

GENERATING THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

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Progress in science, it has often been said, is a continual search for fresh models, to generate new hypotheses about the realities it professes to investigate. The models sometimes come from within the science itself, but commonly take the form of conceptualisations borrowed from other sciences. Theology, too, routinely needs fresh models of enquiry, and the reformulation of traditional issues in linguistic terms provides an example. Now that several major statements have emerged concerning the role of language in the elucidation of theological issues, it is perhaps possible to begin the process of evaluating the usefulness of the model, to identify some of the problems which theologians have encountered in using it, and to suggest alternatives¹.

A linguist approaching this literature cannot but be struck by a curious ambivalence in theological practice, in its attitude to language analysis. On the one hand, it is accepted that progress is to a considerable extent dependent on the extent to which the barrier of language between theologian and layman can be reduced: a wide variety of approaches is suggested, ranging from reappraisal to rejection. Tillich's statement is illustrative: "the words which are used most in religion are also those whose genuine meaning is almost completely lost ... Such words must be reborn, if possible;

¹ It is perhaps superfluous, in the present volume, to supply chapter and verse for the 'statements' referred to. Some specific references will be introduced below.

and thrown away if this is not possible ..." (Tillich 1963:94). Part of the investigation will involve "the study of the language of faith ... in the context of the study of language in general" (Ladrière 1972:3), and this can be discouraging, because of the mass of interdisciplinary literature which probes "the jungle of the problem of language" (Ebeling 1973: 81,ff). On the other hand, there is a marked reluctance to follow this direction of reasoning a step further, and get to grips with those disciplines, such as linguistics, which have been devised precisely to help illuminate the nature of linguistic problems. Both Ladrière and Ebeling do make an initial step in this direction, but neither gets further than a maximally general series of philosophical-linguistic statements about the nature of language; there are next to no examples of the application of linguistic analytic frameworks to specific areas of religious language.

However, these scholars are far outnumbered by those who approach the subject of theological language without apparently feeling the need to address the issues in an appropriately general and systematic way. I would not wish to speak for the relevance or otherwise of disciplines other than my own, but in the case of linguistics it would seem retrograde to fail to make use of those conceptualisations of language and techniques of linguistic analysis which would generally be accepted as insightful². This failure may be little more than the fortuitous result of limitations in the training of individuals - the lack of combined degree courses in theology and linguistics is noteworthy - but matters are now reaching a point where there has to be a radical change of attitude, if the continued use of language models in theology is to be fruitful. The divergence between the conceptions of language analysis held by theologians, and those held by linguists, is now so great that, to someone versed in the latter's

² I am not suggesting here that the constructs used in this paper are without controversy within linguistics, but simply that their use in other areas of linguistic enquiry has frequently been illuminating:

literature, the claims about language made by the former group often seem ambiguous, out-of-date, naive and curiously selective. It is my belief that, if these limitations can be overcome, by developing a proper awareness of current thinking in linguistic science, a plausible theolinguistics can be established. There is a great deal to be gained by modelling theological issues in linguistic terms - but only if the linguistic terms are themselves compatible with the best thinking on the subject.

There are numerous 'low-level' ways in which these criticisms might be substantiated - for example, the theological tendency to talk about language in terms of 'words', compared with the linguist's stress on the notion of 'sentences' (see also the range of examples cited in Crystal 1974:21) - but for the present paper I wish to focus upon what in my view is the most serious index of difference: the theological preoccupation with linguistic *performance*, at the expense of the linguistic concentration on a notion of *competence*. The performance/competence distinction, more than any other, has revolutionised linguistic thinking in recent years. While aspects of the distinction had been anticipated by De Saussure (1916), it was the formulation by Chomsky in the 1960s which led to its widespread adoption as a fruitful model of linguistic enquiry (see especially Chomsky 1965:3). Performance, in this view, is seen as a set of specific utterances produced by native-speakers of a language, as encountered in a (spoken or written) corpus. The utterances of performance will contain features irrelevant to the abstract rule system of the language, such as hesitations and unfinished structures, arising from the various psychological and social difficulties acting upon the speaker (such as lapses of memory, or inattention). Competence, by contrast, refers to a person's knowledge of his language - the system of rules which he has mastered so that he is able to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences, and to recognise grammatical mistakes and ambiguities. Historically, linguistic science can be seen as having evolved from a period when analysis was preoccupied with the performance of speakers in corpora of data, instead of with the underlying competence of those speakers - the 'tacit knowledge' of the rules of their

language. In Chomsky's terms, there has been a move from grammars which tried to be 'observationally adequate' (able to account for the properties of a corpus and no more) to grammars which try to be 'descriptively adequate' (by describing the tacit knowledge of language users). The formal way of achieving this goal is to develop generative models of language.

At this point, it would be easy to get sidetracked into a technical discussion of the relative merits of the various models of generative grammar which have been propounded, or of the theory's claims to psychological reality.³ Such matters are not essential for the point currently being made, which is the need for linguistic analysis to project, somehow, from a finite sample of language in a corpus to the language as a whole. Whether we choose to do this using one of the models propounded by Chomsky and his associates is beside the point: the crucial distinction is that between sample and totality (or *parole* and *langue*, or *act* and *system* - to cite some analogous terms from other theories). The change of emphasis is essential, whether we are studying the language as a whole, or a single variety of it. We may begin by studying the language of several scientific/legal/advertising/religious... texts, but the final question, 'What is scientific/legal, etc. language *like*?' is more than just an extrapolation from these texts: it is a *prediction* about what counts as successful, acceptable for the variety in question, and (by implication) what would not be considered acceptable language for that variety.⁴ The study of theological language, no less than of any other variety, needs to work within a predictive perspective.

That theologians are concerned with individuals' competence, in the above sense, is plain from the repeated stress on the need to make religious language meaningful to modern man - not just on specific occasions, but in general. Whatever the rules

³ See, for example, Matthews (1978), for a summary of criticisms.

⁴ The notion of 'success' is itself a complex one: see further, Crystal (1973).

governing theological language are, their applicability is to a person's whole life, and not just to his understanding on a certain day or in a certain situation. Van Buren's (1972) concern to push language to its limits, and Ramsey's (1957) concern to stretch language, illustrate this direction of thinking. The problem comes when theologians begin to make claims about religious linguistic competence, while continuing to use discovery procedures that are appropriate only for the study of linguistic performance. These procedures include the investigation of popular statements about God; the description of a theological use of terms; analyses to determine the original meaning of terms, with reference to the biblical corpus, the history of doctrinal statement, or liturgical tradition; and so on (for a review, see Van Noppen 1980: Ch.1). The characteristically historical perspective for theological enquiry is integral to its purpose, of course; but what I want to point out is that the forward-looking drive which governs so much theolinguistic writing - the recurrent reference to change, relevance and reinterpretation in the light of modern circumstances - necessitates an appropriately forward-looking perspective. There is therefore a need to develop new analytic techniques, in order to arrive at a more precise characterisation of the nature of theological linguistic competence. Contemporary corpus-based analyses are an invaluable first step, in that they provide a systematic data-base from which interesting hypotheses about practice in an attitude towards theological language can be generated; but there is too much arbitrariness in corpus-based work (for instance in the selectivity of the texts and measures used) for generalisation ever to be convincing without the supplementary role of the analyst's intuition. A theologian looking at the data provided by the Leeds corpus (Towler 1974) or the Brussels corpus (van Noppen 1980) will judge it in relation to the extent to which it fits with his intuitions about theological language as a whole. This step cannot be avoided. Chomsky's point is that therefore it might as well be addressed directly, with intuition being an initial focus of investigation.

What it is important to appreciate in this argument is that the shift from an observational to a descriptive (competence) mode of knowing requires a new range of techniques and models of

analysis. My criticism of much contemporary theolinguistics is not that theologians are unaware of the importance of handling the language as a whole, but that their analytic techniques and assumptions do not allow them to do so. A good example is Van Buren's (1972) notion of the 'edges' of language - an excellent idea, but one which evaporates when large-scale testing of this model in competence terms is carried out. Van Buren is properly cautious (*ibid.*:84) but he is extremely restricted in the range of examples he uses to illustrate the notion (*solid, rough, grow, alive, talk, self, think, love, intend, purpose*, along with a mention of a few other lexical items), and he proposes no formal way of inter-relating his judgements about each lexical item. Each example is plausible, but no linguistic generalisation is made. But *can* any such generalisation be made for the lexicon? Van Buren needs to generalise, because his theory is to posit the term *God* as the marker of the outer edge of language - that is, language in general, not just the specific set of lexical items illustrated above. There is here a logical leap from performance to competence. Does Van Buren's model enable us to bridge this gap? He pictures language as a platform, the planks of which are the rules for our use of words, of various but determinate lengths (*ibid.*: 82). But the problem is that if all, or most of the planks are of different lengths, there is no coherent shape to the platform at all, and thus no coherent shape to the construct which defines its edges. Van Buren's is a difficult argument to attack, because we are given no heuristic for determining the lengths of the various planks; but the more lexicon one investigates, the more varied they seem to be (e.g. in terms of the kind and number of intermediate, metaphorical 'stopping-points' as one moves from centre to edge of lexical use). There is certainly no way in which we can systematically proceed from a study of his individual examples to a model of theological linguistic competence - though his theory requires that we do thus move. Only a more sophisticated lexical analysis will enable this to happen (See further below).

A similar point might be made in relation to the mainstream of writing in the 1960s concerning the crisis of religious language. While at the time there was much talk of linguistic revolution, the range of examples which characterise the work of Robinson, *et al*, and which are reviewed by van Noppen (1980), is nonetheless extremely

conservative. To replace one set of spatial terms by another may have dramatic and far-reaching theological consequences, but linguistically very little has been done. If there *is* a road which leads from the centre to the edge of language, then only the shortest of steps has been taken along it. The layman's intuitions of relevance might indeed be little moved by his being confronted with an alternative conceptualisation from within the restricted domain of spatial lexicon (as many of the reactions contained in the Leeds corpus suggest). Rather, one might well ask whether the theologian would not do better to search for his fresh linguistic models well away from the traditional foci of enquiry. As I understand it, his concern is to establish equivalences between the language of traditional theological expression and the language of modern daily life, in such a way that the concepts embodied in the former can be interpreted in relation to those embodied in the latter, and thus made meaningful. The language which will do this (assuming that in any age there will always be some language that will) will be a sub-set of the whole language, but there is no way of knowing in advance which sub-set is likely to be the most motivating. The job of the theolinguist, then, is to systematically and objectively test various sub-sets, culled from the language as a whole, against the traditional formulations, and attempt to establish empirically which equivalences generate most insight.⁵

The direction of this procedure should be noted: one begins with the potential of the modern language (as represented by some formal notion of competence) and relates this to theological linguistic tradition. This seems far more likely to generate a renewed awareness of the value of the older forms than the reverse way of proceeding - attempting to stretch theological tradition to cope with the modern language's potential. While there is no *a priori* reason

⁵ The operative words are 'systematically and objectively': the personal insights of the poet (as illustrated in such pieces as *Litany for the Ghetto*) may be pointers to the theologian as to where to look for fruitful equivalences, but they do not of themselves constitute the scientific investigation of the problem.

why this latter approach might not succeed, it is patently obvious that so far it has not.

Developing a competence model for theological language will be a complex intellectual enterprise. In the present paper, all I can do is indicate some of the constraints which will affect the scope of the model, and its application. Firstly, it is concerned with what *can* be expressed in a language, not simply with what has been expressed in the past. It is therefore lexically all-inclusive: no aspect of the lexicon is in principle to be omitted from the investigation⁶. Secondly, within the lexicon, it will avoid any conception of meaning in terms of individual words; rather, it will aim to show the network of relationships which lexical items contract with each other, and which constitute the *sense* of the items (cf. Lyons (1977: Ch.7) for a review of the sense-relations literature, and for the following terminology). Of the various sense-relations identified in structural semantics, only one seems to have been used routinely in theological language studies, namely synonymy (various names for God, definition of his attributes, and so on). Other sense-relations - hyponymy, oppositeness and incompatibility - do not seem to have been probed. Hyponymy may well be irrelevant (*God* as a 'kind of' X, or Xs as 'kinds of' *God*), but the notions of incompatibility (see below) and oppositeness seem promising (remembering that there are many kinds and degrees of oppositeness: cf. Lyons 1977: Ch.9).

Thirdly, the model must take into account the roles of both speaker and hearer in assigning meaning to lexical items. It is the 'person in the role of hearer' ('hearer', for short) who has often been neglected, in theolinguistic discussion. A great deal of attention has been paid to the question of what we mean when we say something, or what the Bible means when it says something, but very little

⁶ Nor any aspect of grammar, graphology, and so on; but it is accepted that the study of lexicon is central.

to what we mean when we hear/read something - or perhaps it should be 'how' we learn to find meaning in what we see/hear around us. The hearer brings to the communicative act several factors - a set of expectations about the nature of the interaction, one of which is an ability to make good some of the inadequacies of a speaker's expression. This is done partly by feedback cues while the speaker is talking (*really? sure, wait a minute...*, dubious facial expressions, etc.), and partly by the process of 'reading in' meaning to what is said. In cases of extreme non-fluency, or difficulty of level, this reading-in may be tantamount to the hearer constructing a prototype of what the speaker was wanting to say - it may even provoke the hearer to re-state the utterance, to check that he got it right. What needs to be emphasised is that, under normal cooperative principles,⁷ a hearer makes far more semantic allowances than he is often given credit for. Under the cooperative principle, the speaker is assumed to be attempting to say something sensible. Only when the hearer, having exhausted all possible contexts, finds no coherent interpretation for what the speaker has said, is he justified in concluding that a sentence is nonsense. The problem, of course - as is well recognised in literary criticism - is in knowing when 'all possible contexts' have been evaluated.⁸

The importance of taking both linguistic and extra-linguistic context into account when investigating the acceptability of sentences has been a major theme in linguistics for some time. Its importance in linguistic theory has been recently stressed by Haas (1973), who relates his argument to philosophical themes.

⁷ See Grice (1975): in communicative activity, people try to be informative, truthful, relevant and clear, though they may not always succeed.

⁸ For further discussion, see van Noppen (1980: 287-8). Beardsley's notion of 'significant self-contradiction' (1958: 138,ff.) may also be cited, whereby an interpretation of nonsense for a use of language is rejected, and a metaphorical interpretation accepted instead: 'the reader jumps over the evident self-contradiction and construes it indirectly, on the principle that the writer is contradicting himself and would not utter anything unless he had something sensible in mind'.

For present purposes, my concern is simply to emphasise the hearer's ability to use context in a flexible and creative way, when encountering lexically anomalous sequences. As long as sentences conform to the norm of grammatical construction in a language, and assuming a cooperative principle, people are able to assign a meaning even of quite bizarre-sounding sentences. Haas's contextualisation of Russell's *Quadruplicity drinks procrastination* is a case in point (the relevant context being the Big Four powers' conference after the Second World War). Chomsky's *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously* has been contextualised several times by ingenious linguists. But any sentence can be given such a treatment. Take, for example, the frame *The --- is sleeping*. Allowing for grammatical restrictions as to what may occur in this slot in English (as **The quickly is sleeping*), there must be a quarter of a million nouns or noun-like items that could be used here, e.g. *man, flower, idea, oxygen, madrigal, macaroni*. It would not be proper to ask people to contextualise all these possibilities in isolation: to ask "What does *The oxygen is sleeping* mean?" is not a fair question, without full context. But allowing for context, a reading can be given. The scientist who, waiting longer than he expected for some oxygen to emerge from an experiment, might remark to his colleague 'The oxygen is sleeping today', and he would be understood - even though the hearer may never have heard that sentence before. Questions of what is orthodox do not arise. To say "People do not usually say that" is to miss the point. Any one of us *could*, and hearers often have to search for a meaning in what they hear, using context as much as they can.

I do not know if it is going too far to say that all semantically anomalous sentences are contextualisable; but one does not need to adopt such an extreme position to see that traditional models of language use (and some of the linguistic ones⁹) are in need of

⁹ For example, it also attacks a generative conception of language in which too much stress is placed on the notion of well-formedness, and not enough on such notions as gradience. See further, Matthews (1978).

modification, if they are to handle such behaviour. To return to the Van Buren 'edge' model, as an example. The sentences which he cites as going beyond the edge of language are all contextualisable. One could say that a *country is solid* (in the sense of 'behind a leader'). That the *universe is solid* (for science fiction fans, we might wish to contrast a non-solid universe with one of unknown dimensions), that *history is rough, the earth is growing*, and so on. This is not of course a criticism of Van Buren's theory as such, for he is giving an account of what constitutes *normal* usage. Rather, it is this *type* of theory which is too limiting. Any postulate of 'edge' assumes a 'normal' usage; but it is very difficult to give this norm a clear definition. It is not simply a matter of frequency: it is quite normal, at times, to use rare items; and it would be normal for science-fiction fans who wish to do so to use such sentences as the above. We may wish to step back from such usage, and criticise the legitimacy of the activity of carrying on science fiction in this way, or denying science fiction any useful function at all, but such reactions are grounded in *non-linguistic* considerations, and constitute a different type of problem. For the theologian, too, this problem exists: will people give him credit for attempting to talk sense, in the first place, and allow a Gricean cooperative principle?

How might this approach be operationalised? One way might be to take a set of paradigm structures, such as 'God is NOUN (PHRASE)', 'God is ADJECTIVE (PHRASE)' or 'God VERBS', and analyse the effects of inserting the grammatically permissible set of lexical items in the empty slot. Working systematically through a dictionary will then generate several thousand putative theological sentences.¹⁰ By ana-

¹⁰ Hundreds of thousands, of course, if the biggest dictionaries are taken. But in the first instance, a small-size contemporary dictionary will do, in which the range of everyday use is captured. If the model will not work well for this lexical range, there is no point in involving the esoteric vocabulary of the sciences (which constitutes the bulk of the larger dictionaries). The principle, however, is plain: all language that is represented in the dictionary is to be processed using the model. For present purposes, I used the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978).

lysing the different kinds of contextualisation required to make sense of such sentences, it is possible that new and theologically insightful collocations might emerge, with certain lexical domains becoming worthy of especial attention. To some extent, the exercise is a further illustration of the approach of metaphor logic (van Noppen 1980), whereby the relationship between supranatural and empirical reality is studied from the way in which the latter is linguistically structured: by using empirical lexicon in a theological environment, a tentative analogy between the two realities is proposed, and its implications analysed. The difference with van Noppen, however, is that there is no concern here to restrict the approach to a traditional lexical domain: in principle, the whole of the language is involved.

As an example, we may consider how to handle all of the lexical items found in the first few pages of letter M, in a popular dictionary, using just the first of the above paradigm structures. The initial list generated such strings as 'God is macadam/macaroni/a macaw/a mace/a mace-bearer...' The next step was to examine each collocation to determine what kind of contextualisation would be needed in order to assign an interpretation to the sentence. A threefold classification suggested itself.

1. *Standard theological lexicon.* There were a small number of items which one would not be surprised to encounter in traditional theological discourse. The most important were *spatial* terms, such as *macrocosm*, *magnitude*, *margin*, and perhaps *mansion* and *mantle*. There were also several *personal* terms, such as *magnanimity*, *majesty* and *maker*, and a few others (*manifestation*, *marvel*, and perhaps *Mass*).
2. *Incompatible lexicon.* There were a large number of terms which could be used with the paradigm structure only if it were in negative form, because the collaboration would otherwise produce an unacceptable correlation with the belief tradition. The various types of incompatibility relationship involved would of course make a fruitful mode of enquiry in its own right. The chief domains seemed to be:
 - (a) terms containing the feature 'bad', of various degrees of strength: at one extreme, there were relatively 'strong' items, such as *malice*, *malignancy*, and the forms based on *mad-* (*-ness*, *-man*, etc) and *mal-* (*-formation*, *-function*, etc.); at the other extreme, there were items

to do with crime (*mafia*, *manslaughter*) and disease (*maggot*, *malady*, *mange*, *malaria*);

(b) terms relating to specific belief systems, such as *maenad*, *magic(ian)*, *Martian*, *Maoism*, *mason*;

(c) proper names, such as *Macabees*, *Magi*, *Magnificat*, *Malay*;

(d) terms indicating a subordinate role within a series, such as *maisonette*, *major*, *marshal*, *masterpiece*;

(e) terms for human attributes, such as body-parts (e.g. *mandible*), or containing a specific marker for 'sex', such as *madame*, *maiden*, *male*, *man*, *manageress*, *masculinity*.

Doubtless other domains would emerge with a larger sample.

3. *Compatible lexicon*. The vast majority of terms can be grouped under this heading, which is therefore in danger of becoming useless without further criteria of classification. One possibility would be to attempt to use the notion of 'cash value' (cf. Robinson & Edwards 1963:247). Some lexical domains, and some terms within each domain, have a much more immediate and plausible metaphorical application than others. While it is possible that some of the items in the following lists can motivate illuminating theographic parallels, given appropriate contextualisation, the intuitive likelihood of their doing so is poor. Such 'low' cash value terms would include:

(a) animals and parts, such as *macaw*, *mackerel*, *magpie*, *mallard*, *mamba*, *mane*;

(b) food and drink, such as *macaroni*, *macaroon*, *madeira*, *maize*, *malmsey*;

(c) domestic entertainment, such as *macrame*, *magazine*, *magic lantern*, *mah-jong*, and possibly *madrigal*;

(d) flora, such as *madder*, *magnolia*, *mahogany*, *mallow*, *mandrake*, *maple*;

(e) domestic products, such as *mackintosh*, *mail*, *mains*, *mantelpiece*, *mantilla*.

By contrast, there are several domains which contain lexical items of much greater potential applicability, given appropriate contextual-

isation. With such a small sample, it is possible only to illustrate the sorts of domain involved, the category labels being somewhat arbitrarily assigned.

- (f) human types, such as *maestro*, *magistrate*, *magnate*, *manager/ment*, *man(kind)*, *manufacturer*;
- (g) human activities, such as *mania*, *manicure*, *manipulation*, *maintenance*, *mannerism*, *marathon*, *march*;
- (h) human implements, such as *mace*, *machete*, *machine-gun*, *machine(ry)*, *mallet*, *manacle*, *mandolin*, *mangle*, *mask*
- (i) social entities, such as *manners*, *manor*, *manse*, *market*, *marriage*;
- (j) linguistic entities, such as *main clause*, *malapropism*, *mandate*, *manifesto*, *manual*, *manuscript*;
- (k) technical notions/products, such as *macadam*, *magma*, *magnesia*, *magnification*, *main-mast/sail/spring*, *manganese*, *magnet-ic field/pole/ism*;
- (l) others, such as *manger*, *maelstrom*, *manner*, *mark*.

A group of a dozen students (all theists) were asked to look through this list, presented in alphabetical order, and to say which sentences (all 'God is ---', it will be recalled) they thought they would most easily be able to contextualise. The items which came out on top were: *manager/ment*, *manufacturer*, *maintenance*, *machinery*, the *main-set*, *magnification* and the *magnetic set*. It is interesting that these all belong to the major domain of modern industrial/technical society - its professionals and its products. With the possible exception of *manufacturer* (which relates closely to *maker*) these candidates for theographic status seem eminently worthy of further study.

The next step is a difficult one, of establishing the relevant features which constitute the basis of the metaphorical correspondence which we intuit to be present. Asking groups of people to contextualise the above sentences would be one way of proceeding. But in order to do this, it would first be necessary to take into account the network of sense-relations within which these items are placed. It must not be forgotten that many of the

above items are polysemic, and a particular sense must be selected if the task of contextualisation is to be kept unambiguous: for example, *God is mail* would have to be supplemented using synonymy, hyponymy, and so on (*mail = armour*, or *mail = letters*). This dimension is especially important with such complex items as *manner* or *mark*, where there are not only several senses, but also idiomatic and stylistically restricted usages to be taken into account.

But this paper is not about methodology: it is about aims. Doubtless, if the above change in the direction of thinking is accepted, better methodologies than the above will be forthcoming. All I have tried to do in this example is put some flesh on the notion that theologians, as well as philosophers, 'should be trying to say what cannot be said' (Wisdom 1936:88). A genuine exploration of language is possible, but only if theologians do not restrict themselves to traditional modes of theographic performance, but begin to investigate systematically the limitless contextualisations generated by their own (and others') linguistic competence. By selecting lexical domains from the gamut of modern experience, theological language may come to seem more relevant than previously; by generating novel theographic sentences from these domains, there is a chance of motivating more popular interest; and by demonstrating the compatibility of these sentences with those of theological tradition, a fuller meaningfulness may be achieved. There *is* a re-birth of language involved in all of this - but it is not, as Tillich and others have thought, a re-birth of old words. Rather, it is the modern words themselves which have to be re-born.

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