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A Proverbial Paradox: Language, Isolation, and Change in Robert Frost's *North of Boston*

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Abstract: This article explores the role of proverbs in Robert Frost's *North of Boston* and examines the ways in which it affects personal relationships. It argues that proverbs constitute pre-fabricated ways of knowing that is shared by people within a specific community and, as such, also constitute a kind of membership to that society. Use of proverbs, then, perpetuate and solidify that community and its ways, excluding those who do not subscribe to the wisdom of their proverbs. It examines this dynamic at play in poems such as "Home Burial", "The Black Cottage", "A Servant to Servants", and "Mending Wall" in order to demonstrate – unlike previous scholarship – that the presence of proverbs in *North of Boston* is more than an aesthetic mannerism but rather serves as social commentary of the place and people it dramatises.

Keywords: proverbs, tradition, miscommunication, exclusion, isolation, Robert Frost, modernity, colloqualism

In *Names, Proverbs, Riddles, and Material Text in Robert Frost*, Timothy O'Brien makes the point that despite "the sophisticated body of commentary on Frost's poetry, politics, and life", studies regarding Robert Frost's use of proverbs in his poems "have been largely ignored" (O'Brien 2). Commentary on the topic, as it were, has been confined to brief passages in Robert Faggen's introduction to *The Notebooks of Robert Frost* and, more recently, expanded to include a single chapter in O'Brien's work mentioned above. Interpretation and analysis of this phenomenon, then, has been sparse. In Frost's poetry, however, the case is different altogether. Proverbs seem to abound. Faggen even goes so far as to suggest that it is "[t]he power and lure of his aphorisms [that] has made him both one of the most remembered and yet widely misapprehended of modern poets" (xx). The proverbs, in other words, stand out and ring and reverberate in the readers' ears. By the same token, they offer plenty of food for thought. Yet, they have evaded critical attention nonetheless. Faggen, as mentioned above, briefly touches upon them and suggest that Frost uses them almost as writing tools to inspire turns of phrases and situations. O'Brien, on the other hand, underlines that for Frost, the proverb at once describes and provides the solution to "a human problem" (2). Over the years the scholarly focus, as it were, has shifted from the poet to the poem, from the toolbox to the artwork. In that sense my work follows along the lines of O'Brien's, but the path I am interested in taking, however, ultimately diverges from his. Where O'Brien believes Frost uses proverbs and proverbial language as something to be dismissed and safely return to when needed: as an affair that "unfolds as a repeated pattern of avowal and disavowal" (O'Brien 3); I see Frost's use of proverbs as more social. I argue that

Frost's use of proverbs underlines a paradox, a reality which the people portrayed in *North of Boston* are confronted with. That paradox is the conflict of tradition in the face of progress and these people's place and relation to it.

On the subject of place, *North of Boston*, as its title suggests, points to an area more than any particular place. It gestures to Vermont, New Hampshire, and even Maine, and, as such, it posits itself against Boston. It characterises itself as what Boston is not. As a result, it locates itself as being "simply out there, provincial and exposed" and as Sanders adds, this location – or lack thereof – "suggests the fortitude of its people by hinting at the cold and emptiness that they face" (103). They do not belong or identify so much to a locality, but rather to an experience: The experience of braving that which afflicts what lies beyond Boston, beyond the protection of the definite. Reading the poems, we discover that there is much to that effect. More precisely, the poems seem to be about different flavours of failure, ranging from the already failed to the failing farms, and the families that those failures affect (Sanders 103). This struggle, however, is not only fictional. *North of Boston* was published, as Donald G. Sheehy reminds us, in "a cultural climate deeply conflicted over the vitality and values of such a way of life" (217). That "way of life" is one that can only operate outside the metropolis, one that lies outside the city. At the time, people were conflicted about this way of life because they were beginning to see "a decline" in the quality of that life on "economic, social, and moral" fronts (217). In this sense, though the location is vague, and its people are often nameless, *North of Boston* portrays real people and dramatises a real, human struggle, which fuels the paradox posed by proverbs.

Another layer to Frost's realism, so-to-speak, is his ability to capture the vernacular of these people and transmit it onto the page. It is not shocking to the seasoned reader to remark that *North of Boston* is written in "colloquial diction" and that it often catches the speakers' "hesitations, repetitions, and second thoughts" (MacGowan 169). Reading Frost's poems, we can hear the people as they sound and as they would express themselves. Part of this colloquialism includes proverbs and sayings that belong to them and their community. These proverbs and sayings, for our purposes, constitute the intersection between tradition, progress, and the existential threat one poses for the other. They are the very heart of the matter. Indeed, as O'Brien echoes: "[T]he poems in *North of Boston* often pivot on a saying or proverbial statement, [and] explore the ways in which such prefabricated ways of knowing interfere with and also preserve relationships" (8). Here, I propose to explore how the poems depend and pivot on these proverbs; how they interfere with and preserve relationships; and how, in addition, they reflect the threat progress poses to the way of life depicted in *North of Boston*.

In order to begin an investigation of proverbs in the poetry of Robert Frost it would be useful to define what I mean by proverbs and to examine their cultural dimensions. In its dictionary definition a proverb is a "short, traditional, and pithy saying; a concise sentence, typically metaphorical or alliterative in form, stating a general truth or piece of advice; an adage or maxim" (*OED* n.p.). Nonetheless, as O'Brien highlights, proverbs can be understood in a broader sense when summarised under the term "sayings" (52-3). In its broader and colloquial sense, the proverb "speak[s] from a sense of the shared, traditional, customary wisdom of a community rather than reflect individuality" (52). It speaks for the community because, as Kenneth Burke attests in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, "[p]roverbs are *strategies* [or attitudes] for dealing with *situations*. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure" (297) (emphasis original). In other words, proverbs provide a community's solution or prescribed reaction to a problem. Proverbs, in turn, are thus not only indicative of the community but, in some ways, sustain and perpetuate it by virtue of the shared and traditional wisdom they proffer. They also perpetuate it as a result of their form. Indeed, their "typical phrasing—concise, witty, memorable, and assertive—depersonalizes [sic] the problem" to the extent that they almost unequivocally invoke "a third perspective that implies the community's own unbiased judgment" (O'Brien 54). More to that effect, the "proverbial inclination, then, is generally to preserve the community at the expense of the individual desire" (O'Brien 54). This is one of the modalities that interferes between the characters of *North of Boston*.

We can observe this at play in the poem "Home Burial" in which the reader is given a glimpse into the life of Amy and her partner as they try to come to terms with the passing of their child. The poem hinges on the couple's apparent inability to communicate. The opening sentence of the poem immediately introduces separation and miscommunication as it places—metaphorically and literally—the couple on different levels. The opening sentence of the poem reads: "He saw her from the bottom of the stairs / Before she saw him" (43). To put it plainly, and perhaps facetiously, one could say that the couple is not seeing eye to eye. This can be interpreted as an early clue of their disjointedness, a disjointedness which progressively takes form in the poem. In the lines that follow, the man moves upstairs to see exactly what Amy sees and asks her: "What is it you see / From up there always—

for I want to know" (43). The word "always" implies that this is not the first time Amy has stood there looking out the window. It implies, too, that despite the fact that this has happened before they have never successfully communicated what is the "fear" Amy looks back at. The next few lines lend further support to this interpretation:

> He spoke
> Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
> From up there always—for I want to know."
> She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
> And her face changed from terrified to dull.
> He said to gain time: "What is it you see,"
> Mounting until she cowered under him.
> "I will find out now—you must tell me, dear."
> She, in her place, refused him any help
> With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
> She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
> Blind creature; and a while he didn't see. (43)

Once he is upstairs, she lets him look out the window, sure that he would not see what attracts her attention, and sure that he would not understand why she fears it. Her attitude in this sequence suggests they could not communicate successfully even if they were to try. She does not answer him nor does she offer any help in making him understand. As it turns out in line 24, the window gives onto a "little graveyard" (44) where his people and their child are buried. Despite what Amy believes, he finally understands why she has been looking out the window and says:

> […] We haven't to mind *those*.
> But I understand: it is not the stones,
> But the child's mound—"
> "Don't, don't, don't, don't," she cried. (44) (emphasis original)

As it were, his attempts to speak of the problem are interrupted only for him to retort: "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?" (45). Amy lashes out and answers: "Not you!" (45). The tirade continues and reveals that the crux of their problems is their inability to communicate:

> "There's something I should like to ask you,
> dear."
> "You don't know how to ask it."
>
> "Help me, then."
> Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.
>
> "My words are nearly always an offence.
> I don't know how to speak of anything
> So as to please you. (45)

This passage demonstrates that the reason they cannot communicate lies in the man's method of communicating, his way of expressing himself. Amy adds to make it even clearer: "You can't because you don't know how to speak" (47). The man's inability to speak, for Amy, is exemplified in his attitude after burying their dead child:

> I can repeat the very words you were saying.
> "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
> Will rot the best birch fence a man can build."
> Think of it, talk like that at such a time! (48)

Here, it becomes clear that she takes particular issue with the man's proverbial expression in such a situation.

Despite the fact that the proverb proffers sensible advice there are at least two main reasons why it is, in this case, inappropriate for Amy. On the one hand, "[c]ommunities do not depend on the truth of the vehicle in the proverb's metaphor; rather they depend on its applicability" (O'Brien 56). The situation explored in "Home Burial" is certainly a case where the impersonal nature of the proverb renders its applicability questionable. In fact, it is something Amy reproaches the man:

> Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
> What had how long it takes a birch to rot
> To do with what was in the darkened parlour.
> You *couldn't* care! (48) (emphasis original)

Just like the man did not initially see or understand what Amy was looking at, it is now Amy's turn to be in the dark about what her husband meant or what information the proverb might have been carrying. On the other hand, speaking proverbially generally "signals a lack of individual thinking, even perhaps a kind of ignorance" (O'Brien 55). In this situation Amy is trying to communicate with her partner, the father of their child, and the poem makes it clear that Amy feels the need to share and to communicate her experience with someone, with an individual. Yet, the man is not described as one in the poem. For one, he remains nameless and therefore stands as a figurative or archetypal figure more than an individual in his own right. Secondly, she thinks of him as a "[b]lind creature" (43) and later says that when she saw him digging the grave she could not recognise him:

> I saw you from that very window there,
> Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
> Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
> And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
> I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know
> you. (47)

The act of burying their child, an act so unthinkable to Amy, has rendered her husband a stranger. Coupled with the fact that he expresses his grief and, in a way, justifies burying the child himself using a proverb seems to further deprive him of personality. The use of the proverb, then, prevents communication because Amy disagrees with its applicability and its impersonality.

The broader implications of proverbial language hint at another source of tension. Namely, it questions and problematises Amy's place within the household and the community at large. As we have seen, the chasm between Amy and her partner is a result of their inability to communicate, but this chasm is sustained and in some respects widened by the cultural implications of proverbial speech. Reading "Home Burial" keeping in mind that proverbs prioritise the community over the individual sheds a new light on Amy's situation and the man's apparent cold and unfeeling attitude. Indeed, it alerts us to the fact that the man is part of a community while Amy is on the periphery of it, almost to the point of exclusion. At the beginning of the poem we find Amy at the top of the stairs in a position of "metaphoric superiority" (Faggen 218), but she soon moves to the bottom of the stairs and towards the exit. She spends a considerable amount of the poem on this threshold, threatening, as it were, to go to someone else with whom she can share her grief. Amy cannot communicate with the man and must leave the house which symbolises the community she is not part of. To put things into perspective, the house they live in has belonged to the man's family at least long enough for the house to have a family gravesite. As the man says while looking out the window, it is the graveyard where his people rest: "The little graveyard where *my people* are!" (44) (emphasis mine). He adds: "So small the window frames the whole of it" (44). The word "frame" and the image that it imparts defines the graveyard as an enclosed space—a space that is, according to the passage above, full, virtually leaving no space for Amy. Moreover, only the man is shown to have access to the graveyard, which is the site where a sort of communion with the child takes place. On this matter, Guy Rotella writes that "[t]he intimacies of this involvement, the homely placement of the family graveyard, and the dead child's accommodation within familiar patterns of life, death, and continuity all console him" (100). Indeed, they console him, but not Amy. In the same vein, he asks: "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"; and later: "A man can't speak of his own child that's dead" (45, 47). The emphasis is placed on him. Amy, on the other hand, watches from the window above, separated from her child and from her husband in more ways than one. In this light, it becomes apparent that the

man communicates his grief using proverbial expressions because he is part of the community which is familiar with death and loss, as exemplified by the home cemetery and the fact that he seems to have no problem digging the grave of his own child. For him, grief can be expressed in a "human" (46) way if, and only if, it relates to the community rather than the individual. By using this expression, he can relate the inexpressible to something familiar and a prefabricated solution. Amy is portrayed as falling outside of this community and thus does not have access to this shared traditional wisdom. This is suggested by the fact that Amy finds no solace in proverbial language and is excluded or stands outside of the symbolic places of communion such as the cemetery. In other words, according to the effect of the poem, this is not her wisdom to share or have access to. Therefore, it is through the lens of proverbial language that we can see that the tensions between individual expression and communal wisdom problematise Amy's position in the home and, by extension, the community.

Proverbial language in "The Black Cottage" also carries the sense of the community, but problematises and questions the role of this traditional wisdom in the face of change. The poem is for the most part a minister's monologue addressed to his walking companion as he decides they should visit a decaying cottage they happen to pass. The reader learns of the widow who once lived there, of her life, her family, and of her idiosyncrasies. This woman, as the minister recalls her memory, represents a sort of unexamined fidelity to social and communal conventions. Indeed, as the minister says she spoke in "quaint phrases—so removed / From the world's view to-day" (52). The more is revealed about the old lady, the more she becomes "regarded as an embodiment of outmoded, quaint innocence […] [which] nevertheless persists, [and] endures, almost as if she embodies the timeless force of proverbs themselves" (O'Brien 90). The timelessness of her proverbs, however, are not necessarily a sign of congruity. Instead both the woman and her phrases stand as relics of the past that appear out of touch with the present. The minister relates that he wished to change the words of the Creed to reach a wider audience, but reveals that he was reluctant to do so because of the woman. He tells his companion:

> Do you know but for her there was a time
> When to please younger members of the
> church,
> Or rather say non-members in the church,
> Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
> I would have changed the Creed a very little?
> Not that she ever had to ask me not to;
> It never got so far as that; but the bare
> thought
> Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,
> And of her half asleep was too much for me. (53-4).

Here, keeping with the woman's "quaint phrases" (52) excludes a large number of people. Unlike "Home Burial" where a single individual is excluded from the community, an entire group of people is in "The Black Cottage". It reverses the situation found in "Home Burial" and showcases a different type of tension. If we take the cottage to stand as an embodiment of the old woman, her quaint phrases and her ways, we see that they are removed, inaccessible, and decaying. The characters of the poem only happen to encounter it by "chance" as it sits "well back from the road" behind thickets of leaves at the end of a path that is a "vague parting in the grass" (50). The woman's children, the people whom should be invested in the condition of the cottage and which are emblematic of the new generation, the people who will eventually make up the community, do not visit or try to maintain it. Moreover, the interior of the place has been left as it was when the widow lived there. All these factors emphasise that the old ways and old phrases are not the vehicle of progress. Even the portrait of her husband—the only item that could be said to depict some form of life—is described as helplessly lifeless. Indeed, the minister questions whether the "crayon portrait on the wall / Done sadly from an old daguerreotype", of "such unlifelike lines kept power to stir / Anything in her after all the years" (51).

Interestingly, "The Black Cottage" seems to offer the continuation of "Home Burial". It seems to propose the natural or logical ending of the nameless man. The two are nameless and, in a sense, are unable to speak for themselves, regardless of their condition. It appears to be only a matter of time before the house and the cemetery are overtaken by the unstoppable march of time and progress. Perhaps to be visited by chance by another speaker in the future.

"A Servant to Servants" sheds the illusion that the inadequacy of proverbial language is simply a result of generational conflict and explores the ways in which the pre-formed stock expressions do not measure or even respond to the reality at hand. The cause of the woman's isolation in "A Servant to Servants" does not rest on her falling out of the community which uses and accepts proverbs. In fact, it seems quite the opposite. The poem's opening lines are as follows: "I didn't make you know how glad I was / To have you come and camp here on *our land*" (50) (emphasis mine). Here, the speaker's place in the home is certain. And to some extent, it is her integral place in the household which is the source of the problem:

> It's rest I want—there, I have said it out—
> From cooking meals for hungry hired men
> And washing dishes after them—from doing
> Things over and over that just won't stay done.
> By good rights I ought not to have so much
> Put on me (66)

Clearly the chores and work she must do around the house are a burden. She also admits that the men they house do not censure their speech when she is around as though she were one of them: "No more put out in what they do or say / Than if I wasn't in the room at all" (67). Despite the fact that these tendencies are undesirable they are nonetheless inclusive, so-to-speak. The question is not of social estrangement—it is a slightly more existential one. She has managed to share her situation with Len, her husband, however, his response to the way she feels comes in the form of a proverb. The woman relates:

> Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.
> He says the best way out is always through.
> And I agree to that, or in so far
> As that I can see no way out but through— (66).

In the other poems we have observed so far, proverbial language served as a platform for disagreement whilst here the case is different. In "A Servant to Servants", the receiver agrees with the proverb, but only partially because the solution disregards the situation. The woman finds herself in a scenario that is similar to Sisyphus: her work will not stay "done" and thus never ends. She reassures the implied listener that were he to stay with them in the house rather than live out on the land the added work that this would entail would only make a minimal difference. After all, she says, she would fall behind but: "behind's behind. The worst that you can / do / Is set me back a little more behind. / I sha'n't catch up in this world, anyway" (72). She feels as though she cannot get on top of things or even pull through thus the proverb "one steady pull more ought to do it" rings empty. It disregards the root of the problem and the reality which the woman faces. The inadequacy of proverbial language is something which she notices herself. She underlines the way proverbs try to force a solution upon a problem instead of deriving the solution from the problem. Her understanding is apparent when she talks about the asylum:

> You know the old idea—the only asylum
> Was the poorhouse, and those who could afford,
> Rather than send their folks to such a place,
> Kept them at home; and it does seem more
> human.
> But it's not so: the place is the asylum. (68).

The "old idea" reminiscent of the widow's 'quaint phrases' pretends to proffer a solution. Yet it does precisely the opposite. Instead, it reiterates the quandary. The speaker as we come to learn has been prejudiced to the asylum as well and expresses from her personal experience that the home is the asylum. Contrary to the proverb's communal wisdom, this woman's personal, first-hand experience demonstrates that proverbial language is inadequate in situations where communication and mutual understanding are needed. She adds later in light of her brother's treatment: "I've heard too much of the old-fashioned way" (68). Again, this old-fashioned way she speaks of is a synecdoche of proverbial language. That which is supposed to provide a solution fails to do so. Instead of

communicating, the proverb tries to force issues into a specific mould or form, while the fact of the matter is experience takes on many shapes and the proverb cannot account for that which falls outside of its mould or limits.

Proverbs then, as we have seen, are often inadequate ways of communicating between individuals, but in some cases they prevent conversations from taking place altogether. Proverbs provide solutions to the problem at hand and thus disregard the possibility that there could be anything more to say about the situation once the solution is offered. This dynamic—or lack thereof, I should say—is acted out in "Mending Wall". This is something which George Monteiro echoes in his analysis of the same poem. Monteiro writes: "What finally emerges from Frost's poem is the idea that the stock reply—unexamined wisdom from the past—seals off the possibility of further thought and communication" (127).

Indeed, in "Mending Wall", though we encounter the speaker's desire to communicate with his neighbour and ask him why exactly they need this wall between them; why they must continue to repair this wall which invariably comes down time and time again, only staying in place until their back are turned; that desire is never fulfilled within the stanzas. The speaker admits:

> Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
> If I could put a notion in his head:
> "*Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
> Where there are cows? But here there are no
> cows.
> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offence.
> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That wants it down." (12) (emphasis original)

But he never puts any notion to his neighbour's head, nor asks him why good walls make good neighbours, nor what he is walling in or walling out. Even the fanciful and ultimately meaningless "Elves" (12) he could say to his neighbour remains unspoken. It remains nothing more than a possibility expressed in the speaker's mind in the conditional. In short, he never communicates with his neighbour. Instead, he keeps to himself, on his side of the wall, and continues placing the fallen stones where they once balanced momentarily. The poem ends on the repetition of the proverb and this repetition gives the sense that it is the end of the conversation altogether. To use Monteiro's term, it seals off the possibility of communication, the possibility of apple trees crossing over to the pines, and precludes any conversation, precludes any exchange whatsoever.

The proverb in this case seems to be a way of keeping the tradition of the neighbour's father alive more than anything else. The triviality of the task has already been established and the inadequacy of the proverb is being revealed line by line. Moreover, the poem suggests on more than one occasion that it is not an expression of individuality nor of individual thought or desire. Indeed, the speaker thinks he could say to his neighbour "Elves" are damaging the wall, but he would rather "[h]e said it for himself" (12). He would rather, in other words, have the neighbour think for himself and break from the spell of the proverb's prefabricated wisdom. This does not occur and the extent of the man's thoughts – as imagined by the speaker of the poem – is relegated to not going "behind his father's saying" and repeating "[g]ood fences make good neighbours" (12). Like there is something that does not love a wall and wants it down, there is something of tradition here, too, in the mending of the wall which will not be abandoned. As it were, tradition in the broader sense permeates the overall effect of the poem. Not only does the neighbour abide by his father's old idiom, but he is also compared to a prehistoric, Cro-Magnon figure: "I see him there / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed" (12). Here, the stubborn neighbour is not painted in the same soft light in which the old lady of "The Black Cottage" was, and yet both seem equally distant from the time being dramatised in *North of Boston*. To further cement the notion that tradition as expressed by stock phrases precludes communication, and, as a result, impedes progress, the activity of mending the wall is described as something cyclical like the passing of the seasons. It is, in this configuration of life, inevitable: A thing to be done for the simple reason that it has always been done before. Unlike spring, however, the mending of the wall, the proverb itself, does not bring new life or achieve anything.

Surveying the role of proverbs in *North of Boston* demonstrates that Robert Frost "explore[s] the ways in which these prefabricated ways of knowing" and of speaking affect human relationships (O'Brien 8). Depending

on the situation, they sometimes preserve communities or sometimes exclude others from the very communities they are preserving. It also explores the interaction between these prefabricated ways of knowing and the relationship of its characters to time, space, and belonging. In this exploration, it seems that it captures the "contradictions of individual freedom within the constraints of social and national identity" (Faggen xxiv). Indeed, it captures the paradox of the proverb, the fact that it is at once applicable, useful, consoling, and representative, but also repressive and silencing. However, the underlying, common denominator of these poems is the isolation which these characters experience and the way in which proverbial language contributes to their own isolation or the exclusion of others. I would also like to suggest that the attitude towards proverbs and proverbial language in *North of Boston* is symptomatic of the changes rural New England was undergoing at the time. O'Donnell reminds us in his essay "Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation" that New England was becoming "largely urban and industrialized", that "the strength of village culture [was diminishing] year by year," and holds that *North of Boston* should be read "against this social and economic disturbance" (50). As its title suggests, *North of Boston* is set against a definite, unambiguous and fully urban and industrialized locus—Boston. The area which *North of Boston* purports to portray is general and in the midst of change. Its boundaries and identity are vague. In that way, the fact that proverbs, which are in effect vehicles of traditional and communal wisdom, are portrayed as inadequate ways of communicating reflects that the community is ushering into modernity. Indeed, the break between the way the world is and the way which language expresses it—or in this case, does not—illustrates that there needs a language to express, to share, and to accommodate for new experiences, whether they are positive or negatives ones. This reading is especially compelling when we consider that the majority of the characters who are "victims", shall we say, of proverbial language are women, the mentally ill and/or the elderly. Thus, it suggests that since language mirrors the community, language must also change with the community or for the community.

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