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PROVERBS, SYMBOLIC CAPITAL, AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: A BOURDIEUSIAN SURVEY OF PAREMIOLOGY

Abstract: This article applies the fundamentals of Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory to the analysis of the use of proverbs in communication. According to the French sociologist, human interactions are determined by the symbolic capital held by participants in these interactions. Regarding proverbs, their anonymity and folkloric nature adds to their symbolic capital, motivating their use as a communication device believed to grant the speaker an argumentative advantage. This paper, in addition to repositioning proverbs within the Bourdieusian dichotomy of *doxa* and *habitus*, analyzes how certain proverbial uses may result in what Bourdieu termed "symbolic violence." To prove this, and after noticing a relatively frequent use of proverbs by Elon Musk on his Twitter/X account, a search for proverbial uses that could be considered aggressive was conducted to demonstrate how such proverbial references may exemplify Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence.'

Keywords: Bourdieu, *doxa*, Elon Musk, *habitus*, paremiology, symbolic violence

0. Preamble

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) is one of the most influential intellectuals of the 20th century. The French sociologist left an indelible mark across a number of disciplines, such as those involving education and communication theories, among others. His com-

plex sociological model, known as Field Theory, helps us understand interpersonal dynamics based on the Bourdieusian concept of ‘capital’, as well as other ideas that are central to his model and which will be discussed below. This framework was developed by Bourdieu during his stay in Algeria, where he originally arrived during the Franco-Algerian war to serve one year of his military service, but remained for several years as a lecturer and researcher on the ethnography of the Kabyle people, a Berber ethnic group. It was in relation to the study of these people that Bourdieu apparently first noticed the importance of proverbs as a communication device and part of their cultural heritage (Bourdieu 1977), although he never undertook a thorough examination of their relevance for social and communicative interactions. Despite this, Bourdieu’s theories have proved to be suitable for analyzing how proverbs are used in communication, revealing a specific, spurious use of proverbs that may be explained through Bourdieu’s concept of ‘symbolic violence’, particularly in the context of socio-political debate.

Although the use of proverbs to defend political ideas is a topic that has motivated numerous publications as of late, most notably in this journal, both top-down (see Konstantinova 2020; Tserpes 2021), as well as bottom-up (see Konstantinova 2019; Busau 2021), this paper aims to analyze the use of proverbs within the context of socio-political debate in connection with some of the central concepts in Bourdieu’s model of social interaction, most notably in relation to the concept of ‘symbolic violence,’ under the assumption that this approach provides the foundation for an insightful analysis of how and for what purpose proverbs may be used under certain circumstances. For this reason, and in order to provide a better understanding of Bourdieu’s Field Theory and its relation to the use of proverbs, some central concepts in Bourdieu’s model, such as ‘capital,’ ‘*habitus*,’ and ‘*doxa*’ will be surveyed. Before that, and to delimit the scope of the present study, a working definition of ‘proverb’ will be presented, elaborating on some of the most widely accepted attempts by various authoritative proverb scholars. Using Bourdieu’s theory as the framework, this study intends to document how the use of proverbs may lead to symbolic violence, particularly in the case of relevant figures who, to continue using Bourdieu’s terminology,

enjoy a high level of symbolic capital and use their privileged position to promote their ideas with the help of the dogmatic character of proverbs. To this end, Elon Musk's Twitter/X account was surveyed for his use of proverbs in the months leading up to the composition of this paper, and several cases were found that illustrate the use of proverbs as symbolic violence. However, the purpose is not to present an exhaustive survey of Elon Musk's tweets for his use of proverbs resulting in symbolic violence; rather, some of his tweets are used here to illustrate an "aggressive" use of paremiology that, despite having been noted (see Russell, 1999), has not yet been related to Bourdieu's framework. Moreover, the choice of Musk for this purpose is not arbitrary but lies in his cultural and social influence as one of the most vocal spokespeople for conservative ideas globally and as the individual with the largest following on Twitter/X (Gupta 2024).

1. Scope of study

This study was motivated by recognizing the suitability of Pierre Bourdieu's postulates for analyzing how and why proverbs are used in communication. Proverbs are multi-word communicative devices that encapsulate the traditional wisdom, beliefs, and customs of a people. Among the different phraseological categories, the proverb is arguably the most difficult type of phraseologism to define; nonetheless, a working definition must be provided to establish the limits of this study.

Paremiology has developed greatly since the second half of the 20th century and is of considerable interest to a variety of fields of knowledge. The reason for this is the multifaceted nature of proverbs, in which linguistic, cultural, folkloristic, or psychological aspects intertwine. It is due to this complexity that a unanimously accepted definition of proverb has not been agreed upon yet. A. Taylor (1890–1973), one of the parents of modern Paremiology, went as far as stating that 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 Those who do not speak a language can never recognize all its proverbs, and similarly much that is truly

proverbial escapes us in Elizabethan and older English. Let us be content with recognizing that a proverb is a saying current among the folk (Taylor 1931: 3).

However, in order to avoid leaving it at the reader's discretion to decide whether a certain element qualifies as a proverb, scholars have composed numerous definitions which, despite agreeing on the basics, differ with regard to some of the features that should be considered when determining whether a given phraseologism may indeed be considered a proverb. After carefully reviewing the explanations provided by some of the most authoritative and highly regarded scholars in the subject, it can be affirmed that a proverb

- 1) is of relative brevity (Mieder 1996: 597, 2004: 3)
- 2) is often of unknown origin (Corpas Pastor 1996: 148)
- 3) has a fixed memorizable structure (Mieder 2004: 3)
- 4) has syntactic and textual independence (Corpas Pastor 1996: 148; Honeck 1997: 11-12)
- 5) is used for its dogmatism (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 51)
- 6) fulfills a certain communicative function (Mieder 2005: 209)
- 7) often shows an aesthetical inclination (Villers 2022)
- 8) is generally used figuratively (Honeck 1997: 84; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 52)

Although these are the most frequently cited defining features considered in the various definition attempts analyzed, the heterogeneity of the proverbial stock of any language includes items that may not fulfill all these requisites, a clear example of which is the lack of rhetorical devices in many proverbs, as mentioned in 7). This complexity often leads to the misclassification of different types of phrasemes as proverbs, which, in turn, hinders the production of a widely accepted definition. Hence, for the sake of exemplification, when we refer to proverbs in the present paper, we mean items such as "Strike while the iron is hot" (Wilson 1970: 781), which meets most of the characteristics listed above. On the other hand, phrases such as "to kick the bucket" (Ayto 2010: 194) or "like a bull in a china shop" (Ayto 2010:

48), despite showing an undeniable degree of “proverbiality” as alluded to by Taylor in the quote above, lack one of the unambiguous defining features of proverbs that distinguishes them from other phraseological categories: their textual independence; that is, proverbs, contrary to other types of phraseologisms are considered to be complete sentences. The reason for this is that, to use either of the two examples mentioned, the speaker needs to add other elements to compose a grammatically correct sentence with a complete meaning; accordingly, S. Fiedler (2007: 39–40, 43–44) identifies “to kick the bucket” and “like a bull in a china shop” as a ‘phraseological nomination’ and a ‘stereotyped comparison’ respectively.

Apart from the formal aspects of proverbs that help us conduct a coherent analysis, there is an element that becomes apparent in their connection to the Bourdieusian model: their traditionality as the result of being elements of folklore handed down from generation to generation (Dundes 2007). This causes many proverbs to “embody conservative values and perspectives and encourage respect for authority” (Louis 2000: 178), which plays a key role in the perceived dogmatic character of proverbs. Likewise, the datedness of proverbs and their peremptoriness are vital to understanding how proverbs exemplify Bourdieu’s Field Theory, especially in relation to how symbolic capital affects social interactions. As the French author explained,

Utterances receive their value (and their sense) only in their relation to a market, characterized by a particular law of price formation. The value of the utterance depends on the relation of power that is concretely established between the speakers’ linguistic competences, understood both as their capacity for production and as their capacity for appropriation and appreciation (Bourdieu 1991: 67).

In the case of proverbs, this occurrence presents some peculiarities because, contrary to quotations, which can be readily attributed to respected authors with, presumably, a significant amount of symbolic capital supporting their claim, proverbs derive their perceived sense of legitimacy from their unknown origin as manifestations of popular wisdom. Thus, the anonymous nature of proverbs confers on the speakers the argumentation to

defend their point of view, aligning it with a framework of debate regarded as legitimate and beneficial to society. As will be explained below, this is highly relevant for understanding the connections between proverb-use and Bourdieu's conceptualization of how interpersonal exchanges are governed by various regulating factors, especially in the case of linguistic interactions.

2. Overview of Bourdieusian concepts and Field Theory

Given the complexity of the model proposed by Bourdieu, some elements of his taxonomy may require explanation to demonstrate their suitability for analyzing how proverbs are used by speakers in communication, particularly with regard to their function as symbolic violence, which is the main focus of the present article. These concepts are:

- Capital
- Symbolic violence
- *Doxa*
- *Habitus*
- Field

A problem that one might encounter when approaching Bourdieu's works is the fact that the French author rarely provides clear, straightforward definitions of the concepts he uses, which are fundamental for a proper understanding of the social model he proposed, known as Field Theory. For this reason, it is often more accessible to rely on third-party analyses of Bourdieu's works, whose verbose and convoluted style makes him a rather inaccessible author for readers who are neophytes in sociological matters in general and Bourdieu's publications in particular. First, it must be considered that Bourdieu conceptualizes human interactions in terms of commercial exchanges. Consequently, an individual's actions, or in the case of our analysis, his or her words, are assigned a certain value according to his or her 'capital'.

To most readers, 'capital' relates to an economic context. However, in Field Theory, the concept of 'capital' is broader, as "Bourdieu's purpose is to extend the sense of the term 'cap-

ital' by employing it in a wider system of exchanges whereby assets of different kinds are transformed and exchanged within complex networks or circuits within and across different fields" (Moore 2008: 99). Therefore, in addition to economic capital, Bourdieu also identifies symbolic capital, *i.e.*, an individual's prestige as perceived by others; cultural capital, *i.e.*, an individual's acquired knowledge and skills; or social capital, *i.e.*, an individual's relationships and connections. These concepts may be used to explain why proverbs are used and how a speaker employs them in different situations. In Bourdieu's system, human interactions are determined by an individual's "cultural and social resources" (Crossley 2008: 88) and these interactions are motivated by the "accumulation and exchange [of cultural and social resources] as humans struggle to maintain and enhance their position in the social order" (Swartz 2013: 55). More relevant to the purpose of the present article, proverbs may be used to affirm one's stance on a subject in connection with the symbolic and cultural capital attributed to proverbs, which in some cases produces what Bourdieu labeled as 'symbolic violence,' that is, the way in which "contemporary social hierarchies and social inequality, as well as the suffering that they cause, are produced and maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination" (Schubert, 2008: 179). Accordingly, violence may not only be physical, but also symbolic and to produce it, proverbs prove an invaluable device, as will be shown. As D. L. Swartz (2013: 89) explains,

[Symbolic violence] is experienced as a taken-for-granted, natural, inevitable state of affairs, especially on the part of the dominated. The language of symbolic violence is intended to capture this effect of symbolic power. [...] Bourdieu offers the following definition: 'Symbolic violence is "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication (Swartz, p. 83) and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling' (Swartz 2013: 89).

Consequently, our interpretation of symbolic violence in relation to proverbs is a consciously fallacious employment of proverbs for self-justification based on the premise that the beliefs they

contain are indisputable. Even though society has advanced in many respects, particularly regarding some backward social ideas expressed in proverbs such as the justification for the mistreatment of women, the speaker employs them to rebut the arguments of the other party. Hence, since Bourdieu considers language an “instrument of action and power” (Bourdieu 1991: 37), it may be used as a tool of domination that can only be applied unidirectionally by the dominant class towards the dominated, whose power “[derives] not only from possession of material resources but also from possession of cultural and social resources” (Crossley 2008: 86). Furthermore, not only does the dominating class enjoy its position of prominence thanks to the acquiescence of the dominated, but it also contributes to perpetuating the set of beliefs that constitute the *doxa*, according to which, those roles are assigned. Therefore, the conservativeness of proverbs favors the maintenance of the *status quo* in which the dominant class, or in this case the dominant point of view, remains unchallenged.

As hinted above, central to Bourdieu’s system are the concepts of ‘*doxa*’ and ‘*habitus*’, terms that also seem readily applicable to an analysis of the use of proverbs. In the Bourdieusian system, ‘*doxa*’ is “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma” (Bourdieu 2000: 16). Incidentally, in the case of proverbs, they are often used as the verbalization of those “fundamental beliefs” to which Bourdieu refers. Conversely, *habitus* “focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others” (Maton 2008: 51). Therefore, these two concepts, rather than being mutually exclusive, are complementary and can be interpreted in relation to the distinction between canonical uses of proverbs, *i.e.*, the standard wording and meaning attributed to a given proverb, and proverbial modification, which is consciously undertaken to fulfill a communicative need encountered by a speaker. In parallel, we can also find proverb variation, which is involuntary and results from the folkloric nature of proverbs as they are being transmitted by word of mouth. Consequently, although Bourdieu “located proverbs and sayings as unmediated signs of the *habitus*” on the

grounds that “[most] proverbs in his text are unattributed or attributed to a generic speaker” (Goodman 2003: 784), this leaves out the more institutionalized character of proverbs, rendering Bourdieu’s assessment insufficient to capture the complexity of proverbs due to its inability to account for an individual’s agency in the use of proverbs when that individual may be introducing his or her own experience into the equation.

From our point of view, proverbs may be regarded as *doxa* or *habitus* depending on how they are used. Hence, when proverbs are used in their canonical form which is widely received, and which is preserved in authoritative works such as proverb dictionaries, their use seems to be more appropriately considered as belonging to the sphere of *doxa*. However, proverbs can also be modified, either by adding, removing, or substituting some of their components, or by deliberately twisting their accepted meaning (Fiedler 2008: 90–91). In such cases, the speakers would be alluding to a widely accepted statement to support their opinion by introducing some form of manipulation or interpretation of the proverb, thus relating to the concept of *habitus*. This is supported by proverb scholarship on the capacity of proverbs to undergo various types of modification (see Mieder and Litovkina 1999; Mieder 2004: 28; Litovkina 2015), which transcends the notion of proverbs as fossilized uses of language and allows for a more profound understanding of how proverbs function in communication within Bourdieu’s Field Theory. If, as P. Bourdieu and L. Wacquant (1992: 145) claim, “every linguistic exchange contains the potentiality of an act of power”, utterances containing proverbs are representative of this, as speakers use them to reaffirm their own righteousness.

Lastly, there is another Bourdieusian concept relevant to the scope of our study and helpful for understanding the complexities of Bourdieu’s theory, apart from the fact that it is used to name it: the concept of ‘field’, which

[denotes] arenas of production, circulation, appropriation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate, exchange, and monopolize these different kinds of capital. Fields may be thought of as structured spaces that organize around specific types of capital or combinations of capital. There are power

arenas as well as power resources in Bourdieu's political sociology (Swartz 2013: 57).

In relation to our analysis, the examples presented can be located within the field of social media, currently one of the most powerful means of communication, particularly in the case of profiles belonging to such influential individuals such as E. Musk. The current relevance of social media is such that, even from a non-Bourdiesian perspective, it is an unquestionable "arena of production of goods" as it provides a variety of lucrative opportunities to users willing to explore them. However, this does not imply that proverbs can only produce symbolic violence in this particular field; it has been included here because it is one of the most common settings for interpersonal communication today and one that, contrary to other contexts, allows for the interaction between individuals with radically different levels of symbolic, cultural, and social capital. Therefore, in the following pages, some proverbial uses by E. Musk in his tweets will be discussed as representative of symbolic violence within the field of sociopolitical debate on social media.

3. Elon Musk's proverbial references as symbolic violence

Within the scope of Critical Discourse Analysis and in order to provide some practical examples of what is presented here as a symbolically violent use of proverbs, various tweets posted by Elon Musk between the last quarter of 2023 and 2024 will be analyzed. Elon Musk, who purchased the microblogging platform Twitter in 2022 for \$44 billion (Conger and Hirsch 2022), is an avid Twitter user, now X, whose popularity on the platform skyrocketed after its buyout. Musk is widely regarded as a successful businessperson and is the CEO of three enormously influential companies: Tesla, SpaceX, and now, Twitter/X. To his cohort of followers, he is little short of an idol and a role model, and his tweets have a tremendous impact, amassing hundreds of thousands of interactions, with Musk's account having the largest number of followers on X. For these reasons, Elon Musk seemed a perfect fit for our analysis, especially given his use of proverbs that aligns with our interpretation of proverbs as symbolic violence, as stated above.

Apart from his entrepreneurial endeavors, Musk is also known on Twitter as an outspoken pundit with a “true conservative bent” (Peters 2022). Considering Musk’s straightforwardness and willingness to share his point of view on current affairs, together with his conservative stance on social issues, and his large following¹ and consequent impact on public opinion, he seemed the ideal subject for analysis of proverbial references in his discourse. After a survey of his X posts in late 2023 and 2024, various instances of proverbial use were found; of these, the examples discussed below appear to be clear examples of the potential use of proverbs as symbolic violence.

The first example found concerns Musk’s resolve to make Twitter/X a profitable platform. For this purpose, X has introduced a series of changes since Musk’s takeover that, in his opinion, should enhance the platform’s economic viability. Many of these changes have faced opposition from the community, such as the proposal to remove the block functionality, which allowed users to prevent interactions with other users exhibiting abusive or offensive behavior. In this regard, despite Musk’s claims that “‘it makes no sense’ to have both ‘mute’ and ‘block’, the Community Notes feature on X noted that the blocking function ‘is a basic safety feature that allows basic protection for victims of abuse and stalking’” (Tinoco 2023). In this context, on September 6th, 2023, Musk posted the following:



Figure 1: Elon Musk’s tweet posted on September 6, 2023.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1699231052089147772?s=20>

¹ As of the composition of this article, Elon Musk’s official Twitter profile (<https://x.com/elonmusk>) has over 238 million followers.

In his tweet, Musk is evidently alluding to the well-known proverb “he who lives by the sword dies by the sword” (Speake 2008: 190), as a means of supporting his view on the aforementioned topic of ridding Twitter of the “block” function. Moreover, not only does Musk resort to a popular, recognizable proverb to justify his position on the proposed changes to the platform, but he also makes a proverbial reference that includes language that is explicitly violent, as the dichotomy ‘live’ versus ‘die’ implies confrontation and a side coming about as victorious over its opposing, fatally defeated side, especially when identified as an allusion to the proverb in question. Furthermore, reading between the lines, an interpretation of Musk’s words could be the implication that users who rely on the block function have no place on his site. This may be taken by some users as a direct attack considering that they were there before Musk purchased the platform, and it relates to Musk’s crusade against political correctness and in favor of his peculiar understanding of freedom of speech.

In addition to his vehement defense of the measures he intended to take, Musk is prone to sharing his thoughts about current social issues, topics that seem well-suited to his use of symbolic violence. This symbolic violence is most evident when Musk uses proverbs in his tweets to support his stance on a certain topic given his privileged position on the platform, his perceived conservativeness, and the natural tendency of proverbs to preserve the traditional, broadly accepted *status quo*, often under the trite argument that the defended position represents “common sense,” a concept that is “in large measure determined by who exercises power and domination in a society or a social institution” (Fairclough 2015: 113).

An example of Musk’s opposition to what has become consensual to the majority of society concerns the phenomenon of fake news and the concept of post-truth. In this context, social media has been placed at the center of the debate for enabling people to spread falsehoods, often for political purposes. One of the best-known examples of this was the Cambridge Analytica affair, which received significant attention for the role that Facebook played in swaying the 2016 US presidential election towards the Republican candidate, D. Trump (Ward 2018). Yet,

Twitter has also received some criticism for its alleged conservative bias despite Musk being a “self-proclaimed ‘free-speech absolutist’” (Ecarma 2023). Nevertheless, Musk’s self-definition reveals some contradictions regarding the concepts of freedom of speech and the democratization of access to information. On the one hand, there is the looming threat that X will become a subscription site, which would prevent many current users from accessing it and would likely make other users disinterested. On the other hand, Elon Musk has unwaveringly voiced the reservations that certain conservative pundits have sown into the public debate, questioning the reliability of such a powerfully democratizing resource as Wikipedia.

Apart from being frowned upon by academia, not without reason, some conservative media outlets have appointed Wikipedia as their sworn enemy. This is often done under the pretext of inaccuracy and lack of rigor since, seemingly, anyone may log into the platform and edit any entry of their choice, along with the platform’s alleged leftist bias (Lott 2021), a claim that is documented as far back as 2007 (Johnson 2007), when Wikipedia was still in its infancy. However, the former argument chooses to overlook the quality control system that Wikipedia entries undergo. Whereas it is true that loopholes are found by mischievous editors, malicious changes are promptly reversed by the community of volunteer editors. This alleged inappropriateness of Wikipedia as a reliable source is based on a principle of authority, according to which traditional reference works issued by authoritative publishers are sanctioned as the only incontrovertible sources of knowledge. This is an unsound position that may also be explained with the help of Bourdieu’s postulates inasmuch as Wikipedia’s alleged unreliability is linked to the lack of symbolic capital held by anonymous editors compared to the symbolic capital of a renowned publisher. Even more distressingly, this view neglects an undeniable truth: Wikipedia’s ability to grant universal, free access to human knowledge in many world languages.

Considering all of this, and bearing in mind Musk’s sociopolitical stance, it is no surprise that, while advocating “free speech” for \$9 a month, he would resort to deriding a cooperative resource like Wikipedia. In the post below, shared by Musk

himself, he is quoted using an expansion to the proverb “history is written by the victors” (Mieder 2021: 105) to ridicule the labor of Wikipedia editors. As can be clearly seen, by referring to a proverbial piece of wisdom, Musk uses the paremia to mockingly question the reliability of Wikipedia as an objective resource:



Figure 2: Elon Musk’s tweet posted on September 19, 2023.

Source: <https://x.com/KanekoaTheGreat/status/1703911656156430785?s=20>

With such a statement, Musk is evidently undermining Wikipedia’s credibility by expressing his distrust of one of the most visited reference websites around the world. Furthermore, part of Musk’s criticism might stem from the fact that Wikipedia operates on a collaborative system, which is diametrically opposed to the model implemented by him in his own company, and which depends on Musk making every decision and personally overseeing every aspect involved in the management of X.

Related to this same topic is the rise of AI as a source of information, which does not seem to bother Musk as much as the use of Wikipedia, possibly because X has since implemented its own AI model, Grok. This is despite scientific evidence proving the negative impact of AI on people's cognitive development (see Jose et al. 2025), on the one hand, and on the environment (see Alnafrah 2025), on the other, neither of which seem to concern Musk in the slightest, though, as shown by the fact that, in response to someone who expressed his concerns about the use of AI, he responded as shown below:



Figure 3: Elon Musk's tweet posted on March 9, 2024.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1766575787388416005?s=20>

Little explanation seems necessary to justify the use of the proverbial sentence “always look on the bright side of life” (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992: 539) as an example of symbolic violence when it is used to justify the demise, whether literal or figurative, of humanity by means of a tool from which Musk himself profits as it is now an integral part of X. Moreover, the fact that it is accompanied by the musical note emoji, which one cannot help but understand as a reference to the famous final scene in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Jones 1979) rather than a conscious reference to a proverb, only adds insult to injury, increasing the aggressiveness of his post and demonstrating an absolute lack of empathy for an issue with enormous social and environmental repercussions.

Another explicitly symbolically violent use of proverbs by Elon Musk took place on June 28, 2024, when he again modified a rather popular proverbial sentence, i.e., “truth is the first casualty of war” (Mieder 2021: 185), expanding it to include “the war that is politics.” Here, apart from the obvious hostile references to ‘casualty’ and ‘war’, which are explicitly violent in themselves, Musk quotes Bill Ackman’s tweet criticizing former President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party. In this tweet, Musk exploits his position to present himself as the supposed defender of truth, something that, as has been shown, is questionable. Also, he chooses to omit the fact that he participated actively in the 2024 presidential campaign that would lead to Donald Trump’s reelection. Therefore, not only is the tweet cynical but, by avoiding presenting himself as an actor in the context he is explicitly criticizing, Musk evades any kind of responsibility in a process in which he was involved. Moreover, there is an even greater degree of cynicism in the fact that, despite his acknowledgment of the evils of politics, the fact that he still decided to campaign for Trump shows that he was willing to participate in what he regarded as reprehensible. Thus, the ambivalence of using a proverb and taking advantage of its argumentative power to condemn something in which he decided to participate is precisely the type of use of proverbial wisdom analyzed in this paper, and may be interpreted as an example of symbolic violence, which is further supported by his aggressive choice of words.



Figure 4: Elon Musk’s tweet posted on June 28, 2024.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1806697085107851307?s=20>

Even more illuminating and representative of Elon Musk's standpoint and his paremiological minimum is his repeated use of the proverb "might makes right" (Wilson 1970: 530) as well as his own reformulation as an antiproverb in the form of "weak makes right." On April 26, 2024, Musk tweeted both versions within one minute, leading to an apparent contradiction. A few months later, on August 9 and October 11 of the same year, he used his antiproverb in response to someone else's tweet, as reproduced below. These instances show once again how Musk repeatedly resorts to proverbial wisdom to express his political standpoint, here in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. In the first of these tweets, Musk takes a jab at "wokeism" in the context of this conflict, as progressives tend to side with Palestine, which would relate to "the oppressed" in his tweet. Furthermore, by labeling Palestine and its sympathizers as the "weak" and oversimplifying the conflict as a struggle between a strong and a weak side, Musk attempts to undermine Palestinian resistance by questioning whether the fact that they are considered "the oppressed" makes them automatically the rightful side and whether the oppressors must be considered "the bad guys," hinting at the fact that such oppression might be justified.

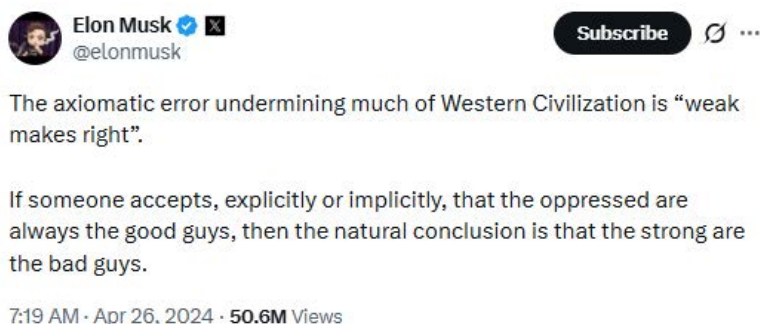


Figure 5. Elon Musk's tweet posted on April 26, 2024.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1783727565989134488?s=20>

It is evident that Musk chooses to overlook the complexity of the conflict and the fact that the oppressors are not seen as "the bad guys" by many only because they are stronger, but because they

have repeatedly initiated the attacks. Moreover, this opinion, despite being coherent with Musk's own position of privilege as an anti-woke opinion-maker, may lead some to understand this tweet as a contradictory statement, both in relation to his previous comment about how history is written in his criticism of Wikipedia, as well as to his second reference to his own anti-proverb, reproduced below. From a strictly paremiological point of view, though, it must be noted that despite the somewhat witty modification to the existing proverb, its canonical form relies on the internal rhyme between 'might' and 'right' to reinforce its argumentative effect, something that is lost in Musk's antiproverb. However, again in comparison to the previous tweet about Wikipedia, this is not the only apparent incongruity which Musk has ever displayed. Remarkably, just one minute after posting this tweet, Musk posted another one, this time reproducing the proverb in its canonical form, which, on a superficial level, might have been perceived as a contradiction by many:

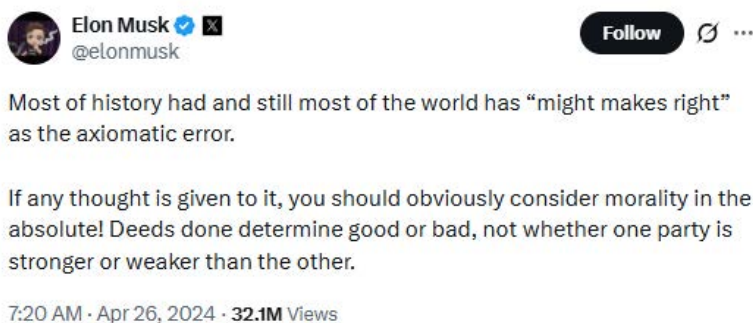


Figure 6. Elon Musk's tweet posted on April 26, 2024.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1783727843203268632?s=20>

If one makes an effort to understand what Musk meant, though, in his attempt to explain his stance on morality, he seems to be advocating individual accountability for one's actions, regardless of whether one is on the weaker or stronger side. That is, no one is inherently good or bad simply for being the stronger or weaker side respectively. Moreover, it is also remarkable that the previous tweet, which comes across as more symbolically

violent as it directly criticizes those siding with “the oppressed,” which many would simply consider part of human nature, has had a much greater impact than the second tweet, in which Musk explains his true intentions in a more grounded fashion with 50.6 million views and 32.1 million views respectively. This is relevant because it is difficult not to believe that this is by design, particularly considering that Musk owns the platform, which promotes engagement for profit (Williams 2024). Consequently, whereas in the first tweet Musk adopts a bolder position by criticizing his opponents on the grounds of power, something that aligns with Bourdieu’s Field Theory, his more moderate explanation may be seen as a sign of weakness and, therefore, detrimental to his public image as a polemicist. Yet, this did not stop him from resorting to the same formulation repeatedly to criticize those with different opinions. On August 19, 2024, Tesla advocate and conservative influencer Alexandra Merz criticized what she saw as the seemingly incoherent set of principles of the woke movement, bringing together abortion, LGBTQ+ rights and the Palestine conflict. The adherence to these apparently unrelated concepts is insightfully explained by such an influential figure as G. Lakoff (2014), who argues that people support seemingly unconnected issues like gender identity, global warming, or gun control according to the way in which they conceive society and politics as representing the “nurturing parent” or “strict father” models, the former explaining people with progressive ideas and the latter, those people with conservative ones.



Figure 7. Elon Musk's tweet posted on August 19, 2024.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1825360944802795768?s=20>

Although to Musk and Mertz these beliefs may be unconnected, Lakoff does an excellent job explaining why they are not. In his response, Musk alludes again to the false dichotomy between "weak makes right" and "might makes right" to defend a third way in which everyone is responsible for their actions,

regardless of their affiliation. However, before stating this, he used judgmental adjectives such as “absurd” or “contradictory” to define those who defend women’s right to choose, gay rights, and the freedom of Palestine, while, at the same time, surreptitiously describing them as “weak” leading to what may be considered as another example of his use of proverbial references incurring symbolic violence. It should not go unnoticed that, in this tweet, Musk adds another element that may be associated with proverbs, as is the case of the phrase “the root [...] of,” which is found in the well-known proverbs “money is the root of all evil” (Speake, 2008: 214) or “idleness is the root of all evil” (Wilson, 1970: 396).

But this is not the last time Musk employed his antiproverb. Whereas so far there seems to have been an evolution in the way he assessed his own version of the proverb in relation to the original, in a tweet posted in October 2024, Musk reached his final conclusion. If barely half a year earlier he had described “weak makes right” as wrong, and a month prior to the tweet under scrutiny, “[w]eak makes right” [was] at least as foolish as ‘might makes right,’” by October 11, 2024, “weak makes right” was now “potentially a more dangerous philosophy than ‘might makes right,’” finalizing the evolution of his self-created anti-proverb, as shown below in his response to like-minded venture investor Shaun Maguire’s criticism of wokeism, once again in relation to the Palestinian conflict and concluding with the tautology “right is right,” which one may wonder whether it was meant as “conservativeness makes correctness:”



Figure 8. Elon Musk's tweet posted on October 11, 2024.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1844524931083882771?s=20>

Here, it is worth noting that, as is widely accepted, proverbs are context-dependent, which explains the existence of seemingly contradictory proverbs such as “many hands make light work” (Wilson, 1970: 509) and “too many cooks spoil the broth” (Wilson, 1970: 831) or “absence makes the heart grow fonder” (Speake, 2008: 1) and “out of sight, out of mind” (Wilson, 1970: 602), to name just a few examples. Nevertheless, it is less common for the same speaker to change their understanding of a proverbial sentence so markedly within a matter of months. Yet, this also demonstrates how proverbs, or pretended proverbs for that matter, may be used to support one's opinion in the context of political discussion.

There is one final example that deserves mention, despite not being a proper proverb because it lacks the condition of being a complete sentence. Nonetheless, the phrase in question has some proverbial undertones to it and may come across as violent according to Bourdieu's Field Theory in the context in which it was applied. In a September 2023 tweet, Musk used the phrase "a wolf in sheep's clothing" (Wilson 1970: 907) in connection with the passing of Bill AB 957 in California, a piece of legislation that was controversial because, according to it, "parents affirming their child's chosen gender would be an extra piece of information used in making a decision about parental custody" (Haubner 2023). Such were the circumstances surrounding the following tweet by Musk:



Figure 9. Elon Musk's tweet posted on September 19, 2023.

Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1700297475628871719?s=20>

It is no news that society, at least in most of the Western hemisphere, is moving towards greater inclusion for collectives that have traditionally suffered discrimination. One such collective

includes transgender people, whose ability to reassess their official gender identity is becoming accepted in an increasing number of countries. This position, which often depends on one's perspective on socio-political matters depending on Lakoff's model of the "nurturing parent" or "strict father" mentioned above, is often criticized by the advocates of the so-called family values, among whom Musk is included, although not without contradictions. Proof of this contradictory approach is the fact that he has 11 children by three different women (Hamilton 2023). Moreover, the fact that one of Musk's children is transgender and has cut ties with her father after transitioning in 2022 (Lewis 2022) may also have contributed at a subconscious level to reaffirming Musk's stance and his opinionatedness on a topic that may be mistakenly believed to be alien to him. Given the circumstances, Musk's statement appears as utterly aggressive, since he makes a free interpretation of the legal text to justify his opposition to the very premise of the legal piece in question. What is more, given his family history, it seems a blatant act of negligence, as he does not hesitate to share some views that will ostracize many people, given his potential reach, but most notably, his own daughter. This suggests that the defense of family values, at least in the case under scrutiny, is often merely a façade behind which the conservative agenda is being promoted by one of the most influential people in the world.

4. Conclusions

The first and most evident conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis is the suitability of P. Bourdieu's Field Theory for examining how proverbs are used in communication, particularly when they are twisted to defend one's political stance. According to the French sociologist, people's interactions are determined by an individual's capital in relation to the framework established by the *doxa*, and how this is negotiated by the individual with regard to his or her *habitus*.

Additionally, despite Bourdieu's own identification of proverbs as belonging to the sphere of the *habitus*, this seems to be inaccurate. As has been argued here, proverbs may belong to both spheres depending on how they are used. Thus, canonical

uses of proverbs, in which the speakers do not introduce their own perception of the context surrounding a given act of communication, seem to be more adequately considered as *doxa*, as they seek to establish certain beliefs and opinions as the only acceptable or desirable ones for society. In such cases, an individual reproduces a fossilized, anonymous sentence that has been sanctioned as valid by some immaterial authority with the acquiescence of society, often promoting conservative ideas and values that do not uphold the principles of the majority of society. Conversely, there are cases in which an individual adapts an existing proverb for their use in a context that differs from the usual one to which it is applied, in which case the speaker is making an adaptation based on his or her own individual perception. In this instance, according to Bourdieu's postulates about his Field Theory, proverbs may be said to move away from the sphere of the *doxa* and into the sphere of the *habitus*.

In both cases, speakers allude to proverbs, whether in their canonical form or as modifications, for their dogmatism, as they are perceived as unquestionable truths. What this does is endow one's speech with the apparent argumentative advantage that these discursive devices grant their user. Moreover, in the case of canonical uses, the effect may be immediate, depending on the receiver's paremiological competence, or "paremiological capital" in Bourdieusian terms. For modified proverbs, this competence becomes even more relevant as a receiver's failure to identify a proverbial modification would render the speaker's intentions ineffective.

Finally, some cases have been identified in which the use of proverbs may incur what Bourdieu labeled as "symbolic violence." This becomes apparent when a speaker possesses a substantial amount of symbolic capital, and especially in the case of proverbs that have been modified to distort their original intention to support the speaker's claims. In this article, we have analyzed a series of tweets by Elon Musk as illustrative examples of this use of proverbs as symbolic violence. However, it must also be acknowledged that, on the one hand, this is not necessarily an occurrence exclusive to conservative-minded individuals, although the inherent conservativeness of proverbs favors their use by speakers with a similar worldview and, on the other hand,

other analyses of the discourse of similarly outspoken public figures with comparable levels of symbolic and social capital, as well as the responses by other users garnered, would contribute to providing a more complete understanding of the phenomenon examined here. In short, by using proverbs and proverbial wisdom in such a manner, the speaker undermines another individual's point of view on the grounds of a supposedly widely accepted social consensus regarding a topic, which often relies on the dated nature of proverbs and the outlook they proclaim. For all the reasons expounded, Bourdieusian Field Theory provides a particularly suitable framework for the analysis of how proverbs are used in communication and for what purpose. Even more fascinating is the fact that Bourdieu's teachings allow us to identify a specific use of proverbs that relates to his concept of symbolic violence, which may often go unnoticed.

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