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English For Tourism
**Towards a Topical-interactional English Course
for Undergraduates Specializing in the area of
Travel & Tourism**

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Key terms

Language, culture, travel & tourism, English for specific purposes (ESP), needs assessment, course design.

Abstract

The focus of this study is the development of a topical-interactional course for Moroccan undergraduates specialising in the area of travel and tourism. The existing global courses have not been designed for this particular market and are therefore alien to the local needs. A survey was conducted in the region of Agadir to establish the needs of employers and employees in the travel and tourism industry. Employers pointed out that most candidates lacked the communicative/pragmatic skill necessary for the jobs they were applying for. The employers cited the 'general' aspect of the English language programme taken at university as the main cause. The great majority of employees in the sector found that 'the intercultural aspects of communication' constituted a major challenge. The findings underline the importance of developing a course which suits local needs and takes into account the cross-cultural dimension.

Introduction

One of the major effects of globalisation is that universities all around the world are under mounting pressure to open up to their immediate environment, both social and economic. Educating graduates for the workplace has become a major aim for higher education institutions. In this new global climate, the English language has proved to be a major vehicle in the important spheres of business, information, and high technology. Throughout Morocco, where French has hitherto managed to impose itself, the balance is tilting towards English as a medium of instruction (H. Bouzidi, 1998).

Aware of these universal changes (and concerned about the alarming rate of graduate unemployment), the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education has recently introduced reforms requiring that higher education institutions inside the country work towards specialisation. In the Humanities, the departments of languages are realising that key skills (practical communicative skills) now need to be built into undergraduate courses in such a way as to better correspond to the needs of local employers. Within the Department of English at Agadir, the commitment to change and innovation has never been greater.

The Department already provides the components of the interdisciplinary Licence (BA degree equivalent) - Linguistics and Licence-Literature. Its main objective now is to create new specialised English courses. Many departments within and outside the university have shown great interest in such programs. The first step towards the achievement of this goal is the provision of the necessary materials (textbooks, teachers' books, etc.).

My contribution in this area will be in the form of a topical interactional English course intended for students entering their undergraduate career in the area of travel and tourism (T&T henceforth)⁽¹⁾

(1) It should be pointed out here that the holiday industry is by far the most important in the region. According to the Moroccan Ministry of Tourism over two million people are now employed in the travel and tourism-related industries inside the country.

As the number of foreign visitors to Morocco continues to rise each year⁽²⁾, industries connected to T&T are increasingly feeling the need for personnel with foreign language skills. In the T&T industry, there is a wide range of fields in which English language skills are needed _tour operators, travel agencies, business travel specialists; villa rental companies, airports, airlines, ferry operators, tourist boards and local authority departments.

There are already undergraduate courses in T&T offered by the 'Instituts de Hautes Etudes Hôtelières et Touristiques' in a number of cities inside the country. There are none (as yet) offered by public or private Universities⁽³⁾. Moreover, the existing global courses have not been designed for this particular market and are therefore totally unsuitable. Alexander (1998) uses the term 'Usability', a principle which should guide any such course : it should reflect needs in terms of content as well as the teaching/learning methods adopted.

This project will focus on raising the student's oral skills as well as their communicative (pragmatic) skills to better prepare them for the workplace. The course will be devised taking into account aspects of the local culture as well as the cross-cultural dimension of the holiday industry. The project will be in the area of Course Design and will be carried out within the parameters of the communicative paradigm.

The present article focuses on the results of the needs assessment survey I have conducted in the region of Agadir. I shall begin by presenting the samples and the data-gathering techniques and instruments used. I shall analyse feedback from employers and employees in the sector : their 'needs' and wants' will be reflected in the instructional materials to be developed. Then I will gauge how our graduates (the class of 2000) have fared in terms of employment after having completed the existing four-year English language programme.

(2) A target of 10 million visitors is set for 2010

(3) The Higher Education reforms introduced in 2000 and now gradually being implemented are aiming to change just that (H.Bouzidi 2000)

Sampling, instruments and procedures of analysis

Appropriate materials for the course cannot be developed without feedback from the parties concerned. The 'needs', 'wants' and views of employers and employees are given consideration in the form of an FL-needs survey. The following techniques⁽⁴⁾ and instruments have been used :

- (a) Questioning by means of written questionnaires,
- (b) Questioning by means of structured face-to-face interviews, and
- (c) Direct observation in on-site visits

All three techniques examined : actual language use; lack of language skills; the actual and the desired level of competence in English.

The size of the samples differs considerably, depending on the method of data collection. In the case of structured interviews, for example, the sample is much smaller.

The addresses of hotels and travel agencies were collected via membership lists in the Agadir Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The organisations in the sample were divided with respect to a number of sub-sectors of the T&T industry. The same sample of organisations was used to interview employers about their needs in English language proficiency (ELP henceforth) and to collect data about the actual use of English by their employees. The employers needs and wants were collected through interviews with representatives (managers, training managers) of the organisations in the sample.

The first sample consists of 44 managers/training managers of hotels and travel agencies who have been asked to give an overall picture of their needs in terms of English language skills and the use of the language by their employees. The representatives contacted were also encouraged to prioritise those needs. A drawback was that, very often, the managers of these institutions were not always available so that our requests for interviews

(4) Similar methods have already been put to the test in one of our previous filed works (H. Bouzidi, 1992)

were often handed down to their subordinates who are not always familiar with the organisation's actual language needs.

The second sample is made up of 101 employees in the T&T sector. They have been administered a written questionnaire which sought to investigate opinions and experiences of the language users themselves. They were asked to identify the areas in which they have to use English when carrying out their professional duties and whether the improvement of their proficiency in English would have a bearing on their salaries and/or promotion to higher positions.

The third sample is a group of 167 graduates who kept in touch through email. They belong to the class of 2000 (which totalled 223 students) and who have previously agreed to take part in the survey by updating us on their job situation whenever requested. The aim was to examine their 'employability' after having completed the existing four-year English language course.

Ten final-year students assisted in the distribution and collection of the questionnaires. The 10 students are all linguistics students who have carried out similar surveys for their final-year dissertations and are therefore familiar with data-eliciting instruments and techniques. As linguists they were also able to ask/answer follow up questions during the distribution/collection of the written questionnaires. The questionnaires (translated into French) were distributed along with a letter describing the survey and the objectives behind it.

One of the disadvantages of this method is that, usually, the response rate is very low. Low response rates can be a serious threat to the quality of the sample in terms of the representative-ness regarding the population under investigation. In order to guard against the possibility of a low response rate and to get a more detailed picture of the needs for ELP in the T&T industry we made use of structured interviews and direct observation to complement the data collected through written questionnaires. Supplementary data has also been gathered through an analysis of job advertisements in local and nationwide newspapers.

In needs analysis surveys, the complexity of the categories for describing the needs leaves the researcher with a dilemma : a detailed instrument of needs analysis will mean a lengthy and time-consuming analysis and a short questionnaire may mean that the survey is incomplete. However, one advantage of using short questionnaires is that they encourage response : respondents tend to be put off by long and tedious questionnaires.

During the observation sessions in on-site visits i took notes on how often employees used English in the reception area to communicate with tourists. My two main observational foci are : (a) employee's verbal behaviour (nature of English language used) and (b) employee's non-verbal behaviour (facial expressions, body language, seating patterns).

Two procedures will be used to analyse the data collected : statistical descriptive analysis and non-statistical content analysis. Percentages of answer categories are presented and cross tabulation is used to investigate relationships.

Table 1 - Informants contacted and response rate

Sub-sector	A*	B*	Total informants	Total response
Hotels and Motels	27	47	74	66
Travel agencies	13	38	51	47
Airports and airlines	4	16	20	16
Total informants	44	101	145	
Total response				129 (88%)

* A (Employers), B (Employees)

The use of the questionnaires has yielded a satisfactory level of response (88%). Table 1 gives an overview of the number of informants contacted and the response rate in each sub-sector of the T&T industry.

Employers' responses

A striking finding is that the majority (89%) of the employers I have spoken to during the structured interviews did not immediately see the utility of conducting a survey on fl-needs : most respondents considered ELP (and fl-proficiency in general) as of secondary value to business skills. I had to explain to them that the collection of information about FL-needs is necessary for the purpose of updating and revising existing language programs and for setting up new ones. I also had to point out to them that their businesses could benefit immensely from improved FL-proficiency in their employees.

It should be noted that no FL-needs surveys have ever been initiated by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry or by the T&T industry itself. The necessity of FL-needs analysis for improving the match between fl-curricular and professional requirements is only just beginning to be appreciated and many among the organisations our survey covered are increasingly realising how important it is to link their language needs to the FL-curricular within private and public education institutions.

It is worth noting here that the great majority of the management speak French and did not consider learning another language a priority for them, but thought learning another language 'indispensable' for their employees. They did, however, concede that for them as managers and training managers knowledge of English is 'desirable'. Some stated that English was important for them "to keep abreast of new developments in the T&T industry" since, according to them, a great deal of the professional literature is published in the English language.

Several of the managers and training managers of the big hotels even expected that as a result of the opening up of the Moroccan market, the position of English as a 'lingua franca' would be reinforced. They have also acknowledged that, due to an overall lack of competence in foreign languages, they have failed to attract more tourists from English-speaking countries.

Table 2 - Employers' needs and wants

Performance Areas	%	Additional details
Receptionists	36	Receive guests at airport, at hotel
Tour guides	34	Take tourists on tour excursions
Phone operators	25	Take bookings/make phone calls
Handlers of messages	5	Read/write faxes/telexes/e-mails

The employers who would employ linguists with English skills indicated that most of those employees would be offered a job in the reception area. Of the 44 employers who were interviewed 30% would consider employing graduate linguists at secretarial and managerial levels. In some instances, employers prefer business-related first degrees to language degrees and advise that it would be an advantage to have both.

More than 60% of the employers who gave an interview stated that as managers they require only a minimum of skills in English, sufficient to manage everyday correspondence and contacts with tour operators abroad.

The percentages that managers assigned to key priorities are particularly interesting. Most managers interviewed said the highest priority was to get their employees 'speak to guests' in hotels and airport (70%) followed by 'take bookings/answer phone calls' (25%) and read letters/telexes/e-mails' (5%).

One of the objectives of the interview with employers was to find out whether organisations in the T&T industry took interest in enrolling their personnel in English language classes in order to improve and develop their proficiency in the language.

Employers have cited language as a problem in accepting new recruits. Yet, none of the organisations in the sample had in-house language training programs. They preferred to contact language schools/institutes and the

departement of English at Agadir University whenever the need to do so arises. The majority (87%) of managers/training managers stated that they would encourage their employees to enrol in a Business English course if such a course were to be available.

One of the questions in the survey concerned whether employers would be prepared to “reward” employees for seeking to improve their ELP. The great majority of the respondents (87%) said ELP would be a plus in applying for the job in the first place but would not make any difference to an employee’s career advancement.

The fact that 25% of the employers approached to give an interview declined suggests that there are still many who question the utility and cost-effectiveness of the services offered by multi-lingual personnel.

The use by employers of translators and interpreters is quite often an important indicator of the language problems a lot of hotels and travel agencies are facing. Within the big hotels the services of translators and interpreters were mostly brought in for translations from and into German and English, which suggests that these hotels are experiencing problems with these two languages. Ninety five per cent of employers said that all English-language correspondence had to be translated into French.

The services of translators were sought mainly for purposes of translating T&T literature and outside interpreters were mostly needed for the occasional meetings with non-French-speaking foreign businessmen. Employers also used the services of outside linguists in the translation of technical descriptions of newly acquired equipment.

None of the organisations in the sample had in-house translating or interpreting services, but some employers said that they used their own employees for minor translating and interpreting work⁽⁵⁾.

(5) It should also be noted here that some groups do have hotels abroad and can send Moroccan nationals to other countries and then arrange transfers back to Morocco once experience has been gained. Others prefer to employ foreign nationals directly to avoid having to train Moroccan nationals.

Job advertisements

Employers' "needs" and "wants" are also reflected in job advertisements in local and national newspapers. Most advertisements for the jobs in the T&T industry require that applicants have business skills with foreign language skills a 'plus' : "connaissances en langues étrangère seront un plus".

It should be noted here that French is hardly ever mentioned as a requirement explicitly because most employers just assume that applicants will know the language and the advertisements themselves are almost always in French. Some advertisements may focus on a high level of proficiency in French by simply adding "parlant parfaitement le Français" at the bottom of the advertisement.

As was revealed in the interviews with employers, business skills take priority over linguistic skills in the T&T industry. This was also reflected in the sample of adverts we have examined. However, the possession of FL-skills are definitely taken into account by employers and are considered 'a plus'.

Feedback from employees

To be able to identify 'target needs' (needs that employees will have when performing their specific work-tasks) a questionnaire was administered to employees in the T&T industry. A sample of 101 employees was asked about their use of English in their work, the areas they thought needed improving, and what their future needs would be.

Table 3 : Employees' needs and wants

Performance Areas	%	Additional foci
Public speaking	65	Idiomatic English Tone of voice, intonation, loudness
Telephoning	15	Phone etiquette
Language	13	Technical vocabulary Style (formal vs. informal)
Writing skills	07	Message format (faxes/telexes/e-mails)

The written questionnaires were accompanied by a list of language situations in the T&T industry. By means of such a list respondents were asked to indicate how often they used the English language and in which situations.

One of the most important indicators of FL-needs is the frequency and range of use of foreign languages by employees.

In general, face-to-face conversations and telephone calls tended to be the most important situations in which employees used English.

For the reception area staff, the ability to negotiate, to chat to customers, and to create a pleasant atmosphere was essential. In this respect, conversational and rhetorical skills were indispensable.

A vast majority of the respondents thought knowledge of English either necessary or very important for carrying out their jobs. Thirty per cent of the respondents expected a slow increase of needs in English whereas 45% thought that the need of English skills would increase rapidly. None of the respondent had followed in-house language training courses for the simple reason that there are none offered by their employers.

Most respondents said they were best at reading and listening to English followed by writing and speaking. They also stated that their French language skills were much better than their skills in German or English.

The language situations in which they most frequently used English were, in order of importance : receiving foreign guests, making/answering phone calls, and reding/writing messages (fax, telex, e-mail).

In areas where the use of English was part of the daily routine (receptionists, tour guides, ground hosts/hostesses) ELP was above average. However, some categories of employees such as secretaries (whose work did not require any oral skills) required improvement of the general writing skills in English.

Employees' basic language problems are :

- (a) Inability to express oneself coherently or fluently in speech;
- (b) Inability to understand spoken English when delivered at a normal native-like rate;
- (c) Inability to recognise (also pronounce) basic terminology relating to the T&T industry; and
- (d) Tendency to confuse styles (e.g. formal vs/ informal).

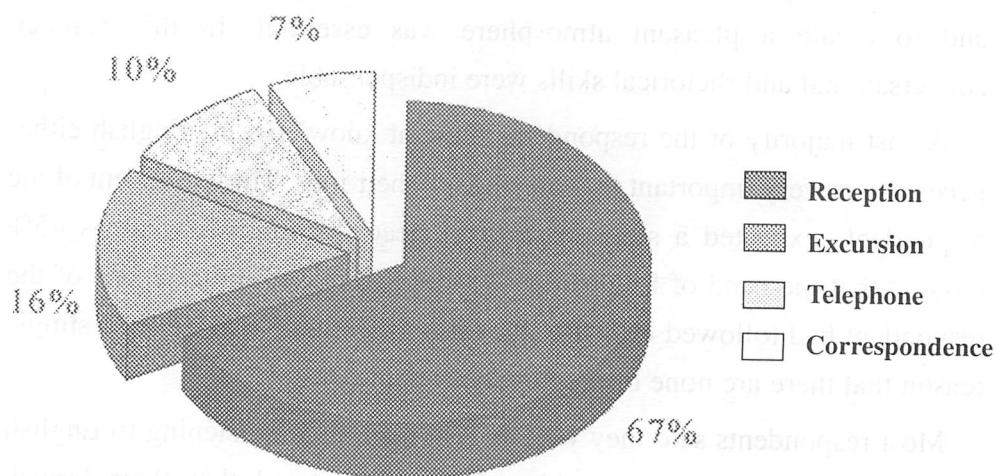


Figure 1 - Overall ELP - needs balance

The pie chart in Figure 1 clearly reveals the overwhelming proportional size (67%) of the ELP-needs for general 'reception' purposes. This includes the general face-to-face interaction with tourists in airports and hotels. Proficiency in English is also important in the area of tour excursions (16%) and to a lesser extent for telephoning (10%).

English skills are least needed for correspondence purposes. (7%). This suggests that the largest part of the course we propose will be devoted to

improving the oral skills needed for reception purposes. On the whole the need for oral skills (reception, excursion, and telephoning) (93%) are by far important compared to writing skills (correspondence) (7%).

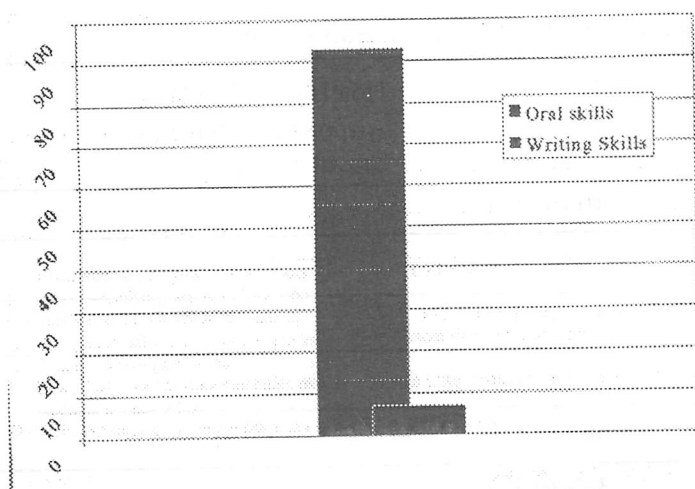


Figure2- Need for Oral vs. writing skills

Graduates' experiences

As a faculty member in the Licence (BA) program, I have taught a number of courses in Linguistics, which undergraduate students take in order to fulfil the requirements for the Bachelor's degree. How our graduates fare in terms of 'employability' has been the subject of much concern. The Department of English (along with other Departments of languages) have been criticised for not keeping up with the needs of the workplace.

This part of our survey is meant to find out more about our graduates' experiences so that we can re-examine our EFL programs to better suit their needs. A sample of graduates have been asked about how much they had benefited from the course offered in the Department of English at Agadir and to what extent they can rely on the skills they have acquired to find employment.

Table 4 - How did the class of 2000 fare in terms of employment ?

Total class : 223			
Total sample : 167 (74.8%)			
Unaccounted for : 56 (25.1%)		Sub-sector	%
(A)	11 (6.5%)	Hotels and Motels	6 (%)
		Airports and Airlines	3 (%)
		Travel agencies	2 (%)
(B)	10 (5.9%)		
(C)	7 (4.1%)		
(D)	27 (16.1%)		
(E)	12 (7.1%)		
(F)	66 (39.5%)		
(G)	34 (20.3%)		

A - Permanent employment in Morocco (mainly the T&T industry)

B - Further academic study in Morocco

C - Further academic study abroad, e.g. MA, M. Phil., Ph.D. (esp. France, Britain, USA)

D - Temporary jobs in Morocco expected to last not more than three months.

E - Teacher Training Centres

F - Other full-time training (includes management training, training for computing, library work, secretarial and other.

G - Still seeking job or course place six months after graduation.

Of the 167 students who graduated from the Department of English language and literature in 2000, only 6.5% were able to find jobs in the T&T industry. 64% of these graduates now employed in the sector thought that, although their ELP played a role in their securing a job, it was not the main skill sought by their employers. This confirms employers' reports that priority is given to business skills followed by FL skills.

Graduate linguists tend to be recruited as receptionists, telephone operators, ground hosts/hostesses and tour excursion guides. They make up 35% of employees in these situations.

Asked about how useful the four-year English course they took at University was, the great majority (90%) reported that while the course offered in the Department of English “stuffs them full of vocabulary and grammar”, they are unable to use it once they join the workplace.

They stated that the ‘general purpose’ nature of the course fails to help students communicate in a wide range of situations, which means that they are not able to function efficiently in any one of them. Others insist on the importance of grammar but then tie it very closely to functions : “As students we had to acquire language in a structured way, but what we learn also needs to be presented in such a way as to appear useful enough for us to want to learn”.

They also said that the aim of the course was to “provide us with a firm foundation of the linguistic rules and just assume that communicative competence will follow”. This attitude is reflected in the nature of the course where grammar has primacy over any other components.

Summary of the results

The overall survey results clearly confirm the growing need for ELP. Based on the results of the survey three main sub-sectors in the travel and tourism industry make use of English most :

1. Hotels and Motels.
2. Airports and Airlines.
3. Travel agencies.

Table 5 - Summary of the results

Performance Areas to cover	% of Course	Additional Details	Skills Needed
Reception	67	Airport Hotel	Chatting to guests Telephoning Taking bookings
Excursions	16	Local National	Giving directions Giving instructions Narrating, describing
Telephoning	10	Reception area Management	Phone language etiquette
Writing/reading messages	67	Faxes, Telexes e-mails	Public speaking Format language styles

Within the Hotels and Motels sector, desk clerks, telephone operators, information staff, administrators- all can provide better service to visitors from abroad and enhance their employer's reputation by knowing a foreign language. In the hotels and travel agencies French was most often used followed by German and English.

Employees who have spent a few years studying English at university use the language most frequently. Personnel in most hotels experienced problems with English, especially with respect to communicative competence. Most problems occurred in professional language situations, in particular with the productive language skills such as speaking and writing.

For many employers preference in hiring goes to applicants whose foreign language skills (with English as a plus) help hotels to attract and better serve the growing influx of travellers from abroad. In hiring personnel nearly all employers in the T&T industry required knowledge of French, followed by German and English.

Tour operators and leaders also make extensive use of foreign languages. Almost all guided excursion tours require personnel with language skills. Many such excursions are now being sold as part of package arrangements for tourists visiting Morocco.

There is a need not only for people to accompany the foreign visitors, but also for bilingual guides on sightseeing excursions in cities and to tourist attractions, museum guides, and hosts and hostesses at resorts. The tour operator, the group's liaison with the travel agency arranging the tour, must handle problems with hotels, restaurants, foreign travel agencies, guides, and even medical emergencies. Hence the need for people with FL-skills.

The international airlines, which schedule hundreds of flights to and from Morocco each month, have an obvious need for persons with foreign language skills. Virtually all the personnel of these airlines who deal with the public make use of foreign languages. Flight attendants (stewards and stewardesses), ground hosts and hostesses, flight announcers, information and reservations clerks, and other personnel at international airports who come into contact with foreign travellers are in some cases required to speak a foreign language.

Most airlines require knowledge of at least one foreign language for their steward/stewardess posts. Some foreign airlines are known to recruit language graduates to their Agadir offices into administrative, clerical, and financial posts. In many other cases, such skills are recommended or preferred. Almost all pilots use English when making an announcement to the cabin crew.

Amongst the airlines, Royal Air Maroc intermittently recruits language graduates to its Administrative Training Scheme which serves departments such as personnel, marketing and operational management (planning flight schedules and providing for the care of passengers). Here fluency in a foreign language is only a marginal asset.

The Moroccan Tourist Authority (MTA), the national and regional tourist boards and some local authorities recruit some graduates either as information receptionists or as tourist guides. For employment with MTA, entrants are required to have at least two European languages (in addition to English) at a good conversational level.

Other tourism-related services such as travel agencies dealing extensively with foreign tourists also make use of personnel with foreign language skills. A restaurant manager or a ship captain would find such skills helpful. Service companies operating at airports, such as car rental agencies and limousine services also prefer personnel with foreign language skills.

Work as a courier is usually seasonal and seldom offers a long-term career. It does, however, require a high level of fluency to organise tourists in and out of airports, coaches and hotels, act as guide, handle paperwork relating to passports, travel documents, accident and injury forms and company reports etc.

The findings indicate that the groups of personnel in the T&T industry who most often use English are : (a) personnel in the hotel reception area, (b) excursion tour guides, and (c) ground hosts/hostesses in airports. The language situations in which a knowledge of English is most needed are 'receiving guests' in hotels and airports; answering telephone calls; reading letters/telexes/e-mails. With regard to the four skills, oral skills were most important followed by listening, reading and writing skills.

In this paper, I have tried to examine employers and employees needs and wants based on information gleaned from the needs analysis questionnaires, interviews and observation. I have also looked at how prepared graduate linguists were for the workplace. In the next step I shall take up the major findings of the survey and look at ways the results can be used for innovating and improving the existing EFL course, in general, and for building English for Tourism, in particular.

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