorporated eight partner libraries, all of which share their digital images and associated descriptive text. The purpose of UCAI is to provide a working model that demonstrates the usefulness and practicality of shared image description. The long term implications of the UCAI project remain to be seen, such as if changing image descriptions over time is useful for patrons, if image catalogers will agree on when an image description should be changed to reflect its place in current culture, and if this effort is feasible over an extended period of time.

### **Summary**

An object is marked when it is out of the ordinary or unusual, unmarked when it is the norm. As discussed in this paper, there is evidence via the literature surrounding photography that the types of photography shift between the two modes (marked, unmarked) due to technological advances and temporal change. As a result, photographs act as markers of a culture at a specific time. Discussed here are 30 years of photographic history, in order to demonstrate that within this short time frame color photography advanced from the marked to unmarked object. The author also notes that the next transition is already taking place with the advent of the digital photograph.

That photographs and other art objects change meaning and have different importance over time means that the terms used to discuss and describe them will also change. Organizing these terms in a system that allows for alterations acknowledges the changing nature of artworks and seeks to keep them active and current for patrons. Constructing a model of image

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description that allows this flexibility will become increasingly important as the visual community seeks to share more of its images and textual descriptions.

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