

memetic.ml

Description

Memetics (also referred to colloquially as **memeology**) is the study of information and culture based on an analogy with [Darwinian evolution](#). Proponents describe memetics as an approach to [evolutionary models](#) of cultural [information transfer](#). Critics regard memetics as a [pseudoscience](#).^{[[citation needed](#)]} Memetics describes how an idea can propagate successfully, but doesn't necessarily imply a concept is factual.^[1]

The term [meme](#) was coined in [Richard Dawkins'](#) 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, but Dawkins later distanced himself from the resulting field of study.^[2] Analogous to a [gene](#), the meme was conceived as a "unit of culture" (an idea, belief, pattern of behaviour, etc.) which is "hosted" in the minds of one or more individuals, and which can reproduce itself in the sense of jumping from the mind of one person to the mind of another. Thus what would otherwise be regarded as one individual influencing another to adopt a belief is seen as an idea-replicator reproducing itself in a new host. As with genetics, particularly under a [Dawkinsian](#) interpretation, a meme's success may be due to its contribution to the effectiveness of its host.

The [Usenet newsgroup](#) alt.memetics started in 1993 with peak posting years in the mid to late 1990s.^[3] The *Journal of Memetics* was published electronically from 1997 to 2005.^[4]

In his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), the evolutionary biologist [Richard Dawkins](#) used the term [meme](#) to describe a unit of human [cultural transmission](#) analogous to the [gene](#), arguing that replication also happens in [culture](#), albeit in a different sense. Bella Hiscock outlined a similar hypothesis in 1975,^[5] which Dawkins referenced. [Cultural evolution](#) itself is a much older topic, with a history that dates back at least as far as [Darwin's](#) era.

Dawkins (1976) proposed that the meme is a unit of information residing in the brain and is the mutating [replicator](#) in human [cultural evolution](#). It is a pattern that can influence its surroundings – that is, it has causal agency – and can propagate. This proposal resulted in debate among sociologists, biologists, and scientists of other disciplines. Dawkins himself did not provide a sufficient explanation of how the replication of units of information in the brain controls human behaviour and ultimately culture, and the principal topic of the book was genetics. Dawkins apparently did not intend to present a comprehensive theory of *memetics* in *The Selfish Gene*, but rather coined the term *meme* in a speculative spirit. Accordingly, different researchers came to define the term "unit of information" in different ways.

The modern memetics movement dates from the mid-1980s. A January 1983 "[Metamagical Themas](#)" column^[6] by [Douglas Hofstadter](#), in *Scientific American*, was influential – as was his 1985 book of the same name. "Memeticist" was coined as analogous to "geneticist" – originally in *The Selfish Gene*. Later Arel Lucas suggested that the discipline that studies memes and their connections to human and other carriers of them be known as "memetics" by analogy with "genetics".^[7] Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*

has been a factor in attracting the attention of people of disparate intellectual backgrounds. Another stimulus was the publication in 1991 of [Consciousness Explained](#) by Tufts University philosopher [Daniel Dennett](#), which incorporated the meme concept into a [theory of the mind](#). In his 1991 essay "[Viruses of the Mind](#)", Richard Dawkins used memetics to explain the phenomenon of religious belief and the various characteristics of organised religions. By then, memetics had also become a theme appearing in fiction (e.g. Neal Stephenson's [Snow Crash](#)).

The idea of *language as a virus* had already been introduced by [William S. Burroughs](#) as early as 1962 in his book [The Ticket That Exploded](#), and later in [The Electronic Revolution](#), published in 1970 in [The Job](#). [Douglas Rushkoff](#) explored the same concept in [Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture](#) in 1995.

However, the foundation of memetics in its full modern incarnation originated in the publication in 1996 of two books by authors outside the academic mainstream: *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* by former [Microsoft](#) executive turned motivational speaker and professional poker-player, [Richard Brodie](#), and *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society* by [Aaron Lynch](#), a mathematician and philosopher who worked for many years as an engineer at [Fermilab](#). Lynch claimed to have conceived his theory totally independently of any contact with academics in the cultural evolutionary sphere, and apparently was not even aware of Dawkins' [The Selfish Gene](#) until his book was very close to publication.

Around the same time as the publication of the books by Lynch and Brodie the e-journal [Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission](#) appeared on the web. It was first hosted by the Centre for Policy Modelling at [Manchester Metropolitan University](#) but later taken over by [Francis Heylighen](#) of the [CLEA](#) research institute at the [Vrije Universiteit Brussel](#). The e-journal soon became the central point for publication and debate within the nascent memeticist community. (There had been a short-lived paper-based memetics publication starting in 1990, the *Journal of Ideas* edited by Elan Moritz.[8]) In 1999, [Susan Blackmore](#), a psychologist at the [University of the West of England](#), published [The Meme Machine](#), which more fully worked out the ideas of Dennett, Lynch, and Brodie and attempted to compare and contrast them with various approaches from the cultural evolutionary mainstream, as well as providing novel, and controversial, memetics-based theories for the evolution of language and the human sense of individual selfhood.

The term “meme”

The term “meme” derives from the [Ancient Greek](#) ???????? (*mim?t?s*), meaning “imitator, pretender”. The similar term “mneme” was used in 1904, by the German evolutionary biologist [Richard Semon](#), best known for his development of the [engram](#) theory of [memory](#), in his work *Die mnemischen Empfindungen in ihren Beziehungen zu den Originalempfindungen*, translated into English in 1921 as *The Mneme*^[citation needed]. Until [Daniel Schacter](#) published *Forgotten Ideas, Neglected Pioneers: Richard Semon and the Story of Memory* in 2000, Semon's work had little influence, though it was quoted extensively in [Erwin Schrödinger](#)'s prescient 1956 [Tarnier Lecture](#) “[Mind and Matter](#)”. Richard Dawkins (1976) apparently coined the word “meme” independently of Semon, writing this:

“‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it

is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word même."[\[citation needed\]](#)

Category

1. External Domains

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