Variation, a precious lesson. Why we need to keep in mind the origin and meaning of to vet, to fit and “survival of the fittest”

Variatie, een belangrijke les. Waarom we de oorsprong en betekenis van de Engelse woorden to vet, to fit en de uitdrukking “survival of the fittest” moeten onthouden

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AMENVATTING

The expression survival of the fittest most often has a misleading connotation in contemporary ears and minds not familiar with genetics and the scientific basis of breeding. Among live organisms, heritable variation is a prerequisite for survival of a species in changing conditions of life. Variants fitting best into new conditions survive and will have the greatest chances to reproduce themselves. This is the meaning of fit in the well-known expression ‘survival of the fittest’, coined by Herbert Spencer on Darwin’s idea of ‘natural selection’. In order to understand this, a short linguistic description is given, starting with to vet, meaning ‘to examine thoroughly’, a relatively recent expression (19th century), which at first sight seems to originate from the examinations done by veterinarians (vets) on racing horses, before they are allotted to certain categories in the races. Nowadays the term is especially used in the context of checking persons applying for jobs, business takeover bids and similar situations involving a certain degree of trustworthiness. To fit has a much older pedigree. The earliest attestations are found in mediaeval texts relating military or fighting episodes in which the adversaries are considered to be of equal power. This survived later on in horse racing competitions and gradually acquired the sense of fitting one thing into another, or to fit into a category. For living organisms, to fit into prevailing conditions of life is of utmost importance. It was only in the previous century that the meaning of fit changed into healthy and strong, possibly also influenced by the use of this term in racing competitions.

ABSTRACT

De uitdrukking survival of the fittest door Herbert Spencer gebruikt voor het resultaat van wat Charles Darwin natural selection noemde, kernbegrip in de evolutieleer, kan actueel potentieel ernstige misverstanden teweegbrengen. In de tijd van Darwin en Spencer betekende the fittest, diegene die het best bij een bepaalde (levens)omstandigheid past of die het beste erfelijke potentieel bezat om daarin te passen of zich aan te passen. Voor levende soorten is variatie een essentiële voorwaarde om in veranderende competitieve omstandigheden te blijven voortbestaan. De basis van Darwins evolutietheorie is dan ook erfelijke variatie binnen de soorten. Die laat toe dat min of meer passende varianten voorkomen die kunnen overleven en reproduceren. Minder aangepaste vinden minder voedsel, worden verdrongen en verdwijnen tenslotte: ze sterven uit. Ze worden op natuurlijke wijze weggeselecteerd. Dit is natuurlijke selectie.

In de loop van de vorige eeuw nam een heel andere woordbetekenis van fit de overhand: die van ‘gezond, in goede lichamelijke conditie verkerend’. Om dat te begrijpen wordt eerst een korte historische beschrijving gegeven van twee Engelse termen to vet en to fit, die lange tijd vooral gebruikt werden in paardenwedrenmilieus. To vet betekent zorgvuldig onderzoeken op eigenschappen en geschiktheid alvorens toegelaten te worden in races, of, voor wat mensen betreft, in bepaalde functies. De term wordt in de literatuur vermoedelijk ten onrechte gelinkt aan veterinarian (vet). Fit, oorspronkelijk gebruikt voor ridders en militairen in de betekenis van aan elkaar gewaagd zijn, werd vooral toegepast bij nagenoeg even snelle renpaarden om toegelaten te worden tot welbepaalde wedrennen. Later werd to fit meer in het algemeen gebruikt om ‘bij elkaar (doen) passen’ aan te duiden en in de vorige eeuw werd de notie ‘in conditie’ of ‘en forme’ (in vorm) eraan gehecht, wellicht ook onder invloed van het woordgebruik in het renpaardenmilieu. Uiteindelijk kreeg de betekenis ‘gezond en/of sterk’ de overhand.
INTRODUCTION

Somewhat strangely, two similar sounding verbs, to vet and to fit, have been related with horses, with the way horses are trained, and with the practical organization of horse races. To vet has been connected with veterinarians examining race horses (Atwood Lawrence, 1989). To fit was similarly used in the competitive context – first in humans and later on in racing horses, but the meaning gradually changed to ‘healthy, strong and fast’ – not only in equines, but also, and overwhelmingly this time, in humans. This change may have led to grave misunderstandings, especially in the evolutionary context of survival of the fittest. Consequences of the change are of utmost importance, because ‘designer babies’ are currently appearing on the horizon.

First, we will take a look into the history of the terms to vet and to fit, which we will try to connect with each other. Then we will examine the manifold changes in the meaning of the verb to fit, paying attention mainly to the origin and meaning of the term in the context of biological evolution.

TO VET, VETTING, TO VET OUT

To vet is defined in English as making careful and critical examinations of persons or situations. Examples: proposals for vetting large takeover bids; examine thoroughly candidates for a job to ensure that they are suitable, especially when secrecy, loyalty, or trustworthiness is required. Synonyms are: assess, check, inspect, evaluate, screen. In this context, vetting is also used: the process of performing background checks of persons before offering them employment, etc.

Vet is also an abbreviation of veterinarian, a term which originated in the mid-17th century (in English), deriving from Latin veterinaria: animals of burden (Devriese, 2012). The colloquial abbreviation English), deriving from Latin veterina: animals of burden (Devriese, 2012). The colloquial abbreviation term which originated in the mid-17th century (in English), deriving from Latin veterina: animals of burden (Devriese, 2012). The colloquial abbreviation

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It is not quite certain that the noun veterinarian, familiarly known as vet, bears an ontological relationship with to vet, to vet out and vetting. The fact that this is widely and intensely practiced in horse racing competitions, both in the past and in the present, may be a pure coincidence. The possibility that the change may have led to grave misunderstandings, especially in the evolutionary context of survival of the fittest. Consequences of the change are of utmost importance, because ‘designer babies’ are currently appearing on the horizon.

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cent decades a general term designating good health, strong, in good bodily condition. It did not take long before the paramedical -more appropriately termed pseudomedical- branch of healthcare provided ample opportunity for the consumer to spend money on food supplements, training manuals, clothing, consultants, etc., as often as possible in well-equipped fitness centers. Thus fitness was born, to become in no time big business.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

The above described change in meaning of fit may have serious consequences in the interpretation of the expression survival of the fittest. It is well known that Charles Darwin’s revolutionary work On the Origin of Species (1859) was in fact a part or abstract of the Gradually changing life conditions, a species has to have greater chances to survive and to procreate than the less well adapted or less easily adapting. In order to have chances to survive in suddenly, as well as in fitting variants or individuals of a species will signify, or to imply, being strong and healthy. Facing a change, in environmental conditions, for example, the best fitting variants or individuals of a species will have greater chances to survive and to procreate than the less well adapted or less easily adapting. In order to have chances to survive in suddenly, as well as in gradually changing life conditions, a species has to have a certain degree of genetic and epigenetic diversity. This implies the possession of a varying gene pool. In other words: the old concept of ‘pure’ races as a necessity for survival, is in fact detrimental. Hybridization with the necessarily prior creation of inbred lines, overwhelmingly successful during past decades in breeding for the higher production of domestic plants and animals, appears unlikely to be accepted and achieved among humans, but other techniques collectively termed genetic engineering, can possibly be applied.

And once again: in the biological context, we should avoid the nearly automatic inclination in contemporary discourse to use fit as connoting health and good bodily condition. Fitness in this biological sense has nothing to do with health and good bodily condition. The genetically schooled may be supposed to be familiar with this, but the concept of variation as a prerequisite for both natural and artificial selection remains largely unknown to the general public. The word fit has become ‘corrupted’. This may have played a role in the reintroduction and general use of the expression ‘natural selection’ after Darwin’s death in 1882. To quote Spencer (1879) himself: ‘How often misused words generate misleading thoughts’.

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REFERENCES


