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► **To cite this version:**

Damien Villers. What makes a good proverb? On the birth and propagation of proverbs. *Lexis. Journal in English Lexicology*, 2022, 19: Phraseology and Paremiology in English. hal-04667389

**HAL Id: hal-04667389**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04667389v1>**

Submitted on 4 Aug 2024

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# What makes a good proverb? On the birth and propagation of proverbs

DAMIEN VILLERS

## Résumés

English Français

In the present article, we examine the mechanisms of *proverbialisation* – the birth and propagation of proverbs – and the criteria that boost their chances of propagation and survival. Before tackling the main issues, we introduce the controversial notion of “proverbiality” and the terminological relativity it entails by establishing a scale of consensus for definition criteria in specialised literature. We then present memetics, or *memology*. This field, which studies the replication of cultural units, offers useful tools through the notions of “meme fitness” and “selection criteria” which may be adapted and transferred to paremiology in order to describe the qualities that help proverbs catch on and survive. In Section 3, a model for proverbialisation is introduced and the memetic framework is applied to describe the impact of the selection criteria on the specific stages of the process, through concrete examples of sayings that successfully caught on. In the final part, the selection criteria previously identified are applied to a list of candidates in order to appraise their chances of replication. The candidates under study are part of a recent attempt by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) to rewrite famous proverbs and idioms with the aim to make them “animal friendly”. Their proposals include *There is more than one way to peel a potato* instead of *There is more than one way to skin a cat*, or *Don't put the caboose before the engine* instead of *Don't put the cart before the horse*. The analysis reveals that despite a degree of creativity, several selection criteria remain obstacles to the propagation of these proverb candidates.

Le présent article a pour but d'examiner les mécanismes de la proverbialisation – la naissance et la propagation des proverbes – et les critères qui favorisent ce processus. Avant d'aborder les principales questions, la notion controversée de « proverbialité » est introduite, ainsi que la relativité terminologique qu'elle implique, permettant d'établir une échelle de consensus pour les critères de définition dans la littérature spécialisée. La deuxième section présente brièvement le domaine de la mémétique, qui étudie la réplication des unités culturelles. Bien que controversé, ce domaine offre des outils utiles à travers les notions de « *meme fitness* » (*aptitude des mèmes*) et de « critères de sélection », qui peuvent être adaptés et transférés à la parémiologie afin de décrire les qualités qui permettent aux proverbes de s'imposer et de survivre. Dans la partie 3, un modèle de proverbialisation est présenté et le cadre mémétique est appliqué pour décrire l'impact des critères de sélection sur les étapes spécifiques du processus, à travers des exemples concrets de proverbes qui ont réussi à passer en langue. Dans la dernière partie, les critères de sélection précédemment identifiés sont appliqués à une liste de candidats afin d'évaluer leurs chances de réplication. Les candidats étudiés font partie d'une campagne de l'association PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), ayant pour but de réécrire les proverbes et les expressions idiomatiques célèbres jugés trop violents envers les animaux. Parmi leurs propositions, figurent *There is more than one way to peel a potato* au lieu de *There is more than one way to skin a cat* ou *Don't put the caboose before the engine* au lieu de *Don't put the cart before the horse*. L'analyse révèle que malgré un certain degré de créativité, plusieurs critères de sélection restent des obstacles à la propagation de ces candidats proverbiaux.

## Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés :** phraséologie, parémiologie, proverbe, propagation, réplication, lexicalisation

**Keywords:** phraseology, paremiology, proverb, propagation, replication, lexicalisation

## Texte intégral

## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> Even if there are several more or less broad<sup>1</sup> conceptions of phraseology, there is a general consensus among scholars that proverbs form a special class among phraseological units. This special category has been the subject of a tremendous amount of studies and even has its dedicated field of study. Proverb studies, or *paremiology*, broach a very wide array of subjects. The most popular topics include, among others, the pragmatic functions of proverbs, their form and the way they vary in speech, their use in literary works, or their compilation into dictionaries. However, one of the most intriguing aspects of proverbs, their birth and propagation, is hardly ever tackled. Studying how they are born and how they catch on in a folk group or a language is certainly the most difficult task to undertake, even with the best corpora available. All folklore pioneers are in agreement on the matter. Trench [1863: 40] considers that their origins “lie beyond our vision, obscure and unknown”; Hulme [1902: 18] notes that “their parentage is enveloped in mystery” while Taylor [1934: 10] claims that finding their inventor “is often an idle task”. In his chapter on proverb origins, Mieder [2015: 29] points out that “it remains an especially vexing problem to ascertain the origin and age of proverbs”. A study by Villers & Mieder [2017] highlighted that even people who are famous for inventing them, such as Benjamin Franklin, are rarely the actual creators. Despite the difficulty, this article is entirely devoted to the birth of proverbs and their propagation. The former, which corresponds specifically to the early stages, will be referred to as *proverb genesis*, *proverbial birth* or *proverbialisation* while the more general phenomenon will be referred to as *proverb propagation* or, from a memetic angle, *proverb replication*. Unsurprisingly, describing the birth of proverbs greatly depends on the notion of “proverbiality”, and how one defines proverbs.



## 1. The notion of “proverbiality”

2 The definition of proverbs is a thorny and unresolved issue. The only real consensus on the matter is the absence of consensus, as summarised by Norrick [2015: 14]: “there is no single proverbiality and no single inclusive definition of the proverb”. Despite this hurdle, numerous attempts have been made. The world-leading paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder even notes: “We can almost state that there are more definition attempts than there are proverbs” (Mieder [1989: 13]). This situation can be explained by a host of factors: varying methods, approaches, needs, and goals among scholars who study proverbs, owing to the interdisciplinary nature of paremiology<sup>2</sup>. To keep stock of the myriad of approaches, Honeck [1997: 5] lists seven main proverbial “views” among experts and non-experts:

- *The subjective view*, based on personal feelings or intuition;
- *The formal view*, based on linguistic and semantic-logic features;
- *The religious view*, based on their moral message in religious texts;
- *The literary view*, based on their emotional or aesthetic value in prose or poetry;
- *The practical view*, based on real-life applications (e.g. psychology, advertising);
- *The cultural view*, based on sociocultural contexts and situations;
- *The cognitive view*, defended by the author, based on mental processes.

3 As observed by the author, some views are more “scientific” in nature. It is therefore easy to imagine that the need for a precise definition is not always high, even in the more specialised linguistic (formal) approach. Often, the term *proverb* is used in a loose manner, as an umbrella term, to include closely-related types that look like proverbs, such as maxims or aphorisms. This practice adds further confusion to an already complex task and is fruitless since such terms already exist: *sayings*, *paremias*, or, more recently<sup>3</sup>, *sapiential utterances*.

4 Other scholars have an overtly pessimistic approach and consider that defining proverbs is not only futile, but also impossible. Decades ago, the folklorist Archer Taylor [1962: 3] famously claimed:

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial.

5 Today, this bombshell has become proverbial among paremiologists and is still used as a starting point to many papers that tackle proverb definition. It also highlights the main impediment to proverb definition: the perception of proverbiality. To circumvent this obstacle, some scholars have cast aside the analytical approach and now use a definition methodology that relies heavily on perception. It is the case for instance with definitions based on the notion of prototypicality, defended by Norrick [2015: 14], where statements are considered proverbial if they contain a certain number of proverbial markers – i.e. markers considered prototypical in proverbs – such as metaphor, rhyme, or parallelism. It is also the case in folklore with the “emic” approach, where proverbs are defined according to the beliefs of the cultural communities in which they are in use. To present a picture of how proverbs are perceived by the general population, Wolfgang Mieder [2004: 3] conducted a survey on 55 non-specialists and summarised the findings as follows:

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.

6 These approaches have the merit of solving the infamous paradox that may be summarised as follows: why are proverbs so easy to recognise and yet so hard to define? However, they contain a significant flaw insofar as perception is mostly based on appearances. Several famous proverbs come to mind to warn us against such a methodology: *Appearances are deceptive*, *Looks can be deceitful*, *Don't judge a book by its cover*, *The clothes don't make the man*, and so on. The deceptive nature of such markers was highlighted in tests conducted by Arora [1984] and Villers [2014], where respondents were asked to assess the proverbiality of given utterances, eventually giving the highest proverbial ratings to the statements forged by the authors simply because they included rhymes or parallelism. Ultimately, perception-based definitions lead to a lack of stability in their results and, therefore, a lack of transferability. Besides, they fail to take into account essential characteristics, hence the necessity for an analytical and transdisciplinary approach.

7 The first step to achieve this is to review specialised literature. Several works have examined an important number of definition attempts: Whiting [1932], Honeck [1997], Villers [2014], or Bhuvaneshwar [2015]. Although they all reveal an absence of consensus and a tendency from authors to rely on their fields of expertise, a cross-analysis of all the definitions clearly reveals that some definition criteria are more often cited (frequency) and, more importantly<sup>4</sup>, more often accepted by the authors and incorporated into their own definitions (acceptance). This is probably why some authors prefer to consider proverbs in terms of *prototypicality*. However, this notion lacks a clear definition and is generally limited to the form and structure of proverbs, as argued above. The review of definition criteria in specialised literature reveals the following *scale of consensus*:

- *Criteria non-grata* (low frequency and acceptance): humour, ancientness, formal archaism;
- *Medium-frequency criteria with moderate acceptance*: truth, prescriptiveness;
- *High-frequency criteria with moderate acceptance*: metaphor and figurativeness, wisdom, concision, rhythmic traits, fixedness and “frozenness”;
- *Moderate-frequency criteria with high acceptance*: human activities (as opposed to weather superstitions), collective anonymity (forgotten author), semantic implication<sup>5</sup>;
- *Consensual criteria* (high frequency and acceptance): grammatical autonomy, generic meaning, currency (also known as “commonness”, “conventionality”, etc.).

8 In this scale, it seems that the most abstract or relative criteria like wisdom or concision are less successful. Since it is difficult to assess in a clear-cut manner whether a proverb is wise or not and since stable definitions should be based on a set of *obligatory features* rather than common features, the criterion is quite ineffective and descriptive at best. Conversely, the most accepted criteria are more functionally effective and make it possible to separate proverbs from other types of phraseological units: currency<sup>6</sup> is what separates them from personal maxims and spontaneous inventions while grammatical or “conversational” autonomy sets them apart from syntagmas such as *to blow a fuse*. Finally, generic meaning filters out expressions that do not contain generalisations but, rather, describe a specific situation like *That's another pair of shoes!*

9 Ultimately, proverb definition involves a certain degree of terminological relativity. To avoid misunderstandings, several methodological principles need to be respected, including a clear position on definition. In this article, the term *proverb* will be used to refer to a specific subtype of phraseological unit that includes the following obligatory features: currency in a folk group, grammatical autonomy, a generalising or “generic” message about human activities, and no specific author in the collective consciousness. Since proverbs belong to the broader category of *phraseological units*, the hypernym, along with its more modern counterpart *phraseme*, will occasionally be used to refer to proverbs. For the sake of variety and differentiation, the term *saying* will be used to refer to proverbs and sentence-type phrasemes with a generic meaning.



## 2. Memetics and its applicability to paremiology

10 Before describing the ingredients for a good proverb, it is essential to introduce the notion of *proverb fitness* and the field of memetics, from which it is adapted. Memetics, or memology, is the study of self-replicating cultural units, named *memes*. In this framework, memes are any type of information that can be transferred from the mind of one individual to another: beliefs, traditions, skills, expressions, and so forth. They have often been described as a “virus of the mind” (after Brodie [1996]) or a form of “thought contagion” (after Lynch [1996]). The field of memetics was sparked by Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene*, a 1976 work on natural selection and evolution where genes are described as a replicating machine. In the final chapter, the author claims that there exists another type of replicator, which is the cultural equivalent to genes. Both replicators, the gene and the meme, follow principles of natural selection, as illustrated by the Darwinian phrase “survival of the fittest”. In this view, both memes and genes compete for survival and only the fittest ones get to replicate. The field of memetics quickly became popular and reached its apex in the 1990s when it was established as a science with the creation of the online *Journal of Memetics* in 1997 and the success of Susan Blackmore’s *The Meme Machine* in 1999, which described the potential of the field, at the crossroads of psychology, biology, and anthropology.

11 After initial enthusiasm and a profusion of works on the topic, the memetic machine started to jam. Among the main sticking points was the lack of a clear definition for the concept of meme, which triggered the appearance of rival schools: the so-called “internalists” (Lynch [1996], Brodie [1996], Aunger [2002]) claimed the meme was a physical phenomenon inside the brain while the “externalists” considered it was an abstract phenomenon (Blackmore [1999]) or observable behaviours (Benzon [1996], Gatherer [1998]). Others argued in favour of a hybrid stance (Wilkins [1999]) but the debate eventually proved counterproductive and no real breakthrough was achieved. Aunger [2002: 21] even claimed that “no one knows what a meme is. Certainly, the existence of one has yet to be demonstrated”. Memetics also came under heavy criticism for its lack of empirical results (Hull [2001], Edmonds [2002, 2005]). The field progressively declined and became moribund: the online *Journal of Memetics* was discontinued, pioneers turned to other theories, and the word *meme* progressively disappeared from studies on cultural transmission and evolutionary psychology. Eventually, the concept of “meme” was discarded as an inconclusive “analogy” for the gene (Edmonds [2005]). However, a few authors continued to work on the concept and achieved major improvements: a methodology to empirically test memetic predictions was put forward by Chielens & Heylighen [2005] and the proof that memes can be measured in the nervous system thanks to neural imaging was brought by McNamara [2011]. Since its official year of death (2005), memetics has been applied successfully to fields such as Internet hoaxes (Chielens & Heylighen [2005]), poetry and metrical patterns (Drout [2006]), marketing and patented trademarks (Johnson [2012]), phraseology (Villers [2017, 2018]), and many others.

12 The most significant contribution to the transferability of memetics to other fields was made by Heylighen [1993, 1997, 1998]. He identified four main stages in the replication of memes: assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission. The first one is the vital condition for a meme to “infect” a host: it needs to be noticed, understood and accepted. It then needs to be stored in memory before being conveyed in speech by becoming a concrete signal (sound, ink, pixels) to reach a new host. The process as a whole is very selective; only the most efficient memes will successfully pass all the stages, whereas the others will fail to replicate. The capacity to survive and complete this cycle is called *meme fitness* and greatly depends on qualities that are labelled *selection criteria*, as an echo to Darwin’s theory of evolution. These criteria improve the chances of survival – or replication rate – of memes, as is the case with the survival-of-the-fittest principle that applies to animal species. Several criteria have been empirically tested by researchers while others have only been hypothesised by Heylighen [1993, 1997, 1998]. Here is the updated list of selection criteria presented in Heylighen & Chielens [2009]:

- Objective (meme-focused) criteria: distinctiveness, invariance (general validity), evidence (reliability of information);
- Subjective (host-focused) criteria: utility, affectivity (emotional response), coherence (compatibility with host’s beliefs), simplicity, novelty, repetition;
- Inter-subjective criteria: publicity, formality, expressivity (ease of expression), authority, conformity (confirmed by a group), collective utility.

13 This revised classification removed criteria such as controllability (adaptation to the subject’s actions) or intolerance and proselytism, which concern memes that seek to eliminate other memes or “urge” the host to replicate them, as can be the case with religion or ideologies. These criteria are not relevant to proverbs, which do not exhibit such self-centred “behaviour”, and will indeed be cast aside. Other criteria in this classification would be redundant in the case of proverbs: expressivity (how easy it is to utter a proverb) greatly depends on simplicity (brevity), making it possible to delete or merge these categories. As for evidence (reliability of information), it is very close to “invariance”, which refers – ambiguously<sup>7</sup> – to the degree of truth contained in the meme / proverb. Finally, conformity and collective utility are very similar so the latter could be cast aside and the former incorporated into authority, since group confirmation is a form of authority in the case of proverbs. As for the term “conformity”, it would be more convenient to keep it to refer to the compatibility between the host’s beliefs and the proverbial message, thus encompassing affectivity and coherence. Even after removing or adapting some of these criteria, something still seems to be missing.

14 To be truly applicable to paremiology, selection criteria need to take into account the fact that proverbs are deeply rooted in oral tradition and represent a form of expression, of *elocutio*; they are consequently strengthened by the qualities or virtues (*virtutes elocutionis*) described by classical rhetoric: *puritas* (grammatical precision), *perspicuitas* (clarity), *ornatus* (elegance), *aptum* (situational relevance). These four virtues of style are not entirely represented in the selection criteria described by the memetic approach. While *perspicuitas* is clearly the equivalent of formality and simplicity, the other three virtues are only indirectly included: *puritas* might correspond to invariance or conformity and *aptum* could be a more appropriate concept for “evidence”. Finally, *ornatus* does not seem to be taken into account despite its key importance in the case of proverbs and needs to be added to the list<sup>8</sup> of relevant criteria.

15 After additional adjustments, it is safe to say that phrasemes follow the same principles as those described by the memetic approach: only the fittest candidates catch on and enter the *mental lexicon* of human hosts, allowing them to propagate, whereas the unfit candidates are ignored and never gain currency. Even established phrasemes need to perpetuate the replication cycle to avoid becoming obsolete; those that outlive their usefulness or can’t keep up with the times (outdated image or syntax) fall out of use and only survive in dictionaries. On this account, the memetic approach can be deemed productive in the description of proverb replication. It also makes it possible to answer the question in the title: a good proverb is a proverb that can replicate successfully.

## 3. The birth and propagation of proverbs

### 3.1. A review of existing research



16 Establishing the origins of a specific proverb is a nearly impossible and often idle task, as mentioned in the introduction: the older it is, the more obscure its origins. This, in turn, makes proverb genesis an even more obscure matter. It is therefore no wonder that very little can be found in specialised literature. Scholars who have commented on the process only note two main stages: the act of verbal creation followed by general acceptance:

New experiences of life are forming [...] and some of the happiest of these will receive the stamp of general allowance. [Trench 1861: 30]

[There is] concrete formation by one individual in response to some set of circumstances [is followed by] acceptance by the people at large [Firth 1926: 263]

Every proverb has been created by an individual and set in circulation by him, but a man's aphorism or witty saying does not become a proverb until it has been accepted by popular tradition. [Taylor 1934: 10]

Proverbialisation includes two stages: first, the formula imposes itself as a proverb and then it remains in usage as such. [Schapira 2000: 84]

[Proverbs] are always coined by an individual whether intentionally or unintentionally. If the statement contains an element of truth or wisdom, and if it exhibits one or more proverbial markers [...], it might 'catch on' and be used first in a small family circle, and subsequently in a village, a city, a region, a country, a continent, and eventually the world. [Mieder 2015: 31]

Formation of the proverb [is followed by] individual-collective-contextual conjunction and standardization [and then by] transmission, retention, and perpetuation. [Bhuvanewar 2015: 26]

17 Rather than two real stages in proverb genesis, the first three remarks seem to only describe the initial act of creation and the end of the process when a formula has obtained the proverbial status. As for Schapira, she does not describe proverbial birth but, rather, proverbial *replication*, which is a cycle that continues even after the candidate has met the minimum currency requirement to be considered a proverb. Mieder, however, gives a first hint of what happens between the initial act of creation and the end of the process. The model he seems to describe is a unilateral propagation, in the manner of a fire that spreads to the surrounding areas. Though it may be valid for local or regional sayings, Villers [2015, 2016] demonstrated<sup>9</sup> that a multilateral model – where hosts are “infected” remotely and simultaneously in a high number of different locations – is a more accurate model for widespread proverbs. From an epidemiological point of view, the propagation pattern of sayings or memes would be described as *mixed diffusion* as it can combine several transmission models: expansion diffusion (localised), network diffusion (remotely or via social networks), contagious diffusion (direct contact), and relocation diffusion (migration of the source).

18 The last model, devised by Bhuvanewar [2015], is a more technical condensate of the previous ones: it contains the two main stages (creation and acceptance), but it also mentions the continued cycle of “perpetuation”. Although the third stage is not actually subsequent but simultaneous to the second one, the model offers a very interesting subdivision of propagation. It highlights three essential stages, which are reminiscent<sup>10</sup> of the memetic approach: hearing a proverb, storing it in memory, and using the said proverb to perpetuate it.

19 Since proverbialisation is a type of *lexicalisation*, it is only natural to look for clues in works on this topic. Bauer [1983: 45] describes this progressive and diachronic process and separates it into three distinct stages:

1. a new complex word is coined by a speaker/writer on the spur of the moment to cover some immediate need;
2. the nonce formation starts to be accepted by other speakers as a known lexical item;
3. it takes a new form by departing from productive rules.

20 The first two steps are the actual formation and the resulting general acceptance and do not offer more detail than the folkloristic approach. The third one is not entirely applicable to phrasemes, especially proverbs. However, it highlights an important factor: phrasemes may not only vary synchronically (in speech) but also diachronically; their form may evolve with time, including in the early stages of proverb genesis. Other notions could be of interest, such as *institutionalization* (a more socio-cultural approach to lexicalisation) or *idiomatization*, which implies semantic changes (Lipka, Handl & Falkner [2004]). However, studies on these concepts do not offer a more detailed description of their stages. The same goes for notions such as *phraseologization*. The authors who study this concept often focus on semantic aspects, as is the case with Sánchez López [2015], who divides the process into four stages:

1. free word combination;
2. restricted word combination;
3. phraseological unit with figurative meaning;
4. frozen phraseological unit.

21 Although she offers a detailed account, these stages do not describe a diachronic process but, rather, a scale of degrees regarding the frozenness or semantic opacity of phrasemes. The author admits that it is actually based on a classification of phraseological units by Ruiz Gurillo [1997]. As a result, Heylighen's stages remain the most relevant to describe proverb genesis.

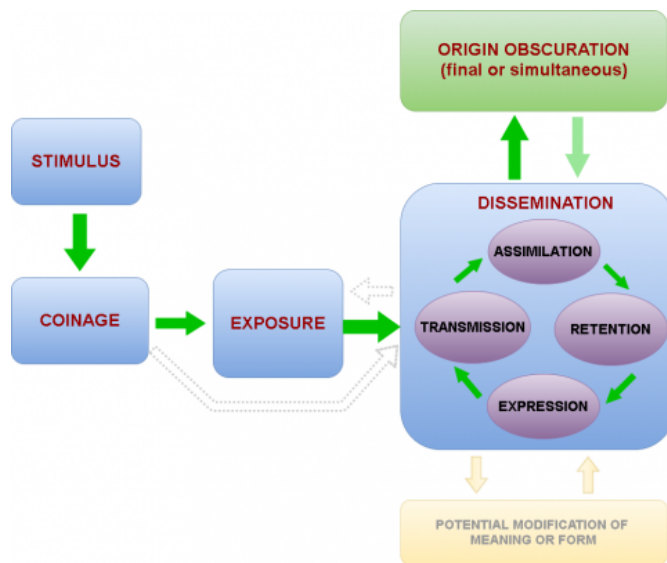
## 3.2. A model for proverb genesis

22 To bypass the difficulty of identifying proverb origins, the best solution is to study recent proverbs in large corpora. This task was undertaken in Villers [2015] in order to consolidate a model proposed in Villers [2014]. This model included four steps and was further completed in Villers [2018] to include the memetic approach defended by Heylighen [1993, 1997, 1998]. It may be summarised as follows:

Figure 1. The stages of proverb genesis and proverb replication







23 In a nutshell, a specific situation (stimulus) triggers the coinage of a phrase which in turn – or sometimes simultaneously – is exposed on a large scale to a sufficient number of hosts (exposure) with the help of a mass propagating agent (a film, a website, a book, etc.). The dissemination phase then really<sup>11</sup> begins and the speakers perpetuate the cycle by repeating and using the phrase, acting as micro-propagating agents. In order to propagate, the phrase or proverb needs to be noticed, understood and accepted (assimilation). Only then can it be stored in memory (retention) and later used (expression) through a medium such as voice, ink, or an electronic signal (transmission). In order to receive the label of “proverb”, the phrase needs to complete a final phase where its creator is progressively forgotten by the folk group where it has currency (origin obscuration). Several elements may vary during the process, including its speed or the number of mass propagation agents. The standard form or meaning of a phrase may also vary<sup>12</sup> over time.

24 Several concrete examples of proverb genesis were described in Villers [2015]. Among them was, for instance, *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas*. The saying was coined in 2002 by the marketing agency R&R Partners in a slightly different form, *What happens here, stays here*, based on the pre-existing pattern *What happens in X stays in X* and on observations about the city of Las Vegas and what tourists usually seek when they visit it. In 2003, it was used as a slogan to promote the city in a series of TV advertisements which became the primary propagating agent, thus reaching a very wide audience of potential hosts. The saying benefited from other substantial mass propagation agents as it was almost immediately used in articles by the *New York Times* and was also uttered the next year in several TV programmes (the 76<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards in 2004, *Saturday Night Live*, or Jay Leno’s *Tonight Show*). It was even used as the title for a 2008 romantic comedy and was later propelled to international fame with the 2009 comedy *The Hangover*. A quick look at online corpora such as COCA or Google Books confirms that the saying started being used in 2003, simultaneously to the advertising campaign for Las Vegas. Its propagation was in fact extremely quick and even takes the form of a sharp peak on Google Books’ n-gram viewer.

25 Despite a very quick spread, the phrase did not gain its proverbial label immediately. It was initially used as a quotation of the advertisements. Corpora such as the *New York Times* archives or COCA reveal that until 2005, it was very often referred to as a “slogan”. Then followed a transition period during which the phrase progressively started being referred to as a “saying” or a “code”. From 2007, it was nearly always introduced as a “general rule” or with the proverbial formula “they say”. Moreover, the phrase progressively gained a metaphorical dimension as its application was no longer limited to the city of Las Vegas, which became a metaphor for any place of excess. This semantic broadening was a major step to establish the formula as a bona fide proverb. The phrase was added to the *Urban Dictionary*<sup>13</sup> in 2006 and included in the first edition of the *Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (Mieder et al. [2012]). On this account, the duration of its proverb genesis can be estimated to be somewhere between a few days and up to roughly four years, depending on whether origin obscuration is considered a compulsory criterion to receive the proverbial label.

### 3.3. Proverb fitness and propagation boosters

26 Human hosts are far from being perfect carriers or vehicles. The vast majority of those exposed to a new expression will either reject or forget it, thus failing to be “infected”. This makes proverb genesis a very difficult task with a low rate of success. It may, however, be facilitated by several factors or qualities that make proverbs “fitter”. These propagation boosters are named “selection criteria” in the memetic approach introduced earlier. After a few adjustments (cf. Section 2), it is possible to apply them to proverbs in the following manner:

- *Distinctiveness*: how different the proverb is from other “competitors”;
- *Ornatus*: the aesthetic or stylistic appeal of the proverb;
- *Veracity*: the degree of truth contained in the proverb;
- *Conformity*: the compatibility of the message with the host’s beliefs / emotions;
- *Simplicity*: the clarity of the proverb and its message;
- *Expressivity*: how easily and quickly the proverb can be uttered;
- *Novelty*: the degree of modernity and perceived “freshness” of the proverb;
- *Utility*: the pragmatic potential of the proverb, its usefulness;
- *Aptness*: how relevantly the proverb is used in context;
- *Publicity*: the reach of the proverb, and the number of hosts in contact with it;
- *Repetition*: repeated contact of the host with the proverb;
- *Authority*: the weight and prestige added by the creator or user.

27 The first criterion, *distinctiveness*, is a formal one. If the form of a proverb candidate is too similar to that of an existing proverb, it will be deemed unoriginal and its replication rate will drop. As a result, one of the formulas in direct competition may become obsolete or lose momentum. It is precisely what happened to *Time is precious*, which was superseded by the more poetic *Time is of the essence* and the more mercantile *Time is Money*. But the most important part for a saying is to stand out from regular speech, which brings us to the criterion of *ornatus*, a pillar of classical rhetoric. The elegance or aesthetic appeal of a proverb is generally achieved with stylistic or poetic features, which include rhyme, parallelism, metaphor, and more. It is interesting to note that while they abound in ancient or classical proverbs, they are also very common in more modern ones,



like *The odds are good but the goods are odd* or *You snooze, you lose*. These features are generally referred to as “proverbial markers” (Mac Coinnigh [2015]), “stylistic features” (Mieder [2004]), or “poetic features” (Norrick [2015]). They act on the genesis process at several levels:

- during the assimilation stage, they act as attention grabbers and make the proverb easier to notice;
- during the retention stage, they make the proverb easier to memorise;
- during the expression stage, they make the proverb more appealing than another form of speech.

28 *Veracity* and *conformity* form a closely related pair. The former is the degree of truth – subjective, *a priori*, universal – contained in the proverb while the latter is the compatibility of the proverbial message with the host’s beliefs. Theoretically, a phraseme that contains a message with a high degree of truth is more likely to be accepted (assimilation phase) and used as an argument (expression phase). However, human beings are very prone to cognitive and emotional biases. This makes conformity much more important than veracity: as long as the proverb supports the host’s beliefs, they will accept and repeat it even if it is scientifically inaccurate (*Lightning never strikes twice in the same place*), exaggerated (*Where there’s a will, there’s a way*), or completely false (*Two of a trade never agree*). This is why slanderous sayings such as *All cops are bastards* can successfully propagate. In the case of metaphorical utterances, conformity implies that the host has to adhere not only to the figurative meaning but also to the metaphor or wording used to express it. For example, a man may believe that friends are more important than flirts but may be unwilling to use *Bros before hoes* because of its derogatory depiction of women or the vulgar slang. The same could be said of the female equivalent, *Chicks before dicks*. In other words, if the proverb triggers a negative emotional response from the host, it is more likely to be rejected. This makes affectivity an important component of conformity.

29 Two other vital qualities are *simplicity* and *expressivity*. Simplicity implies that a proverb needs to be semantically deducible – whether its meaning is compositional or figurative – or it will simply not be understood, thus failing to pass the assimilation phase. As for expressivity, it entails that a proverb needs to be easy to utter. This implies the absence of words that are difficult to pronounce as well as relative brevity. This requirement is confirmed by the average length of popular proverbs. Mieder [2004: 7] claims that it is about 7 words while Villers [2014: 223] calculated it is 6.01 words, based on a corpus of 300 high-frequency proverbs in the English language. Brevity, an essential component of both criteria, facilitates all the stages of dissemination:

- during the assimilation phase, short sentences are easier to parse from a cognitive point of view;
- during the retention stage, short proverbs are easier to remember;
- during the expression stage, short proverbs can be used more quickly;
- during the transmission stage, shorter utterances or messages are less likely to bore or put off addressees or readers.

It is therefore no surprise that *Opposites attract* or *Shit happens* always rank among the most frequent proverbs.

30 In the constant race to be “in” and keep up with the times, *novelty* affects even phrasemes. In a similar manner to the craze over new smartphones or new fast-casual vegan restaurants, new proverbs – or proverbs that look modern – are more appealing to hosts that are susceptible to such considerations; they are consequently more bound to accept them (assimilation phase) or use them (expression phase). But in the case of older proverbs, novelty gives room to the more important notion of *topicality*: if some elements – such as its theme or its form – are too archaic or no longer relevant, the phraseme is likely to become obsolete and fall out of use. This happened with *Gluttony kills more than the sword* or *Garlic makes a man wink, drink and stink* because the way of life they reflect has disappeared. It is thus important for a proverb to “adapt and survive” by updating its outdated components. *First come, first served* is a great example of such a phenomenon. Through centuries, it evolved considerably from its 15th-century form *Who comyth fyrst to the mylle, fyrst must grynd*. By the 17th century, it had changed into *First come to the mill, first grinde* after shedding its then outdated syntax and spelling. Progressively, the outdated lexical elements – relating to wheat grinding – were replaced or deleted.

31 One of the most important qualities required in a proverb is usefulness, or *utility*. It is the most influential factor in the expression phase since a host will only be able to use a proverb if it fits a precise situation. This criterion is not to be confused with veracity: a proverb can be undeniably true and yet not very useful in “normal” everyday situations like *Dead men tell no tales* or *When Wall Street sneezes, the world catches a cold*. Proverbs with low utility and low veracity are doomed to become obsolete, as is the case with *Three (re)moves are as bad as a fire*. In order to be applicable to the highest number of situations, they need to deal with common feelings or situations (e.g. *Love is blind*) and will benefit even more from a surface structure with a high degree of hypernymy<sup>14</sup> and a low degree of overt prescriptiveness. A good example for this is *You reap what you sow*: not only is “you” very generic and inclusive, but “sowing” concerns good and bad things alike. More importantly, its surface structure is not prescriptive, which means the proverb can be used to describe a situation or pass a judgment onto someone (criticise, congratulate, etc.) but also convey prescription indirectly (issue a warning or command a course of action). In a nutshell, its polysemy and polyfunctionality greatly increase its usefulness and its chances to propagate. Although less decisive, *aptness* is closely connected to utility. However useful a saying may be, if it is used inappropriately in a specific context, the addressee or reader will find it more difficult to understand or accept it (assimilation phase). Thus, proper usage is a complement to utility, especially if the proverb is not semantically transparent.

32 From a quantitative point of view, *publicity* and *repetition* are the key criteria. In order to propagate successfully, a proverb needs to be in contact with as many hosts as possible. To do so, it relies heavily on the number of mass<sup>15</sup> propagation agents (exposure and dissemination phases). In the pre-computer era, the main agents of mass propagation were the Bible and the translations of *Adagia*, compiled by Erasmus. This explains the existence of European proverbs (cf. Paczolay [1997]) which are sometimes present in more than forty languages. In our digital era, information travels faster but competition is tougher for proverb candidates, hence the vital need for an optimal “pool” of hosts. The propagation of a proverb can be measured in several ways: online corpora can be used to quantify usage while *Google Trends*, an analytical tool used mostly in marketing, can be used to measure exposure through online searches. Repetition is another important facilitator: the more a host hears or reads a proverb, the more likely he or she is to notice it (assimilation phase) and remember it (retention phase).

33 These quantitative factors are directly connected to a more qualitative one, *authority*. A host-speaker is more inclined to accept a phraseme (assimilation phase) if the person using it is eminent or trusted. In the early stages of the genesis process, the “aura” of the proverb’s creator / source has a very strong impact on the type of folk group the proverb will reach. For instance, *The cake is a lie* (meaning roughly that promises are deceptive) was coined in a popular 2007 video game – *Portal* – and propagated very quickly on the Internet among the gaming community but has not yet been able to penetrate the general population (cf. Villers [2018]). This becomes apparent with its only 14 hits on COCA, all of which are from web sites. Conversely, *Haters gonna hate*, which came to life as an animated image drawn by a cartoon designer and then posted on a forum in 2009, is largely limited to the Internet and social networks – where “haters” lurk – despite being widespread (777 hits on Sketch Engine’s EW). In this sense, authority may be seen as a double-edged sword: it sets and increases the scope of a proverb candidate but it can also narrow it. If the known creator or source of a saying is too famous, it may even block or delay the origin obscuration stage, turning the saying into a famous quotation, such as this line from *Forrest Gump*: “Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get”, which is often used along with a reference to the film in the results from corpora such as COCA or EW. Very often, the known creator is in fact the main propagating agent; many quotations are



wrongly attributed to Shakespeare or Benjamin Franklin<sup>16</sup> for example but they still boost the genesis process by providing extensive publicity (exposure phase). If time successfully obscures the origin – known or real – of a saying, another type of authority progressively builds up: the weight of the collective voice. If a proverb corresponds to a doxa, a host-speaker is more likely to accept it (assimilation phase) but is also more bound to use it to add weight to his argumentation (expression phase).

34 Although it is impossible to quantify the exact weight of each criterion in the genesis process, it is possible to distinguish between criteria that concern intrinsic qualities of proverbs (distinctiveness, ornatus, veracity, simplicity, utility) and those that focus on the host’s point of view (conformity, novelty, aptness, expressivity, authority). As for publicity and repetition, they are the quantitative factors that binds the meme to the hosts. From another angle, it is possible to say that selection criteria influence the birth of proverbs in several ways: some improve the success rate of their replication, others increase the total number or “pool” of potential hosts, or determine the type of group they will affect. While their presence facilitates the genesis process, it is important to note that their absence can complicate or block it.

## 4. Evaluation of PETA’s proverb candidates

35 The model put forward to describe proverb genesis and the propagation boosters identified make it possible to devise qualitative predictions on proverb candidates. In 2018, the animal rights organisation PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) published a list of “animal-friendly idioms” with the aim to replace well-known phrases that “condone violence toward animals and perpetuate speciesism, a human-supremacist worldview<sup>17</sup>”. This list of phrasemes, which was updated in January 2020, includes a majority of idioms and a few famous proverbs, which will be the focal point in this part. For the sake of information, their frequency<sup>18</sup> on major online corpora was also added (Google Books<sup>19</sup>, Sketch Engine’s English Web 2020, and News On the Web). Here is the sample selected for this study, along with PETA’s proposed replacements:

Table 1. Proverbs revised by PETA

	Existing proverb	Replacement proposed by PETA
1	A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush (GB 64,000 / EW 1,838 / NOW 418)	An ace in the hand is worth two in the deck (GB 92 / EW 0 / NOW 3)
2	You can’t teach an old dog new tricks (GB 39,500 / EW 1,477 / NOW 387)	You can’t teach an old clown new tricks (GB 1 / EW 0 / NOW 0)
3	You catch more flies with honey (GB 9,070 / EW 599 / NOW 193)	You befriend more flies with molasses (GB 0 / EW 0 / NOW 0)
4	Don’t cry over spilt milk (GB 45,400 / EW 1,296 / NOW 468)	Don’t cry over burnt toast (GB 2 / EW 0 / NOW 1)
5	Curiosity killed the cat (GB 32,600 / EW 974 / NOW 142)	Mind your own business (GB 243,000 / EW 4,273 / NOW 1,027)
6	Don’t count your chickens before they hatch (GB 48,000 / EW 974 / NOW 558)	Don’t count your chips before they’re cashed (GB 0 / EW 0 / NOW 0)
7	Every dog has its day (GB 6,810 / EW 340 / NOW 237)	Every dog has to play (GB 4 / EW 0 / NOW 0)
8	There’s more than one way to skin a cat (GB 15,400 / EW 1,012 / NOW 236)	There’s more than one way to peel a potato (GB 147 / EW 1 / NOW 6)
9	Don’t put all your eggs in one basket (GB 28,500 / EW 6,492 / NOW 3,820)	Don’t put all your berries in one bowl (GB 6 / EW 0 / NOW 4)
10	Don’t put the cart before the horse (GB 77,300 / EW 3,851 / NOW 2,206)	Don’t put the caboose before the engine (GB 2 / EW 2 / NOW 0)
11	The world is your oyster (GB 12,100 / EW 1,495 / NOW 611)	The world is your oyster mushroom (GB 204 / EW 1 / NOW 0)

36 Several preliminary remarks are in order. Firstly, the targeted phrasemes do not necessarily contain overt animal violence and even farming or eating animal products is seen as a form of abuse. Secondly, nearly all of the revised proverbs – except 1, 5, and 11 – appear to be new creations by PETA, i.e. neologisms. Thirdly, the proposed modifications – with the exception of 5 – are based on the surface structure of the incriminated proverbs. The main modifying mechanisms are:

- substitution of a single word to redirect the “violence” toward a non-animal subject: 2;
- substitution of several words to create a new metaphor: 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10;
- substitution with another, well-known phraseme: 5;
- addition of a word: 11.

37 From an analytical point of view, it may seem problematic to refer to neologistic alterations as “proverbs”. In paremiology, the result of such modifications is often referred to as “anti-proverb” or “twisted proverb”, interchangeably (Mieder & Litovkina [1999], Mieder [2004], Litovkina [2015]). Finally, it is clear that the proposed modifications have not yet “caught on” among the general population since their frequency in online corpora is very low. This does not mean that PETA’s endeavour is a failure since less than three years have passed and the process may still be triggered in the future. But this offers us a unique opportunity to evaluate the fitness of these proverb candidates and their chances to enter general parlance.

38 The most important factor here is that PETA’s modifications – except in number 5 – are based on the surface structure of the incriminated proverbs, which means that potential hosts will immediately think of the standard version when they hear the new one. In terms of distinctiveness, this similarity is problematic and means that the updated proverbs will be in direct competition with their well-established counterparts. From the very start, PETA’s candidates start with a serious handicap in all stages of the process. Furthermore, this close proximity in form and meaning entails a low degree of utility: the new versions are not particularly useful since they offer tools that are very similar, making them redundant. Even if aptness is a criterion that needs to be studied in specific contexts, it is still possible to note that applying PETA’s suggested substitutions may create inappropriate usages or tensions, for instance with the overt prescriptiveness and thus reduced polyfunctionality of *Mind your own business*. Similarly, “Every dog has to play” (number 7) evokes a necessity while the original proverb concerns the





possibility of good luck. If one wanted to reassure an unlucky friend with this revised version, it could lead to awkward moments.

- 39 Another obstacle may very well be the organisation itself, which has a rather controversial image despite its noble cause. Over the years, it has made the front pages<sup>20</sup> mostly for negative reasons: shock campaigns involving recurring female nudity, frequent recourse to euthanasia in its shelters, divisive statements on pet owners, risky comparisons (for instance with the “Holocaust in your plate” campaign), fake videos, and even misinformation in some of its advertisements (for example autism and its alleged connection to dairy products). If we consider the authority criterion, this is problematic: while PETA’s aura will be a significant boost for its members and advocates, it will probably be a deterrent to the general public, making the revised proverbs more difficult to accept (assimilation phase) and use (expression phase).
- 40 Conformity entails the same paradox as authority. It is greatly boosted among hosts who share PETA’s beliefs about animal abuse, especially with number 5 or 8, which may offend a large number of people. However, conformity is unimproved for an even greater number of people who may consider that teaching tricks to dogs (2), drinking milk (4) or raising chickens (6 and 9) is hardly a form of abuse. Suggesting that these actions are abuse may, on the contrary, trigger a negative self-preserving emotional response in a large number of hosts. The same goes for example 11, which has vegan inspirations. Besides, the use of some metaphors may seem inappropriate for children (gambling in 6), counter-intuitive (9), or obscure (“caboose<sup>21</sup>” in 10). In summary, the degree of conformity with the beliefs of the general public is very low for most examples and will constitute one of the main obstacles, even among hosts who do not have a negative image of PETA.
- 41 The results from online corpora clearly show that the modified proverbs have not yet caught on, as mentioned above. This means that they have a low degree of publicity and repetition among the general population. They had very limited coverage in the press and were mentioned in several TV shows but mostly with the intent to mock or criticise them. A contextual analysis of the results in online corpora such as NOW or EW confirms that the vast majority of occurrences are comments or debates on the revised versions, not actual usage, except for three examples: 1, which has been used among poker players and magicians since at least 1882; candidate 5, which is a well-known proverb / phrase<sup>22</sup>; and 11, which is already in circulation in the vegan community where it originated in 2014. Despite this very low publicity, the emergence of a mass propagation agent cannot be ruled out at this point in time. The prospects for these two selection criteria may therefore evolve, especially if the authority and conformity factors evolve.
- 42 Naturally, other criteria offer more favourable odds. Overall, the degree of veracity is as high for the revised versions as it is for the standard ones since they contain messages that are generally true. The same goes for their expressivity, which is as high. The only real exceptions could be 3, 8, 10 and 11 with the addition of two syllables, making them longer to utter. This difference may seem inconsequential but since the new versions are in direct competition with their very similar models, it could prove decisive. In terms of simplicity, PETA’s candidates are more or less as easy to understand and process, with the exception of the more technical example 10. It is even improved for example 5 with the more explicit *Mind your own business*. In terms of aesthetic appeal or *ornatus*, the revised versions generally display a degree of fitness that is equivalent to their models: not only do they imitate their structures (the parallelism or binary oppositions), they also reproduce the register of language and the alliterations (like in 6 with “chips” and “cashed”, or in 8 with “peel a potato”). On a more positive note, PETA’s candidates benefit from the novelty factor, even if it is very limited in the case of proverbs that only modify a word (such as candidate 2).
- 43 In a nutshell, even though the presence of several boosters seems to depict favourable odds with an increased or equivalent degree of fitness (novelty, veracity, expressivity, simplicity, *ornatus*), the more influential selection criteria are so deficient in PETA’s candidates that they prove to be handicaps (distinctiveness, utility, publicity, repetition) and even major obstacles to replication (conformity, authority). While it is very unlikely that any of these revised versions will ever supersede the standard one, it is possible to see some of them become variants in smaller folk groups – 1, 4 and 8 being the fittest<sup>23</sup> candidates. Moreover, PETA’s objective is not on the short term but on the long term; it starts with children, hence their incentives are aimed at teachers to use animal-friendly idioms for “classroom fun” (peta.org).

## Conclusion

- 44 To spell out what a *good* proverb is, two keystones were used. First, the definition of proverbs and the methodology to define them; secondly, the memetic approach and the concept of *meme fitness*. After a comprehensive review that allowed us to map the relativity of proverbiality, the controversial field of memetics was introduced in order to appraise its applicability to paremiology. Despite unsettling aspects, it was demonstrated that memetics should not be buried as it offers extremely useful tools that are more effective than those available in linguistics or rhetoric when it comes to describing the birth and propagation of proverbs. These two keystones made it possible to identify twelve criteria that are found in “good” proverbs and therefore facilitate their genesis and replication at several levels. In order to test the qualitative predictions offered by this framework, several proverb candidates revised by PETA were assessed. The results indicate very low chances of success for most candidates but more importantly, several criteria such as publicity, conformity, or authority were identified as the main obstacles. More research and diachronic data is required to confirm whether these factors will retain a high impact over time. Designing empirical tests to evaluate the weight of each criterion would be a fascinating challenge, but in addition to the difficulty of this task, one cannot help but wonder if the results would prove to be worth the undertaking.

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## Notes

1 Traditionally, it includes units that are lexicalised (reproducible) and composed of at least two words (Cowie [1994: 3168]; Gläser [1998: 125], etc.). More recently, authors have argued in favour of a broader conception, in order to include patterns (Legallois & Tutin [2013]) and even single "polylexemic" words (Mel'čuk [2015: 55]).

2 Unsurprisingly, this term can be defined in several ways. Some scholars reduce it to the study of proverbs but it generally includes closely-related sayings such as aphorisms, maxims, twisted proverbs, etc. To avoid confusion, some scholars have argued in favour of the term *proverbology* (Bhuvaneshwar [2015]) while others prefer *proverb studies* (Mieder [2004]).

3 While these terms are highly synonymous and often used interchangeably to refer to sentence-type phrasemes with a generic meaning, it is worth noting that the last two are specialized terms while *saying* is a non-specialized one, meaning it is more likely to be used in a loose manner.

4 For instance, brevity, fixedness, or wisdom are among the most *cited*, but they are far from being the most undisputed in specialised literature.

5 The presence of a generalised implication (if P, then Q) in the meaning of the proverb.



6 This notion implies a more folkloristic approach. It implies being used in a folk group. In a more cognitive approach, the notions of *preconstruction* or *reproducibility* would be more common while a cultural approach would favour notions such as *conventionality*. Formal approaches focus on *fixedness* and *frozenness*, which are more controversial notions.

7 Using the term “invariance” to comment on phraseological units whose form can vary in speech would create confusion and would evoke the controversial notion of frozenness or formal rigidity.

8 The complete list of selection criteria will be presented in Section 3.

9 Online corpora and marketing tools, such as Google Trends, made it possible to map the dissemination of modern proverbs such as *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas*.

10 Bhuvaneshwar [2015] does not adopt a memetic approach and defends his own “karmic” approach, based on philosophical and cosmic concepts in Hindi tradition such as karma.

11 Naturally, dissemination may begin before the mass exposure phase, hence the dotted arrows. But the diagram represents the most viable model, as the chances of propagation are very low without the main propagating agent and large-scale exposure.

12 For instance, *First come to the mill, first grinde* has evolved into *First come, first served*. This kind of “update” is common and allows proverbs with outdated elements or themes to adapt and survive.

13 <https://www.urbandictionary.com/>

14 The quality of being superordinate. For instance, *Don't judge a book by its cover* does not only concern books and their covers but can encompass metaphorically various objects and even people.

15 Speakers who repeat a proverb may be viewed as small propagating agents but their impact on the initial stages is limited.

16 For instance, *Time is money* is attributed to Franklin but he merely copied and pasted an entire paragraph with the proverb (cf. Villers & Mieder [2017]). Plagiarism was not frowned upon or uncommon at the time.

17 <https://www.peta.org/features/animal-friendly-idioms>.

18 The frequency given is not for the exact complete proverb but for the root phrase (e.g. “teach an old dog new tricks”), even if it causes a shift in categories, resulting in a new label (proverbial phrase). Here, our focus is not categorisation but simply concrete usage and frequency. Famous variants are included. Date of access to the corpora: 30 October, 2021.

19 Google Books is the biggest online corpus with more than 25 million books. Despite a margin of error that needs to be taken into account, its results are very revealing.

20 A summary may be found at <https://www.businessinsider.com/peta-shocking-controversial-ads-2011-10?r=US&IR=T> or <https://www.zmescience.com/science/peta-killing-campaign-28032019/>.


21 On top of appearing too technical, this word refers to the last wagon of a train in American English and may therefore be confusing to speakers from other countries.

22 It can be argued that *Mind your own business* has a hybrid status insofar as it can be used as a complete sentence or self-sufficient utterance (*Mind your own business, Karen!*) but also as a mere verbal syntagma (*You didn't mind your own business*). Its category contextually shifts from proverb to proverbial phrase.

23 It is interesting to note that the degree of fitness in 4 and 8 greatly improved with PETA's January 2020 update. The previous versions were *Don't cry over spilt silk* and *There's more than one way to skin an orange*.

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## Table des illustrations

	<b>Titre</b> Figure 1. The stages of proverb genesis and proverb replication
	<b>URL</b> <a href="http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/docannexe/image/6383/img-1.png">http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/docannexe/image/6383/img-1.png</a>
	<b>Fichier</b> image/png, 66k

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## Pour citer cet article

### Référence électronique

Damien Villers, « What makes a good proverb? On the birth and propagation of proverbs », *Lexis* [En ligne], 19 | 2022, mis en ligne le 16 février 2022, consulté le 21 février 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/6383>

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## Droits d'auteur



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