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## Milk is the new oil, Iraq is the new Korea ... enough already!

Drake Bennett  
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EARLY last month, medical researchers at Spain's University of Granada called a press conference to announce their findings on the thirst-quenching properties of beer. In a study, 25 university students, after exhausting themselves on a treadmill in 40-degree heat, had been given either water or Spanish lager to drink. According to the university's research team, it was the beer that, by a slender margin, proved more effective at rehydrating the students, thanks to its bubbles, salts and carbohydrates. Beer, news reports were quick to proclaim, was the new water. And water? Development experts have begun to worry that industrialisation, pollution and even climate change are turning it into a scarce commodity in many parts of the world. Analysts paint a picture of growing domestic unrest, geopolitical jockeying, even water wars. Water, in short, is the new oil.

So, too, is milk. This year, with a swelling global middle class thirsty for milk (and butter, cheese, milk chocolate, lattes and dairy-heavy baked goods) and with prices for livestock feed being driven up by the biofuel boom, milk prices are soaring. Governments are imposing price controls, and the US, among others, has seen its butter stockpiles all but disappear. "In a growing world," read a late-August headline in *The International Herald Tribune*, "milk is the new oil".

If you want to know what happened in 2007, you could do worse than noting what it was that people decided was the new black, or the new oil, or the new golf.

Because it is so ubiquitous and so adaptable, because it so easily captures the human mind's penchant for analogies, and because it is constantly rendering itself obsolete (What is the new iPhone? Who is the new Amy Winehouse?), this off-the-shelf rhetorical device makes an ideal marker of a year's conversational currents. The charts here are an unsystematic attempt, culled from web searches, to trace the patterns that emerge.

Nobody knows who first called something "the new black". Linguists have traced the term to the early 1980s — they believe, to no one's surprise, that it first arose in the fashion world. Some see an early ancestor in the much-repeated proclamation, by legendary *Vogue* magazine editor Diana Vreeland, that "pink is the navy blue of India" (navy blue being the black of Vreeland's 1960s-era New York). Regardless, the term has stuck, and proliferated, metastasising along the way. Grey, we've heard, is the new black, pink is the new black, George Clooney is the new Cary Grant, small is the new big, black is the new white, Facebook is the new Google is the new Microsoft.

Plotting a year's profusion visually allows a certain textural logic to emerge. Cultural novelty unfolds in long transitive cascades — werewolves to vampires to zombies to pirates to ninjas — and in clusters around particularly hot or tendentious topics.

A quick glance reveals familiar nodes: Facebook, for example, or the iPhone.

Jail replaced rehab (which itself replaced clubbing) as a destination for young female celebrities, a place for life lessons, self-examination, and temporary chemical independence. And while 2007 saw its share of Iraq-as-Vietnam and Iraq-as-Taliban-era-Afghanistan analogies, Iraq also became the new Korea, at least to those who foresee a decades-long armed stand-off and no end to the American military commitment.

As for the werewolves, vampires, zombies, pirates and ninjas, it's a bit complicated, but suffice to say that it emerges from a particular hipster subculture, well-represented on the internet, in which the comparative merits of ninja webcomics, "piratecore" punk music, and various supernatural schlock horror genres tend to be hotly debated. Among other things, the length of the chain suggests just how difficult it is to hold the attention of such a crowd.

A few years ago, the economist and blogger Glen Whitman coined a term for the linguistic genus into which "X is the new Y" falls: familiar clichés that leave themselves open to easy and open-ended appropriation by lazy (or desperate) writers. He dubbed them "snowclones", from another paradigmatic example of the type: "If Eskimos have X words for snow, then A (e.g. Saudi Arabians, San Franciscans, diplomats) must have even more words for B (e.g. sand, fog, maybe)."

The continued reign of the "new black" snowclone dismays language watchdogs, in part because, like all clichés, it makes for mediocre writing and mediocre thinking. It also betrays a fetish for the new, and the new new. But there are signs that the trope has reached a level of terminal self-consciousness. Casual examination of the year in "new" betrays at least a couple of snowclones coined in a spirit of linguistic pranksterism, the results meant to explode the cliché through their own absurdity — in what way, exactly, is Christmas the new awesome? Eventually, sapped by this sort of subversion, the phrase might have to give way to another equally handy one. What the new "new black" would be remains anyone's guess.

*Drake Bennett is a columnist with The Boston Globe.*

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