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San Francisco Chronicle

## Summing up 2007 means seeking out the 'new black' and other new cliches

Drake Bennett, Boston Globe  
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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 104-degree heat, had been given either water or Spanish lager to drink. The researchers found that, by a slender margin, beer 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.

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And water? Development experts have begun to worry that industrialization, 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 United States, 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, metastasizing along the way. Gray, 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.

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 standoff and no end to the American military commitment.

The continued reign of the "new black" concept dismays language watchdogs, in part because, like all cliches, it makes for mediocre writing and mediocre thinking. It also betrays a fetish for the new, and the new new.

Eventually, the phrase might have to give way to another equally handy one. What the new "new black" would be remains anyone's guess.

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