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Linguistically Strange Word Combinations

D. J. Allerton

Linguistic phenomena, like any other phenomena, may appear to the beholder as strange for one of two reasons: either the item itself is unfamiliar and differs from familiar specimens in at least one important respect; or, alternatively, the item is an ordinary one occurring in an unfamiliar context. The first type of strangeness might be compared to the inherent peculiarity of mythical creatures with unusual combinations of features, such as basilisks and griffins, which count as strange in any context (except perhaps in the city of Basle). Strangeness of the second variety is well illustrated by the case of the ugly duckling, in which a change in the context was all that was required to make the item in question absolutely normal.

My concern here is the "ugly duckling" type of word strangeness, but it is worth briefly noting the main subvarieties of context-free inherent strangeness in words. Unfamiliar words may be totally new, involving new morphemes, like the new verb *fax*, "send by telecopying machine," or the new noun *glasnost*, "political openness"; and if their phonology differs from native patterns, they will appear even stranger. Alternatively, they may be new combinations of existing morphemes; in Dylan Thomas's poem "After the Funeral," for instance, we find examples like the derived words *ferned* and *foxy* (l. 24) and the compound words *tear-stuffed* (l. 10) and *cloud-sopped* (l. 36). We can usually make a shrewd guess as to the meaning of such new combinations of morphemes, since the morphemes are familiar, and they are combined in familiar patterns, though often they remain obscure or ambiguous. We are certainly immediately aware of a new word we meet. This is less true of new word combinations.

Words are usually combined for the purpose of giving linguistic expression to complex meanings. When a strange word combination arises, this may be due to the strangeness of the meaning it expresses; in other

words, it may be semantically deviant in the sense that it expresses an unusual combination of constituent meanings, so that the deviance is as much extralinguistic as linguistic. On the other hand, a word combination may be strange for purely linguistic reasons, and in such cases it is usually possible to suggest a corrected or preferred expression for the same intended meaning. Some such combinations (see Haas 1972–3, 1973) are grammatically deviant, but others are deviant because they violate what I have called "locutional" norms (Allerton 1984).

Semantically strange word combinations abound in Dylan Thomas's poetry, and are not lacking in "After the Funeral." Restricting ourselves for the time being to adjective-noun combinations, we may note the examples *crooked year* (l. 30), *sour and humble hands* (l. 31) and *threadbare whisper* (ll. 32–33). At first sight these appear anomalous, in that they suggest puzzling constellations of ideas. The adjective *crooked* would be more normal in combination with *stick* (or even *hands*) than with *year*; and *humble* would be more natural with *whisper* than with *hands*. As for *threadbare* in combination with *whisper*, it seems to be an original way of saying "faint" or "faltering." Such interpretations extend the meanings of words figuratively or metaphorically, and they are possible thanks to the inherent flexibility of language. But the fact that they rely on the originality and inventiveness of language-users means that the meaning is seldom absolutely clear and unambiguous. Consider further the following examples from the poetry of Robert Rehder (cited from notes taken at a reading of his poetry by the author): the phrase *folding the sky* can only be interpreted if we extend the meaning of *fold* or of *sky* or of both beyond their normal senses. The same would apply to the noun-verb combination in the clause *where Frank's paintings are built*; either they are not "paintings" in the ordinary sense, or they are not "built" in the ordinary sense.

The examples quoted above have all involved what semanticists usually term "anomalous" sentences (or parts of sentences). But the same points apply equally to tautologous or contradictory sentences like:

The water was wet.
The water was dry.

In the first sentence *wet* probably means something like "much wetter than expected"; and in the second sentence *dry* might be taken as meaning

perhaps "somehow having a drying effect." In all these cases basic meanings are extended to make a sentence interpretable.

Grammatically deviant sentences have a totally different effect. If we consider a deformed sentence like:

*The man which came yesterday enjoyed to talk

we find that it infringes one or more grammatical rules. In this case, there is a rule that forbids the relative pronoun *which* after human nouns; there is also a rule that requires the gerund rather than the infinitive after a certain class of verbs including *enjoy* (also *suggest*, *finish*, etc.). A corrected version of the sentence would therefore be:

The man who/that came yesterday enjoyed talking.

There is no question of interpreting the strange version as having an unusual meaning; it is simply wrong. The person who produced it must be lacking in grammatical competence, or subject to a severe performance disorder.

The criterion of corrigibility applies not only to cases of grammatical strangeness but also to locutional cases. Considering the sentence:

The man was not listening to me when I made the statement

we find that the combinations *listen* + *to* and *make* + *statement* involve collocational restrictions of this type. The preposition *to* is required after *listen*, whereas *at* would have been required after *look*. Similarly *make* is required before *statement*, whereas *give* is required before *order*, and *put* before *question*. Thus a sequence like:

*The man was not listening at me when I put the statement

must be rejected as deviant and just as much in need of correction as any sentence that is grammatically wrong. Once again we would not normally think of looking for some extra nuance of meaning carried by *at* or *put* in such a context. It would rather be assumed that the speaker was a speaker with slightly deviant English, such as a foreigner or dialect speaker, and that his command of idiomatic Standard English was imperfect.

Such locutional restrictions particularly affect prepositions and what have been termed "general verbs." Prepositions in combination with verbs, adjectives or nouns (see further *dependent on*, *independent of*; *solidarity with*, *loyalty to*) and general verbs in combination with abstract nouns derived from verbs (see further *make an attempt*, *have a try*, *give some help*) operate at an abstract non-literal level of meaning, at which literal semantic distinctions like *to* / *at* / *on* / *with* or *make* / *give* / *have* / *put* fail to apply. The selection of preposition or verb in such combinations is thus made on an arbitrary basis but is conventionally fixed in each case, with the result that both mistakes and correction are possible. Semantic motivation is not totally absent for such word selections, but it is certainly far from sufficient to make the choice predictable.

Having made a relatively clear distinction between semantically based word selection and arbitrary locutional choices, I now wish to concentrate on a phenomenon which falls somewhere between the two, viz. combinations of intensifying adjective and abstract noun, in which the choice of adjective seems to be not so much totally fixed as weighted in favour of a particular adjective or set of adjectives. Consider the following combinations as they might appear in a sentential context like *There was — — about the problem*:

(i) great concern, ?great agreement, ?great disagreement,
(ii) ?strong concern, strong agreement, ?strong disagreement,
(iii) ?sharp concern, ?sharp agreement, sharp disagreement.

The intended meaning in all cases is roughly "a large measure of *x*," where *x* is the abstract quality concerned, but the natural choice of intensifying adjective (or "degree adjective," to use Bolinger's terminology) differs according to the individual noun. Although the intuitions of individual speakers differ, in my view the majority of British native speakers would prefer one adjective in each case, and according to Bolinger (private communication) American preferences are similar. How can such preferences be explained?

As a preliminary to such an explanation, let us consider briefly how everyday adjectives that denote external physical characteristics are used in a literal sense, when they are used to modify nouns denoting physical objects. Typical words of these types would be as follows:

NOUNS: man, building, aeroplane, knife
ADJECTIVES: big, huge, massive, strong, tall, high, deep, sharp, heavy, warm, red, rough, square, full, complete.

These are naturally only sample lists, and the adjectives could be supplemented by antonyms and other alternatives. Adjectives like these are mostly gradable and in fact are mostly of the "scalar" type (Allerton 1987), allowing modification with *very*, *rather*, and so forth. Although not every adjective is natural with every noun, all nouns are possible with a wide range of adjectives. Moreover, while some adjectives clearly undergo slight differentiation in meaning according to the noun they modify, each adjective has a clear meaning of its own which is distinct from that of other adjectives. Each adjective represents a certain degree of a particular physical quality.

When the head noun refers to a physical entity with only one dimension or quality or to that physical quality itself, then it is only natural that the choice of adjective should be largely limited to those that refer to this dimension. Looking at the following combinations we find that alternatives to the adjectives listed are more or less restricted to adjectives of the same semantic subclass, differing only in degree:

a *big/large* mass/quantity
a *high* altitude
a *long* way
a *heavy* weight
a *deep* pit/shaft
a *sharp* cutting-edge.

In each case an antonym can be substituted for the cited adjective (with the exception of *?a small mass*, since a mass is by definition large); but replacing the adjective with one of a different semantic subclass usually creates an odd effect, e.g. *?a tall quantity*, *a high weight*.

In the case of physical qualities of a more general nature or more abstract character, there is still a limitation to one subclass of adjectives but the choice is more difficult to predict and seems a trifle arbitrary. Take the following examples:

the *high* degree/pressure/tension/temperature/fever
the *large* amount/extent/majority
the *wide* scope.

Although the cited adjectives seem very natural in the context of the nouns given above, it is possible to imagine other combinations that would be semantically plausible, but rarely if ever occur; *large pressure*, *wide majority*. In such cases then there is an element of arbitrariness in the choice of adjective, but also a degree of motivation. When we turn to nouns

denoting abstract qualities that have no relation to any physical dimension, for instance those referring to mental states, we find that the element of arbitrariness increases further.

Nouns like *concern, agreement, disagreement, difficulty, strength* also represent a single dimension, and they therefore basically have need of only one adjective to represent the positive degree of their quality. But, as we have seen, while *agreement* prefers *strong*, and *disagreement* prefers *sharp*, the noun *concern* leans towards *great*, and in doing so, it is following a very common pattern also found with, for example, *difficulty* and *strength*. The choice of adjective is thus largely determined by the noun it modifies, although some nouns allow more than one possibility. What can the basis be for such selections?

It is firstly worth noting that the number of adjectives used to modify abstract mental nouns is strictly limited and only represents a small subgroup of the dimensional adjectives of physical quality that we considered above. Adjectives of colour and shape are presumably excluded because they are qualitative rather than quantitative, colour adjectives having the additional disqualification that they do participate in binary oppositions as antonyms (like *high* – *low*) do. Some individual adjectives like *tall* and *bright* seem to be excluded from use as modifiers of mental nouns, but for no obvious reason.

In describing the adjectives that are used as basic intensifiers of mental nouns, it may be useful to see the controlling noun as a kind of master word exercising power over its adjectival servant. Some noun masters have more than one servant adjective, and most adjectives serve more than one master. It is also apparent that each servant adjective adapts its work to suit the particular noun it is serving: thus *great* makes a slightly different semantic contribution with *concern* compared with the one it makes with *difficulty*, a phenomenon I have referred to as "semantic tailoring" (1984: 21–23). Using the master-servant metaphor, we can say that the master word (in this case the noun) has the right to lay down the nature of the duties of its servant word, the adjective.

Some adjectives are more versatile than others in their role of degree specifier; they serve a wide range of masters and adapt their work accordingly. Amongst those that describe a high degree, we can pick out *great* as the most versatile of all. Its most common combinations include:

great: charm, curiosity, danger, importance, interest, joy, patience, surprise, skill.

Despite its very wide range of possibilities, *great* is not a natural intensifier for all mental nouns; in particular, it is less happy with nouns that denote passive qualities, as in *?great boredom, ?great misery*. Despite these restrictions *great* remains the most widely used intensifying adjective with mental nouns, and this may not be unconnected with the fact that in current English it has virtually lost its concrete meaning. Admittedly in formal English it can still be used in the meaning "large," as in *a great lump of stone*; but in conversational English *a great big lump of stone* would be more normal, and here *great* seems to be reduced to the role of submodifier (of *big*). The lack of a concrete meaning may then be thought of as having fostered the generality of *great* in its abstract uses, for instance with mental nouns. We have already seen how the meaning of *great* is "tailored" to suit the master word noun it is serving, but what kind of meaning is it that results? The fact that *great* and its fellows (like *strong, sharp*) are mere intensifying adjectives means that they simply express a high degree of the quality already inherent in the meaning of the noun. Thus the meaning of *great concern* could be expressed as "very concerned concern," the meaning of *great difficulty* as "very difficult difficulty," and the meaning of *great strength* as "very strong strength." Although the collocations used in these glosses are highly abnormal because of the redundancy involved, they do justice to the meaning, and illustrate the semantic "tailoring."

Other intensifying adjectives are not so versatile as *great*. Those adjectives that refer to a measurable physical quality are, however, each possible with a range of nouns, and it is worth examining these individual ranges to see whether there is any semantic basis for them or whether they simply involve an arbitrary set of locutional restrictions. Usage is notoriously difficult to establish in such cases, but typical British use would be something like the following:

strong: agreement, support, appeal, response, prejudice, belief
sharp: disagreement, criticism, contrast, response, rebuke, pain
deep: disappointment, sorrow, admiration, longing, prejudice, knowledge
warm: welcome, support, appreciation, thanks, applause
high: hope(s), spirits, risk, expectations, fever
hard: work, discipline, punishment

big:	gain, loss, mistake, difference, chance
heavy:	loss, defeat, wear, traffic, cold (nose/throat illness).

It goes without saying that these are not the only possible nouns to occur with the adjectives in question; indeed, for some speakers, other nouns may even be more common. But these lists do give some indication of the range that is natural for each adjective. Not all the nouns listed are actually nouns that are fully "mental" in meaning, but those that have been added fill out the picture. In general there seems to be some semantic coherence in each of the noun lists, and some of the collocational links seem to be motivated. For instance it could be argued that *strong support* is a natural combination because physical strength is needed for physical support, so that the expression is simply a double metaphor. Similarly, *sharp criticism* is an appropriate combination because the mental effect of criticism can be compared to the physical effect of wounding with a knife (as evidenced by expressions like *a wounding remark*). In other words many such combinations can be explained as involving a metaphorical use of the adjective, and the choice can be at least partly viewed as being determined by one of the underlying conceptual metaphors of the type argued for by Lakoff and Johnson, such as ARGUMENT is a BUILDING (to explain *strong argument*) or GOOD is UP (to explain *high hopes*).

Unfortunately, not all collocations are explained as easily as this. There seems to be a considerable element of arbitrariness. Why, for instance, do we find that *high* is the natural choice with *risk* (despite the fact that risks are generally a bad thing rather than a good one) but that *big* (or *good*) is preferred with *chance*, and *strong* with *possibility*? Similarly why do we generally speak of a *big difference* but a *sharp contrast* (the reverse pairings being not impossible but certainly less common)? The answer must be that these are partly standard combinations that speakers largely learn and use as units. They are probably mentally stored this way, and although they are metaphors, they are conventionalized ones that come to mind very readily. In fact they come very near to being clichés, or favourite collocations. But such predilections are not absolutely fixed in either time or space. In recent years, for instance, there has been growth in British English in the popularity of the word *heavy* in such combinations, perhaps stemming from American English, where there have always been different preferences: newer uses include *heavy increase* (compare *heavy wear*), *heavy user* (compare *heavy smoker*) and *heavy criticism*. If this sharp (or

"heavy") increase in use continued unabated, *heavy* might eventually become a rival of *great*. But for the present it still seems to carry with it an association of detrimental effects, which leads us to ask whether our intensifying adjectives really are equivalent to each other.

We have already seen some cases of nouns with which more than one adjective is possible, such as *strong prejudice* beside *deep prejudice*. Such phrases are not quite synonymous, despite that fact that the principal role of the adjective is to act as an intensifier, giving the general meaning "high degree of prejudice." The case is even clearer with a noun of more general meaning like *feelings*. (I mean the "mass plural" form *feelings* rather than the mass singular *feeling*, which typically takes *great*.) If we take a sentential frame like:

The Prime Minister's speech aroused — — feelings in the crowd

we find that *deep* and *strong* may occur, but also *warm* and *bitter*; these all suggest a high degree of feelings, but not only that. Although these words of physical dimensions are not so clearly different in meaning as when they are used in a literal sense, they still seem to contrast with each other. For example, in combination with *feelings*, *strong* suggests something perhaps short-lived but forcefully expressed, while *deep* suggests something more permanent but more passive; and, whereas neither of these adjectives tells us much about the kind of feelings involved, *warm* would imply positive ones, and *bitter* negative ones. These qualitative aspects of the meanings of the adjectives are not so much to the fore in a combination with a noun that denotes a specific feeling, because usually the only adjective possible is one that expresses a semantic feature that is already present or half-present in the noun: *strong backing*, *deep longing*, *warm welcome*, *bitter dispute*. In such combinations the qualitative aspect of the meaning of the adjective is largely redundant because it is in a kind of semantic concord with the noun, so that all that remains to be expressed is the degree or intensity of the feeling or other mental quality. If, on the other hand, a noun expressing a more specific feeling is modified by an adjective that semantically clashes rather than agrees, a strange combination results, as in *?strong sorrow*, *?deep support*, *?warm regret*.

Not all intensifying adjectives have an obvious literal meaning, of course: we have already noted *great*, but there are also others with a somewhat lower frequency of occurrence, such as *acute*, *grave*, *intense*,

serious and *severe*. Although, unlike *strong*, *sharp*, *deep*, etc., they have no concrete meaning to restrain them, they are still subject to collocational restrictions: for instance, while *difficulty* could be used with any of them, *error* would only be natural with *grave* and *serious*, while *pain* or *embarrassment* would only be common with *acute*, *intense* or *severe*. Again it seems to be a matter of a kind of semantic agreement, or "redundancy features," to use Bäcklund's term. Things are naturally slightly different when such adjectives are used with a concrete, animate noun like *person*; then the full power of the semantic contrast comes into play.

Some intensifying adjectives are so specialized that they are limited to the function of serving just one or two abstract nouns. Take the following examples:

rapt attention	(a) *glaring* error
stark truth	(an) *unmitigated* disaster
excruciating pain	(a) *comprehensive* defeat
raging jealousy	(a) *resounding* victory
outright rejection	(a) *rich* supply
monumental ignorance/stupidity	

In such cases the adjective, at least in this intensifying use, has such a specific meaning that it somehow includes not only the idea of intensification but also a field of application corresponding more or less to the meaning of the noun. The word *rapt*, for instance, seems to mean not just "a high degree of" (like *great*) but more particularly "a high degree of attentiveness or some similar quality." The adjective therefore has such a close semantic link to its noun or nouns that the combination seems to be mentally stored and recalled for use as a single unit. They certainly represent one kind of cliché. The cliché can be avoided through the use of a more general adjective; *great*, for instance, is acceptable with most, though not all, of the above nouns. But the degree expressed by *great attention* or *great pain* seems distinctly weaker than that expressed by *rapt attention* or *excruciating pain*, which seem to suggest a very high degree indeed. In view of the high specificity of these adjectives, it is not surprising that using one of them with a noun that is semantically rather distant can give a somewhat strange effect, as in *?excruciating attention*, *monumental attention*.

The above discussion of combinations of lexically subservient intensifying adjective and lexically dominating abstract noun has illustrated the difficulties of describing patterns of coocurrence that seem in part to

involve arbitrarily fixed locutions but in part to be semantically motivated, sometimes in rather subtle ways. Other lexical master-servant patterns similarly straddle the locutional-semantic borderline in their selectional restrictions. In fact there is a whole series of such patterns, all observing the following hierarchy of word-classes from the most lexically rigid (and thus master-like) to the most lexically pliable (and thus servant-like):

NOUN > ADJECTIVE > VERB > ADVERB > PREPOSITION.

Such patterns include noun-verb (for instance, verb selected by its object noun) and noun-preposition (for example, preposition selected by the noun it is complementing). It is worth noting that the lexically master-like word precedes its servant word in some syntactic patterns but follows it in others.

We may take verb-object combinations (which in English have the master verb preceding) as an illustration, in particular those with a verb meaning "experience" and an abstract noun object. Consider the example given in Table 1, in which the combinations are marked with three grades of naturalness for a typical British speaker: +, (?) and ?.

Table 1

USE OF VERBS MEANING "EXPERIENCE" WITH CERTAIN ABSTRACT NOUN OBJECTS

	have	experience	suffer	undergo	encounter
a problem, a difficulty	+	+	?	?	+
deprivation, hardship	(?)	+	+	+	(?)
a loss*, a defeat	(?)	(?)	+	?	?
a setback	+	+	+	(?)	+

* in the emotional sense

It seems appropriate that the verb *suffer* occurs with those nouns that refer to a very bad experience, and *encounter* seems to fit in very well with the meaning of (perhaps unexpectedly) mildly bad experiences like *problem* and *difficulty*. But such semantic motivation is not always paramount, as the unpredictably defective distribution of *have* in Table 1 illustrates. To a

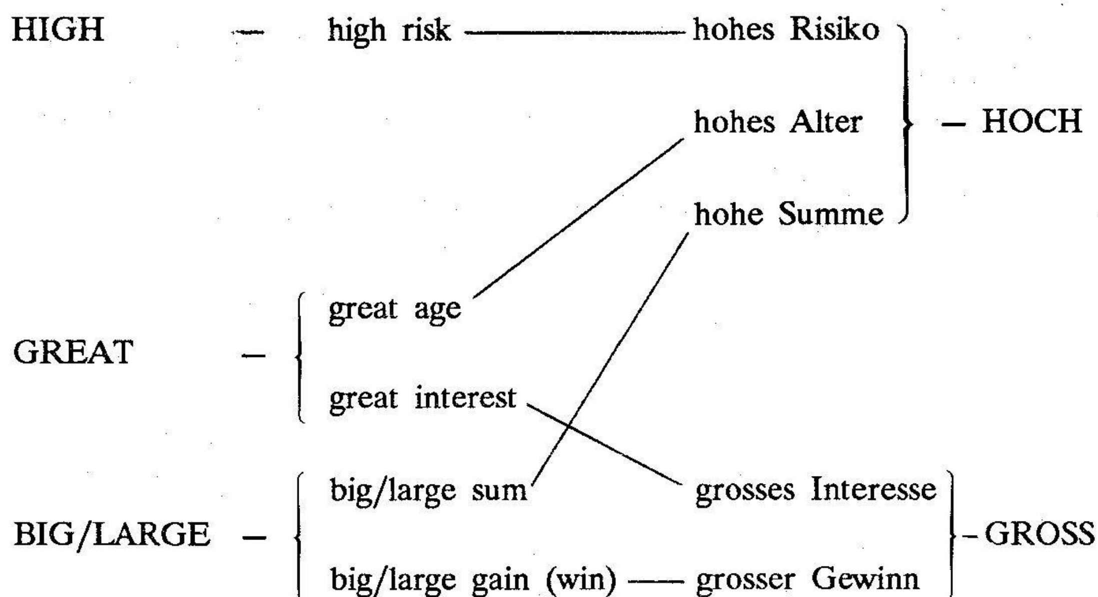
certain extent such combinations are in fact used as locutionally fixed collocations. As such they can of course be recalled incorrectly, as evidenced by the deviant phrase *?undergo problems* heard from a B.B.C. radio reporter in May 1989.

Such faulty, deviant combinations are not so surprising; what is really remarkable is that the correct individual locutional combinations can be retrieved at all from a speaker's competence. They are not a matter of generalized grammatical rules; and they can not be safely predicted on a semantic basis. They therefore constitute quite a burden for the memory, and recall is yet more complicated in those cases when a servant word precedes its master word (for instance *undergo/encounter* being selected before *hardship/problems*), because the former then has to be chosen before the latter has been uttered, or perhaps even formulated. Quite apart from such performance factors, in this as in any field of linguistic activity there are bound to be not only different degrees of linguistic competence (with some speakers being relatively incompetent) but also considerable variations between speakers, and more obviously between dialects, such as those between British and American English.

The conventionalized, arbitrary aspect of our semantic-locutional combinations is further attested by the degree of non-matching across languages, although the partial semantic basis ensures that there will be a fair degree of correspondence as well. Returning to our adjective-noun combinations, we find, for instance, that the German adjective *schwer* "heavy" is used with nouns to give combinations that, translated literally, seem strange in English. For example, while *schwere Verluste* gives *heavy losses*, which is normal, *schweres Leiden* would correspond to *?heavy* (= *deep*) *suffering*, and *schwere Sorgen* to *?heavy* (= *serious*) *worries*, each noun demanding a different adjective in English. Similarly, the German intensifying adjectives *hoch* and *gross* have a complex set of correspondences to English *high*, *great* and *big/large*, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2

CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN CERTAIN INTENSIFYING ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN



Strange semantic-locutional combinations may thus arise for a number of reasons. It may be that the language user has an inadequate or deviant knowledge of the language, perhaps because he is a non-native speaker, perhaps because he is a dialect speaker, or perhaps simply because he does not have a high level of competence in the learned register in which most of these combinations commonly occur. Alternatively, it may be that he is a scientist, philosopher or poet, trying to express new constellations of thoughts, perhaps differing in fairly subtle ways from familiar packages of ideas. Strange new combinations used in this way make us rethink existing complex ideas and prevent us from swallowing them as undigested wholes. In this way they may help promote psycholinguistic alertness. Unfortunately, however, it is not always easy to distinguish between strangeness deriving from defective knowledge and strangeness deriving from originality.

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