Contrastive is the new black:
A cross-linguistic study of a "snowclone" in English, German, and Spanish

Recent research in Construction Grammar has seen increased interest in language contact and contact-induced change (see e.g. Pietsch, 2010; Van de Velde & Zenner, 2010; Wasserscheidt, 2014; Colleman, 2016; Zenner et al., 2018; Boas & Höder [eds.] 2018, 2021; De Psacale et al. 2022). In this paper, we present a contrastive corpus-based analysis of [X *BE the new* Y] and its equivalents in German and Spanish. This construction instantiates a type of semi-fixed idiomatic formulae known as "snowclones" (Traugott & Trousdale, 2013; Hartmann & Ungerer, 2024), which are originally derived from a more lexically fixed source (in this case, fashion slogans such as *pink is the new black*), but which have developed open slots that can be filled by variable lexical items. While the construction is particularly well documented in English, as illustrated in (1), it also occurs in German (Weber 2019), as shown in (2), and it is further attested in Spanish, cf. (3) (all examples are taken from the COW web corpora, Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012).

(1)   *Thursday is the new Friday. Sleep is overrated.*
(2)   *Teilen ist das neue Besitzen. Wer Dinge nicht mehr braucht, gibt sie weiter.*
         'Sharing is the new owning. If you no longer need things, you pass them on'
(3)   *Hoy las drogas son el nuevo alcohol.*
         'Nowadays, drugs are the new alcohol'

We use collostructional analysis techniques (see Stefanowitsch 2013) to investigate which words the pattern combines with in the three languages, drawing on data from the COW web corpora (Schäfer & Bildhauer 2012, Schäfer 2015). Our results show that the construction is most frequent in English but productive in all three languages. reveal parallels among the lexemes that the pattern combines with in each language, but also differences in the degree of semantic variability. At least in Spanish, the variability of the slot fillers appears to be somewhat more constrained than in English: Apart from color terms, the Spanish construction does not typically combine with adjectives, and it seems to rely more heavily on recurrent semantic domains such as age (e.g., *30 is the new 20*). This lower degree of formal and semantic flexibility suggests that the Spanish pattern is used more conservatively than its English model.

Finally, specific (semi-)lexicalized subtypes are shared by all three languages: This includes fully lexicalized instances (e.g., *data is the new oil*) as well as the subpattern [X *BE the new black*], which may qualify as a subconstruction in its own right. The fact that these exact patterns are attested in each language suggests that they are the result of constructional borrowing (Colleman 2016) from a common source. In an alternative scenario in which [X *BE the new* Y] developed independently in each language, rather than through contact, such close lexical correspondences would not be expected (see Weber, 2019, for a similar argument).

Together, the results reflect the role of constructional borrowing in the emergence of the German and Spanish constructions, which can be modeled via links in the mental network of multilingual speakers.

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