

**A TENSION BETWEEN LINGUISTIC SEMANTICS AND  
PRAGMATICS:  
THE TRANSLATION OF THE WORD  
'WOMAN!' (GUNAI) INTO 'MOSADI!' IN THE  
SETSWANA BIBLE**

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**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to explore the tension between semantics and pragmatics as evidenced in the translation of one Greek word *gunai* (woman) in the Setswana Bible. Translators of the Setswana Bible have generally used the word *mosadi* to translate *gunai*. This word, however, causes problems for readers of the Setswana Bible.<sup>1</sup>*

**1. The word 'woman' in the Setswana context**

The Greek word *gunai* has been translated *mosadi* in the Setswana Bible: that is, in both the Hookey (1908) and its reviewed version by Morolong (1992). It is an indisputable fact that the word *gunai* literally (semantically) refers to English "woman," or Setswana *mosadi*. Matumo (1993:267) in the *Setswana English Setswana Dictionary* supports this translation. He points out that the word *mosadi* falls in the noun Class 1 /*mo-*/ and is a singular of *basadi*; it refers to a woman or a wife in Setswana.

Although the semantic sense (the literal meaning) of this word in Setswana corresponds well with the Greek word *gunai*, the pragmatics of the same word, particularly in the vocative case, prove to be problematic for many Batswana who interact with the Setswana Bible. The following are the responses of my informants. My focus here is on the vocative use of this word. The following evaluation is based on interviews held with sixteen Batswana of varying ages (between 18 to 80 years), different religious affiliations (regular church members, those who go to church occasionally and those who do not go to church at all) and of both sexes.

Out of the sixteen interviewees, only one (a middle aged Christian man) said that the word *mosadi* is appropriate. He developed his argument from the definition given by Kgasa and Tsonope's (1995:177) *Tlhanodi ya Setswana*, a dictionary of Setswana words. Here it is pointed out that the word *mosadi* means "a grown up female being," (*motho wa bong jwa bonamagadi, mme a setse a fetile seamo sa boroba ka dingwaga*). So this informant was of the view that given the originally intended meaning of the word *mosadi*, it constitutes an appropriate address for an adult female person.

**2. *Mosadi* portrays rudeness and disrespect**

The remaining fifteen Batswana interviewees (and therefore, the overwhelming majority) vehemently argued that the word *mosadi* when used to address a woman demonstrates

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1. Setswana is a Bantu language of the southern African region. It is, alongside English, Botswana's official language and is also one of South Africa's eleven official languages.

disrespect and even insolence. It was further argued that the address *mosadi* (and even *monna* - that is, "man") is bad to the ears of a Motswana. My informants indicated that it is a rude and unbecoming practice to use such an address, particularly to elderly people, because *mosadi* has both a derogatory and diminutive effect. It thus seems to belittle the one who is being addressed. As such the response of Jesus to Mary in John 2:4 is quite shocking to them.

My interviewees maintained that when one is addressed as "woman," this address tends to carry a connotative sense of anger or disrespect. Hence even when an individual addresses another as "*mosadi*," many would respond by saying *A ke mosadi wa gago?* That is, "Am I your wife?" The word is, therefore, perceived as provocative. Hence, some will respond to such an address by saying *ke na le leina!* that is, "I have a name!" So the negative implications of the word *mosadi* in Setswana are very serious. Some of my interviewees even said that the word *mosadi* does not only have negative implications when used to address individuals (vocative case), it can also sound provocative in declarative sentences in Setswana. For example, let us assume that a certain woman "x" came in looking for another woman "y" at her home, but not finding "y" present, finds only "z". It will be more appropriate for "z" to say to "y" later when she returns, *Mme yo mongwe o ntse a go batla* that is, "A certain "lady"<sup>2</sup> was looking for you." And not, *Mosadi yo mongwe o ntse a go batla* (A certain "woman" was looking for you).

It was also pointed out that *mosadi* when used to address a woman is generally used in a situation where there is a contention between individuals. Although a common word, it is rather sharp or provocative. Most of the time, it is used in situations where there is antagonism. They added that it would be appropriate to use *mmaetsho* (literally "our mother") rather than the word used in the Setswana Bible.

My interviewees expressed the harshness, even the rudeness, of the word *mosadi* especially with regard to John 2:1-4. In this scripture, we are told of the relationship between Jesus and Mary. We are told that "the mother of Jesus" (v. 2) was discussing a serious issue with Jesus, an issue that demanded the attention of individuals present. Amazingly, the response of Jesus does not give us any indication that it is his mother he is talking to: he calls his mother "woman" (*mosadi*). To a Tswana listener there seems to be some inconsistency here, because the "mother of Jesus" is termed "woman" by him. The surprising choice of this word cannot be overlooked in the Setswana translation of the Bible.

In the view of my informants, a Motswana who addresses a woman *mosadi* does not only disrespect that individual but actually dishonours him or herself as the speaker. This being the case then, in Setswana a woman should be addressed as *mma*, or *mme*, (mum/mother) irrespective of her age or one's relation to her. A woman is addressed as *mma* or *mme* even when the interlocutors are not at all biologically related. One of the informants, however argued that although the word "woman!" is undoubtedly very rough and normally shows some form of disrespect, it is important to observe that Jesus throughout scriptures is presented as showing scant regard for his earthly parents: for example, in Mark 3:33-34, in a scenario where he said his mother and his brothers are those who do the will of the Father.

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2. Note that the word "lady" here has been used to reflect a better understanding of the Setswana word, *mme*. The word itself (lady) is not necessarily the exact English equivalent of the Greek word *gunai*. English is deficient of a proper word to represent the Greek word *gunai*. As such some translators like those of the NEB have opted to use the word "mother" to translate *gunai*.

By means of a summary then, it is valid to say that the interviews with Batswana regarding the word *mosadi* reveal overwhelmingly that the use of this word in addressing women is improper. The unfavourable connotation that this word holds cannot be denied. This is not only true for the general way in which this word is used, but also in the interpretation of the word as it occurs in the Setswana Bible. Such evaluations as rude, harsh, provocative, derogatory, and diminutive as pronounced by the interviewees alluded to above, clearly convey the negative picture that this word reflects.

At this point, I want to proceed to make a close examination of the Greek word *gunai* to see how its understanding and implications differ from the Setswana understanding of the word *mosadi*.

### 3. 'Woman!' in the Greek context

The word "woman" is from the corresponding Greek word *gunē* (γυνή). The word *gunē* when expressed in the vocative case, that is, the case of address, is *gunai*. (This is the occurrence that this paper is focused on) This word is hardly rare, or semantically complex: it occurs widely also outside of biblical literature. As J.H. Moulton and G. Willigan (1930:134) point out, this is quite an old noun that is attested from works of Homer (8th-6th century BC) up to the Modern Greek. The word is also found in the Septuagint and in the writings of Philo of Alexandria (1st century AD) (W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich 1979:1068). The word *gunē* is used two hundred and fifteen times in the Bible (Goodrick and Kohlenberger 1990: 1698). Ninety times it pertains to "a woman," thirty times to "women," fifty-eight times to "a wife," twelve times to "wives," twice to "dear woman," twice to "widow," twice to wife in the singular genitive, once to "bride" and once to "a believing wife."<sup>3</sup>

The dictionaries and commentaries thus attest diverse meanings of the word *gunē*. We have seen that there is no one English word to convey all the nuances of this term. The context would dictate whether the translation should be woman, wife, bride or widow. In the vocative case, we observed that most prominent Greek and translation sources maintain that the word *gunai* does not imply rudeness or reproof, unlike the Setswana word *mosadi* and occasionally, the English word "woman." As a result of this difference some translators like those of the NEB occasionally translate the word *gunai* as "mother" in order to maintain the implicational meaning reflected in the Greek context. However, I do not want to overlook the fact observed by Arndt and Gingrich (1978:168) that in some rare cases there is a tone of disrespect in *gunai* in the Greek context also. Having explored the word *gunai* in Greek and Setswana contexts, it will then be appropriate to briefly explore the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, which this paper suggests is the problem the Setswana translator is faced with when translating the Greek word, *gunai* into Setswana.

### 4. Distinction and tension between semantics and pragmatics

Both semantics and pragmatics are concerned with meaning. They are thus relevant to translation, because translation aims at capturing meaning in moving from one language to another. Accordingly, it is appropriate to say that translation is an effort to transfer meaning. Nida and Taber (1982:208) define translation as "the reproduction in a receptor's

3. Similar definitions are maintained by WF Arndt and FW Gingrich (1979: 168), *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (1985), Abbott-Smith (1991:96), R. E. Brown (1966:99), EA Nida and Taber (1982:95). These scholars continue to point out that in the vocative case, the word *gunai* ('woman!' or 'O woman!') when used in addressing a woman, is not a term of reproof or severity, but of endearment or respect, for example, Matthew 15:28 (1985:681).

language of the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of *meaning*, and second in terms of style..." This reproduction of message should be the transfer of implicatures rather than lexical translation. Roger T. Bell (1991:06) also pointed out that translation is the process of transferring *the meaning* of the source language into the receptor language.

Thus the major struggle of a translator is to transfer the meaning from the source language to the receptor language. The translator attempts to transfer meaning in terms of not only the grammatical or encoded features. Instead, the translator is also after implicational meaning. In the last definition of translation it has been shown that a translator ought to take into account both the meaning of the sum of lexical items or words in the sentence (semantics) and the meaning dictated by the given situation, under which such words are made, that is, context and cultural situation (pragmatics). Hence, the translator is faced with the tension between linguistic semantics (henceforth, semantics) and pragmatics. To appreciate the existence of this tension, I will start by defining these two concepts, and go on to distinguish between the two.

Frawley (1992:1-2) defines linguistic semantics as, "The study of literal, decontextualised, grammatical (encoded) meaning." It explores meaning that has grammatical reference rather than implicational meaning. Linguistic semantics is not concerned with what the expression suggests about the speaker's intentions or the hearer's expected response to what is said. *The Collins Concise Dictionary* maintains another meaning that is related to Frawley's definition. Here, it is pointed out that semantics is generally viewed as a branch of linguistics that deals with the study of meaning, the study of the relationship between signs and symbols and what they represent (1999:1348).

On the other hand, JC Richards, J Platt and H Platt (1992:284) argue that pragmatics is the study of use of language in communication, in particular looking at the relationship between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used. Pragmatics therefore includes the study of how the speakers use and understand speech acts, how the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

SC Levinson defines pragmatics as "the study of all those aspects of meaning that are not captured in a semantic theory" (1983:12). Pragmatists study those aspects of the meaning of an utterance, which cannot be accounted for by straightforward reference to truth conditions of the sentence uttered.

In communication some meaning is left unstated (not encoded) in the sentences. It is only implied and encapsulated in the context. Moreover, some aspects of communication might not be encoded in the text (and as such be unclear or confusing to the reader of the text) but yet clear to the interlocutors. Hence there is a need for a translator to have knowledge of the history and culture and the general context under which a text was written. G Yule succinctly makes the above distinction between sentence meaning versus speaker's meaning when he points out that,

"Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader). It has consequently more to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean in themselves. Pragmatics is the study of speakers meaning" (1996:3).

This area, which is covered under Pragmatics, is what the translator ought to be wary of when translating the word "woman" in the Setswana Bible. As Leech properly observed:

“...We cannot really understand the nature of language itself unless we understand its pragmatics: how language is used in communication” (1983: 1). If we fail to appreciate the depth of this distinction, that is, the distinction between the general meaning of words and what the meaning of the same word is in various situations, we risk mistranslation.

This context factor gives the translator a problem (particularly in Bible translation where the original context, or *Sitz im Leben*, is irretrievable. Levinson explains this aspect of context as “the social and psychological world in which the language user operates at a given time. Factors covered under context are things like, knowledge of location (spatial and temporal), knowledge of medium (roughly the code or style appropriate to a channel), knowledge of formality level (relation between speakers)” (1986:23).

From the above discussion one can say that, although semantics and pragmatics are complementary and related fields of study; they are distinct. As pointed out earlier on, both deal with meaning. But they can be distinguished in the sense that semantics is about, “What does *X* mean?” (Dyadic relation) while pragmatics is more about, “What did *you* mean by *X*?” (Triad relation). So that, while the “you” (or the speaker’s intentions) are important to a pragmatist, the same cannot be said for a semanticist. As G. Leech (1981:06) concisely argues, “...meaning in pragmatics is defined relative to a speaker or the user of a language, whereas meaning of semantics is defined purely as a property of expressions in a given language, in abstraction from particular situations, speakers, or hearers.” It follows that an expression or a word whose meaning is uniformly understood by the speakers of a language, may at the same time be understood or interpreted differently by various people depending on the situation in which such an expression is made.

## 5. Data analysis

Language is a very complex phenomenon. The complexities of distinguishing between sentence meaning<sup>4</sup> and utterance meaning,<sup>5</sup> semantics and pragmatics, are some of the difficulties that are to be faced by the translator. The meaning of an utterance can transcend (and at times be opposite to) the literal meaning. The responses of most of the informants to the word *mosadi* undoubtedly show that there are unhidden discomforts in this translation. The discomfort that this translation evokes (whether one argues that it originates from the original text or from the translator of the Setswana Bible) cannot be denied. Hence, there is a need for addressing this problem.

Most of my informants argued that the use of *mosadi* in the vocative case is disrespectful, provocative and rude. Furthermore, most of the dictionaries and commentaries I approached show that, impoliteness and rudeness was not always implied by the Greek word, *gunai*. As these sources have revealed, the Greek word *gunai* does not harbour the same negative impressions that the word *mosadi* causes in the understanding of the Setswana speakers. As such it is true to say that although the word *mosadi* semantically reflects what the Greek word *gunai* literally means, the Setswana translation does not capture the pragmatic implications of this word. However, it would not be proper to

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4. The sum of the lexical items’ (words) meanings in a given syntactic order. It is the literal meaning and as such independent from context.
  5. Sometimes referred to as speaker’s meaning: the meaning of a sentence, taking into account the context in which it occurs. (*Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, edited by Richards, J Platt and H Platt, 1992:395). While semantics studies meaning out of context (sentence meaning), pragmatics studies meaning in context.

generalise on this sensitive issue. As such, I will pick several incidences of *gunai* in the Biblical text and discuss each individually. I will discuss four examples.

## 6. The use of the word *Gunai* in the New Testament

The first occurrence of *gunai* is from the book of Luke 22:57, the story of Jesus' arrest. Peter follows a group of people who were leading Jesus into the High Priest's house (v.54). Peter is identified by a certain slave girl as one of the associates of Jesus. In response to this "accusation", Peter says, *gunai, ouk oida auton*, meaning 'woman! I do not know him' (v.57). The same scripture has been translated in the Setswana Bible as, *mosadi, ga ke mo itse*.

In this context, by translating *gunai* as *mosadi* (which is discourteous in the Setswana understanding), the probability that Peter is not trying to be polite is aptly captured. Peter is very much on the defensive here, negating the 'accusations' levelled against him. The word *mosadi*, which is understood to be offensive is then appropriate to express the sense of Peter's feelings. Batswana who come across this scripture and feel that the word is rude are, therefore, conceivably getting the same impression that might have been felt by someone standing by and hearing Peter denying his association with Jesus. The translation of the word *gunai* into *mosadi* here does not only reflect the semantic meaning, but the pragmatic aspect of the meaning is also maintained. The meaning as implied by the speaker and interpreted by the hearer is maintained in this situation. If the translation is left as *mosadi*, there is a correspondence between the understanding of source language speakers and that of the Batswana. Hence the word here has been properly translated.

The second occurrence of *gunai* is at Matthew 15:28. Here a woman of Canaan comes to Jesus and his disciples. She asks them to help her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus responds to her request by saying, *ō gunai, megalē sou hē pistis*, that is, "o woman, great is your faith." In the Setswana version this is translated, *Ija, mosadi! Tumelo ya gago e kgolo*. This statement forms the conclusion of the story that starts in verse 21. Although a sense of resentment against the woman cannot be denied between verses 23 to 26, there is some evidence that the statement above, *ō gunai, megalē sou hē pistis*, is said in a distinctive tone. The major factor that demonstrates this is the concept articulated by Jesus, the concept of *pistis* (faith).

Throughout the gospels, Jesus makes a prominent demand for the expression of *pistis*. He expects individuals who come to him, or those who request anything from him, to express faith (Matthew 6:30; 8:10, 17:20, Mark 4:40; 11:22, Luke 18:8). Moreover, he often rebukes his disciples for their deficient faith. Actually, a chapter before this incident, Peter, one of his disciples, is rebuked for his lack of faith (Matthew 14:31). Furthermore, in the chapter that follows (see Matthew 16:8), Jesus rebukes his disciples for being of little faith. Therefore, the concept of faith (*pistis*) is clearly something that Jesus demanded from people and actually emphasized in this story. As shown earlier on, in pragmatics we look at the context, the "social and psychological world in which the language user operates at a given time."<sup>6</sup> The context of *pistis* is maintained throughout the text. The statement, *ō gunai, megalē sou hē pistis* forms the climax of the concept of *pistis* that is discussed here. The interpretation of the word *ō gunai* cannot be separated from this context.

Therefore, in Matthew 15:28 Jesus is neither reprimanding, nor rude to this woman. Instead, Jesus is showing some respect and exhorting (with excitement) the woman for her exceptional expression of faith. The statement that follows the above phrase, "let it be to you as you desire" also emphasises this factor. Moreover, this is not the only place where Jesus praises individuals for their expression of faith. Matthew 8:10 and 9:22 provide similar examples. So, there are incidents of lack of faith, where Jesus rebukes those who do

6. Levinson SC *Pragmatics*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain, 1983:23.

not believe, as in Matthew 14:31 and Matthew 16: 8. And there are incidents where people show faith, as in Matthew 15:28, where such individuals are applauded and are rewarded by receiving what they desire. The “resentment” that precedes the statement, *ō gunai, megalē sou hē pistis*, only serves to emphasise the persistence that this woman had, thus highlighting her immovable faith.

In this instance then, the harsh word *mosadi* should be replaced by a word that reflects appreciation and respect. In this case priority would be given to meaning. Radical departures from the formal structure are not only legitimate but may be highly desirable in order to give priority to meaning intended (utterance meaning). One can then take into consideration alternative words some of which were suggested by my interviewees. These include *mmaetsho*, *mme* and *mma*.

*Mmaetsho* (from *mme wa ga etsho*) literally means “our mother,” as such; it has some interpretation of the genitive.<sup>7</sup> However, as my interviewees pointed out, the word can be used to show respect even in areas where there is no clear relationship between the concerned parties. For example, when a female patient comes into the hospital, the attendant may say, *A nka le thusa mmaetsho?* meaning, “Can I help you *mam*?”

The second word, *mme*, which literally means “mother”, is a word that is used to refer to ones’ mother (parent). But the word is also generally used to refer to any grown-up (woman) to show respect.

The last word “*mma*” is probably the best word to substitute *mosadi* in most of the controversial instances of the Setswana Bible. The word is more generalised in meaning and does not convey a particularly close, or familial relationship as do the first two words (*mme* and *mmaetsho*), nor does it convey disrespect and rudeness, as does the word *mosadi*. As such, in a situation like Matthew 15:18, the word *mma* is appropriate, so that the sentence will read:

*Mma tumelo ya gago e kgolo,*

rather than,

*Mosadi tumelo ya gago e kgolo.*

At this point, I want to go on to discuss the last two scenarios concerned with the word *gunai*: John 2:4 and 19:26. I will discuss these together as they are related. In John 2:4 there is a story of Jesus and his mother at the wedding feast at Cana (vv 1-2). When the people ran out of wine, “the mother of Jesus” informed Jesus of this situation of need (v. 3). The response of Jesus to his mother is a perplexing one. He says, *Ti emoi kai soi, gunai?* Literally, “what to me and to you, woman?” In the Setswana version this perplexity is felt even more strongly. It says, *Mosadi, ke dirang ka wena?* (v. 4). This translated into English is, “Woman, what am I to do with you?” The Setswana translation as such did not translate *kai*, that is, “and”. This conjunction has been disregarded by the Setswana translation, although it is important in the transfer of the meaning of the phrase. Furthermore, the personal pronouns *soi* (to you) and *emoi* (to me) have not been translated as such. The question *Ti emoi kai soi...* would then be properly translated into Setswana as (*seo*), *ke eng mo go nna le mo go wena...?* Meaning, “Are we supposed to be involved in this?” So besides the problem we have to face regarding the word *mosadi* (*gunai*), the whole translation of the phrase in Setswana is problematic.

7. A special form of noun, a pronoun or adjective used to indicate possession or close connection (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, edited by J Crowther).

Actually, this whole phrase has raised a lot of arguments not only regarding the Setswana translation. Scholars like R. E Brown (1966:99) argue that the phrase *Ti emoi kai soi...* is a Semitism which can be used when one party is unjustly bothering another (thus showing hostility) as in Judges 11:12, 2 Chronicles 35:21, 1 Kings 17:18 and Mark 1:24. The phrase can also be used when someone is asked to get involved in a matter that he feels is not his area of concern (hence implying simple disengagement). Then he may say to the petitioner, "what to me and to you?" That is to say, "that is your issue; how am I involved?" Examples of such use are 2 Kings 3:13 and Hosea 14:8. Therefore, this phrase is not uncommon in biblical literature and can imply either hostility or disengagement. And, as Brown points out, the most probable understanding of John 2:4 is the latter one (that is, of disengagement).

Coming to the word "woman" as used by Jesus to Mary, it is quite apparent that Jesus "avoids" using or addressing Mary as "mother" throughout the gospels. As one of my informants has rightly observed, there is an incident in Mark 3:33-34 where Jesus points out that his mother and brothers are those who do the will of the Father. Even at the crucifixion, John 19:26, Jesus says to his mother (concerning the disciple whom he loved, who was standing by) *Gunai, idou ho huios sou*, that is, "woman, behold your son!" Then he said to the disciple, *idou he mētēr sou* (behold, your mother).

So we see Jesus recurrently using the address of "woman," while refraining from calling Mary "mother". As such, it will be improper to translate the word *gunai* as it occurs in John 2:4 and John 19:26 as mother (or its Setswana equivalent *Mme*) as this will (in Brown's words) "obscure" and "cloak" the peculiarity of this consistent address. However, although Jesus did not address Mary as "mother" I do not find any substantial evidence that he wanted to be rude or unchivalrous towards Mary or any woman for that matter. As scholars like Abbott-Smith (1991:96), Vine (1985:681), Brown (1966:172), Nida (1982:95), Arndt and Gingrich (1979:168) have clearly argued in the Greek context, the word *gunai*, does not often imply rudeness. This being the case then, the word *mosadi*, which does suggest rudeness requires an alternative translation. It need not be *mme*, as proposed earlier, the word *mma* is more appropriate.

## 7. Conclusion

The problem discussed above then is not posed by the literal meaning of the word. In actual fact, the word *mosadi!* that has been used to translate the vocative word *gunai* (woman) is the best word that will represent the literal meaning of the word. There is no better word in Setswana that reflects a clear understanding of the Greek word *gunai*, that is, in so far as the semantics of the word are concerned. However, issues of translation are not about literal meaning. As was demonstrated in this paper, the pragmatic understanding of the same word in the vocative case poses a lot of problems. This paper has demonstrated that this phenomenon is also true in other languages, like English.

In conclusion then, the appropriateness or otherwise of the translation *mosadi* should be dealt with carefully. Although there are places where the translation of this word needs to be reviewed, it is important to avoid generalizing. As Nida (1982:15) points out, priority should be given to contextual consistency (this is the context which was discussed under pragmatics) over fixed verbal consistence. On the other hand, if the literal rendering, that is *mosadi* in this discussion, is misleading or at least inappropriate, it will be crucial to depart from it taking into account the particular context. It would therefore be more acceptable for Batswana readers to translate John 2:4 with the word, *mma* rather than *mosadi* which sounds shockingly rude for a son to say to his mother. However, as argued earlier, this departure cannot be made universal.

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