

# From ‘luck’ to ‘wealth’

## The stylistic (re)distribution of *fortuné* in Modern French

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This chapter examines the semantic development of *fortuné* in Modern French, charting its sociostylistic variation from the 18th to the 21st century. It focuses particularly on the increasing use of *fortuné* in its current sense of ‘rich/wealthy’, and the negative reception of this new sense in most lexicographical works up until the 20th century. The study aims to show how this semantic innovation produced a lexical stylistic division, opposing a traditional usage (considered standard) to a ‘neological’ one (considered non-standard). Having undergone a shift of meaning from ‘lucky/happy’ to ‘wealthy’, *fortuné* is currently most commonly understood as a euphemism for ‘rich’.

### Introduction

The case of *fortuné* in Modern French<sup>1</sup> illustrates the ways in which a study of the stylistic<sup>2</sup> variation of a lexical item over time can be helpful in understanding the reasons for its present-day usage. As Romaine (2005: 1697) remarks, one of the tasks of historical sociolinguistics is to provide data in order to “us[e] the past to explain the present”, drawing on sociostylistic variation in order to do this. This approach is particularly suitable in tracing the link between the negative attitude

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1. The results presented here come from an ongoing research project including *fortune*, *chance*, *hasard* and *risque* in Modern French.

2. The term *style* is used here in a broad sense to refer to the way in which certain linguistic forms are associated with specific values or text types (social values, how technical or formal a text is considered to be and the extent to which the forms used are idiolectal or conform to particular genres).

to *fortuné*'s new semantic use before the first half of the 20th century and the fact that this item is now largely employed as a euphemism<sup>3</sup> for 'rich'.

The data used to investigate the shift in meaning in *fortuné* come from written sources contained in Frantext (16th-20th century), and more precisely from a period beginning in the 18th century. A number of scholars (Gadet 2000, Armstrong 2001, Ayres-Bennett 2004, Romaine 2005) have highlighted the limitations of such sources. These difficulties are exacerbated when the object of study is variation, the view of the linguistic facts being somewhat limited. Nevertheless, although we have to acknowledge practical restrictions in the Frantext corpus such as weak stylistic annotation, scant representation of non-standard texts before the 20th century, and unbalanced genre sampling, one may consider this massive collection of more than 210,000,000<sup>4</sup> tokens as a suitable basis for drawing tentative conclusions.

In preparation for the investigation of the sociostylistic variation of *fortuné*, two methods have been adopted to explore its shift in meaning: first, an analysis of the lexical context (collocations and other co-occurring items) and, secondly, a survey of metalinguistic comments (particularly lexicographical descriptions).

### The semantic change of *fortuné* in Modern French: from 'happy' to 'rich'

Whether it is used as an adjective or to a lesser extent as a noun, the shift in sense of the word *fortuné*, from 'happy/blessed by fortune' to 'rich/wealthy', appears to reflect sociohistorical trends. Relating *fortuné* to the first sense of *fortune* given in their dictionary (i.e., the sense of 'material wealth/riches'), Dubois *et al.* (1966) indicate that its most common usage in the middle of the 20th century had become that of 'rich'. Picoche (2006, under the entry for *fortuné*) proposes that this meaning developed in the 17th century: the semantic innovation may indeed date back to the 17th century, but its spread seems to originate in the second half of the 18th century, at least as far as written texts are concerned.

Both sociohistorical and morphosemantic factors can explain this shift in meaning through the 18th century. On the one hand, the economy was growing faster than ever in Western societies, giving rise to a new 'cultural model' (Holland and Quinn 1987): there was an urgent need to express these changes through language.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, *fortuné* was felt to be derived from *fortune*: it thus followed the semantic change of its stem. The narrower sense of *fortune* ('riches') arose from the

3. See section below on 'The euphemistic use of *fortuné*'

4. Total number of words in the corpus.

5. Brunot (1966, vol. VI) gives an insight into the way that the vocabulary of 18th. Century French reflected economic factors.

beginning of the 18th century, and this is revealed in the development of new collocations expressing quantity. Some typical collocations appear in the corpus: e.g., *fortune considérable* (Hamilton 1713: 85), *fortune immense* (Galland 1705: 275), *grosse fortune* (Marivaux 1727: 359), *immense fortune* (Prévost 1751: 351), *fortune énorme* (Mirabeau 1755: 349), and *énormes fortunes* (Diderot 1774: 191)<sup>6</sup>.

Similarly, *fortuné's* "semanticization" (Hopper and Traugott 2003: 235) is first accompanied by the re-utilization of older collocations and by the construction of redundant contexts in which the new sense eventually becomes "crystallized" (Traugott 2004: 55). For instance, collocations such as *peu fortuné* (lit. 'little wealthy') or *plus fortuné* (lit. 'more wealthy') develop, in which the items *peu* ('little') or *plus* ('more') bring out the notion of quantity associated with *fortuné's* new meaning.

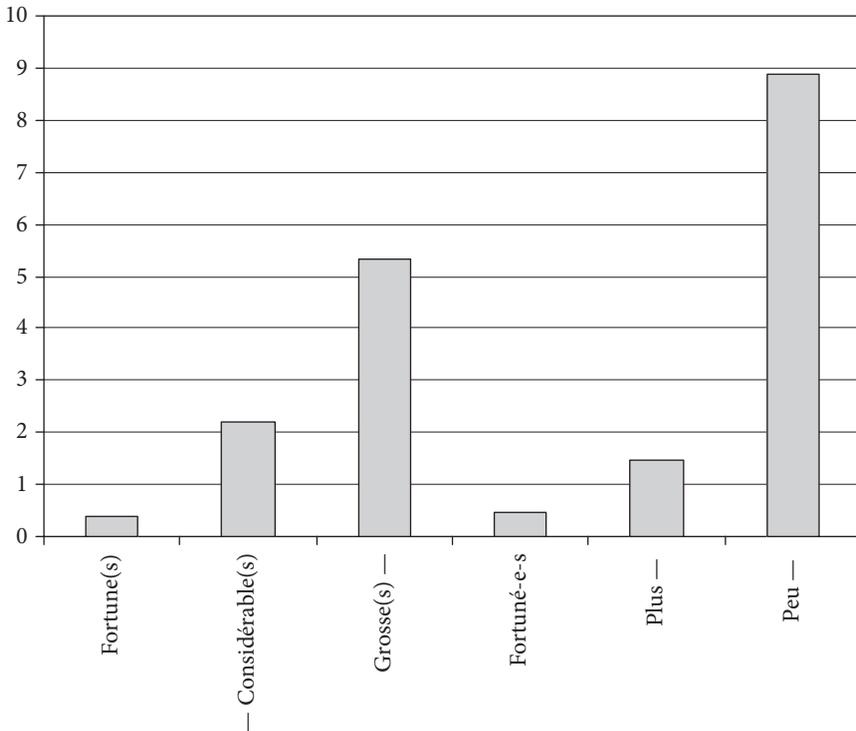


Figure 1. Relative frequency ratios (after 1750 / before 1750) in the Frantext corpus<sup>7</sup>

6. Respectively: *considerable*, *huge*, *large* and *enormous fortune*.

7. The relative frequency for each unit or collocation is calculated over both 1500–1749 ( $RF_A$ ) and 1750–1999 ( $RF_B$ ) periods of time relative to the total number of tokens. The ratio consists of dividing the resulting relative frequency of the 1750–1999 period by that of the previous one ( $=RF_B/RF_A$ ).

The frequency of these collocates is far higher than that of the single item *fortuné* (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows a decrease in the frequency of use of *fortuné* and *fortune*: both were between two and three times more frequent in the 1500–1749 period than after 1750 (Appendix Tables 1.1. and 1.2.). In spite of this statistical decrease (Appendix Table 2), the corpus displays a strong increase in the frequency of use of collocations typically related to *fortune* and *fortuné*'s 'economic' senses. The relative frequency of the lexical combinations *fortune(s) considérable(s)*, *grosse(s) fortune(s)*, *plus fortuné-e-s* and *peu fortuné-e-s* rose by 2.21, 5.33, 1.47 and 8.89 respectively.

The lower increase of *plus fortuné* may be accounted for by greater prevalence in the preceding stage, when *fortuné* meant 'happy' (Appendix Tables 3.1. and 3.2). The older meaning of *fortuné* was typically found in contexts where it was opposed to *malheureux* ('unhappy'), e.g., Marmontel (1761: 112):

- (1) [...] vous m'allez rendre, d'un seul mot, le plus fortuné ou le plus malheureux des hommes.<sup>8</sup> 'With a single word, you will make me the most fortunate or the most unhappy of men.'<sup>9</sup>

Even though the increase in relative frequency of *plus fortuné* is the lowest of the collocations examined (1.47), it is still three times higher than that of *fortuné* (0.46).

From the 18th century, *plus fortuné* is more often interpreted as 'wealthier', while *fortune* came to be associated with material wealth: in the articles of the *Encyclopédie* (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751–1765), *fortuné* occurs in texts dealing with the economy, finance, trade, profit and savings. But it is not always easy, or even possible, to decide whether it can be unambiguously interpreted as 'fortunate' or 'wealthy'. In the following extract by Rousseau (1762: 564), the co-occurrence of *heureux* ('lucky') and *pauvre* ('poor') makes *fortuné* ambiguous:

- (2) [...] qui est-ce qui sait être heureux? C'est moi, répondit un jour le prêtre d'un ton dont je fus frappé [*sic*]. Heureux, vous! Si peu fortuné, si pauvre, exilé [*sic*], persécuté, vous êtes [*sic*] heureux! '[...] who knows how to be happy? I do, the priest answered once with a tone which struck me. Happy, you! So badly off/unfortunate, exiled, persecuted, you are happy!'

8. Underlining is added in the examples either to suggest that the meaning of *fortuné* was closer to "fortunate" or to "wealthy" at different times, or to indicate a particular view users may have held concerning the modern sense of *fortuné*. In this example, collocation with the word *heureux* ('happy') suggests that *fortuné* is closer to 'fortunate' than to 'wealthy'.

9. Our translation.

In fact, the co-occurrence of *peu fortuné* with *pauvre* reveals a growing association which was previously unusual: it may be conceived of as a way of establishing the modern sense of *fortuné*.

Such an ambiguity occurs in texts dating back to the beginning of the century, among which Galland (1715: 364):

- (3) Je ne me contentai pas de me revoir possesseur de mes quatre-vingts chameaux et de savoir qu'ils étaient chargés d'un trésor inestimable qui devait me rendre le plus fortuné des hommes. 'I did not just see myself owning my eighty camels again and knowing they were loaded with an invaluable treasure which was to make me the wealthiest/happiest of men.'

It is uncertain whether this usage was ambiguous for French users of that time, whether *fortuné* was considered as polysemous, or as a monosemous word with polyvalent uses. However, the contextual change observed in the corpus helps consider these occurrences as having either a double or an indistinct meaning, in other words signifying either 'happy' and 'rich', or 'being in such a social position or mental state that one can be seen either as happy or rich' (Figure 2).

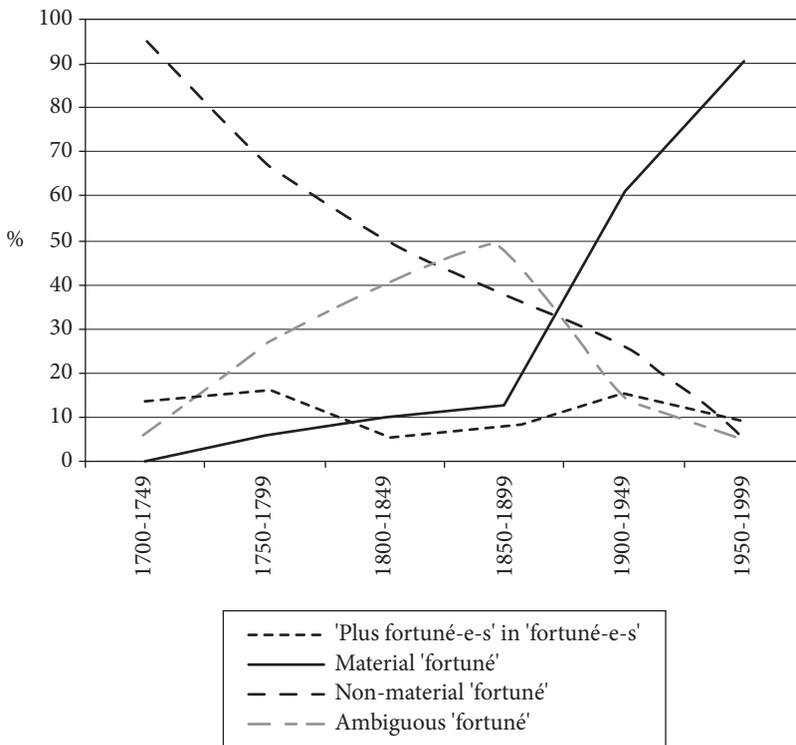
This shift from *fortuné's* general meaning either to its old or to its new (economic) meanings, sometimes both (5), constitutes a well-attested type of semantic change which usually occurs through what Evans and Wilkins (2000: 550) called a 'bridging context'. In this case, the extension took place in specific contexts where *fortuné* applied to human beings, a semantic constraint that is not yet present for Vauvenargues (1747: 252):

- (4) Pleure, dis-je, verse des larmes, pousse de lamentables cris; à grande peine quelques débris d'une armée si florissante reverront tes champs fortunés; avec quels périls! j'en frémis. 'Cry, I said, shed some tears, bemoan your fate; with great difficulty some remains of such a flourishing army will see your fortunate fields again; and how perilous! it makes me shudder.'

It is difficult, even in a figure of speech, to characterise a field by its material wealth and therefore the bridging context is, as yet, irrelevant.

The data from Frantext indicate that the new 'wealthy-and-happy' usage increases from the 1760s, which Saurin (1768: 252) exemplifies in creating a semantic isotopy (Rastier 1987) of 'material wealth' around *fortuné*:

- (5) Ce salon que j'ai vu si richement orné,  
Ses meubles, ses tableaux, ses glaces, sa dorure,  
Tout cela rendoit-il [*sic*] mon cœur plus fortuné? 'This parlour I saw so sumptuously adorned / Its furniture, its paintings, its mirrors, its gold decorations / Did all that make my heart wealthier/more fortunate?'



**Figure 2.** The collocation *plus fortuné-e-s* within the subcorpus <fortuné-e-s> (Frantext, 1700–1999, ALL GENRES)

The ambiguous *fortuné*, as well as *cœur* ('heart'), may be interpreted in a figurative way: it works as a hypallage or transferred epithet: the subject is 'wealthy/happy', not his heart.

The emergence of the new sense of *fortuné* can also be observed by the growing semantic indistinctness of *plus fortuné-e-s* in a 'period of transition'. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 charts the frequency of *plus fortuné-e-s* in relation to *fortuné-e-s* in 25-year periods from 1700 to 1999 (Frantext): every major 'interpretation' of (*plus*) *fortuné* is reported (i.e., 'happy', 'rich' or indistinct). It is based on the interpretation of the meaning of the word in a broader context (cf. also Appendix Tables 4.1 and 4.2).

Each peak of *plus fortuné-e-s* relative to the frequency of use of *fortuné-e-s*, in the second half of the 18th century and in the first half of the 20th century, corresponds to a time when the competition between *fortuné*'s two principal senses is rather low. For instance, in the text by France (1922: 481), its meaning is no longer ambiguous:

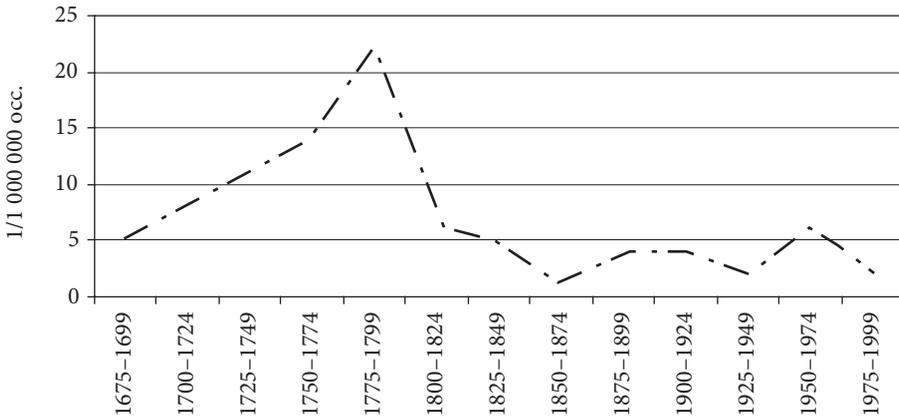


Figure 3. Relative frequency of *fortuné-e-s* (Frantext, 1675–1999)

- (6) [...] je m'aperçus que mes camarades, plus beaux et plus fortunés que moi, n'étaient pas plus heureux [...]. '[...] I realised that my schoolmates, more handsome and richer than me, were not happier [...].'

The new polysemy of *fortuné* can be located around the third quarter of the 18th century (in so far as this is reflected in Frantext, at least). Not only does it show in the increase in references to material wealth in texts, but it is confirmed by the enormous rise in *fortuné's* relative frequency (Figure 3).

The material-sense collocations which emerged during the 19th century reflect a sociohistorical shift, with the rise of individualism and that of economic concerns. Classically associated with nouns such as *amant* ('lover'), *année* ('year'), *climat* ('climate'), *époque* ('time'), *jour* ('day'), *lieu* ('place'), *moment* ('moment'), *peuple* ('people'), *région* ('region'), *rencontre* ('encounter'), *séjour* ('stay'), *siècle* ('century'), *terre* ('land'), *union* ('union')..., *fortuné* became increasingly associated with lexical items comprising an asserted [+ HUMAN] feature:

- (7) *ami-e* ('friend'), *camarade* ('schoolmate'), *classe* ('(social) class'), *client-e* ('customer'), *commerçant-e* ('shopkeeper'), *dirigeant-e* ('manager'), *enfant* ('child'), *famille* ('family'), *fille* ('daughter'), *gendre* ('son-in-law'), *minorité* ('minority'), *propriétaire* ('owner'), *publicitaire* ('advertising agent'), *retraité-e-s* ('retired'), *touriste* ('tourist')...

Its semantic pattern shifted from a 'transcendental' to a subject-centered paradigm. In the first paradigm, a divine agent received supra-human traits (cf. Fortune), whereas the human was conceived of as a recipient of a gift from heaven. In the paradigm which ensued, the agent fits in to a conception of the human being

as an individual free to choose his/her destiny, therefore capable of managing his/her material fortune.

### The proscription of the modern use of *fortuné* in dictionaries

The modern usage of *fortuné* finds its way into Féraud's 1787 *Dictionnaire* [sic] *critique*, where it is stigmatized as a 'barbarisme':<sup>10</sup>

- (8) *Fortuné, signifie heureux, et non pas riche, qui a de la fortune.* "Par les largesses de plusieurs prosélytes *fortunés*", dit M. Berault de Bercastel. En ce sens, *c'est un barbarisme.* '*Fortuné, signifie happy, and not rich, who owns a fortune.* "With the generosity of several *wealthy* proselytes", Mr. Berault de Bercastel said. In this sense, it is a barbarism.' (under the entry for *fortune*)

As Gadet (2003b: 18) remarks, the standardization of the French language involved "the creation of homogeneity as a mental construct" ("*une construction discursive sur l'homogène*"); indeed, the ideology of the French standard<sup>11</sup> which prevailed throughout the 18th and was continued in the 19th century implied that new coinages and variation were proscribed. It is no surprise that this '*cacologie*' (Quemada 1968: 242–245; Branca-Rosoff & Schneider 1994: 9–10) was adopted by the lexicographers of the time, as a direct result of "deliberate and conscious planning" (Romaine 2005: 1698).

A number of lexicographers proscribed the new usage of *fortuné*. Boiste (1803) suggested that using *fortuné* to mean 'wealthy' was to use it '*abusivement*' ('wrongly'). Some fifty years after Féraud, Landais (1836) bewails the fact that "Quelques-uns le disent pour *riche*" 'Some use it for *rich*', which is "*presque un barbarisme*" '*almost a barbarism*'. Contextually, this '*presque*' suggests a weakening of the stigmatization. It implies that the modern usage of *fortuné* had become prevalent.

Unlike Landais, Noël and Chapsal (1843) deny the very existence of any usage of *fortuné* to mean 'wealthy'. Poitevin (1855), despite the sub-title of his glossary *Glossaire raisonné de la langue écrite et parlée* 'A reasoned glossary of the written and spoken language', rejected the modern usage, criticising its use on moral grounds. The later edition (Poitevin 1856) went even further, citing Nodier's 1828 famous condemnation, in which this 'barbarism' was associated with a fuzzy social class called *le peuple* 'the people':

10. About Féraud's vision of the French language, see Seguin *et al.* (1990).

11. See Milroy & Milroy (1985) for the concept of "ideology of the standard".

- (9) Charles Nodier a dit: “Dans la logique du peuple, un homme *fortuné* est nécessairement un homme *riche*. C’est un barbarisme très-commun [*sic*] dans la langue, et qui provient d’une erreur très-commune [*sic*] dans la morale.” Ce barbarisme a échappé à beaucoup d’académiciens: *Les classes les plus élevées comme les moins FORTUNÉES souffrirent plus ou moins longtemps de cette perturbation, dont la classe moyenne profite.* (Boss.) ‘Charles Nodier said: ‘In the logic of the people, a *fortunate* man is necessarily a *rich* man. It is a very common barbarism in language, which comes from a very common error in morals.’ Many academicians overlooked this barbarism: *The uppermost classes and the less FORTUNATE alike have suffered for a long time from this disruption, which the middle class profit by.* (Boss.)’ (under the entry for *fortuné*)

Ironically, in interpreting Bossuet’s *fortuné* as meaning ‘wealthy’, Poitevin showed, despite himself, that the sense of the word had indeed already shifted. In Littré (1863–1873), the *fortuné*=‘wealthy’ sense appears only at the end of the article, as a remark. Inserting Nodier’s comment on the modern sense, Littré followed the lexicographical proscription of his time.

Although the association with ‘*le peuple*’ was ancient, Bescherelle (1887) was among the first to add the sociostylistic label ‘pop.’ ‘popular’ to this sense, before completing his definition with Nodier’s criticism. This flag illustrates the role dictionaries have played in the standardization of the French language. Behind the label ‘pop.’ lurks the notion of an ‘unsafe variety’ which might detract from the ideal image of the “legitimate language” (Bourdieu 1983: 98). As Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975: 21) put it, “fixing” and “refining” language implies excluding popular uses, and particularly the most recent of them.

This distancing of dictionary writers from ordinary everyday usage, what Gadet (2003a: 103) refers to as “a heterogeneous social construct which conveys an implicit downgrading function”<sup>12</sup>. It cannot be overlooked when studying a change of this sort, as it raises complex identity issues (Branca-Rosoff 1996: 93), including symbolic power struggles between groups of speakers who have or do not have easy access to the standard, and who thus perceive and value colloquial vocabulary differently (Lodge 1999).

Despite Gourmont (1899: 152)’s pronouncement that saving *fortuné* was a lost cause: “[...] il suit l’évolution de *fortune*, et les grammairiens n’y peuvent rien” ‘[...] it follows the evolution of *fortune*, and grammarians cannot do anything about it’, the *Petit Larousse* (Augé 1905, under the entry for *fortuné*) utterly proscribed the modern sense: “Ne pas dire *homme fortuné* pour *homme riche*” ‘Do not

12. “[...] un construit social hétéroclite qui véhicule une fonction déclassante implicite.”

say *fortunate man* for *rich man*; and it was still pleonastically called an “abus incorrect” in Augé (1928–1933, under the entry for *fortuné*).

The Académie Française is notorious for its gate-keeping role in maintaining standards in linguistic matters. Its members found another way to avoid endorsing the deviant usage by omitting to mention the ‘new’ sense right up until 1932 with the 8th edition of their *Dictionnaire*. Their definition of *fortuné*, which comes at the very end of the article, reads as follows: “Il signifie aussi Qui est pourvu de grandes richesses. *C’est la famille la plus fortunée du pays*.” It also means Who is very well-off. *It is the wealthiest family in the country*.’ Once this two-century-year-old ‘neological’ sense had eventually been accepted by the Académie, most lexicographers lifted the ban on the description of *fortuné*. Some of them acknowledged that it had been used for a long time:

- (10) On a dénoncé maintes fois comme un barbarisme l’emploi de *fortuné* dans le sens de *riche*.

*Fortuné* signifie cependant, aujourd’hui [...] 2) pourvu de grandes richesses. D’innombrables écrivains l’emploient dans ce sens depuis longtemps, et l’Académie s’est ralliée à l’usage [...]. ‘The use of *fortuné* in the sense of *rich* has frequently been denounced as a barbarism.

*Fortuné* today however means [...]; 2) very well-off. A number of writers have used it in this sense for a long time, and the Académie has reconciled itself to usage [...].’ (Hanse 1949, under the entry for *fortuné*)

while others warn against its potential ambiguity:

- (11) L’Académie [...] a entériné l’usage, usage surtout oral, car beaucoup d’écrivains répugnaient à employer ce mot dans un sens pouvant créer une amphibologie. ‘The Académie [...] ratified usage, a rather spoken usage, because many writers were reluctant to use that word in a sense which could create an ambiguity.’ (Thomas 1956, under the entry for *fortuné*)

Interestingly, *fortuné* illustrates a common phenomenon whereby the modern use of a word undergoes stigmatization for social reasons. Dismissing the sociostylistic distribution that dictionary-writers reveal through the condemnation of this usage would reduce the scope of a diachronic study: the significant discrepancy between the lexicographical proscription of the modern sense of *fortuné* and its actual usage reflects the historical and prescriptive approach to the description of the French language. No doubt the tension between the reality of usage and the social representations based on it have played a part in the semantic evolution of the word. For various reasons including standard diffusion and linguistic “homogenisation” (Trudgill 2002: 29), the marginalization of *fortuné*’s ‘new’ sense took

place at a time when the division between written and spoken language was crucial, with a huge difference between prestigious literary styles on the one hand and stigmatized popular forms on the other.

### *Fortuné's prevailing sense and its stylistic redistribution in contemporary French*

The interpretation of *fortuné* as 'wealthy' became commonplace in the 20th century. It is nowadays the prevailing usage. Dictionaries such as the *Dictionnaire du français contemporain*, children's dictionaries (Abenaim and Boulanger 1999, Rey-Debove 1988) and shorter dictionaries including the *Petit Larousse*, give only this sense for *fortuné*. Bilingual dictionaries either omit *fortuné's* old meaning (e.g., Robert & Collins 2002), or label it as 'Arch & Litt' (Harrap's Shorter 1995). The *Petit Larousse* broke with tradition in the 1970s, proposing one single meaning in its 1980 edition: "Qui a de la fortune, qui est largement pourvu de biens matériels" 'Who owns a fortune, who is very well-off', while in its 1968 edition, both 'happy' and 'wealthy' senses were given (under the entry for *fortuné*). When present-day monolingual dictionaries include the definition 'happy', they invariably label it as 'old' or 'literary' (Rey 2001). The *Trésor de la langue française* (Quemada 1980, t. VIII) distinguished between the labels 'littér.' 'literary' in the case of *fortuné's* 'favoured by fortune' sense, and 'usuel' 'usual' in the case of *fortuné's* 'who owns goods, riches' sense.<sup>13</sup>

The stylistic distribution of the two senses of *fortuné* reflects sociolinguistic factors: its use in the sense of 'blessed by fortune' is restricted to literary usage, while its use in the sense of 'wealthy' was for a long while omitted, stigmatized or considered to be appropriate in informal styles only (Roubaud 1785, Féraud 1787). Regarding the sense of 'blessed by fortune', Vaugelas (1647: 449, under the entry for *fortuné*) already noticed that "quand il signifie *heureux*, il est plus noble que le mot d'*heureux*, et n'est pas du langage familier."<sup>14</sup> The change in the genres of writing in which *fortuné* is used is revealing (Figure 4). Used mainly in poetry until the third quarter of the 19th century, *fortuné* then became about equally used in the different genres present in Frantext.

13. Respectively 'favorisé par la fortune', and 'qui possède des biens, des richesses'.

14. "When it means *happy*, it is grander than the word *happy*, and it is not colloquial language".

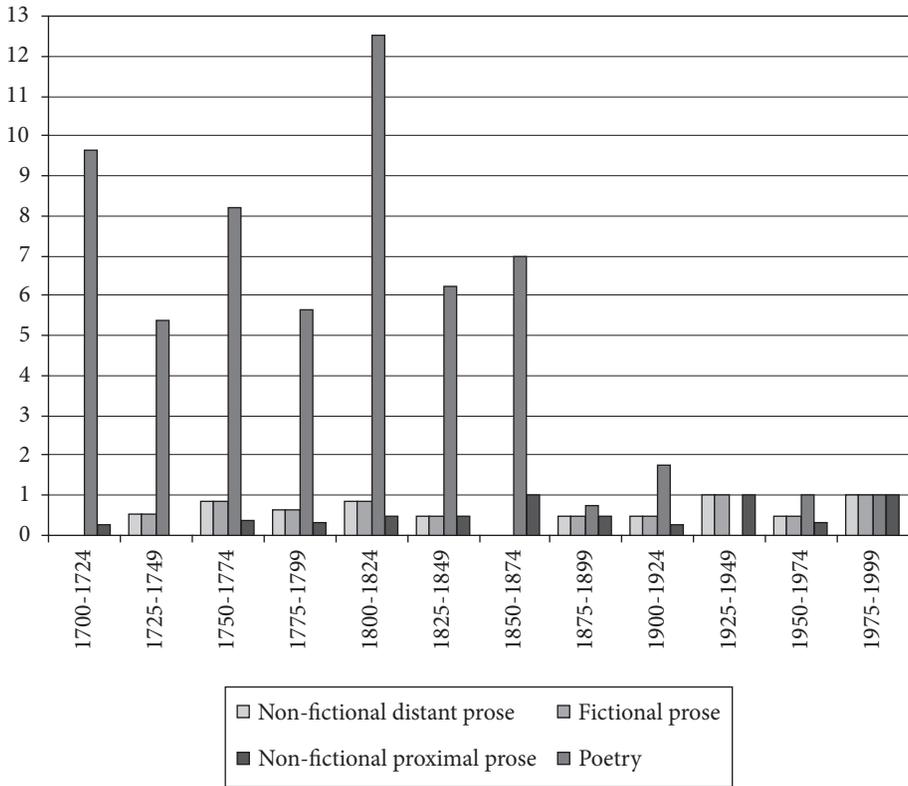


Figure 4. Rate of occurrence of *fortuné-e-s* by genre (Frantext, 1700–1999)<sup>15</sup>

The categorization of texts into genres in Figure 4 is based upon the ‘opposition’ between communicative ‘distance’ vs. ‘closeness’ (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985, 2001), and inspired by the concepts of (‘identity’/ ‘proximal’/ ‘distal’) semiological zones theorised by Rastier (1996). (Biber’s 1995 involved vs. non-involved register scale is a similar concept). The distinction presented here is binary: ‘non-fictional distant (vs. proximal) prose’ refers to non-fictional texts (vs. novels, drama, poetry) which are neither interactive (cf. personal letters) nor directly expressive of the self (cf. memoirs, diary). Figure 4 thus shows that *fortuné*’s rate of occurrence has risen from almost zero to one in ‘non-fictional proximal prose’ (i.e., in personal letters, diary and memoirs), while it has diminished from seven (in average) to one in poetry from the last quarter of the 19th century.

15. The rate of occurrence in this figure consists of the relative frequency of *fortuné* by genre for each period of time, divided by its whole relative frequency for the same period of time.

### The euphemistic use of *fortuné*

The fact that *fortuné* originates in a 'noble' genre (poetry) may help to explain why the sense of 'rich' has long been stigmatized. It also explains why this word is now used as a euphemism for 'rich':

- (12) [...] un glissement sémantique s'est produit, qui est passé dans la langue correcte, et a fait de *fortuné* un synonyme 'élégant' de riche. '[...] a semantic shift happened, which was adopted in 'correct' language, and made *fortuné* an 'elegant' synonym for *rich*.' (Colin 2002, under the entry for *fortuné*)

Associated with prestigious genres and formal styles, *fortuné* was a good candidate to express economic issues without being blunt, and could be used as a euphemism (cf. *aisé* 'well-off', *huppé* 'classy', *opulent* 'opulent', *prospère* 'prosperous', etc.). Its high-brow origin reduced the 'face-threatening' embarrassment (Brown & Levinson 1987)<sup>16</sup> arising from highlighting social difference of a pecuniary sort.

The transformation of society through the 19th and 20th centuries, and particularly the opportunity for individuals to make their own fortune, led to new ways of referring to wealth to avoid the difficulty in naming the social differences arising from those changes. As material wealth was increasingly considered to be a condition of a good and happy life, and as every person had in principle<sup>17</sup> the right to be happy and succeed in his or her life, the lack or excess of this stereotypical condition (wealth) became a touchy subject. For many reasons, material wealth is considered a strength, whereas poverty is considered a weakness (cf. the term *economic power*). Consequently, expressing someone's poverty in a blunt manner would sound insulting (cf. the expression *pauvre type!*<sup>18</sup>). A compensatory remark often further softens the injury of calling someone '*peu fortuné*' (lit. 'little wealthy' = 'badly off'):

- (13) [...] ce professeur qu'ils ont pris au hasard, est [...] un homme peu fortuné, mais du plus grand mérite et des plus savants. '[...] this teacher whom they chose by chance, is a man of little fortune, but he is very deserving and learned.' (Sand 1841: 226)

16. Beeching (this volume) also notes the influence of face needs in semantic change.

17. Weber (1958: 271) was clear on this: '[the fortunate] needs to know that he has a *right* to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he "deserves" it, and above all, that he deserves it *in comparison with others* [...]'

18. This equivalent of *poor guy!* does not have any opposite (?*riche type!* / ?*rich guy!*).

To resolve the ticklish dilemma emerging from the socio-economic discrepancy between individuals, alternative names for ‘wealthy’ had to be used, names with no past in this conceptual domain.

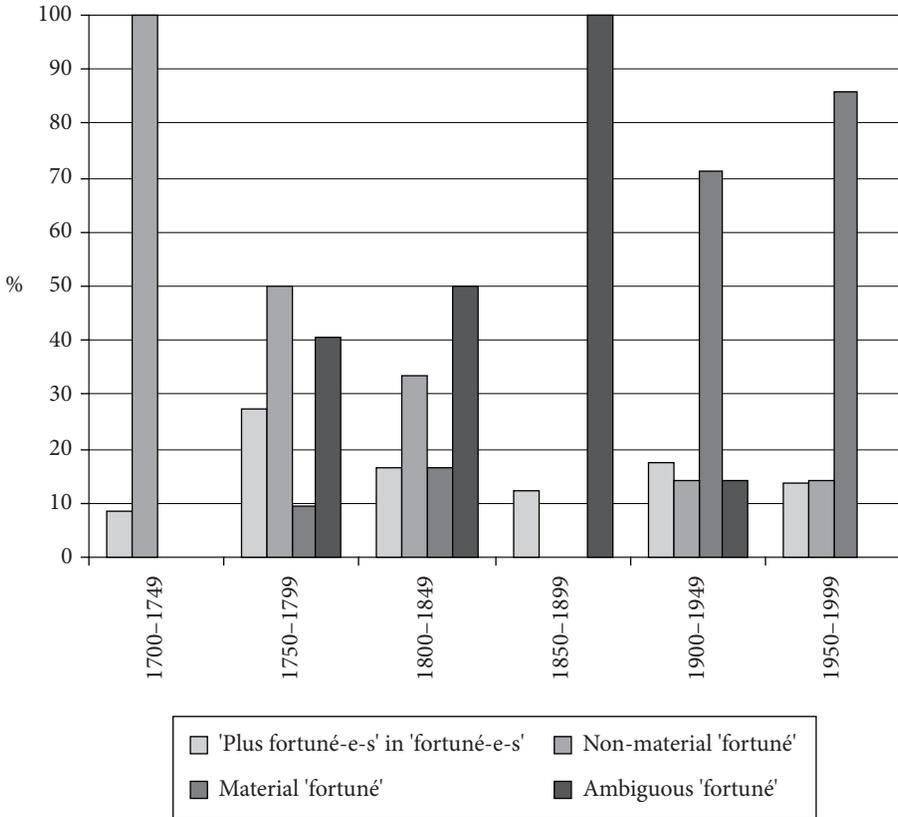
The abstract aspect of *fortuné*’s meaning may have promoted it as a substitute for *rich*: the relative indeterminacy of its reference blurred the line between offensive vs. objective reality, thus easing tensions (Courthéoux 2005: 6; Ayto 1993). This strategy of using semantic abstraction to form euphemisms corresponds to what Boulanger (2000: 312) called “hyperonymisation”: *fortuné* is used as a ‘hypernymic synonym’ for *rich*.

The term *style redistribution* captures the process whereby *fortuné*, over and above its new denotation ‘wealthy’, could move from having a predominantly ‘contextual’ function (formal style) to an interpersonal function (softening device). *Fortuné* in its economic sense was soon used in ‘distant’ texts; this is still the case:

- (14) Les classes moins fortunées voyagent autant que les gens riches. ‘The less well-off classes travel as well as the rich.’ (Commissariat général au tourisme 1960: 13)

Figure 5 confirms the close link between the use of *fortuné* in its modern sense and more distant forms of writing.

Following Jakobson’s (1990: 105) and Romaine’s (2005: 1698) remarks on the function of style in linguistic change, the semantic evolution of *fortuné* presents a good example of a “change from below” (Labov 1994: 78) which was progressively reinforced by ‘higher-level’ uses. Indeed, though the change took place in ordinary language, *fortuné*’s economic sense was also used in formal style from the 18th century (e.g., economic philosophy). Before it was even remarked upon and criticised by lexicographers, the innovating use of *fortuné* emerged and expanded “in the lower end of the social hierarchy” (Romaine *ibid.*). The ambiguity accompanying this semantic shift must have supported its diffusion. Once the change was completed, the modern semantic usage progressively became the norm.



**Figure 5.** The collocation *plus fortuné-e-s* within <fortuné-e-s> (Frantext, 1700–1999, non-fictional distant prose)

## Conclusion

The rate of diffusion of the new meaning of a word – from its first appearance (its ‘invention’) to its adoption by the whole linguistic community – is related to a phenomenon described by Meillet (1958: 231), namely the socio-stylistic function a lexical usage has within a particular group of users, and whether this usage is accepted by the other members of the community or not. Sociolinguistic variation is often considered as a condition for change (Labov, 1972; Coseriu 1983: 417). The shift in meaning of *fortuné* in Modern French, from ‘fortunate’ to ‘wealthy’, the resistance to this shift in meaning by dictionary-makers and its increasing usage in both standard and non-standard styles, cannot be accounted for without

considering, on the one hand, the desire for linguistic stability and the correlated fear of confusion ingrained in the ideology of the standard (Labov 1994: 9), and, on the other hand, the cultural change in Western societies which made it necessary to refer to material wealth, both frankly and euphemistically.<sup>19</sup>

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## Appendix

**Table 1.1** Relative frequency of some lexical items in Modern French (Frantext, 1500–1999)

Lemma or collocation	1500–1999 nb of occ.	1500–1999 total vol.	1500–1999 ‰	≤ 1749 occ.	≤ 1749 total vol.
<i>fortune(s)</i>	30023	219770807	0.13661	10775	39160405
<i>fortune(s) considérable(s)</i>	123	219770808	0.00056	11	39160405
<i>grosse(s) fortune(s)</i>	128	219770807	0.00058	5	39160405
<i>fortuné-e-s</i>	1561	219770807	0.00710	502	39160405
<i>plus fortuné-e-s</i>	148	219770807	0.00067	19	39160405
<i>peu fortuné-e-s</i>	42	219770807	0.00019	1	39160405

**Table 1.2** Relative frequency of some lexical items in Modern French (Frantext, 1500–1999)

Lemma or collocation	≤ 1749 ‰ (A)	1750 ≤ occ.	1750 ≤ Frantext	1750 ≤ ‰ (B)	Ratio (B/A)
<i>fortune(s)</i>	0.27515	19248	180610402	0.10657	0.39
<i>fortune(s) considérable(s)</i>	0.00028	112	180610402	0.00062	2.21
<i>grosse(s) fortune(s)</i>	0.00013	123	180610402	0.00068	5.33
<i>fortuné-e-s</i>	0.01282	1059	180610402	0.00586	0.46
<i>plus fortuné-e-s</i>	0.00049	129	180610402	0.00071	1.47
<i>peu fortuné-e-s</i>	0.00003	41	180610402	0.00023	8.89

**Table 2.** Relative frequency of fortuné-e-s  
(Frantext, 1700–1999)

	<i>fortuné-e-s</i> nb of occ.	Frantext total volume	relative frequency (per 1 000 000)
1700–1724	30	3674188	8.17
1725–1749	97	8813273	11.01
1750–1774	161	11383123	14.14
1775–1799	252	11417192	22.07
1800–1824	62	8961800	6.92
1825–1849	122	24422469	5.00
1850–1874	36	18750068	1.92
1875–1899	70	17331134	4.04
1900–1924	74	17653260	4.19
1925–1949	80	33516674	2.39
1950–1974	174	28623289	6.08
1975–1999	47	17184614	2.74

**Table 3.1** The collocation plus fortuné-e-s within <fortuné-e-s>  
(Frantext, 1700–1999, ALL GENRES)

	<i>fortuné-e-s</i> nb of occ.	<i>plus</i> – nb of occ.	relative freq. (%)
1700–1749	127	18	14
1750–1799	413	67	16
1800–1849	184	10	5
1850–1899	106	8	8
1900–1949	154	23	15
1950–1999	221	21	10

**Table 3.2** The collocation plus fortuné-e-s within <fortuné-e-s> (Frantext, 1700–1999, ALL GENRES)

	material nb of occ.	non-mat. nb of occ.	ambiguous nb of occ.	rel. freq. M (%)	rel. freq. NM (%)	Rel.freq. A (%)
1700–1749	0	17	1	0	94	6
1750–1799	4	45	18	6	67	27
1800–1849	1	5	4	10	50	40
1850–1899	1	3	4	13	38	50
1900–1949	14	6	3	61	26	13
1950–1999	19	1	1	90	5	5

**Table 4.1** The collocation plus fortuné-e-s within <fortuné-e-s> (Frantext, 1700–1999, non-fictional distant prose)

	<i>fortuné-e-s</i> nb of occ.	<i>plus –</i> nb of occ.	rel. freq. (%)	material nb of occ.	non-mat. nb of occ.
1700–1749	23	2	9	0	2
1750–1799	116	32	28	3	16
1800–1849	36	6	17	2	2
1850–1899	8	1	13	0	0
1900–1949	40	7	18	5	1
1950–1999	51	7	14	6	1

**Table 4.2** The collocation plus fortuné-e-s within <fortuné-e-s> (Frantext, 1700–1999, non-fictional distant prose)

	<i>plus –</i> nb of occ.	ambiguous nb of occ.	rel. freq. M (%)	rel. freq. NM (%)	rel. freq. A (%)
1700–1749	2	0	0	100	0
1750–1799	32	13	9	50	41
1800–1849	6	3	33	33	50
1850–1899	1	1	0	0	100
1900–1949	7	1	71	14	14
1950–1999	7	0	86	14	0