

The Meaningless Phrase and the Empty Metaphor: An Examination of an Early “Viral Meme”

Introduction

Today, the slang expression “23 skidoo” connotes a carefree era when fads and crazes abounded. Some might recall that the term once meant “leave, get a move on, get out of here,” but most Americans today only know it as a cultural fossil dating from the Twenties, a convivial fad expression used by flappers and college boys in raccoon coats. Like many commonly accepted beliefs about “23 skidoo,” this view is incorrect. In fact, “23 skidoo” was not very popular in the Twenties — its heyday was actually two decades earlier. By the Twenties, it was considered outdated.

“23 skidoo” first appeared on the American cultural stage in 1905, and in 1906 it became a full-blown craze, peaking during the summer months and subsiding as the year drew to a close. Its growth in popularity was explosive and pervasive. During that time, virtually any mention of the number 23 would prompt someone to respond with “Skidoo!” Popular culture became saturated with it: “23 skidoo” appeared on buttons, banners, hats, and other novelties; in popular songs, short comedy films, and plays. Department stores advertised “skidoo sales” (“seven spools cotton thread – 23 cents”). Young women formed “skidoo clubs” restricted to twenty-three members. “Skidoo” dances were held on the 23rd of the month. A despondent Chicago man made national news when he cried “Skidoo! 23 for me!” before jumping off the Madison Street Bridge.¹ In Cleveland, telephone subscribers assigned the number 23 were being “persecuted” by

¹ "Skidoo--23 for Me' Suicide's Last Words." *Duluth News-Tribune*. 6/15/1906: 1. Print.

prank calls “thirty or forty times a day.”² (“Is this number 23?” “Yes, it is.” “How do you do, Mr. Skidoo?” And so on. Said Miss Harriet Gleason, a repeat victim of the prank: “Maybe you think it’s funny, but I don’t.”)

For many, “23 skidoo” was like an uninvited, unmannered dinner guest: a little too loud, a little too coarse, and a little too merry. For others, it was the life of the party. Over the course of its career it had a variety of meanings – not just “let’s go” or “get lost,” but also “glad to meet you,” “see you later,” and “cheers.” But mostly, it meant “Have fun! Live it up! Don’t take life so seriously!” In other words: “23 skidoo!”

And then there’s that mysterious number 23. It seemed to pop up everywhere, and for no reason. To many, this outbreak seemed a little sinister, and 23 came to be considered an omen of misfortune – the unlucky “skidoo number.” In Chicago, building inspectors refused to be assigned badge number 23.³ The Rockford, Illinois *Daily Gazette* noted that Friday, November 23, 1906 “was accompanied by a long series of unexpected happenings”:

One man died from a wound resulting from the accidental discharge of a gun, another man was struck on the head by a wheel barrow filled with mortar after a fall of fifty feet, a civil war veteran tripped on a rope and broke an arm, a woman sought to end her existence by swallowing carbolic acid, and Robert Rew gave a banquet in which thirteen guests participated.⁴

² “Skiddoo Phone 23: Demand Subscribers.” *Rockford Daily Register-Gazette* [Rockford, IL], 13 Jun 1906: 8. Print

³ “Shy at Badge ‘23’.” *San Jose Mercury News*. 17 Aug 1906: 8. Print.

⁴ “Skidoo Day Was Hoodoo.” *Rockford Daily Register Gazette* [Rockford, IL], 24 Nov 1906: 5. Print

A reporter in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania observed that rooms bearing the number 23 “are usually vacant in the hotels, even 13 being preferred,”⁵ and an investigation in Missouri revealed that every law student who ever drew the number 23 in the state bar examination had failed.⁶

No one wondered about “skidoo” – that part was easy. Most philologists and students of American slang considered it to be a descendant of “skedaddle,” which debuted on the battlefield during the Civil War.⁷ But what about “23”? Even before it teamed up with “skidoo,” “23” had a history: since the late 1890s it had been increasingly used on its own as a slang term meaning “go away,” “get lost,” and sometimes “too bad.” How did that particular number come to be associated with the idea of dismissal? It was a vexing problem, and a variety of solutions were offered.

When I started my research into “23 skidoo,” I had two goals in mind. My first goal was to see if I could resolve the mystery surrounding the etymology of “23” by examining the most commonly accepted etymologies in the light of documentary evidence. What I discovered surprised me: none of the etymologies were likely to be true. Eventually, I realized that it hardly mattered. The key to “23” was not in how it was coined, but in why the coinage is so difficult to discover.

My second goal was to see whether meme theory could shed any light on the “23 skidoo” craze. “23 skidoo” seemed like an ideal test case for meme theory: it had all the earmarks of a “viral meme.” Again, I was surprised: in the nearly forty years since Richard Dawkins coined the term,

⁵ “Stray Leaves from a Reporter's Note Book.” *Wilkes-Barre Times*. 31 Jan 1907. Print.

⁶ “Number '23' Is a Hoodoo.” *Rockford Daily Republic* [Rockford, IL], 16 Jun 1906: 3. Print

⁷ Hannaford, Ebenezer. *The Story of a Regiment: A History of the Campaigns, and Associations in the Field, of the Sixth Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry*. Published by the author, 1868. 547. Print.

“meme” still lacks a rigorous definition, and a coherent, productive theory of memes (or “mimetics”) has failed to emerge. While the notion of a “viral meme” has been embraced by popular culture, in academia the meme has been all but abandoned. The theoretical tools that I had hoped to use in my analysis simply didn’t exist. So I faced a new question: if meme theory couldn’t shed light on the “23 skidoo” craze, what can? Three concepts borrowed from telecommunication proved to be particularly helpful: the network, the channel, and the protocol.

This paper is divided into four parts. Part One is an examination of the six most often repeated etymologies for the slang phrase “23.” In Part Two, I will take a look at the earliest citations for “slang 23” and present a hypothesis on its original usage. In Part Three, I will examine the “23 skidoo” craze and offer a theory as to what drove it. In Part Four, I will discuss the shortcomings of meme theory and propose other ways to examine evolutionary processes in cultural phenomena such as the “23 skidoo” craze.

Throughout this paper I will introduce theoretical concepts as they become relevant to the discussion. They derive largely from concepts I have used during the course of my professional career in Information Systems. This paper was researched and written over a period of two months after a thirty-year absence from academia. In such a short period of time it would have been impossible for me to review and study even a fraction of the significant contributions made by linguists, information scientists, and sociologists over the past three decades. If I fail to give credit to theorists who have followed similar lines of thought, it is because I am egregiously ignorant of their work. I therefore make no claims of scholarship, originality, or priority. Compelling ideas have a way of insinuating themselves into society. I owe a debt of gratitude to those whose ideas have subconsciously or circuitously found their way into my head.

For my research I relied mainly on American newspapers, periodicals, and books published between 1890 and 1915. Three online corpora were particularly useful. “Chronicling America,” a program sponsored jointly by the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities, is an online searchable database of American newspaper pages from 1860 through 1922 and includes 3.47 million newspaper pages from 457 publications covering twenty-one states and the District of Columbia. GenealogyBank, a commercial database marketed primarily for genealogy research, includes 552 million pages from 4427 publications covering all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For periodicals and books, I relied on the Google Books database, which contains over 15 million documents. All three databases consist of scanned document images with text made searchable via OCR transcription.

PART ONE

“23”: Popular Etymologies

Speculation about “23” has focused primarily on its etymology. How did the number 23 come to be associated with departure and dismissal? Most of the proposed etymologies have the flavor of a just-so story: an explanation, neatly wrapped in an appealing narrative, that seems perfectly reasonable as long as one doesn’t examine it too closely. I examined the six most commonly accepted etymologies to see what evidence exists for each.

1. The racetrack

Another commonly accepted etymology attributes “23” to a racetrack rule:

I happened to meet a man who tries to ‘keep up’ on slang, and I asked the meaning of ‘Twenty-three!’ In his opinion it came from the English race tracks, twenty-three being the limit on the number of horses allowed to start in one race. This was his explanation. I don’t know that twenty-three is the limit. But his theory was that ‘twenty-three’ meant that there was no longer any reason for

waiting at the post. It was a signal to run, a synonym for the Bowery boys' 'On your way!'⁸

The man reporting this exchange – George Ade, a Chicago journalist who we will encounter again later – seems skeptical, and there is reason to be. It should be noted that there is a slight error in his account. Most versions of this etymology claim that the limit on the number of horses in a race was twenty-two, and therefore the twenty-third horse would not be permitted to compete. As an explanation, this makes more sense. But either way, how did a rule peculiar to English horse racing give rise to an American slang term? It's possible that "23" was coined at an English racetrack and imported to America fully formed, but there's no evidence that "slang 23" was used in England; in fact, in later years it would come to be regarded as quintessentially American. In any event, if there had been such a rule in English horse racing, it was frequently ignored: a review of contemporary accounts of nineteenth-century English horseraces demonstrates that it was not at all uncommon for twenty-three or more horses to compete in a race. ("Thormanby" 191, 335; Tattersall 26, 273, 85, 339; Watson 57, 203, 05)

Could there be *some* truth to the story, even if not all of the facts are correct? Clearly, if twenty-two had been the prevailing limit at American racetracks, there would have been no need to ascribe the rule to the English tracks. But could such a rule have existed at a *particular* American racetrack? If so, "23" could have been coined locally in the manner described.

Such a variation on the etymology appeared in 1906, when a former jockey named Patsy Morrison claimed to have originated the phrase himself:

⁸ "How Slang Is Coined." *Washington Post*. 22 Oct 1899: 19. Print.

“You see, there is room for just twenty-two horses on the Sheepshead track. When one more is entered it has to go behind all the others and gets a handicap that way. They generally figure to put the horse behind that has not any chance anyway. I started the saying by yelling ‘23 for you’ every time an old skin-and-bones got out on the track. The other jockeys took it up and it was not long until everybody was on.”⁹

When Patsy made this claim in 1906, the “23 skidoo” craze was at its height, and the origin of “23” was the subject of much speculation. Patsy Morrison’s claim was widely circulated and was described in the newspapers as being the definitive solution to the mystery.

Was there any truth to it? An examination of the *Goodwin’s Annual Official Turf Guide* (a compendium of racing data for the United States and Canada) for 1895 and 1893 reveals that during those two years no race run at the Sheepshead Bay track ever included more than fifteen starters. Since it appears that in the 1890s races run at Sheepshead Bay rarely, if ever, included twenty-two horses, it’s unlikely that the racetrack had a rule imposing such a limit. Even if a limit of twenty-two had existed at Sheepshead Bay, Patsy Morrison would have had very few opportunities to get his catchphrase going.

Perhaps Patsy erred and named the wrong course; maybe another American racetrack imposed a limit of twenty-two entrants. But there is no data in the *Goodwin’s* guides to suggest that such a limit was in force at any American or Canadian racetrack in 1893 or 1895.

Finally, it’s worth noting that when Patsy Morrison made his claim, he was being arraigned for drunkenness and facing a year of hard labor. Patsy evidently charmed the judge with his story: his sentence was reduced to 23 days.

⁹ “Sweet Revenge: Man Who Coined ‘23 for You’ Is Fined \$23.” *Fort Worth Telegram*. 17 Aug 1906: 9. Print.

2. The telegraph code

One frequent assertion is that “23” derives from telegraphic code. The following account is typical, if a bit gothic in tone:

[“23”] is not only slang, but it is prophecy. Its origin has been sought in the dark backward of antiquity, and various ancestral reports have been made upon it. The only one which, to our comprehension, seems adequate is the source lodged in the telegraphic code, and it is because of this that the new slang appears to us in such a dangerous light. “23” is, in telegraphy, the signal sent to clear the line, to “get out,” and, as such it has important place in the wire-speech of this nation.¹⁰

This explanation seems plausible (early in my research, it was the one I favored most), but it doesn’t quite fit the facts. “23” was indeed a telegraphic code, but it didn’t mean “clear the line” as these accounts claim. It stood for “all stations copy” or “the following is for you and others” and tagged a message as being pertinent to all telegraph operators on the line. In the American telegraph system, so-called “23” messages were typically sent each morning from the central office. Operators were expected to be at their stations at exactly 9 o’clock to receive the messages (*Rules and Instructions*). To a telegraph operator, “23” would have connoted the need to be present and engaged, not to “get out.”

In addition, there is no evidence to indicate that telegraph operators had been using “slang 23” earlier than anyone else. The Order of Railroad Telegraphers, a labor organization, issued a monthly publication (*The Railroad Telegrapher*) that included reports from local districts. These reports were written in an informal style, and frequently contained slang, colloquialisms, and telegraph jargon. “Slang 23” does not appear in these reports until 1906, the year of the “23-skidoo” craze.

¹⁰ “23.” *Norfolk News* [Norfolk, NE], 27 Jul 1906: 2. Print

Furthermore, the telegraph code “23” had been in daily widespread use well before and throughout the history of “slang 23.” If the term indeed derived from the telegraph code, one would expect telegraph operators to be aware of that fact. Yet I have not found a single claim for the term’s telegraphic origins that actually came from a telegraph operator. We need to conclude that “slang 23” and telegraph code “23” are unrelated.

3. The traveling theater company

This etymology emerged in 1906. Here’s an account that originally appeared in the Boston Globe and was reprinted elsewhere:

It seems that a manager [of a repertory theatre company touring through the South and Southwest] was a kind-hearted guy and did not want to bruise anyone’s feelings. He never fired any of the bunch, but had a habit of piling on the extra parts in the plays ... the man or woman who was in bad favor was ordered by the manager to study additional parts until the number reached 18, and at [sic; should be ‘during’] that time the manager kept putting off salary day. It took about five weeks for the artful proprietor of the show to work up the list to 18 parts. That meant five weeks’ unpaid salary.

By that time the object of the scheme reached the subject and he or she quit the show. So in that company it got to be a byword. When one of the troupe fell down or failed to make a hit the rest of would pass out the word “18 and 5 for you.” It meant that there were 18 parts and 5 lean weeks coming, and the actor had better leave.

After a while the “18 and 5” was found to be too long and someone did an adding stunt and brought out “23.”¹¹

The source is not named in the article, nor is the repertory company. But aside from its sketchy provenance, this story does not seem credible. I have been unable to find any evidence that “18 and 5” was a slang term in use in the South (or anywhere else) between 1890 and 1906. The quantities upon which the story hinges – 18 parts to learn, 5 weeks without pay – seem too

¹¹ "The Origin of '23'." *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], 22 May 1906: 10. Print

precise. The theatre manager's strategy for getting rid of an actor was this: pile on the work and withhold pay, and eventually the actor would get fed up and leave. But why couldn't the actor quit after 16 parts and 4 weeks, or after 20 parts and 8 weeks? The manager cannot precisely control how much the actor will tolerate before leaving, so it's difficult to see how the "18 parts and 5 weeks" scenario would occur often enough to be commemorated in a catchphrase.

It's possible that the phrase was coined after one particularly notable departure. It's also possible that phrase was coined by actors in a theater company, but not in the manner described.

Furthermore, an itinerant theater company would seem to provide a good means for spreading the phrase. We shall see, however, that the theater community is not the likeliest source for the origin of "23."

4. *A Tale of Two Cities*

In the earliest print reference to "23" (an 1899 article in the Lexington, Kentucky *Herald*, which I will examine further in the next section), the author speculates that the term derives from Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It is ventured that this expression originated with Charles Dickens in the "Tale of Two Cities." Though the significance is distorted from its first use, it may be traced. The phrase "Twenty-three" is in a sentence in the close of that powerful novel. Sidney Carton, the hero of the novel, goes to the guillotine in place of Charles Darnay, the husband of the woman he loves... The prisoners are beheaded according to their number. Twenty-two has gone and Sidney Carton answers to – Twenty-three. His career is ended and he passes from view.¹²

It's an appealing theory. *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dickens) was first published in America in 1859 and was still very popular in the 1890s. It had been adapted for the theatre several times. The use

¹² "'Twenty-Three': Did the Slang Phrase Originate in Dickens' 'Tale of Two Cities'?" *Morning Herald* [Lexington, KY] 17 Mar 1899: 4. Print

of “twenty-three” in the novel’s execution scene is indeed quite powerful, and it seems more than coincidental that the novel’s significant use of the word should so closely mirror the word’s slang usage. All the same, it seems unlikely that a coarse slang term such as “23” should derive from a literary allusion. Another possibility is that the term was adopted by theater companies performing stage adaptations of the novel. But as I noted in the discussion on the traveling theater company etymology, we shall see that there is evidence that “23” did not derive from the theater community.

5. The circus

George A. Kingsbury, a theatrical producer and manager, claimed in 1906 that “slang 23” comes from the traveling circus:

It isn't new at all. I knew it fifteen or eighteen years ago, and as a matter of fact every circus man did. I used to be with a circus at that time, and every man in the circus line had as a by-word the number “23.” It meant “get out,” just as it does today.

The way in which that meaning came to be attached to the number was very natural. You may not know it, but in every ring show there are just twenty-three numbers on the programme, and the last is the Roman chariot race. Well, when a tented show plays a one-night stand, pegs are pulled and every bit of canvas is moved as soon as possible after the performance. The canvas men and hangers on of a circus work very hard, and while a performance is on they lie down to rest and generally to sleep. The boss canvas man knows well where each man is to be found, and as the show draws to a close there is a cry outside the tent of “23.” The sleeper wakes and the whole crew is active, for it is the signal to prepare to move, or “skedoo.”

Records indicate that Kingsbury was in fact employed by the Sells Brothers circus seventeen years earlier, but he wouldn’t have traveled *with* the circus: he was a member of the advance crew that traveled two weeks ahead of the circus to hang show posters (Dahlinger).

Although it's possible that Kingsbury had observed "slang 23" in use during his stint with Sells Brothers, his explanation of how the term was coined cannot be correct. An examination of circus programs from that time does not support his claim that every show had exactly twenty-three acts (Dahlinger). Furthermore, it's difficult to imagine why there would be such a rule or how a circus could adhere to it.

6. The Flatiron Building

This etymology may well be the one most widely accepted today:

... the Flatiron [Building in New York] captured the wind and drove gusts to the sidewalks below. Hats would take flight and women's dresses would lift high enough to be noticed by knots of men gathered at strategic locations along 23rd Street. Cops on the beat would scatter the gawkers with the phrase "23 Skidoo" meaning that they should keep moving and don't block the sidewalks on 23rd Street (Korom 256).

Except for its claim for the origin of "23 skidoo," everything in this passage is well documented. The claim itself cannot be true. There are references to "23" dating back to 1899, but the Flatiron Building wasn't erected until 1902. So the "23" portion of the expression could not have derived from 23rd Street. It's possible that "23 skidoo" was adopted by "cops on the beat" in 1905 or 1906, but I don't think so. I have not been able to find any citations prior to 1954 that support this etymology (Vail). The Flatiron theory is a charming and compelling story (all the more so since it's mostly accurate), but it was most likely fabricated some fifty years after the heyday of "23 skidoo."



Ultimately, what I learned by examining these six proposed etymologies is that all of them are untenable. But if we dismiss as fabrication the claims for how "23" was coined, what claims do

the accounts make for where the term originated? The speculation that the term derives directly from *A Tale of Two Cities* makes no claim as to its original users. We have seen that it is not likely that the term originated with telegraphers, and we can discount the claim that it originated with a travelling repertory company or that it derives from Twenty-third Street and the Flatiron Building. Of the two remaining accounts, one claims that “23” came from the racetrack (we can discount the claim that it was an English racetrack), and the other makes a similar claim for the circus.

But even these claims are weak. All we can really conclude is that one possible first-hand source (Kingsbury) reported having heard “23” in use at the circus in 1889; and that another (the unreliable Patsy Morrison) claimed that the term was in use at the Sheepshead Bay racetrack. Since in each case the claim for how the term was coined can be discounted, we don’t yet have evidence that the term *originated* at either venue.

PART TWO

“23”: Earliest References

It’s not surprising that the origin of “23” is obscure; many slang terms are. Slang is notoriously difficult to define as a linguistic concept, in part due to its tendency to provoke moral judgment. Even linguists have historically been unable to refer to slang without denigrating it (Dumas 5). The prevailing view among educators and guardians of propriety at the turn of the last century was that slang debased the language and corrupted those that used it:

Persons who use slang take an apparently meaningless word, like *bamboozle*, and invest it with arbitrary meaning, or they take a perfectly proper word, like *awful*, and give it meanings of which it is innocent. The habit at best is a stupid one. It implies laziness or ignorance, and a disregard for the dignity and truth of

language. It is inconsistent with clear thinking. It lowers the mental standard, and in time may even lower the moral standard of those who employ it. (Salmon 122)

At the same time, slang terms were increasingly regarded as “specimens” to collect, catalog, and peruse in the manner of a Victorian naturalist. Two dictionaries of American slang (Maitland; Farmer) were published in the 1890s (neither of which contained an entry for “23”), and colorful, slang-speaking characters in fiction were very popular. Slang, of course, was not considered suitable for formal writing, and apart from fiction, it rarely appeared in print unless it was being examined, condemned, or reproduced by necessity. The earliest instances of a slang term from this era are therefore not likely to be documented.

There is another challenge to tracking down “23.” Even with fully-searchable digitized corpora, it is not easy to cull the rare instances where “23” was used in its slang sense from the multitude of cases where it is used numerically – as a quantity, person’s age, day of the month, serial number, and so forth. It’s not so difficult, however, to find examples of “numeric 23” that seem to have some bearing on the development of “slang 23.” These perceived relationships are almost always coincidental, but they can be difficult to dismiss. With little hard evidence and lots of red herrings, it’s easy to see how a variety of etymologies would have developed.



The earliest citation for the slang usage of “23” is in an issue of the *Lexington (Kentucky)*

Herald dated March 17, 1899:

For some time past there has been going the rounds of the men about town the phrase “Twenty-three.” The meaning attached to it is to “move on,” “get out,” “goody-bye, glad you are gone,” “your move” and so on. To the initiated it is used with effect in a jocular manner.

It has only a significance to local men and is not in vogue elsewhere.¹³

¹³ "'Twenty-Three': Did the Slang Phrase Originate in Dickens' 'Tale of Two Cities'?"

There's not much to go on, but we can say a little more about the "men about town" who were using the term. Lexington and Fayette County are situated at the heart of Kentucky's Bluegrass region, an area known for thoroughbred horse breeding since the 18th century. From *King's Handbook of the United States*, published in 1891:

Lexington is the greatest horse-market in the State, and every spring-time dealers in fine horses assemble here from all parts of the country, to attend the annual auction-sales, whose proceeds amount to several millions of dollars... Fayette county is now almost a solid stock-farm. There are thirty regular breeding establishments, besides which nearly every farmer is to some extent a breeder...

In addition to the annual auction and the breeding operations, Lexington had four racetracks at that time. Lexington's economy was devoted to horse breeding, selling, and racing. The "men about town" would have been predominantly men involved in some way with horse racing: breeders, owners, buyers, jockeys, bookmakers, tipsters, and betting men — "turfmen," as they were collectively known at the time.

American horse racing thrived during the 19th century. In the 1890s there were 314 thoroughbred racetracks operating in the United States; today, there are only 80 (Sasuly; "Track Information"). Turfmen tended to be highly mobile. Horse owners and jockeys routinely traveled long distances to compete in a race; bettors, bookies, tipsters, and con men routinely traveled long distances to profit from one. Wherever they congregated, turfmen talk to one another; race tracks therefore provided the means for turfmen to exchange information, to "network."

A social communication network (which for brevity I will to as a "social network" or simply "network") is a set of individuals who exchange information, or *communicate*, with one another. I will usually refer to individuals within a social communication network as *members* or *nodes* of

the network, or as *belonging to* the network. The inhabitants of a city constitute a network; so do a company's employees, members of a professional organization, participants in an Internet discussion forum, and members of a household. A marriage is a social network with two members (provided they communicate). A social institution comprising a number of individuals can also be a node if it acts as a single body when communicating with other nodes in the network. A newspaper publishing company, for example, acts as single a node when publishing the news, even though it comprises many individuals.

Since American turfmen tended to travel frequently and widely in order to congregate and communicate with one another, they constituted a profession-based social network. Most of Lexington's "men about town" would have belonged to this network. They would also have belonged to the regionally-based social network of individuals who lived in or frequented the Lexington area. Which network did "23" belong to: the regional network centered on Lexington, the professional network of turfmen, or another network altogether?

The author of the *Lexington Herald* article stated that the term was "of a significance only to local men" and was "not in vogue elsewhere." The word "elsewhere" is vague, but it's a fair assumption that the writer was referring only to other localities in the region, and wasn't including distant localities of which he would have little knowledge or experience. This strongly suggests that the term did not belong to the regional network. What about the professional network? Is there any evidence to suggest that "slang 23" was being used by turfmen elsewhere?

Yes. In the summer of that year the slang use of "23" was observed in Chicago by George Ade, a popular journalist:

By the way, I have come upon a new piece of slang within the past two months and it has puzzled me. I first heard it from a big newsboy who had a ‘stand’ on a corner. A small boy with several papers under his arm had edged up until he was trespassing on the territory of the other. When the big boy saw the small one he went at him in a threatening way and said: “Here, here! Twenty-three! Twenty-three!” The small boy scowled and talked under his breath, but he moved away. A few days after that I saw a street beggar approach a well-dressed man, who might have been a bookmaker or horseman, and try for the usual “touch.”

This man looked at the beggar in cold disgust and said: “Aw, twenty-three!” I could see that the beggar didn’t understand it any better than I did.¹⁴

As far as the use and meaning of “23” are concerned, Ade’s account agrees with that of the journalist in Lexington. His account also suggests that the phrase did not belong to the local regional network, as neither Ade, who was a keen student of American slang, nor the beggar was familiar with the term; rather it spread within the network of turfmen (and at some point was picked up by newsboys, who would have formed an overlapping network). It is therefore reasonable to conjecture that in its early stages “slang 23” propagated within the network of turfmen. Whether it *originated* in this network is still an open question.



The next reference to “23” comes from the 1901 edition of the infamous Storyville “Blue Book.” In an effort to more effectively regulate – and profit from – prostitution, in 1895 the New Orleans City Council passed an ordinance establishing Storyville, a district where prostitution would be legal and licensed. Legal prostitution created an influx of new visitors to New Orleans, and it was soon apparent that for their own security and for the reputation of Storyville, these new visitors would need reliable advice on where to find safe establishments that catered to their preferences. To meet this need, the Storyville bosses published a pocket guide to the local establishments, known as the “Blue Book.” It was distributed throughout the district and sold for

¹⁴ “How Slang Is Coined.”

a quarter. The 1901¹⁵ edition of the Blue Book included a preface entitled “HOW to be “WISE,” which contained the following slang-filled passage:

Now if you are in the A.B.C. class you want to get a move on yourself and “23,” and to do it proper is to read what this little booklet has to say and if you don’t get to be a 2 to 1 shot it ain’t the author’s fault.

Here is the passage again, with the slang phrases replaced by more familiar terms:

Now if you are [new to Storyville] you want to [go about your business] and [leave], and to do it proper is to read what this little booklet has to say and if you don’t [win big] it ain’t the author’s fault.

“23” is used here as an intransitive verb instead of an imperative, but the meaning has not changed. Many of the visitors to Storyville would have been turfmen. (New Orleans also had a race track.) It’s probable that Storyville provided a springboard for “23” to jump from the turfmen’s network to other overlapping networks, thereby helping to spread the term into the larger network of “sporting men” – men devoted to sports, gambling, night life, and other masculine pursuits.



In 1904, “23” debuted on the Broadway stage in *Little Johnny Jones*, a popular George M. musical that opened that year. The titular character is a celebrated jockey, and in the first act we find him and his entourage in London where he is to compete in the big Derby. The show featured Tom Lewis, a popular comedian who specialized in playing drunks. Lewis’s character – who at the very end of the play is revealed to be a Pinkerton detective named Wilson – uses “slang 23” while addressing a perplexed English waiter (Cohan):

Wilson: Twenty-three.
Waiter: What sir?

¹⁵ For the dating of this publication I am grateful to Pamela D. Arceneaux, rare-books curator of the Historic New Orleans Collection at the Williams Research Center.

Wilson: Twenty-three.

Waiter: Who sir?

Wilson: You.

Waiter: No sir, thirty-six, is there anything else I can do, sir?

Since *Little Johnny Jones* is about horse racing, it's probable that Cohan and Wilson understood it to be racetrack slang. That's how the San Jose *Evening News* explained it to its readers:

Unknown [Wilson]—23.

Waiter—No sir, 36.

(The expression "23" is supposed to have originated on the race track. It means "skiddoo," or "get out" or "quit," or "finish." It is becoming a common expression.)¹⁶

The use of the term in the play implies that a significant portion of the Broadway audience had been expected to be familiar with it; otherwise, the joke would have fallen flat. This suggests that by 1904 the term was spreading beyond the network of "sporting men," and *Little Johnny Jones* surely contributed to its growth, particularly when the show went on national tour in 1906.

There's something else worth noting about the use of "23" in *Little Johnny Jones*. In the first act, American ingenuity and high spirits are repeatedly contrasted with the dour, hidebound demeanor of the English. The English waiter misunderstands the term because he is clueless; he is clueless because he is not American. "23" functions in the play as a test to distinguish the American from the non-American. It was a test for the waiter in the play, but it was also a test for the audience. Audience members who were not already familiar with the phrase would have wanted to be clued in so that they, too, would be certifiable Americans.

We've arrived at one of the central arguments of my thesis. From the start, a key function of "slang 23" was to separate the insiders from the outsiders. This is not unusual; a slang term often

¹⁶ "Johnny Jones Entertains a Large Audience at the Victory." *Evening News* [San Jose, CA], 29 Mar 1906: 3. Print

identifies its user as belonging to a certain social network. But “23” was originally *designed* to be inscrutable to the uninitiated. Why are there so many origin stories for “23”? Why is it so difficult to find a connection between the number 23 and its slang meanings? Because by design, there *is* no simple connection. “23” was a code. It was meant to be understood by the initiated and *not* understood by others.

From our analysis of the early references to “23” we know that it was used at the race track during its early years. The 19th-century race track was highly vulnerable to corruption; it was a cultural institution that routinely flirted with criminality. The economy of horse racing depended on bookmaking, which was technically illegal. Swindlers, confidence men, and unscrupulous tipsters were legion at the track. Criminals (confidence men, for example) operating together in a social setting would from time to time have had a need to send an alert or warning to one another without being detected or understood by the public. This would have required a code: a word or a phrase that was significant to the criminal confederates but would pass unnoticed by the public. A code that meant “trouble’s coming; we need to clear out.” I suspect that “23” was originally such a code.

At the race track, the line between criminal and legitimate activities was very vague; “23” would have easily been able to spread to the larger network. Over time its use as an imperative would have broadened: a racetrack insider might use it in a jocular manner to tell another member to “get lost.” More uses meant more occasions for use, and the term would have spread faster. As its use spread throughout the race track it would have gradually lost its utility as a secret code among criminals. But for racetrack insiders, it would have still served as a means to recognize one another. “23” was opaque: its conventional use as a number was completely unrelated to its

slang use. If one didn't already know what it meant, there was very little to go on. Those who aspired to be known as racetrack insiders would have had an incentive to find out what "23" meant. This incentive helped "23" to spread throughout the larger network of "sporting men."

There is one piece of evidence that supports the idea that "23" was originally used as an underworld code word. Two sources claim that "23" was used as a code during the daring escape of Santiago Morphy, a racetrack gambler who was wanted in Mexico for embezzlement. In January 1899 he was apprehended in New Orleans, and on the 23rd of that month a pair of Mexican officers arrived in New Orleans to escort Morphy back to Mexico before midnight, when the extradition treaty between the United States and Mexico was due to expire. Remarkably, one of the officers decided that the extradition party should have lunch at a local restaurant before embarking on the trip back to Mexico. This gave Morphy's supporters (of which he had many; he spread his money lavishly) an opportunity to plot an escape:

As they came from the restaurant [Morphy] heard the voice of an acquaintance mutter "twenty-three." ... he took in the situation while the police were wondering what "twenty-three" signified. He knew that it was time to "skee-doo," to duck, to screw, and that he was in the hands of his friends. As the two officers were bowled over a crowd of his companions split him from his captors and he escaped.¹⁷

Morphy ran to Kansas City, where he was once again captured in April 1899. This account of the escape comes from a 1906 article in the *Kansas City Star* on the origin of "23." Contemporary newspaper accounts do not mention the use of "twenty-three." George Ade, however, does mention it in the 1899 article where he recounts hearing "23" used in Chicago:

Another student of slang said the expression originated in New Orleans at the time that an attempt was made to rescue a Mexican embezzler who had been arrested there and taken back to his own country. Several of his friends planned to close in upon the officer and prisoner as they were passing in front of business

¹⁷ "'Twenty-Three for You!' The New 'Screw-Word' and Whence It Came." *Kansas City Star*. 6 May 1905: Print.

block which had a wide corridor running through another block. They were to separate the officer and prisoner and then, when one of them shouted “twenty-three,” the crowd was to scatter in all directions and the prisoner was to run back through the corridor, on the chance that the officer would be too confused to follow the right man. The plan was tried and it failed, but “twenty-three” came into local use as meaning “Get away, quick!” and in time it spread to other cities.¹⁸

The 1906 Kansas City account was more accurate and detailed than George Ade’s account – contrary to what Ade had heard, the escape was successful – so it’s unlikely that the author of the 1906 account was copying the story from the earlier article. Furthermore, since Morphy hid out in Kansas City after his escape, the later account is likely to have been drawn from sources closer to the actual event. Ade’s source appeared to suggest that “slang 23” originated with the escape, but it’s more likely that it was already in use at that time.

PART THREE

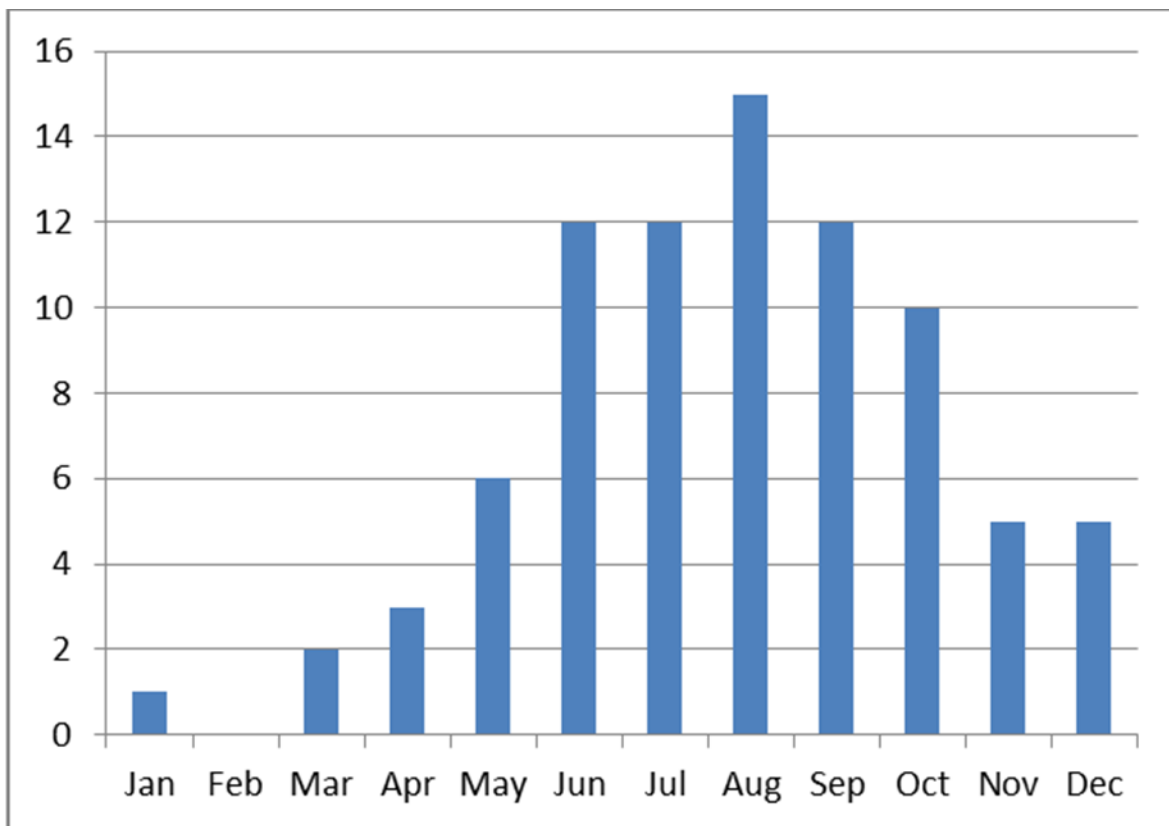
“23 skidoo”: The Craze

Between 1904 and 1905, “23” continued to spread, but it was unable to become truly popular. As more and more people adopted it, it became less useful as a means to distinguish the “insiders” from the “outsiders.” It was still mysterious, but it took an effort to solve the mystery, and there was no longer much of an incentive to do so. Furthermore, there were other slang terms that required less effort to learn. “Skidoo,” for instance.

While “23” was opaque, “skidoo” was transparent. It sounded like other slang words that meant the same thing: skedaddle, skadoodle, scoot, shoo, scat... An American who had never heard the term before could with little effort guess its meaning.

¹⁸ "How Slang Is Coined."

While the use of “23” was slowly growing, the use of “skidoo” was too. “Skidoo” was lively: automobiles were referred to as “skidoo wagons.”¹⁹ “Skidoo” was humorous: it could be used as the name of a character in a comic play.²⁰ Although the spread of “23” was confined to networks of men, “skidoo” was used by men and women alike.



Instances of “23 skidoo” in newspapers and periodicals published in 1906

By May 1905, “23” and “skidoo” had encountered each other. By December, a partnership had formed. They made a very good team, as each had what the other lacked: “23” lent mystery and a little danger, while “skidoo” contributed its lively humor. But what really made the pairing work

¹⁹ Green, Martin. “The Man Higher Up.” *New York Evening World*. 11 May 1904: 14. Print.

²⁰ Clarke, Harold A. *The Missing Miss Miller: A Comedy in Three Acts*. Walter H. Baker & Co., 1907. Print.

was that “skidoo” defined “23.” “23” was a mystery, but “skidoo” was the explanation. “23” was the glyph, and “skidoo” was the gloss.

The new duo – sometimes “23 skidoo,” sometimes “skidoo 23” – grew steadily in popularity over the next five months. Then sometime in May or June, something happened that would turn it into a sensation: it began appearing on buttons.

Message-bearing buttons and badges had been around since the 18th century, but they were not popular until the mid-1890s when the Whitehead and Hoag Company of Newark, New Jersey developed a button that was cheap and easy to mass produce. The Whitehead and Hoag button was both durable and eye-catching: it was covered with a protective celluloid film that made the printed design underneath “pop.” The pinback button was soon recognized as an inexpensive and effective medium for conveying small messages.

Prior to the “23 Skidoo” button, pinbacks had been used principally as vehicles for political endorsements or product advertising, or as “premiums” – little “gifts” that came with the purchase of an inexpensive product such as a pack of cigarettes. A typical “premium” button featured a humorous quip or a cartoon character. Apart from premiums, it was very rare for a button to bear a message that was not a political or product endorsement. So although the buttons were free, they came with a cost: to get one, a person needed either to purchase something or publicly endorse a product or political cause. The “23 Skidoo” button, however, came with no strings attached: it could be purchased on its own for 2 cents, and it didn’t represent an endorsement for anything.

Skidoo buttons were primarily sold at places devoted to leisure activities, such as baseball games, seaside resorts, fairs, and carnivals. They were very popular. (It's difficult to estimate how many were sold, but dealers and collectors of vintage buttons encounter them frequently today. The Skidoo button is neither rare nor valuable compared to other vintage buttons; they currently sell for \$5 at best.) It was the button that enabled "23 Skidoo" to spread with remarkable speed across the entire country, turning a catchy phrase into a national craze.

To understand how the button caused the popularity of "23 Skidoo" to explode, we need some more theory.



Members of a social network are linked by *communication channels*. A communication channel (or simply "channel") is a means by which members of a network exchange information with one another. Speech, the telephone, the telegraph, email, postal mail, Facebook newsfeeds, newspapers, and bulletin boards are all examples of communications channels.

Social networks tend to develop their own *protocols*, that is, rules for *what kinds* of information can be exchanged within the network, which *communication channels* can be used, and what *forms of expression* can be acceptable. Consider, for example, the social network of employees in a company. Within that network, rules for what kinds of information can be exchanged might include "discuss work matters only, minimal chitchat, talk about sexual matters is taboo;" acceptable communication channels might include email, telephone, private conversations, and staff meetings; and rules for what modes of expression can be used might include "English only, no swearing, business and company jargon is OK."

Members of a social network will occasionally violate protocol; when they do, they are penalized. Here are some examples. On an online forum devoted to stamp collecting, a post about gardening techniques would be considered “off-topic” -- a violation of protocols governing what kinds of information can be discussed within the network. The poster would be chastised online or kicked out of the forum. In an office, it would not be acceptable to terminate an employee through the company newsletter – that’s a violation of protocols governing which channels can be used to dismiss employees. A supervisor who commits such an error in judgment might be terminated himself; he will certainly face enmity from his coworkers. Using certain swear words on network television is a violation of protocol governing forms of expression; an infraction of this rule would lead to censure and possibly a fine.

Since individuals can be members of more than one network, an individual will occasionally use (by mistake or by design) a protocol from one network when communicating within another network. If the misused protocol contradicts an existing protocol in the second network, it would probably be considered a protocol violation, and the individual would be discouraged from using it again. However, if the misused protocol turns out to be useful within the second network, or if a significant number of individuals belonging to both networks commit the same misuse, there is a good possibility that the protocol will be adopted by the second network. In this manner, a protocol can “jump” from one social network to another.

First, we need to draw a distinction between two types of channels. In a *node-to-node (N2N) channel*, the sender of a message is able to *address* the recipients; that is, the sender can specify which nodes are to receive the message. Speech, email, the telephone, and a postcard are all

examples of N2N channels. With an N2N channel, the sender has a high expectation that the addressed nodes will receive the message.

In a *broadcast channel*, the sender is not able to address particular nodes. The sender sends the message over the channel to a range of nodes in the hope that it will be received by some of them. Radio, television, newspapers, blogs, billboards, junk mail, and Twitter are all examples of broadcast channels. The success of the delivery depends on the range of the broadcast (how many nodes are capable of receiving the transmission) and the number of nodes within the range that actually receive and decode it. Bear in mind that for delivery to be successful, the recipient must receive *and* decode the message. A newspaper that has been acquired but not read has not been decoded, and therefore the delivery has not been successful.

Receiving and decoding messages require effort – expenditure of time and energy -- on the part of the recipient. The amount of effort it takes for the recipient to receive and decode a message is more critical to delivery on a broadcast channel than it is on an N2N channel. On N2N channels, there is an implicit agreement between sender and recipient that all messages adhering to protocol will be received and decoded; the recipient has an obligation to make the effort necessary to complete the delivery. On broadcast channels, however, there is no implicit obligation to receive and decode; therefore the greater the effort required, the smaller the likelihood that the recipient will complete these operations. In general, longer messages require greater effort on the part of the recipient than shorter messages. But factors other than length can affect the amount of effort required. Messages that are syntactically complex will require greater effort, as will a message that is deficient in contextual or referential cues. Here's an example of the latter: "It worked!" can be decoded with little effort if it's clear to the recipient what "it"

refers to. If there are several possibilities for “it” that seem equally likely on first analysis, the recipient will need to do further analysis (such as a broader review of recent interactions with the sender) to successfully decode the message.

On broadcast channels where a typical message is lengthy or difficult to decode, a two-part message format is often adopted. The purpose of the first part, called the *header*, is to compel the recipient to receive and decode the second part, called the *body*. Headlines in newspapers, subject lines in email, thumbnail images, and book jackets are all examples of headers. In a two-part message, successful delivery of the header does not guarantee that the entire message will be delivered. If the header is delivered successfully but does not compel the recipient to read the body, delivery of the entire message has failed. Selection pressure will tend to evolve headers that are not only shorter and simpler, but also more compelling.



Let’s return to the Skidoo buttons. A pinback button is a communication channel: it is designed to display a message in the hope that someone nearby will take notice of it. A person wearing a pinback button therefore acts as a mobile short-range broadcaster. But this alone was not enough: for the button to spread like wildfire, it needed the right message. What was the message of “23 skidoo”? When printed on a button, what did it mean?

It’s clear that in the context of the button, the original meaning of “23” and “skidoo” – “leave, go away” – was not significant: such a message would be far too antisocial to achieve such popularity. What remains? Well, the “skidoo” side was still playful, and the “23” side was still arcane. The idea that “23” was a token of membership was reinforced by the customary use of pinback buttons in political campaigns. The button was a badge that identified the wearer as a

member of the “Skidoo League.” It was also a kind of in-joke, or a private game. The button insinuated that those who weren’t wearing it were “on the outside,” that they didn’t “get it.” Generally speaking, people want to be “on the inside,” they want to “get it.” The button compelled those who didn’t have one to get one and to wear it like a badge. In effect, the button broadcast a message that turned recipients into new broadcasters. Not every recipient was converted, but enough were to keep the process going. It was through this perpetual cascade of new broadcasters that “23 skidoo” became a national craze. As it turns out, “23 skidoo” did, in fact, endorse something: itself.

This form of transmission – a broadcast that creates more broadcasters -- is precisely what makes a cold virus spread so quickly. The symptoms that a virus engenders – coughing, sneezing, mucus excretions – effectively convert an infected person into a mobile, short-range broadcaster of the virus itself. If we were to apply the viral analogy to the skidoo buttons, we would say that the buttons “infected” people where they tended to congregate – ballparks, seaside resorts, fairs, carnivals – and then turned their hosts into effective broadcasters of the infection. The “carriers” then returned to their homes, where they infected others, who in turn became broadcasters... In this manner, “23 skidoo” became a nation-wide pandemic.

It is important to note that two conditions were necessary for the “23 skidoo” craze to happen. The phrase needed to find a broadcast channel, and it needed to compel recipients to become broadcasters. If “23 skidoo” had been transmitted solely through N2N channels, it would not have spread so widely so quickly. Indeed, before it teamed up with “skidoo,” “23” was transmitted primarily through speech -- an N2N channel. In those instances where it was transmitted via a broadcast channel, it didn’t engender new broadcast channels; subsequent

transmissions were by way of N2N channels. The Storyville Blue Book, for example, can be considered a long-range broadcast channel: when visitors to the New Orleans brothels returned home, they brought “23” back with them. The Blue Book effectively seeded “23” over a wide geographical area, but even if these seeds managed to germinate in their new soil, their further spread would then proceed along slower speech channels.

When summer ended, the popularity of “23 skidoo” declined. As had happened to “23” previously, it was no longer compelling after it had saturated the culture: everyone was on “the inside;” there wasn’t anyone on “the outside.” And so the fad ended.

A couple of factors helped to keep the phrase’s profile up after the craze. In November, newspapers in the western part of the country published a puzzle – the “23 Skidoo Problem” – that created a mild sensation and kept “23 skidoo” in the papers until the end of the year. A few retail stores would continue to advertise “23 skidoo sales” well into 1907, but it evidently failed to attract as many customers as before.

In March 1907, “23 skidoo” got a break when the United States Post Office relaxed its rules regarding postcards – it was now permissible to use the left half of the back of the card to write a note to the recipient. Previously, the entire back had been reserved for the address, and the sender would need to find whatever space they could on the front to write a few words. This change made picture postcards much more popular, and postcard printers increased their output of novelty cards, many of which featured “23” or “23 skidoo.” Through postcards, the phrase managed to stay alive for a few more years, but then came World War I, and the American public was no longer in the mood for frivolity.

So why do we associate “23 skidoo” with the Twenties? The Twenties continued a trend that “23 skidoo” had started: fads and crazes created through cascading broadcast channels. It was as if the culture had found a new technique and wanted to experiment with it. Our cultural narratives tend to simplify over time: confounding or irrelevant details get smoothed over and edited out. That is why we associate “23 skidoo” with the Twenties: in the story of the rise of national fads and crazes, the wartime interruption is a complicating detail, so “23 skidoo” is erroneously linked to the fads of the Twenties.

PART FIVE

“23” and the Meme

When I started this study, I wanted to use the “23 skidoo” phenomenon as a test case for meme theory. It seemed ideal: a very early example of a “viral meme” from well before the Internet age. I discovered, however, that meme theory was not developed to the point where it can be used as an analytical tool.

Although the concept of the meme has taken root in popular culture, it has never been defined with the precision necessary to make it an object of formal study (Rose). The word “meme” was coined and loosely defined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in the first edition of *The Selfish Gene*. In a coda to his main argument (that natural selection can be best understood as a competition for survival among genes, rather than among individuals of the species), Dawkins proposed that just as genes are biological replicators, ideas can be regarded as cultural replicators. Dawkins posited a replicating entity analogous to the gene – “the meme” – as the basic unit of cultural transmission.

Dawkins described a meme as an idea that passes from person to person through a process of imitation. He offers examples: “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.” Other meme theorists have attempted to refine the idea, sometimes by narrowing its scope. Lynch describes it as “a self-propagating idea, or *thought contagion*” (Lynch 1996). By “idea,” Lynch is referring specifically to beliefs. For Lynch, a meme is a belief that contains elements that tend to encourage its perpetuation; for example, parents that accept the idea that contraception is morally wrong will tend to have more children to whom they can pass on the belief. Lynch acknowledges that cultural artifacts – such as tunes, catchphrases, or styles of clothing – may also be viewed as replicators, but he explicitly excludes them from his definition of “meme”(Lynch 1998).

For Daniel Dennett, any cultural idea can be meme, so long as phenotypic expressions (Dennett calls them “vehicles”) of the idea are represented in the culture (Dennett). Dennett makes a careful distinction between the meme, which exists only in the brain, and its vehicles, which are manifest in the culture. Susan Blackmore takes a more expansive approach. Blackmore’s concept of the meme includes not just ideas, but “the brain structures that instantiate those ideas, the behaviours these brain structures produce, and their versions in books, recipes, maps and written music” (Blackmore 1999), and “anything that can be passed on by imitation” (Blackmore 1998), although it’s not clear how brain structures can be imitated.

What is it about “23 skidoo” that encouraged replication? From “23” it inherited a badge-like quality: it allowed adopters to represent themselves as members of an exclusive club. To join the club, one needed only to wear the badge. This badge-like quality of “23” didn’t come from its outward form (the number 23) or its principal meaning (“leave”); it derived from its origins as a

secret code used by a shadowy society. The original *use* of “23” invested it with the means to self-replicate. More precisely, the original use of the term was self-replicating; the term’s outward form and meaning were replicated as a consequence.

In my view, meme theory falls short because it focuses on *objects* (ideas and their representations) that replicate rather than the *processes* that drive replication. Neither “23” nor its meaning has special powers of self-replication. They just happened to find themselves caught in a self-replicating process. Furthermore, meme theory does not address external factors that can affect the rate of replication. “23 skidoo” did not become a craze until after it was printed on a pinback button. At that point, the button, too, got caught up in the process, so each time the process repeated, it not only replicated the phrase – it also replicated a short-range transmitter to broadcast the phrase.

Richard Dawkins contends that wherever there is replication with variation and selection, we should expect to find Darwinian evolution (Dawkins). Let’s return for a moment to the concepts we borrowed from communication theory: the network, the channel, and the protocol. Consider a set of protocols for forms of expression that is used by a particular network when communicating over a particular set of channels. (Language, for example.) This set of protocols replicates – each member in the network would have a copy. There would be variation through a variety of means – for example, through imperfections in the copying process, or through the introduction of a protocol that jumped from another network. And there would be selection – some of these altered or new protocols will find acceptance within the network and become a part of the protocol set; others will not. If Dawkins is correct, we should therefore expect to find that the protocol set is evolving.

Let's look at a specific example. If one compares newspapers of today with those from the 19th century, it is easy to see that in the earlier publications the sentences tend to be longer and the syntax more complex. This suggests that there are protocols pertaining to the length and complexity of sentences in a newspaper, and that these protocols have changed over time. Are these protocols undergoing Darwinian evolution?

A newspaper is a broadcast channel, and broadcast message is in competition with other broadcast messages for the recipient's time and energy. Competition among broadcast messages will tend to favor those that typically require less effort on the part of the recipient, that is, messages that are short and easy to decode. Within a newspaper, however, content is more important to the reader than sentence complexity: a reader usually chooses one article over another because its topic is of interest, not because its sentences are less complex. A newspaper's editorship and prevailing house style would therefore be expected to have a stronger influence over the length and complexity of sentences than competition among articles.

Now consider two newspapers in competition. They report on the same news, more or less, so news content wouldn't be expected to play a major role in the reader's decision to purchase one newspaper or the other. But sentence length and complexity *would* come into play. The newspaper that presents information in shorter, less complex sentences will have a competitive edge. Competition among newspapers would therefore cause the length and complexity of sentences to reduce over time. This is a testable hypothesis: if we examine the sentence length and complexity of newspapers over time and across regions, we should find that the rate in the reduction of sentence length and complexity correlates with the number of competing newspapers serving the region.

In the length and complexity of sentences in newspapers we have a simple, demonstrable case of where Darwinian evolution may be playing a role in cultural development. But since these sentence traits are neither ideas nor expressions of ideas, meme theory has nothing to say about them.

We didn't need Darwinian theory to tell us that living organisms self-replicate: we already knew that. Nor did we need to be told that living organisms evolve over time. What Darwin showed us was that biological evolution is driven by variation and selection through competition for resources. Over the past four decades meme theory has offered many compelling examples of cultural entities that self-replicate. But that is not enough. It also needs to demonstrate that some of these self-replicating entities evolve by means of Darwinian evolution.

What makes Darwin's theory of evolution stand out from its competitors is not its simplicity or explanatory power. (The theory of an omnipotent deity is simpler, and it can explain anything.) Darwin's theory is better because it is testable. In the same way, it is not enough for a theory of cultural evolution to have remarkable explanatory power. It must also point the way toward the means to test its explanations. The online *Journal of Mimetics* ceased publication in 2005. In the final issue, Bruce Edmonds notes the failure of meme theory in this regard:

I claim that the underlying reason memetics has failed is that it has not provided any extra explanatory or predictive power beyond that available without the gene-meme analogy. Thus whilst the idea of memes has retained its attractiveness for some in terms of a framework for thinking about phenomena, it has not provided any "added value" in terms of providing *new* understanding of phenomena (Edmonds).

It turns out that the meme really is, as Stephen Jay Gould famously put it, "an empty metaphor." But that does not mean that evolutionary processes are not occurring in culture; it simply means

that meme theory has not provided us with the tools and the conceptual framework to study them.

There is no meme, but if we look closely, I believe we will find that culture is threaded through and through with evolutionary processes. But we will have to tease them out one by one.

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