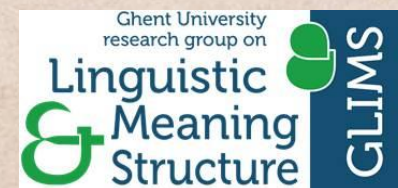


Phraseological shift as a signature of semantic change

The case of French 'courage'

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Ghent University

**11th Symposium on Corpus Approaches to
Lexicogrammar**
July 3, 2026





Phraseological patterns in lexicography

- ❖ Sinclair 1991, 1996...
- ❖ Paquot, 2015, “Lexicography and phraseology”: “Evidence of word use in corpora has shown to an unprecedented extent that words are not isolates but rather combine with each other in preferred syntagmatic patterns to acquire meaning”
- ❖ Hanks, 2020, “How context determines meaning”: “Strictly speaking, a verb in isolation must be regarded as having meaning potential, not meaning per se.”



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

- ❖ Wierzbicka-like “list of situations”: “in circumstance X, you may say P(word) to express Y”



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

Disappointment

X feels something

sometimes a person thinks something like this:

something good will happen

I want this

after this, this person thinks something like this:

I know now: this will not happen

because of this, this person feels something bad

X feels like this

COGNITIVE SCIENCE **16**, 539–581 (1992)

Defining Emotion Concepts

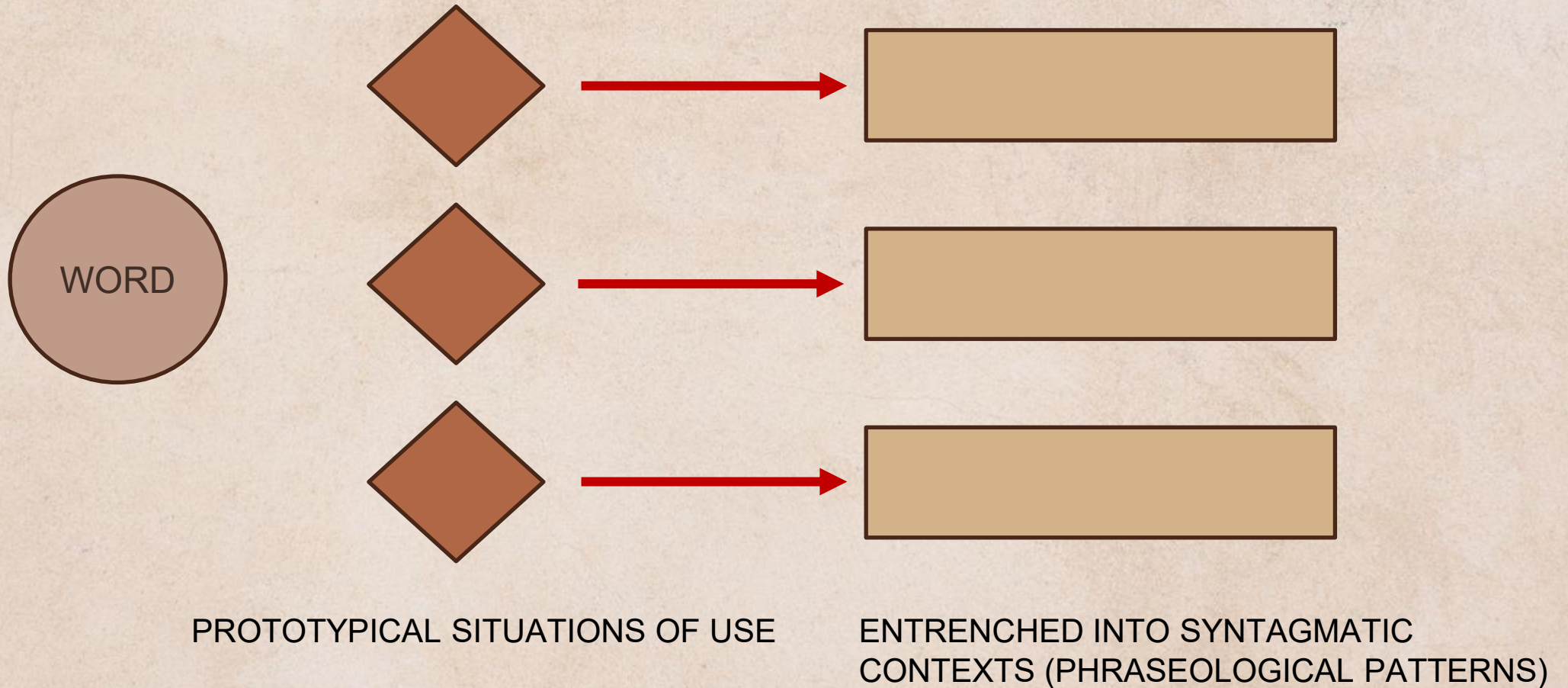
ANNA WIERZBICKA



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

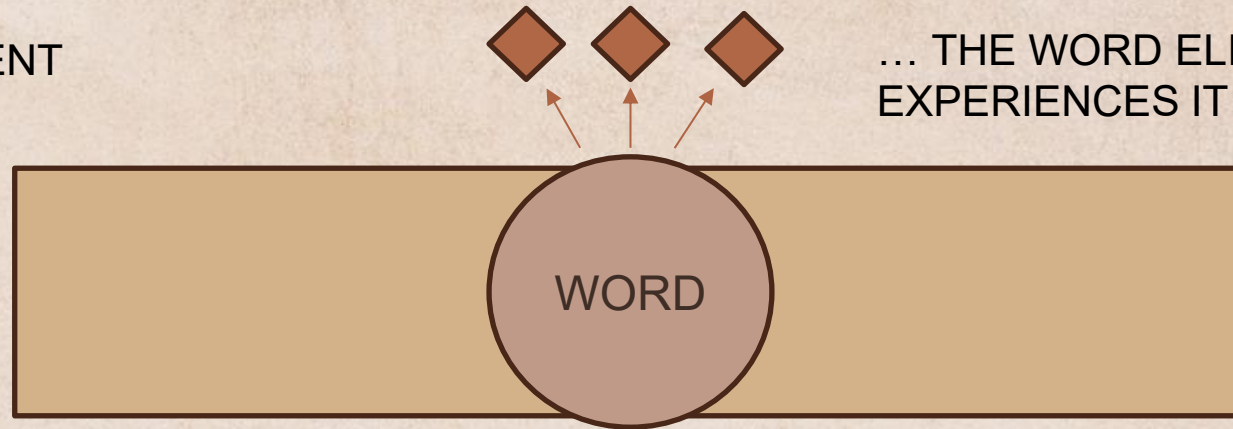
- ❖ Wierzbicka-like “list of situations”: “in circumstance X, you may say P(word) to express Y”
- ❖ The interconnexion of a lexeme’s meaning and its set of specific phraseologic contexts.

Theoretical concerns lurking in the background



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

WHEN FOUND IN A DIFFERENT
SYNTAGMATIC CONTEXT...



... THE WORD ELICITS THE PAST
EXPERIENCES IT IS ASSOCIATED TO...

... TO MAKE SENSE OF ITS ROLE IN THE NEW CONTEXT

THEREFORE, THE PALETTE OF PHRASEOLOGICAL PATTERNS
A WORD IS TIED TO GIVES A SKETCH OF ITS MEANING



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

- ❖ Wierzbicka-like “list of situations”: “in circumstance X, you may say P(word) to express Y”
- ❖ The interconnexion of a lexeme’s meaning and its set of specific phraseologic contexts.
- ❖ How are lexemes distributed in the constructional network?



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

CONSTRUCTICON: TAXONOMIC CONSTRUCTIONAL NETWORK

COURAGE FILLS A SLOT COMMON TO
ALL CONSTRUCTIONAL INSTANCES OF
THIS MACRO-CONSTRUCTION (but they
typically modulate the slot)

“display” constructions

faire montre de N faire preuve de N faire étalage de N

montrer DET N

faire preuve de courage

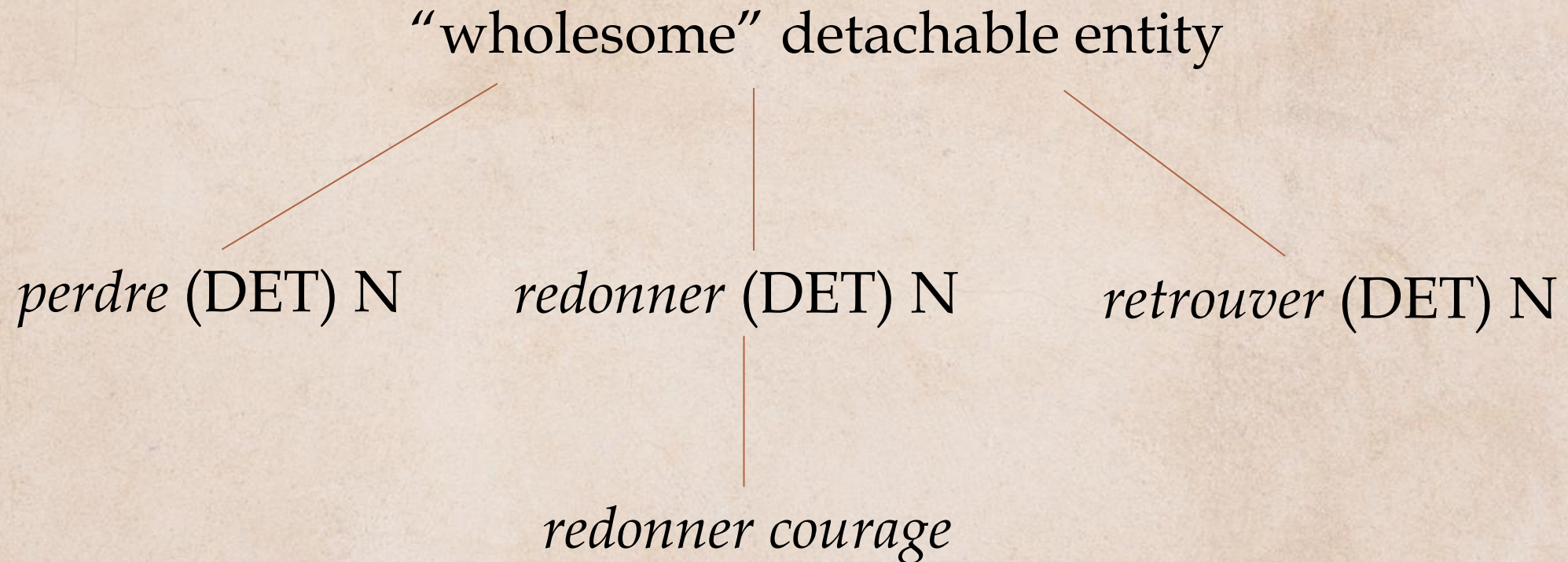
montrer son courage



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

CONSTRUCTICON: TAXONOMIC CONSTRUCTIONAL NETWORK

But now this a different common slot!





Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

CONSTRUCTICON: TAXONOMIC CONSTRUCTIONAL NETWORK

“wholesome” detachable entity

redonner (DET) N

redonner courage

“display” constructions

faire preuve de N

faire preuve de courage

How can we represent that users
likely relate these two constructs
through their common lexeme?



Theoretical concerns lurking in the background

- ❖ Wierzbicka-like “list of situations”: “in circumstance X, you may say P(word) to express Y”
- ❖ The interconnexion of a lexeme’s meaning and its set of specific phraseologic contexts.
- ❖ How are lexemes distributed in the constructional network?
- ❖ What exactly are lexemes in CxG? Ready-made constructs to fill the bottom tier of constructional slots, or cognitive nodes that relate different structures?

Courage in the Middle Ages

Li rois fu gaingnarz et eschis, **de courage mautalentis**.

Le Roman de Thèbes, 1150

The King was rogue and ill-disposed, **of an irritated courage**.

Tot droit a l'entree d'oitovre // Vint uns messages devers Dovre // De Londres et de Quantorbire // Au roi unes noveles dire // **Qui mout li troblent son corage**.

Chrétien de Troyes, Cligès, 1176

At the beginning of October, A messenger came through Douvres, Through London and Canterbury, To bring news to the King, That **troubled his courage a lot**.

Et cil iert ententieux a son oncle servir, // Et **tos iert ses corage a faire son plaisir**.

Alexandre de Paris, Roman d'Alexandre, 1180

And he was devoted to serve his uncle, and **all of his courage was to please him**.

Courage in the Middle Ages

Diex, **molt est tost müez // Mes coraiges et trestornez.**

Wauchier de Denain, *Deuxième continuation de Perceval*, 1210

God, **much is my courage entirely changed and twisted.**

Puis **lor dirai tot mon corage**, que je voeil fere mariage de moi et de vostre seror, que nule n'est si de l'onor digne por estre empereriz .

Jean Renart, *Roman de la Rose*, 1228

And then **I will tell them all my courage**, that I want a marriage to take place between me and your sister, who is worthy above all to the honor of being empress.

Certes, sire, fet la damoisele , tant m'en avez dit que **ge connois bien une partie de vostre corage ;**

La mort le roi Artu, 1230

Indeed, sir, the damsel said, you told me so much that **I know well a part of your courage.**

Courage in the Present-Day Language



à la limite, c'est justement parce que c'est difficile, cette récitation mentale, que **ça peut t'apparaître comme un acte de courage**

Chloé Thomas, *Nos lieux communs*, 2016

In a sense, precisely because this mental retelling is difficult, **you may see it as an act of courage**

On m'a rapporté à quel point **votre épouse avait fait preuve de courage** et de persévérance pour vous sortir de ce mauvais pas...

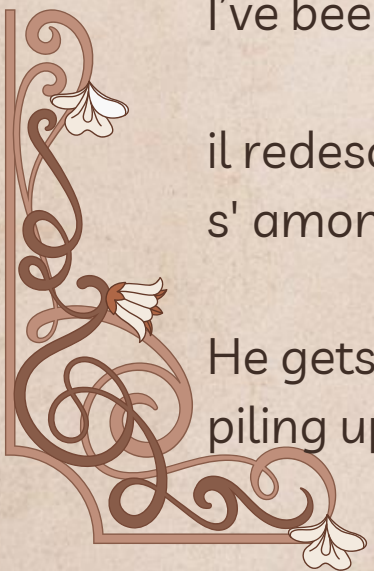
Roukiata Ouedraogo, *Du miel sous les galettes*, 2020

I've been told how much **your spouse showed courage** and perseverance to get you out of this...

il redescend débarrasser la table, soupire, hausse les épaules et, **faute de courage**, laisse la vaisselle s'amonceler dans l'évier.

Dan Nisand, *Les gardiens de la cité-jardin*, 2021

He gets downstairs to clean up the table, sighs, shrugs, and, **by lack of courage**, leaves the dishes piling up in the sink.



Courage in the Present-Day Language

Tu ne comprends pas ce qui s' est passé, ça te rend dingue, alors **tu trouves enfin le courage d'en parler.**

Ève Chambrot, *Tu*, 2021

You don't understand what happened, it drives you crazy, so **you finally find the courage to speak about it.**

Ils tentent de se reposer et **de récupérer du courage** pour le lendemain.

Jean Teulé, *Azincourt par temps de pluie*, 2022

They try to rest and **to gather back some courage** for the day to come.

Courage, mon ami, nous nous en sommes plutôt bien sortis, expirai-je d'épuisement

Anne-Marie Garat, *La Nuit Atlantique*, 2022

Courage, my friend, we managed rather pretty well, I sighed out of exhaustion.

A major semantic shift

Old French

- ❖ *Courage* is a *location* within people (*en mon courage*).
- ❖ *Courage* may be an intent, a feeling, a thought (*savoir le courage de qqn*).
- ❖ Everyone has a *courage*, but it may be of a different kind and directed to different things (*être de mal courage*).
- ❖ It may also “charge” an action (*prier de bon courage*)

Present Day French

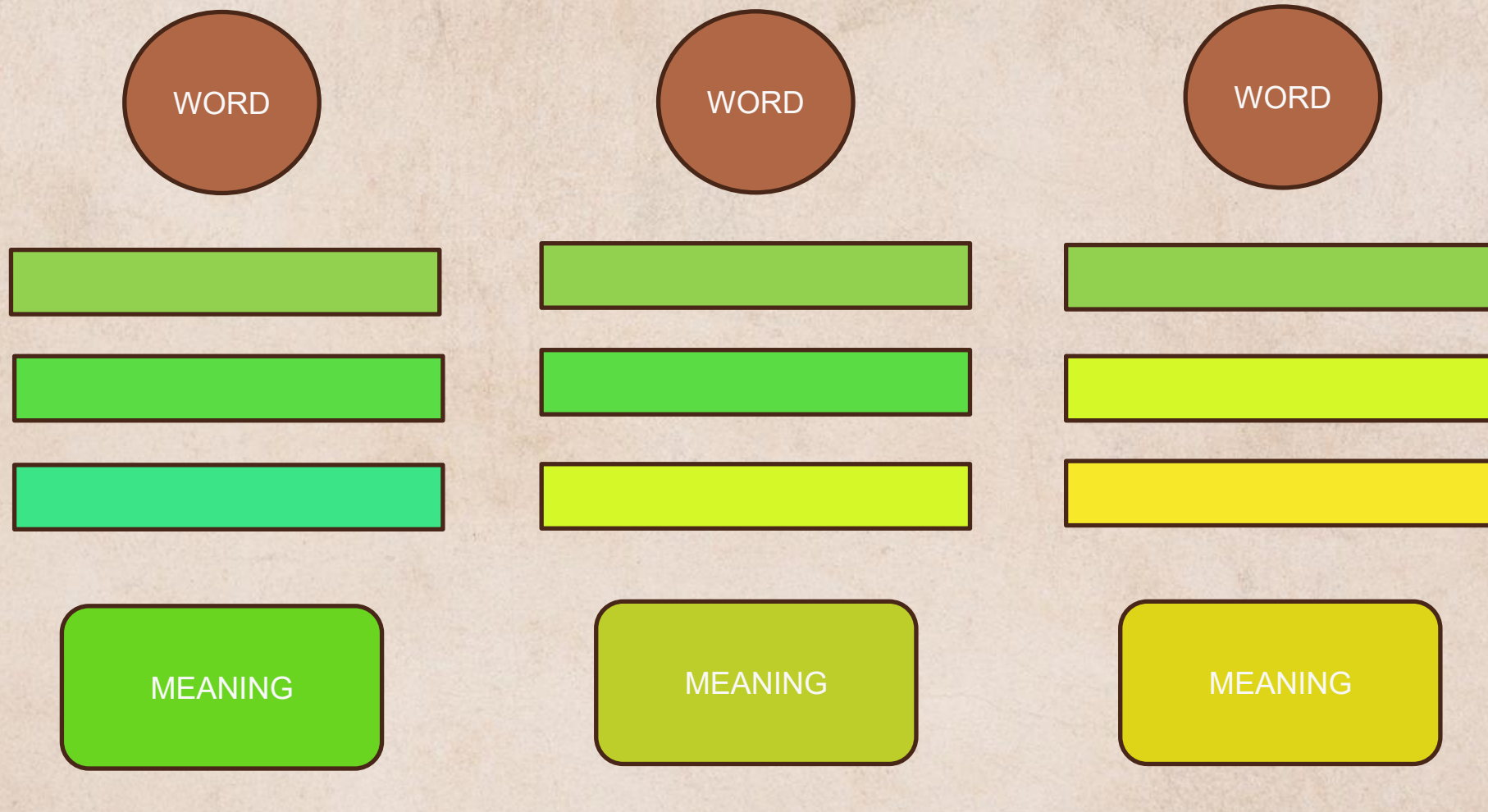
- ❖ *Courage* is a resource that can be lost, given, refilled, depleted, lacking.
- ❖ *Courage* can be missing or found, and may apply to something specifically (*avoir le courage de Vinf*).
- ❖ Or it can be a general quality (*faire preuve de courage, un acte de courage*)
- ❖ Pragmatic use (*Bon courage!*)

What happens between the two?

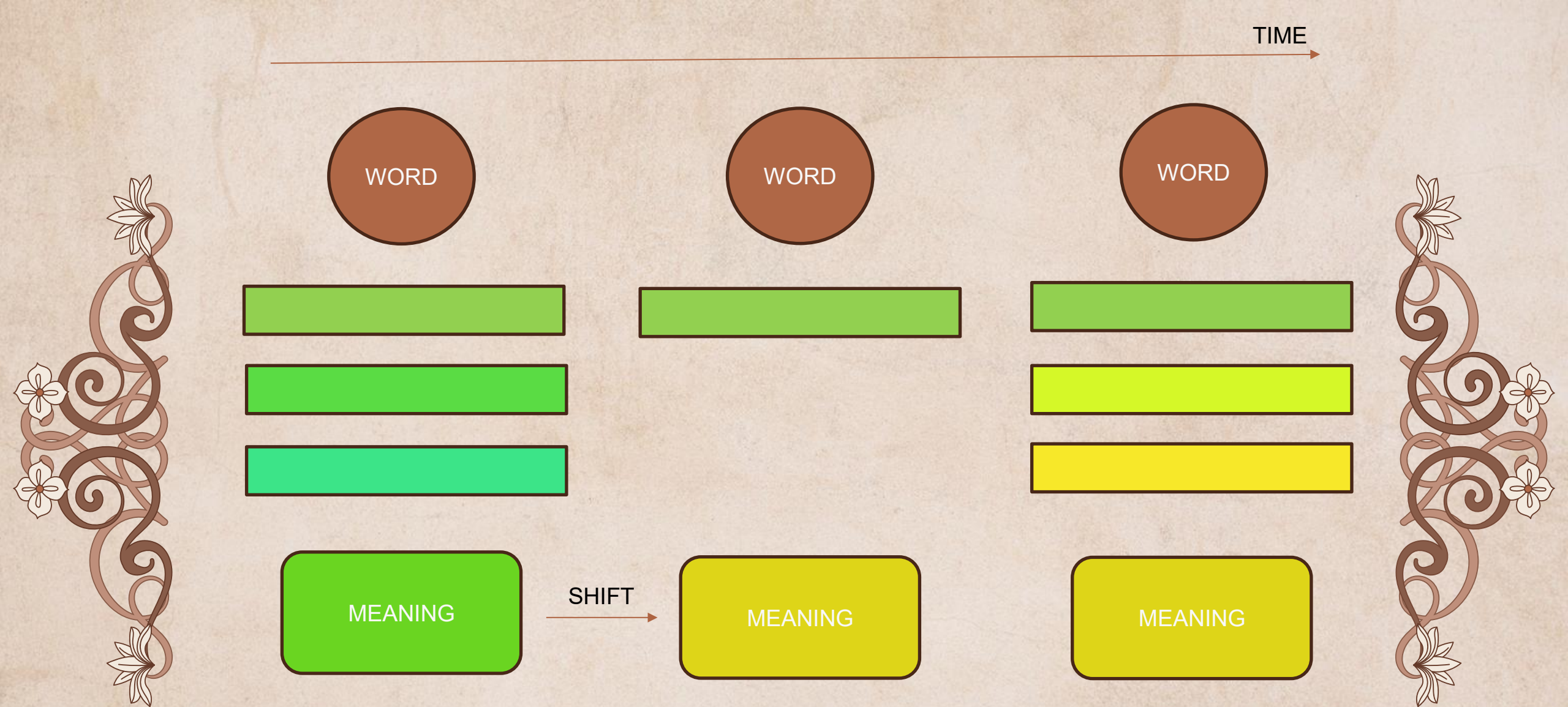
- ❖ Can we track the semantic shift through the changes in phraseological patterns?
- ❖ Is there gradualness (new patterns are regularly emerging/declining) or is the change more 'catastrophic'?



TIME



Hypothesis I: Phraseological drift
gradually implements meaning shift



Hypothesis II: Abrupt meaning shift
leads to phraseological reconfiguration

Methodology

- ❖ All data has been extracted from Frantext (33196 tokens).
- ❖ Manual identification of relevant patterns in a random sample (as evenly split across decades and authors as possible)
- ❖ Extraction of pattern-specific frequency data with CQL on Frantext (alternative: TXM, etc.).
- ❖ Entropy computation to assess how much the tokens spread across these patterns.

The lexico-grammatical patterns

- ❖ They must be recurring enough.
- ❖ They can be partially lexically constrained.
- ❖ They must be retrievable with a CQL request.
- ❖ They must not overlap.
- ❖ They do not have to match in terms of frequency or schematicity.

The lexico-grammatical patterns

❖ *montrer (DET) courage* (123 tokens)

- Non, non resolvez vous il vous faut à ce soir // **Monstrer votre courage**, ou moy mon desespoir.
- No, no, you must resolve, by tonight, to either **show your courage**, or I my despair.

❖ *perdre (DET) courage* (372 tokens)

- Quand à moy je suis prest, & ne **perdray courage**,
 - As for me, I'm ready, and won't **lose courage**.

The lexico-grammatical patterns

❖ *en DET courage* (385 tokens)

- Si la pitié jamais eut place **en ton courage**, // Fais moy treuver le calme apres ce long orage
- If pity ever had a place **in your courage** // Guide me back to calm after such a long storm

❖ *de (un) (ADV) ADJ courage* (673 tokens)

- Celuy qui **d'un lasche courage** // Craint les bourrasques de l'orage
- The one who, **of a cowardly courage**, fears the tremors of thunder

The lexico-grammatical patterns

❖ *avoir le courage* (4835 tokens)

- Il est à ma merci... mais **je n'ai pas le courage** de lui fracasser le crâne.
- He is at my disposal... but **I don't have the courage** to break off his skull.

❖ *donner (du) courage* (895 tokens)

- Mais on ne fit que m'intimider quand **il fallait me donner du courage**.
 - But I've only been daunted when **I had to be given some courage**.

The lexico-grammatical patterns

❖ *prendre courage* (328 tokens)

- À la fin, **prenant courage**, j'appelai tout doucement : Catherine !
 - In the end, **taking courage**, I called softly: Catherine!

❖ *courage « agentive subject »* (946 tokens)

- **Ton courage repugne** à faire la retraite ; // mais, si tu ne la fais, certaine est ta desfaitte ;
 - **Your courage loathes** to retreat; yet if you don't, your defeat is but guaranteed.

The lexico-grammatical patterns

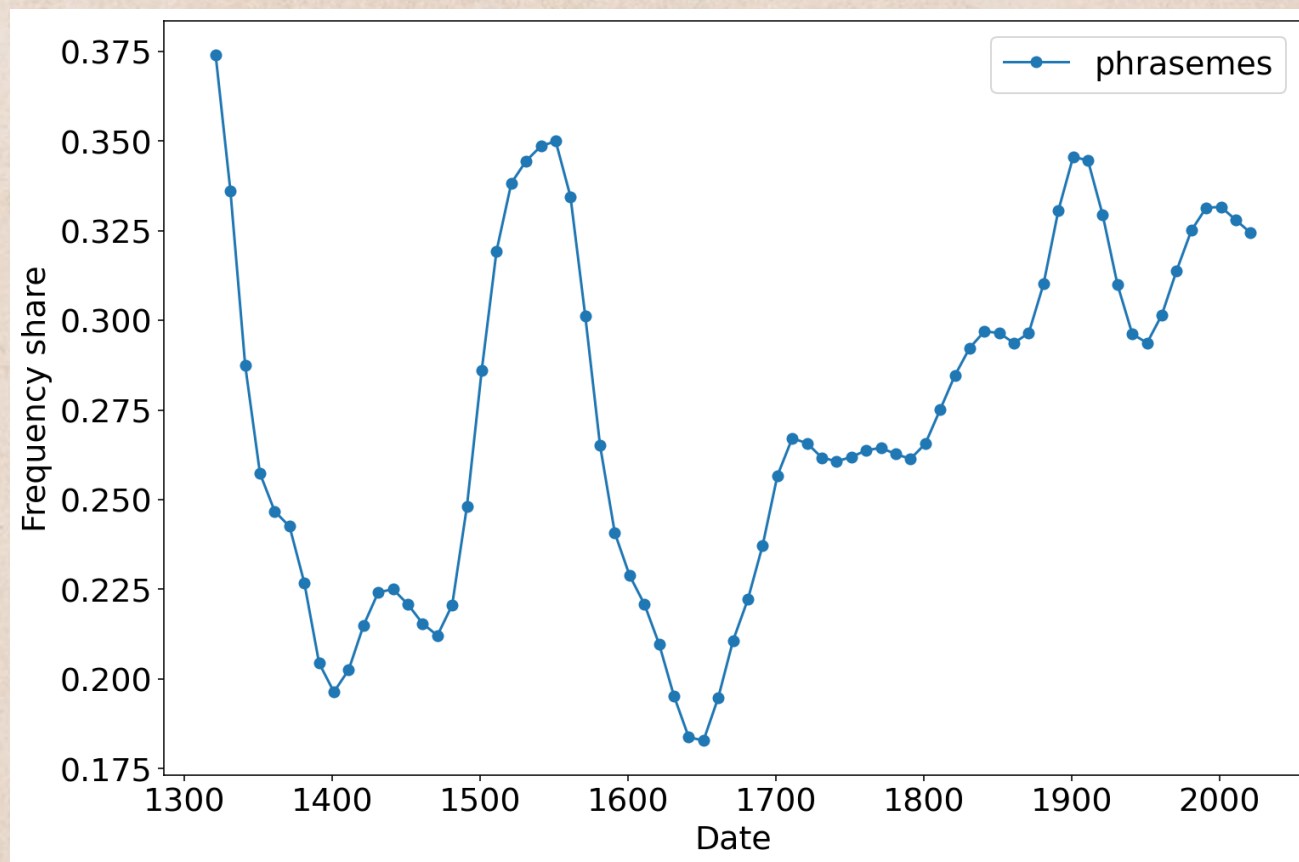
❖ *avec (DET) (ADJ) courage* (806 tokens)

- C'est pourtant ce que je fis, **avec un courage** auquel je rends moi-même hommage.
 - And yet this is what I did, **with a courage** I pay homage to myself.

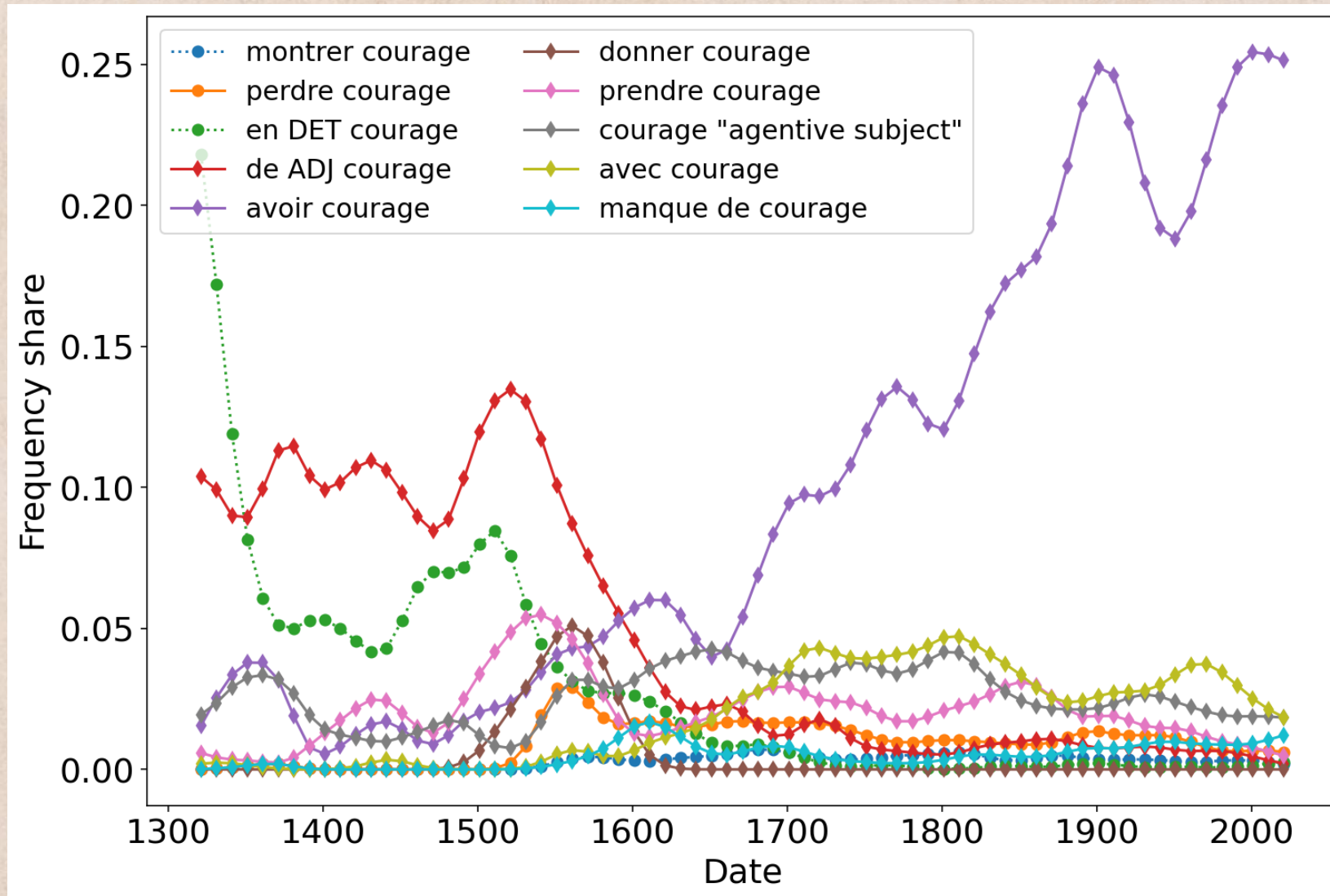
❖ *manque/faute/absence/défaut de courage* (175 tokens)

- Nous observerons en passant que, soit prudence, soit politique, car on ne peut pas dire que ce soit **faute de courage**, les anglais, avarés de leur propre sang, se battent rarement par eux-mêmes.
- We'll take note in passing that, either due to caution or politics, since we can't attribute that to **a lack of courage**, English people, sparing with their own blood, seldom fight by themselves.

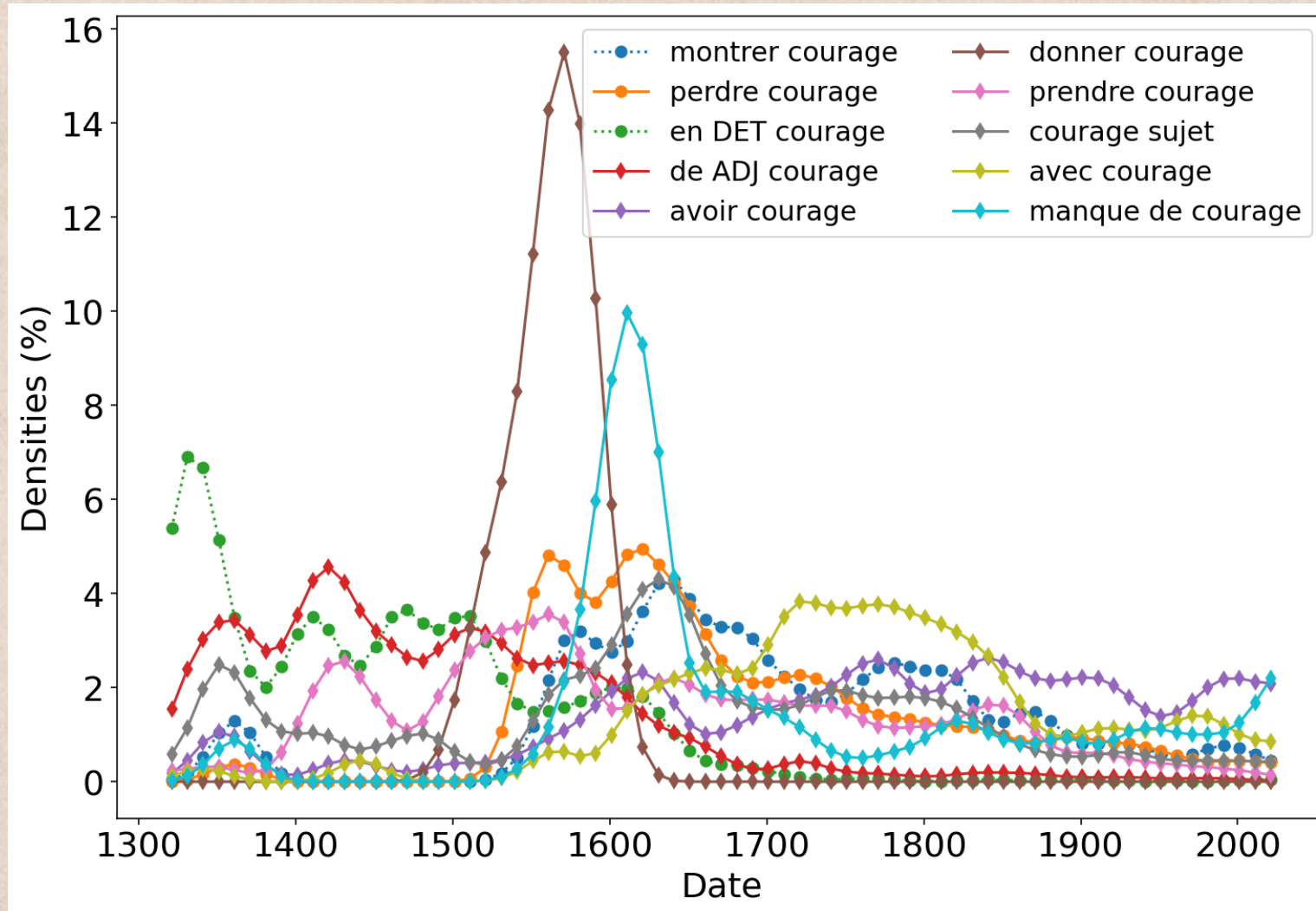
Proportion of tokens accounted for



Patterns' frequency shares



Patterns' z-scored frequencies



Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française

1^{re} ÉDITION **COURAGE.** s. m.

■ Disposition de l'ame avec laquelle elle se porte à entreprendre ou à repousser, ou à souffrir quelque chose. *Grand courage. peu de courage. son peu de courage. noble courage. bon courage. courage franc. courage eslevé. courage haut, fier, invincible, indomtable, inflexible, heroïque. courage masle, viril, brave, hardi, ferme, intrepide. courage martial. donner courage, du courage. prendre courage. perdre courage, le courage. exciter, enflammer, eschauffer, resveiller le courage. glacer, refroidir. abbatre, abbaïsser le courage. relever, hausser, accroistre, augmenter le courage à quelqu'un. le courage luy est revenu. cela luy fera revenir le courage. le courage luy manque. manque de courage. faute de courage. signaler son courage. c'est un brave soldat, il a du courage. son courage le perdra. il a plus de courage que de force.*

Il se dit quelquefois absolument par maniere de particule exhortative. *Courage mes amis. courage soldats.*

On dit prov. Quand on approche de la fin de quelque travail, *Il n'y a plus que courage.*

Il se prend quelquefois pour Affection. *Je vous serviray de grand courage, de bon courage. il y alloit de grand courage. il n'a pas fait cela de bon courage.*

Ce mot se determine quelquefois en mauvaise part par des épithetes. *Lasche courage. foible courage. courage bas. mauvais courage, effeminé, mol. courage malin, meschant. vilain courage. courage brutal.*

Il se prend aussi quelquefois pour Sentiment, passion, mouvement. *Il a gagné cela sur son courage. il n'a sceu vaincre son courage. si j'en croyois mon courage. aurois-tu bien le courage d'abandonner tes enfans ? le traistre eut bien le courage de livrer son ami.*

Il se dit aussi, Des animaux hardis, comme sont les lions, les sangliers, les chiens, les aigles, &c. *Ce chien a bien du courage. le lion est celui de tous les animaux qui a le plus de courage.*

1694

8^e ÉDITION **COURAGE.** n. m.

■ Disposition de l'âme qui lui fait supporter la souffrance, braver le danger, entreprendre des choses difficiles, hardies. *Le courage militaire. Le courage civil. Donner courage. Donner, inspirer du courage. Rendre le courage. Prendre, reprendre courage. S'armer de courage. Perdre courage. Perdre le courage. Exciter, réveiller, ranimer le courage. Relever, accroître, augmenter le courage de quelqu'un. Le courage lui manque. Manquer de courage. Signaler son courage. Combattre avec courage. Il eut le courage de lui résister. Au dernier moment, le courage lui manque.*

p. 316 Il se dit aussi en parlant des Animaux hardis. *Le courage du lion.*

Fig. et fam., *Prendre son courage à deux mains*, Faire effort sur soi-même pour accomplir un acte difficile devant lequel on a longtemps hésité.

Il se dit absolument et comme interjection, pour animer, pour exciter. *Allons, courage ! Courage, mes amis ! Bon courage !*

Il se dit quelquefois des Personnes mêmes, surtout dans le style élevé. *Enflammer les courages.*

Un grand courage se dit souvent d'un Homme qui se distingue par la noblesse d'âme ou par une grande force de caractère. *Un grand courage dédaigne de se venger. Les grands courages ne se laissent point abatre par l'adversité.*

Il s'emploie aussi quelquefois dans un sens défavorable et se dit de la Dureté de cœur. *Auriez-vous bien le courage d'abandonner vos enfans ? Je n'ai pas le courage de lui refuser cela. Ce misérable eut le courage de livrer son meilleur ami.*

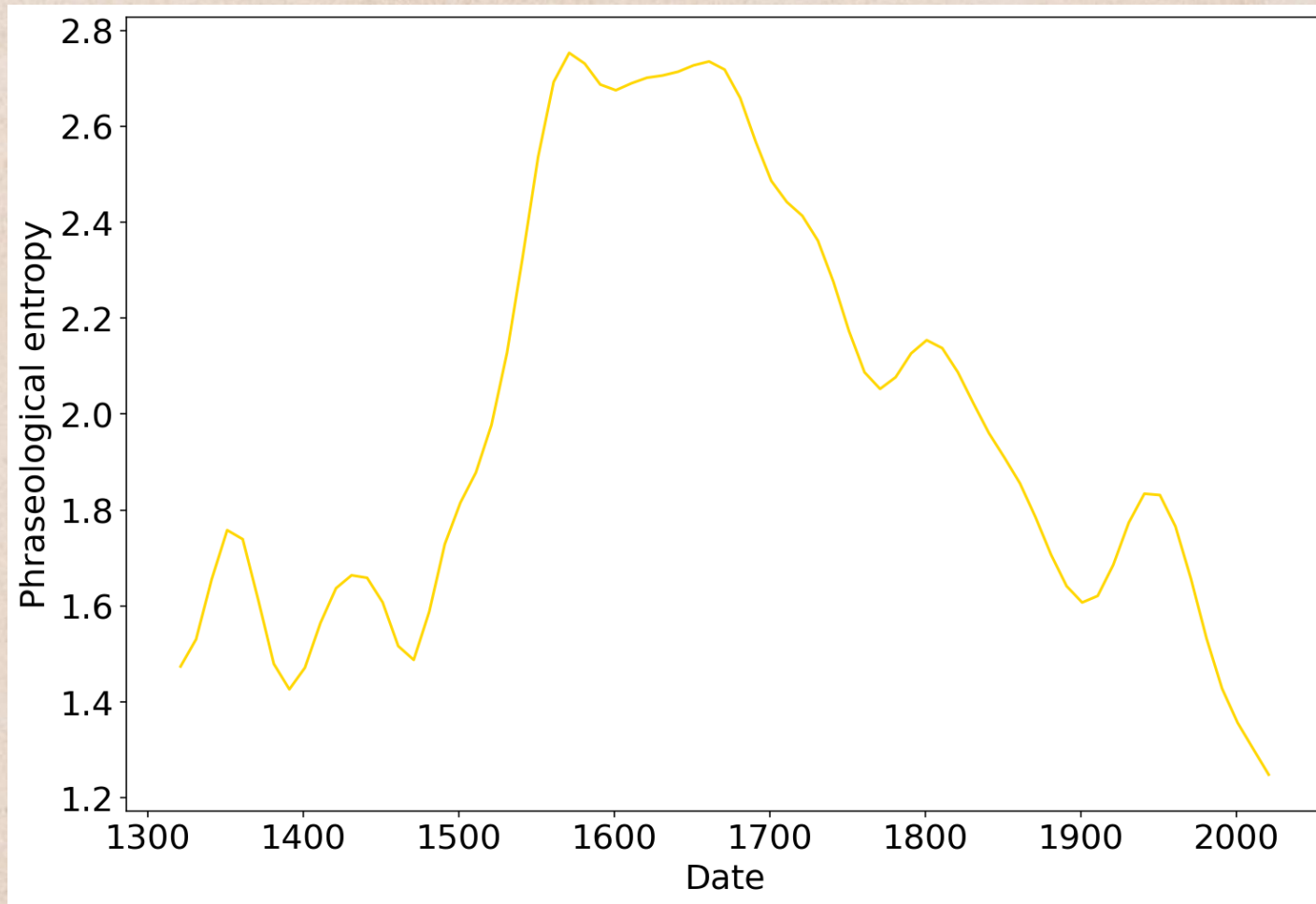
1935

Entropy

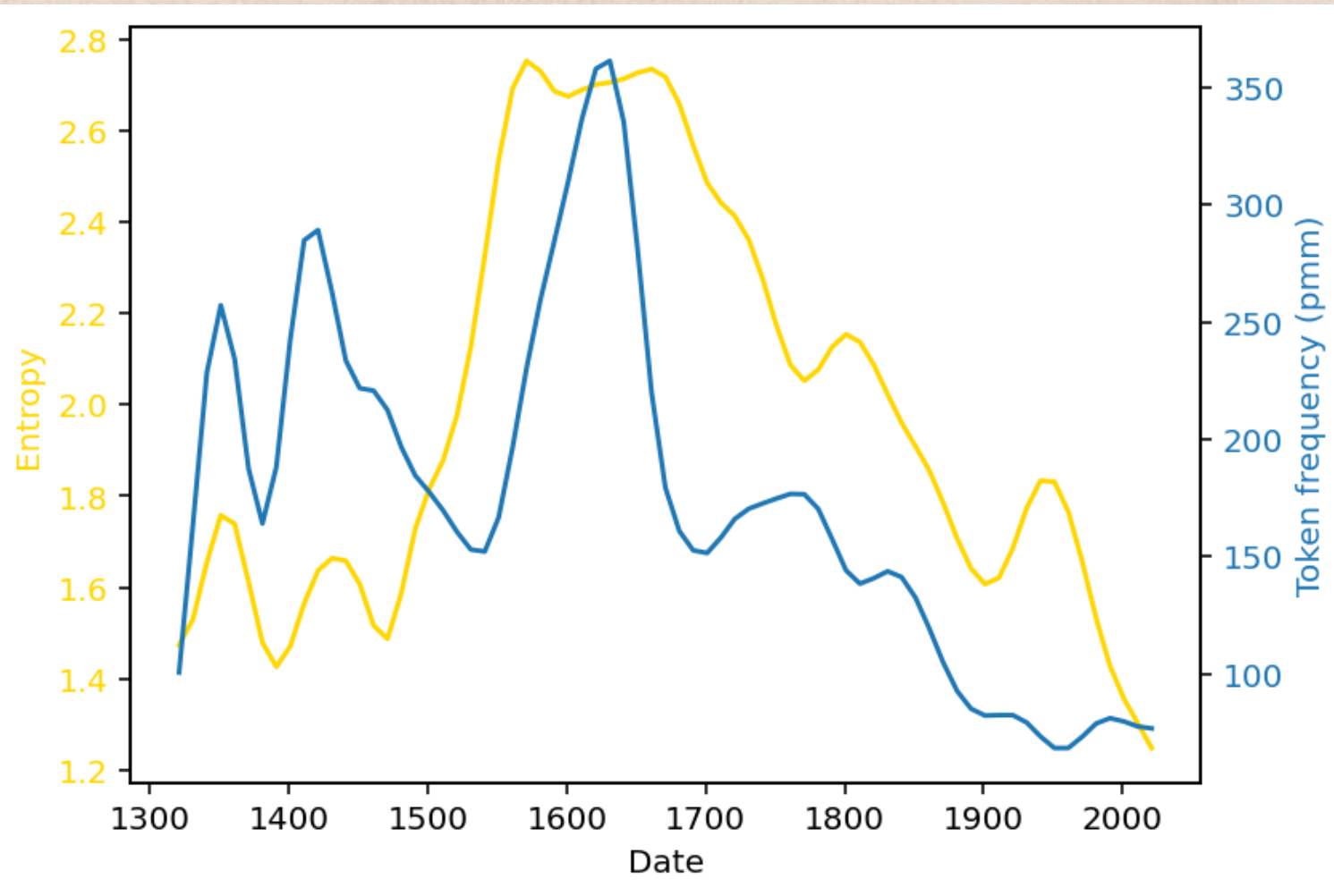
- ❖ Entropy provides a measure of *homogeneity* of a distribution.
- ❖ The higher the entropy, the more homogeneously the tokens are spread across the different « states » (contexts).
- ❖ Here we compute the entropy over all phraseological contexts (tokens outside these contexts are not accounted for).



Entropy



Entropy



Conclusion

- ③ *Courage* switched from something that is owned and can take different values, to something inherently positive that can be given or lost, depleted or refilled.
- ③ The semantic shift is paralleled by a change of phraseological structures.
- ③ At the transition, most contexts are active, such that the diversity of uses reaches a lasting peak.
- ③ There is no gradual replacement, but an overall effusiveness of phraseological associations.