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## LEGITIMISATION AND PROXIMISATION VALUES IN THE DISCOURSE OF HISTORIC CHANGE

### **Abstract**

This methodological-critical paper belongs to the field of pragmatic-cognitive discourse analysis. It develops Cap's STA model of legitimisation (2005, 2006, 2008) and investigates various mechanisms legitimising the speaker's actions (or actions for which he bears responsibility) in political discourse of historic change. Proximation as the salient feature of the model adds significantly to effectiveness of the speaker's continual attempt to convince the addressee of the rightness of political steps taken. It is a powerful and coercive tool "alerting the addressee [to] the proximity or imminence of phenomena which can be a 'threat' to the addressee" located in the deictic centre of a given event (Cap 2006:4) or a chain of events. The STA model accounts for the application of a three-dimensional pattern of the phenomenon in question, i.e. spatial, temporal, and axiological proximation. However, the division does not exhaust the notion's potential, since properties of the dimensions mentioned enable us to classify them according to an extended taxonomic system in which they possess positive, negative, and neutral values (cf. Wieczorek 2008). Thus, the aim of this paper is to (a) analyse the interplay between a number of legitimisation strategies, (b) present the positive/negative/neutral classification of proximation, and (c) comment on the nature of the interaction between and potency of the three dimensions and values. These can coexist within the body of one text, as well as within the body of one paragraph and their complementary character strengthens the overall goal of legitimisation providing various stimuli for the addressee to accept the speaker's stance, his decisions and actions, to comply with them, and to undertake actions intended by the speaker.

### **Keywords**

Legitimation, proximation, STA model, discourse analysis, discourse of historic change.

## 1. Discourse of historic change and legitimisation

Discourse of historic change is a type of political text in which the speaker announces a political decision of great importance which is going to affect a specified group of people. Political discourse in general, along with the discourse of historic change, is not a homogeneous genre. It demands a cross-disciplinary reasoning which relies heavily not only on language studies, but also on such fields as e.g. cognitive psychology, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and rhetoric. However, Chilton and Schäffner (1997) claim that political scientists and discourse analysts tend to focus on different aspects of discourse, as they usually refer to different theories and methods. Also their aims differ significantly: scientists focus on political reality; analysts, on the other hand, concentrate on linguistic structures which constitute a vehicle for information political speakers communicate. Such linguistic and extra-linguistic perspectives allow a far more detailed analysis, yet it may at times be impaired to some extent due to terminological confusion or absence of given notions in some disciplines.

The analysis of the discourse of historic change in this paper is limited to the notion of legitimisation. Although the term appears to be readily understandable, it is a fairly vague notion. As an example of Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies (1987), legitimisation provides reasons for undertaking actions, which in turn mitigate potential face threatening acts. Chilton and Schäffner (1997) see it, along with "coercion, resistance, opposition, (...) protest, dissimulation" and obviously delegitimation, as one of the strategic functions of political discourse. However, Cap indicates that legitimisation is not just one such strategy, but rather "the principal goal of the political speaker seeking justification and support of actions which the speaker manifestly intends to perform in the vital interest of the addressee" (2006: 7). According to him, "legitimization can be defined in terms of a linguistic enactment of the speaker's right to be obeyed" (2005: 12), which unites scientific i.e. politically-oriented, and linguistic prompts for the analysis of legitimisation-driven discourse. He claims that legitimization signals the speaker's authority and "provides rationale for listing reasons to be obeyed" by means of a number of strategies (2005: 13). These can be realized explicitly or implicitly and include:

the awareness and/or assertion of the addressee's wants and needs, reinforcement of global and indisputable ideological principles, charismatic leadership projection, boasting about one's performance, positive self-presentation, [as well as] blaming, scape-goating, marginalizing, excluding, attacking the moral character [and rationale] of the adversary. (Cap 2005: 13)

Legitimation enhances both the speaker's projection of "charismatic leadership" and positive presentation of the self, which constitute a pivotal element of a speech's success (Cap 2006: 7). Therefore, it appears to be much broader a notion than just a positive politeness strategy.

## **2. STA model vs. proximation values**

It was the STA model of legitimation that gave proximation the threefold construction: (s)patial, (t)emporal, and (a)xiological. The cooperation of the three dimensions facilitates the speaker's repeated attempt to instill in the addressees the image of a threat entering the deictic centre, i.e. the addressees' location. Proximation is the prime technique which helps the speaker to convince the addressee of the rightness of the actions taken. The political speaker achieves the goal by alarming the addressees of a threat coming or being brought gradually closer to the deictic centre, which coerces them into taking precautionary action (cf. Cap 2006, 2008). The addressee's and the speaker's direct participation in the occurring event(s) is presupposed, since the addressee, as well as the speaker, are located in the deictic centre, "the anchor point for all conceptualizations" (Cap 2006: 5).

Throughout my work with the theory of linguistic proximation I have discovered that the defining features of the original proximation dimensions are of inherently negative character. The original spatial dimension presents the occurring events as (a) physically close, (b) consequential and threatening, and (c) demanding instant (re)action from the addressee (Cap 2005, 2006). The negative character is produced and imposed by the fact that the events approaching the deictic centre constitute a threat. In positive spatial proximation the events are (a) physically close, (b) beneficial and promising, and thus (c) require instant (re)action. Such an intrinsically positive outcome of the addressees' acceptance compels them to undertake action. Interestingly enough, in negative spatial proximation it is the threat that gradually approaches the deictic centre without the addressee's active participation, while in a positive one the addressee is assigned the active role of the agent "grasping" the benefit and bringing it into the deictic centre.

In September 2007, George W. Bush visited American troops in Iraq where he delivered a speech legitimizing his decision not to withdraw the U.S. forces. To strengthen the overall legitimizing effect of proximation the speaker applied both positive and negative values expressed through various pragmatic and extra-pragmatic tools:

Every day you are successful here in Iraq draws nearer to the day when America can begin calling you and your fellow servicemen and women home. But I want to tell you this about the decision—about my decision about troop levels. Those decisions will be based on a calm assessment by our military commanders on the conditions on the ground—not a nervous reaction by Washington politicians to poll results in the media. In other words, when we begin to draw down troops from Iraq, it will be from a position of strength and success, not from a position of fear and failure. To do otherwise would embolden our enemies and make it more likely that they would attack us at home. If we let our enemies back us out of Iraq, we will more likely face them in America. If we don't want to hear their footsteps back home [...].<sup>1</sup>

Iraq and America are two extreme points in space the speaker refers to, of which the first is equivalent to “here” (Iraq), and the latter is presented as fairly distant. As has been mentioned, the addressees are capable of turning the promise of a safe return home into actual return on condition that they accept the speaker's stance. It is implied that every success in the fight against the enemy situates the addressees somewhere closer to the other extreme—the point from which they can start their journey home. The parallel structure of “a calm assessment by our military commanders” and “a nervous reaction by Washington politicians” is an instance of positive and negative values of spatial proximation conjoined in a thesis-antithesis construction which facilitates convincing the addressee to accept the speaker's decision. The speaker would normally include himself in the group of “Washington politicians,” yet in this case their stance on the war constitutes a threat to the U.S., which locates them outside the deictic centre. Thus, the speaker claims common ground with the Americans in Iraq (“our military commanders,” “here in Iraq”).

Towards the end of the fragment in question the speaker intensifies the application of negative spatial proximation to coerce the addressee into accepting his decision. The threat of terrorists attacking America is made more tangible since the adversaries are metaphorically presented as a force of unspecified strength pushing against a barricade built of American soldiers. If they retreat the terrorists are likely to follow them until they reach the U.S. and American citizens, which is enhanced by “we don't want to hear their footsteps back home.” Such framing evokes the 9/11 attack, as well as brings associations with a villain creeping in the dark of whose presence you can tell only by the footsteps—a frame already existing in the mind of an average addressee.

Cap's original temporal proximation presents the occurring events as “momentous and historic [...] and thus of central significance to the discourse addressee” (2005: 29), which is inherently neutral and present-oriented. The

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<sup>1</sup> Instances of positive spatial proximation are underlined with a single line, and negative ones with a double line.

remaining parameters, however, undergo the positive-negative evaluation and have a different distribution on the time axis: (a) negative temporal proximation implies that the present situation is a result of a specific past event and is definitely past-oriented, while (b) positive temporal proximation expresses ideas which suit the addressee's expectations, wishes, and desires, or expectations, wishes, and desires of those the addressee identifies with, and thus is future-oriented. In the following excerpt from Bush's press conference in Washington in July 2007, the President commented on the current situation in Iraq, as well as on the government's policy concerning the Iraq war:

We've entered a fourth phase: deploying reinforcements and launching new operations to help Iraqis bring security to their people. I'm going to explain why the success of this new strategy is vital for protecting our people and bringing our troops home [...] Our top priority is to help the Iraqis protect their population. So we have launched an offensive in and around Baghdad to go after extremists, to buy more time for Iraqi forces to develop [...] We're helping enhance the size, capabilities and effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces so the Iraqis can take over the defense of their own country. We're helping the Iraqis take back their neighborhoods from the extremists. In Anbar province, Sunni tribes that were once fighting alongside al Qaeda against our coalition are now fighting alongside our coalition against al Qaeda.<sup>2</sup>

Through the use of the neutral value of temporal proximation the speaker claims implicitly that the "fourth phase" of the Iraq war is a crucial and historic moment in the conflict. He makes a very strong point implying that the support of his decision not to withdraw the troops will eventually lead to a successful resolution. The positive and negative values are applied and intertwined to amplify the overall coercive effect on the addressee. The main objectives of such an extensive use of positive proximation are of a twofold nature: (a) the American audience identify themselves (at least to some extent) with the Iraqi people, and thus are more inclined to support the decision to provide help, (b) especially when the wording used in the excerpt in question diminishes, or conceals, the real cost (e.g. "to help Iraqis bring security to their people," "we're helping enhance the size, capabilities and effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces"). Through such recontextualisation the active, as well as more decisive role is ascribed to the Iraqis. In the quoted fragment commissive speech acts appear frequently and are the more readily accepted the closer they are located to the speaker's ultimate claim legitimising his stance, i.e. that the Iraqis will eventually "take over the

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<sup>2</sup> Phrases underlined with a single line indicate instances of a positive value, with a double line instances of a negative value, and with a wavy line instances of a neutral value of temporal proximation.

defense of their own country.” Simultaneously, it is an implicit promise that the troops would be able to come back home, which constitutes a more coercive stimulus for the addressees to accept the speaker’s decision.

Through the implicature in “we’re helping the Iraqis take back their neighborhoods from the extremists” the speaker indicates that the present unfavourable situation is a result of past negligence to confront actively the terrorists who took over vast parts of the Iraqi people’s land. Therefore, to prevent a parallel situation in the future the speaker’s decision to keep troops in Iraq is implicitly claimed to be the best option. Moreover, it is implied that without the American participation in the conflict tribes living in the area would eventually join the terrorists: “Sunni tribes that were once fighting alongside al Qaeda against our coalition are now fighting alongside our coalition against al Qaeda.”

Axiological proximation exhibits properties similar to the two dimensions mentioned above. Its positive and negative values “narrow the distance between two different and opposing ideologies” (Cap 2006: 6), which in the case of positive axiological proximation leads to the cooperation of the parties involved in the attainment of a common goal, while in the case of a negative one leads to a clash. However, it is the addressees’ predisposition, as well as the speaker’s credibility, that determine their evaluation of the opposing ideology, and therefore the value of proximation. According to Cap, also spatial and temporal dimensions define the occurring events, as well as positive or negative character of the axiological aspect (2006: 6).

The following excerpt exemplifies the use of both values of axiological proximation. It has been taken from Bush’s September speech mentioned earlier in this paper:

You see Sunnis who once fought side by side with al Qaeda against coalition troops now fighting side by side with coalition troops against al Qaeda. Anbar is a huge province. It was once written off as lost. It is now one of the safest places in Iraq. Because of your hard work, because of your bravery and sacrifice, you are denying al Qaeda a safe haven from which to plot and plan and carry out attacks against the United States of America. What you’re doing here is making this country safer, and I thank you for your hard work.<sup>3</sup>

There are three parties involved in the conflict: “al Qaeda,” “coalition troops,” and “Sunnis.” The relation between the first two groups defines them as adversaries, however the status of the third group, which relocated from al Qaeda to coalition troops, changes as a direct effect of American intervention. Here positive and negative proximation strategies are intertwined in a parallel structure and thus

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<sup>3</sup> Instances of positive axiological proximation are underlined with a single line, and instances of negative axiological proximation with a double line.

strengthen the legitimising power of the speaker's discourse: "Sunni who once fought side by side with al Qaeda against coalition troops now fighting side by side with coalition troops against al Qaeda" (paraphrases of this assertion appear repeatedly in the speech). The distance between the Sunni tribe and the Americans diminishes, which initially leads to a clash, yet eventually to cooperation of the two parties against al Qaeda. Referring to the common adversary, the speaker applies negative axiological proximation markers exclusively, implying that their ideology constitutes a tangible threat to the safety of Iraq, America, and the world: "you are denying al Qaeda a safe haven from which to plot and plan and carry out attacks." The threat is defined and reinforced by negative spatial proximation, e.g. present in the enumeration of performative verbs "to plot and plan and carry out."

### **3. Legitimation strategies and proximation values empirically**

The empirical part of this paper is based on select excerpts from a speech delivered by the Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, in which he attempts to legitimise the acceptance of a bill allowing homosexual marriages in Spain. In addition to the right to form "a marriage contract," such couples were allowed to inherit from their partners, as well as to adopt children. The speech is an instance of external (i.e. addressed to the nation rather than to politicians) and inner-state political communication (Schäffner 1996: 202). It has a twofold macro-goal: firstly the construction of the text and its content serve to legitimise the acceptance of the bill, and secondly they serve to promote the Prime Minister as a truthful and competent leader.

The speech fragments prompt a top-down pragmatic-functional approach to analysis (de Beaugrande 1991); hence much attention is paid to data supporting the presupposed macro-function of the text, i.e. the speaker's legitimisation of the decision taken and his self-promotion as an efficient leader. For the sake of clarity, paragraphs are numbered, and phrases of major interest are italicised:

(1) Today, my government definitively submits for Senate approval the Bill, modifying Civil Law, which gives the right to form a marriage contract, a fulfilment of an electoral campaign promise (1.1).

(2) We recognize today in Spain (2.1) the rights of same-sex couples to enter in a marriage contract. Before Spain, they allowed this in Belgium, Holland, and, as of two days ago, Canada. We have not been the first, but I assure you that we will not be the last. After us, there will be many more countries motivated (2.2a), honourable members, by two unstoppable forces: freedom and equality (2.2b).

(3) [...] It is a small change in the letter of the law that creates an immense change in the lives of thousands of our fellow citizens (3.1).

(4) [...] We are extending the opportunity for happiness (4.1) to our neighbours, co-workers, friends, and our families (4.2): at the same time, we are making a more decent society, because a decent society is one that does not humiliate its members.

(6) Today, Spanish society (6.1) responds to a group of people (6.2) that for years have been humiliated, whose rights have been ignored, whose dignity has been offended, and whose identity and freedom has been denied. (6.3) Today, Spanish society grants them the respect they deserve, recognizes their rights, restores their dignity, affirms their identity, and restores their freedom (6.4).

(8) Honourable members, there is no damage to marriage or to the family (8.1) in allowing two people of the same sex to get married. Rather, these citizens (8.2) now have the ability to organize their lives according to marital and familial norms and demands (8.3).

(9) Aware that some people and institutions profoundly disagree with this legal change (9.1), I wish to say that like other reforms to the marriage code that preceded this one, this law will not generate bad results, that its only consequence will be to avoid senseless suffering of human beings [...]

(10) In any case, I wish to express my deep respect to those people and institutions (10.1), and I also want to ask for the same respect for all of those who approve of this law (10.2). To the homosexuals that have personally tolerated the abuse and insults for many years, I ask that you add to the courage you have demonstrated (10.3a) in your struggle for civil rights (10.4), an example of generosity and joy with respect to all the beliefs (10.3b).

(13) Today, for many, comes the day (13.1) evoked by Kavafis a century ago:  
                                   “Later was said of the most perfect society  
   someone else, made like me,  
   certainly will come out and act freely.”

Through the frequent use of assertives in the text the speaker depicts himself as a powerful and trustworthy leader, e.g. the entailment in 1.1 indicates that forcing the bill through the Senate leading up to its acceptance was “a fulfilment of an electoral campaign promise.” In 2.2 he emphasizes the role of the recent changes in the law and, by the same token, the new status of the country:

*After us, there will be many more countries motivated* (2.2a), honourable members,  
*by two unstoppable forces: freedom and equality* (2.2b).



It is the use of the honorific address “honourable members” in the middle of the sentence that impairs its natural flow and gives rise to the implicature in 2.2a. The implicature presents the Spanish government’s decision as an example of truly democratic values (“freedom and equality”) and therefore motivates other countries to follow suit recognising the rights of their homosexual inhabitants. 2.2a only reinforces the already present (implicit) message, however, some hearers may not draw enough inferences to recover any implicature whatsoever and treat 2.2a and 2.2b as a simple entailment.

The speaker builds up his political competence overtly acknowledging his opposition, e.g. in 9.1: “Aware that some people and institutions profoundly disagree with this legal change (...)” The referents, towards whom he “express[es] deep respect” (10.1), are strongly presupposed. Simultaneously, he implies the existence of a grand ideological gap between the two sides through the deictic expression in 10.1 “those people and institutions” vs. 8.2 “these citizens.”

The extensive use of assertives reflects, at least to a certain extent, the addressee’s and the speaker’s principles (Cap 2005: 13): the speaker applies a thesis-antithesis technique, contrasting two ideas of which one is absolutely unacceptable, and the other expresses ideas the addressee identifies with, or at least does not reject. Paragraph 6 is an elaborated instance of such a practice:

Today, Spanish society responds to a group of people that for years *have been humiliated, whose rights have been ignored, whose dignity has been offended, and whose identity and freedom has been denied* (6.3). Today, *Spanish society grants them the respect they deserve, recognizes their rights, restores their dignity, affirms their identity, and restores their freedom* (6.4).

6.3 is an example of a device I called elsewhere *impersonalisation in the service of rejection* (Wieczorek 2008): the clauses have no agent presupposed, therefore their actions can be readily rejected by the audience, who hardly identify themselves with the ones bearing responsibility. In the contrastive part (6.4), on the other hand, the agent is given, and refers to the addressees themselves, in which case the speaker builds up the aura of their generosity. Only towards the end of his speech, in paragraph 10, does the speaker apply directives. At this stage the face-threatening quality of the request mentioned is mitigated by downplaying the costs of its fulfilment:

In any case, I wish to express my deep respect to those people and institutions (10.1), and I also want to ask for the same respect for all of those who approve of this law (10.2). To the homosexuals that have personally tolerated the abuse and insults for many years, I ask that you add to the courage you have demonstrated (10.3a) in your struggle for civil rights (10.4), an example of generosity and joy with respect to all the beliefs (10.3b).

Even though the directive in 10.2 is a face-threatening act, it requires fairly little effort on the part of the addressee, and is further mitigated by a positive politeness strategy exhibited in the previous clause of the same sentence (where the speaker claims reciprocity and common ground with the audience). 10.3a, by contrast, demands a lot more from the homosexual hearer, as the speaker implicitly requires them to face the forthcoming, potentially threatening events, with even more courage than they have exhibited so far. The strength of this implicature lies in the reading of the following clause. If 10.3b constitutes the object of the transitive verb “to add” (*sumar* in the Spanish original) the implicature in question makes way for a simple entailment. If, on the other hand, it is an elaboration on 10.4 and assesses the struggle, the implicature remains intact.

As has already been mentioned “those people and institutions” (10.1) and “these citizens” (8.2) implies the existence of an ideological gap, which is a rather rare, yet pragmatically complex, instance where the negative value of axiological proximation can be noticed. Throughout the speech the speaker avoids its application, as he attempts to uphold the aura of lately accomplished unity within Spanish society, thus positive proximation prevails. Yet, on the whole, the clash between those in favour of same-sex marriages and those against is by no means threatening. Quite the contrary: the speaker mentions repeatedly the possibility of reconciliation and creating a “decent society” (e.g. 8.1, 8.3, 10.2, and 10.3). The length of the speech facilitates frequent use of the remaining proximation dimensions, which instill in the audience a sense of the event’s tangibility. Positive spatial and neutral temporal aspects are incomparably more prominent and frequent, as they point at potential benefits, as well as the momentous character and importance of the event, respectively. “Today in Spain” (2.1), duplication of “Today, Spanish society” (6.1, 6.2) within the space of one paragraph, or “today (...) comes the day” (13.1) are instances of the aforementioned proximation dimensions. The change is presented as close both physically and mentally, and beneficial to the addressee (positive spatial proximation).

“We are extending the opportunity for happiness to our neighbours, co-workers, friends, and our families” (4.2) constitutes an instance of persuasive use of spatial proximation: The order of the italicised elements is hardly accidental, as the named groups could be graphically presented as a ring with different distribution around the deictic centre. The first ring is the farthest psychologically, other rings are closer and closer to the centre. Cognitive processes engaged in the understanding of the message raise the audience’s awareness of these groups’ physical and psychological proximity. The historic character of the moment is further reinforced by a paraphrase of the sentence summing up a historic event, namely the 1969 moon landing. “It is a small change in the letter of the law that creates an immense change in the lives of thousands of our fellow citizens” (3.1) is

introduced as an already familiar expression: the aura of mutual success, attainment and celebration present at the time of the original event, is naturally instilled in the addressees' minds and thus affects their reading of the speaker's further messages.

On a more literal level, 3.1 suggests a fairly low cost of attaining this goal, which is clearly a face-saving strategy. In fact, every time the speaker applies a face threatening act he mitigates it with a reference to a past effort, e.g. in 10.4 "your struggle for civil rights." With the past reference the effort is not as oppressive and saves the audience's positive face. Whenever a face threatening act has a present or future orientation, the speaker minimizes the threat by lowering the level of expectations towards the hearer, e.g. 4.1. The speaker clearly obeys Leech's Tact Maxim, which states that expressions implying cost to the other should be minimised and those implying a benefit should be maximised accordingly (1983).

In 4.1 he mentions "extending the opportunity for happiness," which presupposes its previous existence and implies only consent on the part of the non-homosexual Spanish audience. The speaker elaborates on other benefits brought about by this change in the law: e.g. he refers to the moral values of a democratic country to convince the audience that even this minimal effort exercised in granting the rights to homosexuals provides more than what might have been expected (10.3). The speaker, however, elects to keep some pieces of information implicit, e.g. he never explicitly states that the married gay couples are lawfully capable of adopting a child, whose results would be far too unpredictable. He does so implicitly, through the use of implicature in 8.1 "there is no damage (...) to the family" and 8.3 "[homosexuals] have the ability to organise their lives according to (...) familial norms." Drawing relevant inferences the audience is well able to recover the implicature of homosexuals' new possibility to form a full family with children. Yet some addressees might be incapable of recovering the implicature, as it may be too weak, they themselves may lack key premises, or simply may be ignorant of this aspect of the bill in question.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Proximation, along with e.g. implicature and assertion-based patterns (Wieczorek 2008), are salient and complex legitimisation-driven mechanisms when employed in the political discourse of historic change. These by no means separate and independent pragmatic tools frequently overlap, as well as enhance, and enrich one another. Employing proximation patterns the speaker makes the addressee aware of the proximity of a specified threat or benefit on three

interactive levels: spatial, temporal, and axiological. The addressee reorganises all incoming information in relation to the deictic centre in which s/he is located (cf. Cap 2005, 2006). Additionally, the complementary character of the positive, negative, and neutral proximation values strengthens the speaker's prime goal, i.e. legitimation. Such multiple uses of proximation patterns provide various stimuli for the addressee: (a) to accept the speaker's stance, his decisions, and actions, (b) to comply with them, (c) to undertake particular actions, as intended by the speaker. Spatial, temporal, and axiological dimensions interact on explicit and implicit levels of communication leading to legitimation of the speaker's actions. Interestingly enough, virtually all positive proximation patterns (irrespective of the dimension) constitute a macro-act of offering (or promising), which facilitates the speaker's justification of her/his stance, decisions, or actions. By the same token, negative proximation patterns constitute the macro-act of warning; its potency, however, ranges from advice to a threat depending on the context.

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