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The Issue of Ambiguity in the Igbo Language

Thecla-Obiora Udemmadu

Dept. of Igbo, African & Asian Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria

+2347038296895

E-mail: thecla_o@yahoo.com

Abstract

Igbo language like every other language is characterized with ambiguous words. Ambiguity is situation where different interpretations can be given to an utterance. This does not concern only words, some phrases, and even sentences have multiplicity of meanings. Owing to the fact that certain expressions can be interpreted in various ways, the major role of language is frustrated. In other words, ambiguity obstructs language from performing its communicative function because message sent are most case misunderstood and misinterpreted. In affirmation, Bussmann (1996:19) states, "In everyday communication, ambiguity is a rather marginal problem, as context, intonation, situation etc. usually sift out the adequate reading". This problem of multiple interpretations attached to an utterance prompted the researcher to delve into this area of study in order to investigate the causes and then, proffer solution to the existing situation. The data for the study was gathered through simple observation of the native speakers. The methodology for data

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analysis was descriptive method. The findings reveal the ambiguities in the Igbo language arise from homonyms, homophones, homographs and from anaphoric pronouns, dialectal differences, among other things. For solution, the researcher recommended that utterances should be interpreted based on the context of the discourse; that homographs should be tone-marked, and that inherent complements should accompany those verbs that need them. This academic exercise would be of immense benefit to grammarians, lexicographers and Igbo scholars.

Introduction

Ambiguity is a semantic relation that deals with different meanings attached to an expression. Ambiguity is one of the features of natural languages. It is a situation where a word, phrase or a sentence is prone to different interpretations. Fromkin, et al (2003:121) note that syntactic knowledge goes beyond being able to decide which strings are grammatical and which are not. It accounts for the multiple meanings, or ambiguity. Palmer (1981:48) avers that the meaning of a sentence, or the fact that it is ambiguous or anomalous, can be known in isolation from any context, and that as speakers of a language we must know the meaning of a sentence before we can use it in any given context. That meaning equivalence is not stating meaning, and there is no proof that knowing the meaning of a sentence does not entail knowing the context in which it is used.

The work is segmented into sections. The first section discusses the concept of ambiguity. Section two looks at the causes of ambiguity. In section three different types of ambiguity were discussed. And in the last section, the researcher made recommendations. The study ended with conclusion.

The Concept of Ambiguity

Different scholars, linguists and grammarians have described ambiguity in various ways. According to Fromkin, et al (2003:574) ambiguity is the term used to describe a word, phrase, or sentence with multiple meanings. Bussmann (1996:19) states that, in natural languages, property of expressions that can be interpreted in several ways, or, rather, that can be multiply specified in linguistic description from lexical, semantic, syntactic, and other aspects. In this sense, ambiguity is different from the complementary term 'vagueness' as a designation for pragmatic ambiguousness or determinacy, which cannot be systematically described. Malmkjær (2000:460) notes that ambiguous words or phrases have more than one extension (set of things they



denote) and these extensions comprise quite different things or phenomena. This means that an ambiguous sentence has more than one potential set of quite different, unrelated truth conditions at any one time that it is being used. Usually, properly ambiguous words or phrases will be given one entry for each of their extensions in a dictionary. For instance, there will typically be individual entries for each of the meanings of 'coach', 'trunk', 'fall' and 'lift'.

Fromkin, et al (2003:179) add that, a word or a sentence is ambiguous if it can be understood or interpreted in more than one way. For instance, I 'll meet you by the bank, may mean, ' I 'll meet you by the financial institution', or 'I'll meet you by the riverside'. The ambiguity is due to the two words 'banks' with two different meanings.

There are some types of words that are systematically ambiguous. For example, some verbal nouns display systematic ambiguity between process and product. The form utterance can cause much disquiet in linguistics because it is ambiguous between the act of uttering and the utterance thereby produced. The form assignment can be used to refer to the act of assigning or to the thing assigned.

Causes of Ambiguity

Different factors can give rise to a situation where a word, phrase or sentence will have multiple of meanings or different interpretations. Some of the factors are:

Homophone: This refers to where different lexical items have the same sound though they are spelt differently. Malmkjær (2000:460) says that if ambiguity pertains to the spoken form only, the two differently written forms are said to be homophones: site/sight, rite/right, there/their. Saeed (2007:63) has it that, "homophones are senses of the same spoken word, but with different spelling: e.g. the verbs ring and wring. Akmajian (2006:239) stresses that words may also be homophonous: that is, they may have identical pronunciations but have distinct spellings in the written language, such as, Mary, marry, and merry. For Bussmann (1996:211) a homophony is a type of lexical ambiguity in which two or more expressions have an identical pronunciation but different spellings and meanings example: pray vs prey and course vs coarse. Finegan (195) adds these examples: see, sea, so, sew, two, too, flour, flower, boar, bore, bear, bare, eye ,I, aye.

Homonym: Homonym creates ambiguity in a language. Fromkin, et al (2003:179) postulates that words like tale and tail are homonyms. Homonyms are different words that are pronounced the same, but may or may not be spelled the same. To, too, and two are homonyms despite their spelling differences. Homonyms can create ambiguity. Yule (1996:121) asserts that homonymy is used when one form (written and spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings. Example of homonyms are bat (flying creature) bat (used in sports), race (contest of speed) race (ethnic group), pupil (at school) pupil (in the eye), mole (on skin) mole (small animal). Bussmann (1996:210) also supports that homonymy is a type of lexical ambiguity involving two or more different words: Homonymous expressions are phonologically and orthographically identical but have different meanings and often distinct etymological origins, example, found ('establish' or 'cast'), kitty ('fund' or 'cat'), scour ('polish' or 'search'). Saeed (2007:63) also attests that homonyms are unrelated sense of the same phonological word. He grouped homonyms into different categories when he says that there are different types of homonym depending on their syntactic behavior, and spelling, for example, a) lexemes of the same syntactic category, and with the same spelling, e.g. lap 'circuit of a course' and lap 'part of body when sitting down' . b) Lexemes of the same category, but with different spelling: e.g. the verb ring and wring, talk and torque, clique and click. c) Lexemes of different categories, but with the same spelling: e.g. the verb keep and the noun keep. d) Lexemes of different categories, and with different spelling: e.g. not, knot.

Homograph: This has to do with identical spelling but with different meanings. Malmkjær (2000:460) ascertains that if terms are only ambiguous when written down, they are said to be homographs. An example would be lead which may denote either a dog's lead or the metal lead. Finegan (2004:195) also supports that homographs have the same spelling but different meanings (and pronunciations), such as conduct as a verb and conduct as a noun, where the verb has primary stress on the second syllable and the noun has it on the first syllable.

Fromkin, et al (2003:180) also attest that homographs are words that are spelled the same, but have different meanings, such as dove the bird, and dove the past tense of dive. He adds that when homonyms are spelled the same, they are also homographs, for example, bear and bear, but not all homonyms are homograph.



The issue of homographs manifest vividly in the Igbo language because Igbo is a tonal language. Different words with different meaning and different pronunciations but with the same spelling are numerous in the language. Some are as follows:

1. 'Akwa' (cry), 'akwa' (bed), 'akwa' (cloth), 'akwa' (egg)
2. 'Oke' (male), 'oke' (share), 'oke' (boundary), 'oke' (rat)
3. 'Isi' (head), 'isi' (blindness), 'isi' (smell), 'isi' (to cook)
4. 'Igbo' (prevent), 'igbo' (hard drug), 'Igbo' (a tribe/ language in Nigeria)
5. 'Ozo' (again), 'ozo' (title), 'ozo' (chimpanzee)
6. 'Ube' (arrow), 'ube' (pear), 'ube' (dialectal meaning excellent)
7. 'Ihe' (light), 'ihe' (something)
8. 'Mma' (knife), 'mma' (beauty)

Note that the marked vowels have down-step tone.

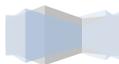
Types of Ambiguity

Ambiguity can be in different forms, hence, types of ambiguity. They are as follows:

(a) Lexical ambiguity

This is where different words that have the same form can have multiple meanings. Fromkin, et al (2003:586) state that lexical ambiguity refers to multiple meaning of sentences due to words that have multiple meanings, e.g. He was lying on a stack of Bibles. Lexical ambiguity involves homonyms and homographs as discussed above. Examples of lexical ambiguity in the Igbo language are:

9. 'Agwa' can mean- 'beans/character'
10. 'ude' can mean – 'fame/ pomade'
11. 'anwu' can mean – 'sunshine/mosquito'
12. 'igwe' can mean – 'king/sky'
13. 'ilu' can mean – 'proverb/ bitterness'
14. 'igwe' can mean – 'iron/bicycle',
15. 'abu' can mean – 'armpit/poem'
16. 'ara' can mean – 'breast/madness'



17. `agba` can mean – ‘jaw/arthritis, appointment’-(idiomatic),
18. `akwa` can mean – ‘bed/ bridge’

(b) Phonological Ambiguity

This type of ambiguity has to do with spoken words. In the Igbo language, when the expressions that have similar phonological realization are written down properly, they are disambiguated because Igbo has principles of writing; otherwise the meaning is tampered with. Some of the instances are as follows:

19. Onye mma anOghị ya/ Onye mma anOghị ya –can be interpreted as: ‘The person I know is not around/ The seller of knife is not around’.
20. Amu siri ya ike/ A mu siri ya ike – can be interpreted as: ‘His penis is strong/ He was born strong’.
21. Ara pu gị n’Onịcha ịga-ama ụzọ lỌta/ A rapu gị n’Onịcha ị ga-ama ụzọ lỌta- can be interpreted as: ‘If you run mad in Onịcha can you come back/ If you are left in Onịcha can you come back’.
22. Ihu nwata ahụ dika ihu mma/ Ihu nwata ahụ dika ihu mma – can be interpreted as: ‘The face of that child is like a matchet/ The face of that child is familiar’.
23. Onye Ọbula zuta baibul na-amu, ụwa na-achọ ikpu/ onye Ọbula zuta baibul na amu, ụwa na-achọ ikpu- can be interpreted as: ‘Everybody should buy a bible and study because the world is about to come to an end/ Everybody should buy a bible and penis because the world needs a vagina’ (obscene language)

(c) Structural Ambiguity

In most cases ambiguity occurs in grammatical structure of a language such as in phrases, clauses or sentences. This means that some structures are prone to different interpretations. Fromkin, et al (2003:122) affirm that many sentences exhibit such ambiguities. That this often leads to humorous results. Consider the following two sentences which appeared in classified adverts:

For sale: an antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers.

We will oil your sewing machine and adjust tension in your home for \$10.00

In the first advert, the humorous reading comes from the grouping... (for lady with thick legs and large drawers) as opposed to the intended...(for lady) (with thick legs and large drawers) where the legs and drawers belong to the desk. The second case is similar. Because these ambiguities are as a result of different structures, they are instances of structural ambiguity.

Finegan (2004:151) points out that structural ambiguity can also occur in the organization of sentences, example: He sold the car to his brother in New York. Despite the fact that the individual words are unambiguous, this string of words has more than one possible interpretation. You may already suspect that the ambiguity arises from two possible constituent structures. We can represent the structure as:

He sold the car [to [his brother in New York]]

He sold the car [to his brother] [in New York]

We can paraphrase the sentence as:

It was to his brother in New York that he sold the car.

It was in New York that he sold the car to his brother

In New York he sold the car to his brother.

Other examples can be in these phrases,

Current information technology can mean:

Technology for current information, or

Information technology that is current.

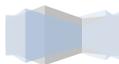
Gullible boys and girls can be interpreted as:

Gullible boys and gullible girls, or

Girls and gullible boys.

This ambiguity reflects the fact that the expression ‘gullible boys and girls’ has two possible constituent structure, depending on whether ‘gullible’ modifies ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ or ‘only boys’. Akmajian, (2006:242) remarks that in some cases the ambiguity of a sentence is caused by the ambiguity of a word as in:

He found a bat (bat: baseball bat; flying animal)



She couldn't bear children (bear: give birth to; put up with)

But in other cases no particular word is ambiguous – the ambiguity is due to structural relations in the sentence, e.g.

She visited a little girl's school

It is not clear whether 'little' modifies only the word 'girl'

(She visited a [little girl's] school) or modifies the phrase 'girl's school

She visited a little [girl's school])

'The mother of the boy and the girl will arrive soon'. This sentence is ambiguous, that is, it has more than one meaning. It is either about one person (the mother) or about two people (the mother in addition to the girl).

The mother (of the boy and the girl) will arrive soon

(The mother of the boy) and the girl will arrive soon.

This can be disambiguated by adding other phrase, e.g.

-The mother of the boy and the girl will arrive soon, won't she?

-The mother of the boy and the girl will arrive soon, won't they?

Saeed (2003:193) notes that it is a well-known fact about English sentence structure that adding a prepositional phrase to a verb phrase can cause ambiguity.

John chased the dog with a stick

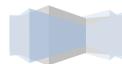
The ambiguity is whether John or the dog has the stick. This suggests that while, structurally, ambiguity should be present in this sentence, in fact background knowledge about dogs and people will mean that for most people there no ambiguity.

Malmkjær (2002:461) gives some examples of structural ambiguity as:

The chicken is ready to eat

Visiting relatives can be a nuisance

The police were ordered to stop drinking after midnight.



The different meanings of such sentences can usually be explicated by syntactic analysis.

He said that it is a fact that almost any linguistic item can be used in many ways and with many functions. Palmer (1981:106) adds that ambiguity can result from grammatical as well as lexical differences. Thus, They hit the ball is ambiguous between present and past tense, while Flying planes can be dangerous is ambiguous because flying plane has two possible grammatical structures (with the meanings 'the act of flying planes' and 'planes that are flying')

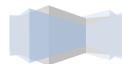
In the Igbo language, ambiguity can surface due to dialectal difference. Some utterances in a dialect can be misunderstood in the standard form of the language. Examples of dialectal ambiguity in the Igbo language are as follows:

24. 'E were ọkụ n'ụlọ Obinna', in Ezeagu dialect means that 'there is light in Obinna's house', but in the standard form of the language it is the opposite, meaning that, 'there is no light in Obinna's house'.
25. 'Chioma na-aya isi', in Ezeagu dialect means that 'Chioma is very pompous' but in Agulu dialect it can be interpreted as that 'Chioma is sick in the head (meaning that Chioma has psychiatric problem).

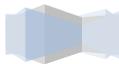
Structural Ambiguity in Igbo Grammar

Structural ambiguity is so glaring in Igbo grammar. Some of them are as follows:

26. 'Onye nwe mma isi wara', can mean that 'The head of the knife is broken' or that the owner of knife is sick in the head or broken head'. The ambiguity is on whether the broken head modifies 'the knife' or whether it modifies 'the owner of the knife'.
27. 'Ọ tara anụ mmadu'. This can be interpreted as, 'He ate the meat kept for somebody' or 'He ate human flesh'.
28. 'Ndị nkuzi Igbo na-ama akwụkwọ', can be that 'teacher from Igbo race are intelligent' or that 'teacher who teach Igbo language are intelligent'.



29. 'Gĩnĩ butere gĩ ebe a?' can be have these meanings: 'Through what means did come here?', or 'For what purpose did you come here?'
30. 'Kedu ihe i jiri bĩa?' This can be interpreted as: 'What is your purpose of coming? Or 'What did you bring while coming? Or still, 'Through what means did you come?'
31. 'Chisom sị na Ọ ga-abĩa' can be interpreted that 'Chisom said that she (Chisom) will come. Or that 'Chisom said that somebodyelse will come'
32. 'Adamma erighị nri ya' has the following interpretations: 'Adamma did not eat her own food', or 'Adamma did not eat somebody's food'.
33. 'Ọrụ onyeisiala na Nsukka' has these meaning: 'The work of the President in Nsukka' or 'The work of the President and the work of Nsukka'
34. 'Nne NgỌzi na Emeka bĩaara taa' can mean 'Emeka and Ngozi's mother came today' or 'Mother of Ngozi and Emeka (together) came today'. Here the ambiguity is whether the mother belongs to one person (Ngozi) or to two people (Ngozi and Emeka).nwere ike ịbụ.
35. 'Oriakụ onyeisi mahadum ha bụ Ebere Njọkụ kwuru okwu'. The confusion is on owner of the name 'Ebere Njoku'. Does 'Ebere Njoku belongs to the Vice Chancellor, or to his wife?'
36. 'E nyela ndị Ọrụ uwe ojii iwu ịkwụsị ñụ mmanya na-aba n'anya'. This can be interpreted as that: 'The police have been direct not to drink alcoholic drinks. Or that ' The police have been directed to stop people from drinking alcoholic drinks'.
37. 'Ọkụkọ adịla njikere iri', has these meaning: that 'The chicken is ready to be served' or that 'The live chicken is ready to it food'.
38. 'Mmọnwụ ejikechaala ikiri', can mean that 'The masquerade is ready to watch something' or that 'The masquerade is ready for people to watch it'.
39. 'Nna ya zụtara Ọkụkọ na ewu ojii', can be interpreted as that 'His father bought a fowl (whose color is not mentioned) and a black goat',



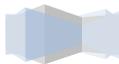
or that ‘His father bought a black fowl and a black goat’. It can be that the black color modifies only the goat, or that it modifies both the fowl and the goat’.

40. ‘Obi bụ onye akaekpe’ has these meanings: ‘Obi is a south-paw (i.e. he uses his left hands more than the right hand), or ‘Obi has queer character’, or ‘Obi is an outcast’- (in Owerri dialect).
41. ‘Ngwere ahụ na-ata ahụhụ’, can mean that ‘The lizard is suffering’ (idiomatic) or that ‘The lizard is eating ants’.
42. ‘Kalụ na-agba bọl’, has these interpretation, ‘Kalu plays football’ (a habitual aspect) or that ‘Kalu is playing football at the time of the report’. ‘ChizỌba na-agụ akwụkwỌ’, can be that ‘Chizoba is a student’ or that ‘Chizoba is reading at the time of the report’.

Disambiguating Ambiguous Expressions

Expressions that have multiple meanings can be clarified through various ways. Bussmann (1996:130) intimates that disambiguation is a process and result of clarifying lexical or structural ambiguity of linguistic expression by the linguistic or extralinguistic content. He suggested the following means for averting ambiguity: Firstly, Linguistic disambiguation on the lexical level is carried out as a rule by excluding semantically incompatible lexeme combinations: for example, the ambiguity of The chicken is ready to eat can be cleared up by following it with so please serve it or so please feed it, thus disambiguating chicken (=meat) from chicken (=live animal). Palmer (1981:49) adds an example of this type of disambiguation as: The bill is large is ambiguous until it is disambiguated by ... but need not to be paid. Disambiguation of structural ambiguity is carried out by explicit reformation of the underlying deep structural. Thus, the two readings of the sentence, The investigation of the politician was applauded can be disambiguate by the paraphrases That the politician was being investigated was applauded or That the politician undertook the investigation was applauded. Disambiguation through extralinguistic context depends on the particular situation, or prior knowledge, attitude, expectations of the speaker/hearer as well as on non-verbal cues.

Added to that Akmajian (:366) says that in order to determine the meaning of expressions, the hearer must be able to mentally process sentences that reflect complex structural properties on human language, such as structural



ambiguity and discontinuous dependencies. Since many expressions are linguistically ambiguous, the hearer must determine which of the possible meaning of an expression is the one the speaker intended as operative on that occasion. This, as far as the Message Model is concerned, disambiguation is a process that is not governed by any principle. But in actuality, disambiguation is not unprincipled and random; rather, it is usually quite predictable. To overcome ambiguity, the hearer presumes the speaker's remarks to be contextually appropriate.

Akwanya (1977:129) remarks that for a more helpful way of distinguishing sentences which are ambiguous from those which are not, one has to turn to anaphoric processes - processes which refer back to an earlier part of the sentence. One example of this is the expression 'to do so too'. This is used where the action described has already been specified and is being referred to again. For example, the sentence John hit Bill and Jason did so implies that Jason also hit Bill. In more linguistic terms, the use of the expression 'do so too' demands identity of meaning of the verb phrases in question. If some verb phrase is two-ways ambiguous, then we can predict that when it is conjoined to a 'do so' or other verb phrase pro-form expression, the entire sentence will be two ways ambiguous. Whichever interpretation is implied, the 'do so' expression must be identical to that interpretation. More formally, a sentence which is two-ways ambiguous must be given two semantic representations to characterize its two meanings. Since a 'do so' expression or any other verb phrase pro-form demands identity of meaning, a two-way ambiguous sentence together with such an expression can only be two-way ambiguous in both of the two representations of the sentence's meaning, the pro-form expression will always be identical to it. So for example, we predict that Johnny saw her duck and Will did so too is only two -ways ambiguous. Either it means that Johnny saw the duck which belonged to her and Will also saw the duck which belonged to her: or it means that Johnny saw her quickly lower her head and Will also saw her quickly lower her head. What is predicted is that it cannot mean is that Johnny saw the duck which belonged to her and Will saw her quickly lower her head, because in such a case the meaning of the two verb phrases would not be identical.

Crystal (1987:179) stresses that writers also have to anticipate the effects of the time-lag between production and reception, and the problems posed by having their language read and interpreted by many recipients in a diversity of setting. In the absence of immediate feedback, available in most speech



interaction, care needs to be taken to minimize the effects of vagueness and ambiguity.

Findings

The findings testify that ambiguity is one of the features of natural languages. That the factors that can bring about ambiguity are: homonyms; a situation where different words with different meanings have the same form, homophone which refers where different words with different meanings have one phonological realization, homograph which is where different words with different meanings and different sounds have the same orthographic representation. Another thing that can cause ambiguity in the Igbo language is anaphoric pronouns, when the antecedent of a pronoun is not very clear to the hearer/reader. Structure of some expressions can also lead to ambiguity. In the Igbo language lack of inherent verb complements goes a long way in bring misinterpretation. Also discovered in the Igbo language is that dialectal difference is a clear evidence of ambiguity in standard form of the language as seen in examples number 24 and 25 above.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that Igbo writers should endeavor to always tone-marking their write-up especially those words that are identical and are prone to different interpretations, bearing in mind that the Igbo language is a tonal language. For example, in Igbo language, tone is used to distinguish between a declarative sentence and interrogative sentence. For instance:

43. ̀Ìbìara ùnyaaḥù? (interrogative),

44. Í bìara ùnyaaḥù (declarative).

Words with the same orthographic form can bring about ambiguity in a construction. Such words should therefore, be tone-marked. For instance:

45. Nna ya zùtara akwa, if not tone-marked can mean, ‘His father bought bed’, or ‘His father bought an egg’, or ‘His father bought a cloth’

46. Ọchìagha tūrù ya ube. Without tone-mark can be interpreted as, ‘The warrior bought an arrow’ or ‘The warrior bought a pear’, or ‘The warrior ordered for arrows’ or ‘The warrior ordered for pears.

Another suggested criteria for disambiguating ambiguous items in the Igbo language is through the use of inherent verb complement. The inherent verb

complements are meaning specifier to certain Igbo verbs that can be interpreted in different ways. For instance:

47. 'Ada gbara' is supposed to go inherent complements to arrive specified meanings, like:
48. Ada gbara asịrị, (Ada gossiped) or
49. Ada gbara ỌsỌ, (Ada ran) or
50. Ada gbara egwu, (Ada danced) or
51. Ada gbara akwụkwỌ,(Ada wedded) etc .

Without the inherent complements the sentence is exposed to different interpretations.

Another solution to the issue of ambiguity is Igbo writers should adhere strictly to the principles of writing Igbo. This is important because ill written constructs can give different meanings different from the intended meaning. Some of the illustrations are:

52. 'Ọlụ Ọma Gov. Peter Obi na Anambra State (sic).

The meaning of this write-up is different from the intended meaning. What is written means 'The good work of Gov. Peter Obi and Anambra State'. But the assumed intended of the write-up is 'The good work of Gov. Peter Obi in Anambra state'. For the intended meaning the write-up is supposed to bear:

53. Ọlụ Ọma Gov. Pita Obi n'Anambara steeti.
54. 'Ihu ya dịka ihu mma' . This epression is supposes to bear:
55. Ihu ya dịka ihu m ma'. Otherwise the meaning will be as in eexample number 22 above.

Conclusion

Natural languages including the Igbo language exhibit a high rate of possessing expressions with different meanings, otherwise known as ambiguity. Ambiguity brings about misinterpretation and misunderstanding between language users. This is so because there is a gap between the encoded and decoded items. When this is so, the social function of language

is debarred. For this problem to be solved uses of the Igbo language should adhere to the recommendations proffered.

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