

Satire in Swift's Own Words: Considerations on Glossopoesis in *Gulliver's Travels*

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Abstract – Jonathan Swift's satire *Gulliver's Travels* has always been subject of extensive research. However, some points are deserving of more discussion. The present essay aims to exploit those points, namely the languages invented by the author, tracing their possible origins and explaining their glosses as accurately as achievable, by researching the most relevant references available like Ehrenpreis (1948), Asimov (1980), Clark (1972) and Pons (1972), and investigating the relevant matters in his writing, hence providing a more specific study on Swift's memorable glossopoeias, which, in turn, will also corroborate to a wider understanding of the writer's satiric view, otherwise hidden in the author's neologisms. While this paper does not claim to have deciphered every and any 'artificial' word Swift coined, it has certainly contributed an enhanced comprehension of the glossopoeias found in the texts.

General Terms- Literary Theory; English Literature; Jonathan Swift

Keywords- *Gulliver's Travels*; Glossopoesis; Satire; Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

How to analyse the artificial languages in *Gulliver's Travels* has been a difficult task and a subject of extensive thought. Even though Jonathan Swift's novels have engaged scholars, students and ordinary readers for quite a long time since they were published, the linguistic aspects contained in the piece of literature are diverse in variety and scarce when it comes to quantity. That is to say, though there are many different languages, there is only a little exposure of each one of them. The outstanding range of his writing, nevertheless, political pamphlets, journalistic pieces, allusive satires on religious and political topics, intimate and direct letters, or entertaining and pungently ironic poetry, his intelligence, wit, and creativity were ahead of his time and have always gleamed clearly. Many of his memorable pieces, A Tale of a Tub, Battle of the Books, and A Modest Proposal remain steadily at the forefront of any discussion concerning satire, irony, parody, flaw in human nature, and the value of classical traditions. One piece, though, outshines all the others concerning the wealth of its scientific possibilities – the remarkable satire *Gulliver's Travels*, which starts satiric from the very beginning, since Lemuel Gulliver did not really travelled, but shipwrecked on those islands and countries. Therefore, the decoding of the "travels" in the book's title could as well mean trouble – a playful cacophony.

Although much has already been researched and discussed about the novel aforementioned, little has been pointed out concerning its linguistic contents. Lemuel Gulliver, the

narrator and character designed by Jonathan Swift, is a very experienced castaway who, albeit unfortunately shipwrecks repetitively, also gets the chance of being to lands never visited before by any European. The account of the culture found in such countries is richly and beautifully described by Gulliver.

In our time, readers and critics alike have come to realise and accept that Swift's powerful imagination places him in the ranks of great ingenious writers like Rabelais. His allusiveness and inventiveness linger as the hallmarks of his work and must be interpreted in the fullest range possible. Therefore, this paper aims to study an area approached by Swift that has not been discussed so extensively as the other points, namely the languages invented by him.

The idea of making considerations on Swift's invented languages arises from the premise that, in general, glossopoeias in literature are more than mere allegory; they are, sometimes of paramount importance to the full and complete comprehension and interpretation of the plot itself.

Even though the proposal of creating a language may not sound very ordinary to most people, the art of coining languages, or Conlanging (as referred to by aficionados), is nothing new. Besides the examples brought by Swift, conlangs like lingua ignota (unknown language) constructed by Hildegard of Bingen back in the 12th century apparently used for mystical purposes could be added (ECO, 1997, p.3)[4].

Numerous other authors also have described conlangs in their writings; for instances, George Orwell and his Newspeak (Nineteen Eighty-Four, 1949) and J.R.R. Tolkien and his famous Sindarin and Quenya (The Lord of the Rings, 1954). In modern times, Klingon speakers, those who have devoted themselves to the study of a language invented for the Star Trek franchise are well-known for their conferences held in the United States of America (OKRENT, 2009, p.3)[8]. Thus, the research will also try to localize Swift's conlanging into the current lore of the glossopoeia adepts.

It is also worth mentioning that *Gulliver's Travels* glossopoeias are not at all the only conlanging activity undertaken by Jonathan Swift. As Irvin Ehrenpreis outlines (1948, p. 80)[5], Swift also makes some use of slightly distorted English words, which he calls a "little language". Such lingo resembles the so-called baby talks, which involves the instinctive habit of pursing one's lips in the peculiar way that makes words come out in a shape, as it were, that adults think, is intelligible to babies – yet according to Ehrenpreis, an expression of Swift's tenderness towards Stella and of their intimacy. Also, as noted by Frederick N. Smith (1940, p. 27)[12], the man behind these creations used to correspond with Stella in a private language and with his friend Sheridan in a highly esoteric Anglo-Latin. Besides, in A Tale of a Tub, he plays with difficult and/or archaic words, neologisms, puns, proverbs, foreignness, clichés, slang and gibberish. Such a recurrence in the use of conlanging seems to suggest that the glossopoeias in *Gulliver's Travels* be taken a bit more seriously.

2. LANGUAGES DECONSTRUCTION

The linguistic journey embraced by Gulliver and the way he describes the languages he happens to encounter disclose the poor view of language shared by many at the period of time in which Swift lived.

Lemuel Gulliver delineates his reality for us in a plain, circumstantial style (he persists on this), but Swift implies that such a style is too plain and too circumstantial to bear complex, subtle interpretations of complex, subtle experiences. Gulliver views things too simply and seems incapable of accepting ambiguity, jumping at conclusions at all times (SMITH, 1979, p. 16) [12].

This plain view of reality might also have rendered Gulliver's view of language slightly far-fetched. By the time Jonathan Swift lived, people's common thought was that tongues other than the European ones were rudimentary, unsophisticated and primitive, and that seems to suggest a fair explanation on how the shipwrecked narrator could nearly effortlessly grasp the meaning of the speech of the small men from Lilliput or make linguistic assumptions thereon, for instance.

Moreover, the contemporaries of Swift's were just starting to envision the possibilities of perfection through language, the benefits of an international lingua franca, and that a unified and purified language (so they reasoned)

is a necessary condition for a unified and purified country, thus contemplating the language theories that ascertain the relationships between language and thought (KELLY, 1978, p. 33)[6].

The following excerpt is noteworthy in this discussion:

Power, government, war, law, punishment, and a thousand other things had no terms wherein that language could express them, which made the difficulty almost insuperable to give my master any conception of what I meant. (SWIFT, 2003, p. 257)[14]

That piece of text suggests Swift's belief in something similar to the Sapir-Whorf theory, which, among other issues, postulates that the language one speaks is capable of shaping, deceiving and even limiting one's mind, even though that theory was yet to be formulated. Of course, that is just an intriguing coincidence since the referred hypothesis was to be proposed several centuries later.

3. GLOSSOPOEIA MODELS

The part that follows is aimed at analysing the more directly the languages invented by Swift. It is hoped to trace the techniques and ideas behind the author's creations, which may show influences from pre-existing languages while contriving an approximate meaning and/or translation of notorious passages, exposing the nature of the conlangs as fictional languages and naming languages (ROSENFELDER, 2010, p. 13)[10], and demonstrating how much effort the writer resorted from in order to transmit a veiled parody, rather than compiling mere gibberish for no relevant motive.

3.1 The anagrammatic method

There is reason to believe that most of the words coined by Jonathan Swift are indeed anagrammatic or quasi-anagrammatic representations of the targets of his satire. The key to that interpretation may be found in two basic examples, the words Tribnia and Langden:

*"I told him, that in the kingdom of
Tribnia, by the natives called Langden
[...]."*

Seidel (2003, p. 317) [11] and Clark (1972, p. 24) [2] both agree the aforementioned words are actually perfect anagrams of Britain and England and, thus, the quotation could actually be read as follows: "I told him, that in the kingdom of Britain, by the natives called England [...]." Therefore, it may be inferred the same conlanging methodology was applied in the construction of yet another set of words. The first example of such hypothesis is the Lilliputian sentence Hekinah Degul (SWIFT, 2003, p. 28)[14], which can be translated as 'What in the Devil', a series of anagrammatic changes and modifications from an English expression. Although other authors, like Émile Pons (1927, p. 225-226)[9], firmly disagree by stating degul would in reality be a derivation of the French word gueule, there is little or no reason not to accept the former assumption as the more plausible.

*"She gave me the name of Grildrig[...]
The word imports what the Latins call*

*nanunculus, the Italians homuncelino,
and the English mannikin” (SWIFT,
2003, p. 104)[14].*

Grildrig can be referred to as another splendid instance supporting the anagrammatic hypothesis. Gulliver tells the meaning is “mannikin”, but the actual interpretation seems to be closer to something like girl-thing, a sort of girlish doll, as it would appear to be in the situation Gulliver was first seen by the giants from Brobdingnag. This theory is also supported by Clark (1972, p. 20)[2]. The city of Lindalino is an additional example worth a mention: “Lindaloin [sic], the second city in the kingdom” (SWIFT, 2003, p. 185)[14]. While Clark postulates Lindal is a clear anagram of Ireland (1972, p. 23) [2], Isaac Asimov states that the double occurrence of the syllable lin suggests a reference to the city of Dublin (1980, p. 160), or Dublin – Double lin, both suggestions, though, seem quite plausible. The “highest title of honour among them” (SWIFT, 2003, p. 60)[14], Nardac, as Michael Seidel puts it finely enough, can possibly constitute an anagram of ‘canard’ in the sense of falsehood or untrue information (2003, p. 31).

*“[...] I heard one of them cry aloud,
tolgo phonac; when in an instant I felt
above an hundred arrows discharged on
my left hand [...]” (SWIFT, 2003, p. 28)
[14].*

The meaning behind that Lilliputian expression can easily be obtained through the context. The origin thereof is not as evident though. Clark suggests tolgo is any anagram of ‘let go’ and phonac of ‘volat’, Latin for ‘vomit’ (1072, p. 10)[2]. It does not take much brain to notice the lack of connexion with the context. Coincidence or not, tolgo means ‘take off’ in Italian, whereas phonac could be a derivation of φονεύω, Greek for ‘to kill’; and this is also supported by Pons (1927, p. 227). Needless to say, that establishes a better link between the words and the situation in which the arrows were flying off. Brundrecal is, too, an excellent instance of the theory in discussion. It surely fits Alcoran, the sacred book of the Muslims.

3.2 The Ludicrous Method

Although Clark’s theory of “anagrammism” is correct most of the time, it does not apply to all of Swift’s neologisms. Some of the cases are nothing more than mere jokes. Such seems to be the case of Laputa. The Laputan scholars have an opinion regarding the etymology of the name:

*“The word which I interpret the Flying
or Floating Island is the original
Laputa, whereof I could never learn the
true etymology. Lap in the old obsolete
language signifieth high, and untuh a
governor, from which they say by
corruption was derived Laputa, from
Lapuntuh. (SWIFT, 2003, p. 173)[14]”*

The intrepid and “linguistically-skilled” traveller offers his own hypothesis about the correct etymology for the name. That appears to be part of the satire as well:

*“I ventured to offer to the learned
among them a conjecture of my own,
that Laputa was quasi Lap outed; Lap
signifying properly the dancing of the
sunbeams in the sea, and outed a wing
[...] (SWIFT, 2003, pp. 173-174)[14].”*

Clark goes even further on the task: “I take it to be an anagram of the words All-up-at, not an unhandy description of Laputa” (CLARK, 1972, p. 22)[2]. But in reality the origin of that ‘pun’ may be much simpler and obvious than Clark might have thought. At first sight, the word resembles to a large extent the Spanish equivalent for ‘the whore’. Not an unlikely satire, since Swift was Irish and probably did not like the fact that his country had to be forcedly submit to His Majesty, the king, and his motherland, besides the fact that there remains little doubt that this satire refers to the tyrannical domination of England over the members of the commonwealth. Such is also the interpretation of Tim Conley and Stephen Cain’s (2006, p. 80) [3]. Further proof following the same concept is also located in:

*“When I arrived at the port of
Maldonada[...]” (SWIFT, 2003, p.
206)[14].*

Maldonada has been interpreted as a quasi-anagrammatic form of London; however it seems more plausible to conclude that it is in fact the Spanish ‘mal donada’ or ‘badly gifted’, or ‘ill-favoured’. It is possible that Swift thought both ways, perhaps intending a satire on the outskirts of the capital.

The name of the narrator itself is also a sort of a pun. It is a consensus the name Gulliver is a clear jibe for gullible, which gives some insight into Gulliver’s misinterpretations about language.

However, most probably the finest example of Jonathan Swift’s humour is the sentence spoken by Gulliver when in the presence of the king of Luggnagg:

*“Ickpling gloffthrobb squutserum blhiop
mlashnalt, zwim, tnodbalkguff slhiophad
gurdubh asht. This is the compliment
established by the laws of the land for all
persons admitted to the King’s
presence.” (SWIFT, 2003, p. 219)[14]*

Gulliver himself offers a hypothetical translation of the compliment, as follows:

*“May your Cælestial Majesty outlive the
sun, eleven moons and an half ” [Swift’s
italics] (Swift, 2003, p. 219)[14].*

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Gulliver actually stands for ‘gullible’, and so, his renditions are not always to be trusted. The main raison d’être of this theory is the next quotation:

A messenger was dispatched half a day’s journey before us, to give the King notice of my approach, and to desire that his Majesty would please to appoint a day and hour, when it would be his gracious pleasure that I might have the honour to lick the dust before his footstool. (SWIFT, 2003, p. 218)[14]

Some language distortion was applied here, but words like ickpling can still be spotted as an anagrammatic distorted form of 'I lick'. Clark shares the same theory (1972, p. 26) [2]. Maybe Swift intended this part to work as a sort of satire on the travel guides of his time, which, not rarely would provide their readers with inaccurate or even absurd translations and language information. If that is correct, Gulliver in a very gullible way thought his deferential compliment was something totally different.

3.3 Onomatopoeic Method

Onomatopoeia refers to the use of words which sound like the noise they refer to; 'hiss', 'buzz', and 'rat-a-tat-tat', for instance. While constructing his last language, Swift used this artifice. Since the speakers of the referred language were actually talking horses, the author found it quite evident that their words should imitate the sounds of horses' neighing and whinnying. This theory is shared by other researchers like Paul Odell Clark (1972)[2], Tim Conley (2010), Stephen Cain (2010) and Henry Morley (1906).

Good examples that support this hypothesis include their name Houyhnhnm, possibly pronounced /'hwnəm/, which is visibly an onomatopoeic imitation of horses' whinnying, meaning 'horse', as found in the book; hhuun, hhuun, perhaps /'xu:ən/ that according to Gulliver meant 'faster', in the sense of 'to hurry', in the imperative form (SWIFT, 2003, p. 241)[14], and gnnayh /'gnej/ or /'gnej:/, or a bird of prey (SWIFT, 2003, p. 261)[14], perhaps there is an etymological connexion with 'to gnaw'. All the assumptions on phonetic transcriptions can be made thanks to Gulliver's comment on the language: "In speaking, they pronounced through the nose and throat, and their language approaches nearest to the High Dutch or German [...]" (SWIFT, 2003, p. 248)[14]. Following this thought, other words worth mentioning are nnuhnoh, perhaps /'nu:no:/ or /'nuxno:/, an animal similar to a rabbit (SWIFT, 2003, p. 289)[14], lyhannh /'ly:hɑ:n/, translated by Gulliver as swallow (SWIFT, 2003, p. 286)[14]; and many others. As a result, all of those instances can be rapidly marked as neighing and whinnying.

The Houyhnhnm language was the most comprehensively described. Gulliver's comments on it are also capable of revealing more satire than one could have gotten by simply reading the scope of the text. The narrator's claims about the language include stating its supposed perfection and purity. Nonetheless, the glossopoeia was not able to contrive expressions of daily things as lies (or "the thing that was not", as Gulliver had to say in order to communicate the idea), neither was it capable of expressing evil, illness or the like. This might indicate Swift's satire on those who tried to invent or 'discover' perfect artificial languages or even judge existing languages as purer or richer than others in earlier times, what could have been a reference of French to the detriment of languages like English or those of minorities in Europe. However perfect or pure, that language was not

much more than mere animal talk, besides it did not abound in different words. This could as well suggest yet another satire, this time on Gulliver himself. He was judged insane upon his return to England. Swift seems to indicate that it was true, and so every whinnying and neighing interpreted by the visitor to the horses' country was nothing more than schizophrenia.

More deserving of attention is one of the horses' words that has been a big interpretation problem and a deep mystery from time immemorial: the whinnying Yahoo, the name given to the humanoid race of wild and irrational people that perverted the horses' environment. It has been a subject of discussion, chiefly because of an apparent un-Houyhnhnm-likeness. Many hypotheses as to the origin thereof have been postulated by many authoritative pieces of writing, but the issue still remains in unease. Richard Stoney has offered a peculiar and interesting view on that matter. According to the theorist, the word Yahoo originated from the Sanskrit root yahu, restless, swift or strong, akin to yahva, restless, swift, active or continually moving. Beyond the plain visual similarity, Stoney goes on by comparing the Sanskrit meaning and the description of the Yahoos offered by Gulliver:

"[...] I far exceeded in shape, colour, and cleanliness, all the Yahoos of his nation, although I seemed to fail in strength and agility [...]" (SWIFT, 2003, p. 270)[14].

In chapter nine, the Yahoos are described as being "restive" (SWIFT, 2003, p. 284)[14], which, as Stoney puts it, is another nuance of meaning of the Sanskrit yahu. All these similarities really do the theory make sense, the only obstacle being herewith how to explain that Jonathan Swift had any significant knowledge of Sanskrit. Stoney defends it by stating that European missionaries acquired some familiarity with the Sanskrit language and literature after the 16th century (STONE, 2001)[13]. There are a number of other theories linking Yahoo to a series of different languages, like Mexican old languages, Australian aboriginal languages, etc. Similar words to Yahoo can be found in virtually any languages if one looks carefully, and yet none of that implies any connexion with Swift's coinage. Truth is if all the other words coined by the author into the Houyhnhnm conlang are onomatopoeic imitations of horses' whinnying, what reason is there to believe that Yahoo is an exception? The features found in the other words, like 'y's', 'h's', 'hn's' or 'm's' can partly be found in Yahoo too, besides if thought straight, it is also possible to invert the syllables (hoo-ya) and get the initial part of Houyhnhnm. Even real horses have different nuances of whinnying or neighing. Yahoo, therefore, may be regarded simply as yet another whinnying. According to Cheryl Kimball in her book Everything Horse Book there are three interesting sorts of horse sounds: nicker, a low, friendly rat-a-tat-tat sound used as a greeting; whinny, a high-pitched, long, and loud sound used for long distance greetings; squeal, distasteful short high-pitched noise used when two horses are getting to know each other (2002,

p.55). Fantastical as it may at first sound, it is not unlikely that Swift had paid attention to these different 'neighings' and used this sort of knowledge when he conlanged, and the similarity between Yahoo and yahu, after all, was nothing more than coincidental. However, like every good theory, this one has one fundamental obstacle; if all of the horses' words were actually onomatopoeic, what about 'illa' as in "Hnuy illa nyha maiah Yahoo, Take care of thyself, gentle Yahoo." (SWIFT, 2003, p. 297)[14]. That does not resemble whinnying or neighing at all. For this case, Clark's hypothesis can be quite enlightening:

[...] It is macaronic Latin for the English ill, an un-Houyhnhnm-like word. From the point of view of construction, the other words are very similar: Hnuy, nyha, and maiah may be reduced to a common whinny, Hnuy, hnay, hmaay. They might be considered meaningless horse whinnies [...] (CLARK, 1972, p. 34)[2].

Such an interpretation does not contradict the lack of words that refer to bad things in the language of the horses; it can instead be viewed as a loanword from the Yahoos' groaning. If this is correct, the literal translation of the Sorrel Nag's goodbye would be: "No/nothing ill(ness) near thee, my [gentle] Yahoo!" Of course, it is significant to also reckon that the author's glossopoeias are still just imaginary languages and thus not all of his declarations on the lingoes has to be correct and true.

3.4 Sporadic Methods

Besides all the methods discussed previously to this section, some ways Swift applied to construct languages could not be determined properly, although the meaning of such words can still be retrieved, or there are too few occasions, not enough to be classified as a differentiated method.

Examples thereof are Flanflasnic and Balnibarbi. There are reasons to believe that Swift, most likely without truly knowing this concept, applied a sort of phonetic change called excrescence. For the former word can be decoded as 'fantastic', with the excrescence of initial and middle 'l's' and an exchange of 't' for 'n'. When it comes to Balnibarbi, a similar method was applied. The excrescence of 'ni', 'b', and the exchange of 'r' for 'l' and 'y' for 'i' can straightforwardly be spotted. Thus the latter word can be decoded as 'Barbary', which unveils Swift's view of Ireland and Britain, according to Clark (1972, p. 24) [2].

Unknown means of conlanging were applied for Slamecksan and Tramecksan. The context does not leave any shadow of a doubt as to how Gulliver understood these two words:

"[...] there have been two struggling parties in the empire, under the name of Tramecksan and Slamecksan, from the high and low heels on their shoes [...]" (SWIFT, 2003, p. 55)[14].

It is clear, if the narrators concepts are to be taken into account, that trameck means 'high' and slameck, 'low', and as to san, heel. Meck seems to be a root, tra and sla, sorts of opposite prefixes.

There is, of course, the absurdity of the "universal language of Lagado". There had been until Swift's days a number of projects proposing constructed languages to solve the world's communication problems. Some of them were preposterously complex and more problematic than the world's communication problem itself. It is possible that Swift was aiming one or some of those projects whereas describing the bizarre language of Lagado, which constituted the use of objects rather than words while conversing. Anyone wanting to communicate in a visual language as that would likely have to go about with a sackful of the objects they wished to designate in their talk (ECO, 1997, 176)[4]. It appears that Swift was mocking the aspirations to a universal language of John Wilkins and debates on rhetoric within the Royal Society; and, that way, the solution for the problem would be having no language whatsoever (CONLEY; CAIN, 2006, p. 81)[3].

4. CONCLUSION

Similar to the glossopoeists of his time, Swift's glossopoeias are more of a code than a proper language. He has a strongly firm and fixed conlanging philosophy. Nearly all of the words reflect to some extent his satiristic philosophy. Like the scripts of Dalgarno and Wilkins that sought for expressing the truth in each word by aggregating a series of representative letters and thus, according to the glossopoeists, carry on the very essence of things in their words. In Swift's case, all the words somehow carry the satire on them, even those onomatopoeic forms.

Although, the conlangs in *Gulliver's Travels* do not play a fundamental part, they have shown to be much more important to the overall understanding of the text than most readers and scholars assume. The same way those readers who do not have sufficient knowledge on British history miss a great deal of Swift's satire, those who do not understand his conlangs are missing out much thereof.

Those languages, however, bear zilch plausibility, and indeed that was part of Swift's plans. Although most of the neologisms are in fact anagrams, they were also distorted by the author in order to render them a foreign touch. The apparent suffixes 'rug' (which varies from 'rug' to 'rog'), 'nag' (varying from 'nag' to 'nap' and 'nig'), and 'glum' (also 'grim') are very recurrent, but seem to be quite nonsensical, moreover they appear not only in one language, but in all of them, except for the horses' language, which suggests some type of relationship among them, if one is to consider them ipso facto artificial languages rather than mere codes.

It is clear that these languages were not developed through orthodox linguistic methods, sound change, syntactic change, etc. Notwithstanding, it is not possible to classify Jonathan Swift's constructed languages as mere codes

because codifications and distorted anagrams are only one of the methods he uses to fabricate his words, which appears to have been used to make it possible for future readers to catch the satire that underlies them. Besides, in words like Laputa, he was likely interested in applying a more playful method both to express his indignity and to poke fun at readers who would try to interpret that word and the satire behind it. Not a unique attempt, it should be noted. What is more, some of the languages' vocabularies are virtually undecipherable, blustrug for instance, which indicates the use of a priori words. Surely Swift also dedicated his hidden reproach to the governants of his time, target of the majority of his puns and condemnation. However, not only of words are glossopoeias made up, but also of grammar, proper morphology, syntax, and semantics. Swift's conlangs appear to have all of that or traces of that, not to mention the exclusive measure systems some of the languages have. Luggnaggian is supposedly agglutinative; the ending 'stald' in Glanguenstald can possibly mean harbour, and thus one could learn the proper word order in that lingo. Whereas sprug, contrary to what other researchers believe, does not seem to be any code, but rather a properly invented coin name. There were words whose pronunciation would vary, as for instance Traldragdubh and Trildrogdrib. As for the language of the Houyhnhnms, it has been exposed properly how much of a glossopoeia it is. The onomatopoeic rather than anagrammatic method is a great deal more orthodox in conlanging. The horses' words are not mere gibberish. They all have some meaning. Besides, its grammar was beautifully described along with its vocabulary, not excluding its limitations.

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