

# Political Language in Thai and English: Findings and Implications for Society<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

There is a relationship between language and politics; politicians who have power in society can use language to manipulate people through the message they deliver. In recent decades, there has been much research in various contexts concerning the relationship between language and politics in both Thai- and English-speaking societies. These studies highlight the characteristics of the language used by politicians in written and spoken texts, the power of those styles of language and the framework with which to analyze language. However, these studies have not been compared and contrasted with those of different cultures or societies. This article is a brief overview of significant previous and present research that focuses on the dominant language used by politicians in relation to power and culture. The article is divided into the following parts: 1) an introduction regarding the relationship between language and politics; 2) a discussion of the framework used regarding language and political research; 3) political language and the social attributes reflected in language; and 4) discussions and implications of how to apply the research to benefit public and academic areas. This article can be of benefit to society in enhancing understanding among politicians, office holders and ordinary citizens, especially in the present era when people from every level of society are paying more attention to politics at both the national and international levels.

**Keywords:** political language, social attributes, language and power

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## บทคัดย่อ

ภาษากับการเมืองมีความสัมพันธ์กัน ด้วยเหตุผลที่ว่านักการเมืองซึ่งเป็นคนที่มีอำนาจในสังคมสามารถใช้ภาษาเพื่อโน้มน้าวผู้คนผ่านข้อความที่ส่งออกไป ในช่วง 10 ปีที่ผ่านมา มีงานวิจัยและบทความวิชาการจำนวนมากที่ศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างภาษากับการเมืองในบริบทต่างๆ ทั้งในสังคมที่พูดภาษาไทยและสังคมที่พูดภาษาอังกฤษงานเหล่านั้นได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงลักษณะพิเศษของภาษาที่ใช้โดยนักการเมืองทั้งในภาษาพูดและภาษาเขียนและแสดงให้เห็นถึงพลังของภาษาการเมืองรวมถึงกรอบที่ใช้วิเคราะห์ภาษา อย่างไรก็ตาม บทความที่เป็นประโยชน์เหล่านั้นมิได้นำผลของการศึกษามาเปรียบเทียบหรือเปรียบเทียบให้เห็นถึงการใช้ภาษาในวัฒนธรรมหรือสังคมที่ต่างกัน บทความชิ้นนี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อจัดกลุ่มงานวิจัยที่สำคัญในอดีตและมุ่งนำเสนอลักษณะภาษาที่โดดเด่นที่ใช้โดยนักการเมืองโดยมุ่งความสำคัญไปที่ภาษากับอำนาจในวัฒนธรรมที่ต่างกัน บทความชิ้นนี้แบ่งการนำเสนอออกเป็นสี่ส่วนหลักๆ ได้แก่ 1) บทนำที่มุ่งเน้นไปที่ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างภาษาและการเมือง 2) กรอบที่ใช้วิเคราะห์ภาษาและการเมืองในงานวิจัยต่างๆ 3) ภาษาการเมืองและลักษณะทางสังคมที่สะท้อนจากการใช้ภาษา และ 4) อภิปรายผลและแนวความคิดการประยุกต์ใช้งานวิจัยเพื่อประโยชน์แก่สาธารณะและวงวิชาการ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จะเป็นประโยชน์ในวงกว้าง เช่น การสร้างความเข้าใจอันดีระหว่างนักการเมือง นักปกครอง และประชาชน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในยุคปัจจุบัน ที่ผู้คนในสังคมหันมาให้ความสนใจการเมืองกันมากขึ้นทั้งในระดับชาติและนานาชาติ

**คำสำคัญ:** ภาษาการเมือง ลักษณะทางสังคม ภาษาและอำนาจ

## Introduction

As can be seen in both classic and new media, politicians use language in speeches, talks, debates, question time in Parliament and interviews designed to communicate with citizens. Because of the close relationship between language, politics and politicians, the study of language and politics is of interest to linguists, sociologists and anthropologists.

Political language is considered a register, with features that are different from other registers. According to Amara Prasithrathsint (2013: 148) as proposed in her book on sociolinguistics and Finch

(2005: 227) in his book on key concepts in language and linguistics, register refers to ‘one language which differs from other varieties.’ Registers have different styles, and political language has styles that are different from other registers. Moreover, as Sombat Chantornvong (1988: 1-2) notes, each language has its own patterns and structure which can be used as a communication tool to explain situations that can create understanding among groups.

As a result, I became interested in comparing Thai and English political language. Prasithrathsint (2013: 96) proposes that different varieties of political language may differ in terms of purpose. In other words, purpose and language are related. Language does not work in isolation without purpose; meaning is always embedded in a context in which social expectations (social attributes) play a role Lemke (1995: 8). From the ideas of Prasithrathsint and Chantornvong, it can be also inferred that political language has its own patterns and styles to show the purpose of politicians and differs according to the culture in which it is found.

The language of politics is the language that politicians use to persuade or manipulate people to believe in and trust them (Chantornvong, 1988: 10). As Prasithrathsint notes, language is not only used as a tool for communication, it also has its own social functions. One of the purposes of political language is to persuade people to believe the speaker, as noted by Simpson and Mayr (2010: 43) and Watcharakaweasilp (2013). Language has various functions in politics and is used to create influence for a source of power Samudavanija and Wongtrangan (1983:2). Therefore, language also has power because power is related to citizens’ decision-making. In other words, it can be argued that political language has the power to control the minds of the people. To support this idea, Pinthong and Prasithrathsint (2004: introduction) propose that authority can be embedded in language. Therefore, language plays an important role in influencing the decision-making process. Wirote Aroonmanakun (2004:12-17) also supports the idea that language is an important device through which politicians can express

their power. It is sometimes used in a short form for publicity in order to make it easier to remember and sometimes used for hedging when answering questions to confuse the listeners. Therefore, it can be said that political language is the register which politicians use to communicate with citizens through political activities to achieve certain objectives.

The ideas proposed by theorists can provide concepts and definitions regarding language and politics and the importance of language in terms of power emanating from language. There are numerous works of research in both Thai- and English-speaking societies to support the ideas outlined above. However, the data are scattered and have not been grouped together to present the framework used in this field nor has there been a comparison between the Thai and English languages and their respective concepts of social power.

Thus, I became interested in highlighting current research by gathering papers and articles on the study of political language, written in both Thailand and foreign countries over the past few decades to present the framework used in this field. Political language and social attributes reflected through language are presented. The benefit of each and the implications for further research are discussed in the conclusion.

### **Analytical Approaches Applied in Political Language Research**

As Samudavanija and Wongtrangan (1983: Introduction) pointed out, most of the research on the relationship between language and politics has been conducted by anthropologists and sociologists, with relatively little by linguists. In recent decades, however, the relationship between language and social attributes that shed light on political behavior has captured the attention of linguists, anthropologists and sociologists. Therefore, broader and more analytical approaches than the previous ones have been conducted. For the benefit of all scholars, analytical approaches and research have been grouped together in this article. Three main approaches have been applied in political language research through the following frameworks: 1) pragmatic framework, 2) systemic

functional grammar (SFG), and 3) critical discourse analysis. The details of these studies are elaborated in the paragraphs that follow.

#### **1. The Pragmatic Framework**

Most of the research used the pragmatic framework to analyze the political language primarily found in speech. According to Drămnescu (2016), the most important pragmatic reflections in terms of political discourse are the ‘speech acts’ of Austin (1962). This is because discourse implies immediate action. Most research concerning pragmatics focuses on the study of direct and indirect speech acts, rhetorical devices, face strategies and conversational implications. An example is found in the research conducted by Al-Ameedi and Khudihier (2015), who analyzed the speech acts and rhetorical devices used by Barack Obama from five electoral political texts. The research found that President Obama used statements, assertions and advice. As can be seen in the use of metaphors and repetition, he used these techniques to deliver his message for persuasive purposes. Moreover, Al-Ameedi and Khudihier also found that he used indirect speech acts as a strategy to show politeness. In addition, the research conducted by Altikriti (2016), who analyzed persuasive speech acts from Obama’s Inaugural Address, found that he used assertive illocutionary acts as a persuasive factor.

The pragmatic theory of conversational implications is also interesting, as well as speech acts and rhetorical devices. The analysis of the speech by President Obama by Adaoma (2016) reveals that the speech conforms to Grice’s Maxims,<sup>2</sup> which consist of rules of quantity, quality, manner and relation. Adaoma found that the use of pragmatic implications (such as “Hope and Change”) by Obama motivated people to change their situation by participating in the election. In addition, Adaoma added that Obama made an effort to deliver straight, brief and well-organized messages in order to avoid ambiguity when he mentioned the Iraq war, which could have had a negative impact on the US economy. The findings of Al-Gaisi (2011) were quite similar to those of Adaoma. Al-Gaisi analyzed the conversational implications of President Obama’s speech regarding the Egyptian President’s stepping

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~haroldfs/dravling/grice.html>

down in 2011 by using Maxims of Grice. The research found that there are some indirect implications in the speech in his reference to security forces dealing with the disarmed civilians when he postulated the idea of the army retaining power. Al-Gaisi also found that the sentences used by Obama were short and that he used repetition in certain utterances to make sure that the ideas he wanted to convey were clear. From this analysis, it can be seen that the purpose and the choice of language spoken by politicians depends on the particular type of discourse. Josiah (2012) studied President Barack Obama's Inaugural Addresses using speech act theory. The research found that Obama spoke for all nations, regardless of his political party. His commissives consist of modal verbs and infinitive clauses to project volition and intention.

Some examples of Thai research using the framework of pragmatics are the works of Theamsomboon (1999) and Vongkrajang (2002). These researchers used conversational analysis together with the pragmatic approach. Theamsomboon studied the linguistic devices in politicians' response to questions by journalists, using ten spontaneous and ten arranged interviews. The findings revealed that Thai politicians use hedging strategies, thereby disregarding the Maxims of Grice (1989) in terms of quality, quantity, relevance and manner, particularly in the spontaneous rather than the arranged interviews. Vongkrajang (2002) also studied the responses of a politician to the questions from a master of ceremonies on a television program. The research found that the Thai politician used three patterns to answer questions: non-response, answer response and non-answer response. Moreover, it was found that Thai politicians use ten strategies to save face, including hedging, answering vaguely and not revealing information. Thus, studying the language spoken by politicians using the pragmatics framework can best describe their strategies and intentions.

## **2. The Principle of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)**

This framework is most commonly used to analyze the context, which includes mode (channels such as writing or speaking), field (the subject matter or the purpose of communication) and tenor (tone of voice used to communicate to an audience). Analysis of context is followed by

analysis of the other aspects of language. An example of the Systemic Functional Grammar framework (SFG) can be found in the political language research of Fairclough (2000) and Hillier (2004: 127). The language mainly used in their analysis includes the use of personal pronouns, repetition and parallels.

Systemic Functional Grammar is used to analyze and explain texts which might lead to the interpretation or criticism of ideology and the way in which power is reflected in language. The aim of this method is to explain the political situation or increase the understanding of social problems in order to encourage people to be aware of and understand social issues.

Research that has used Systemic Functional Grammar as a framework includes that of Kyrala (2010), who analyzed and compared the speeches by Barack Obama and John McCain concerning the economy during their campaigns for the United States Presidency. The research found that both speeches were well-managed in terms of experiential, interpersonal and textual meaning. Their respective ideologies are indicated clearly through their language.

## **3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

The purpose of critical discourse analysis is to study language use and social context to answer questions concerning social problems related to injustice or inequality in society. There are various kinds of methods, most of which are the integrative link between linguistics practice and social practice. The most popular include interactional sociolinguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. One example of a study which uses CDA is that of Edwards and Valenzano (2007). They analyzed the foreign policy speeches of President Bill Clinton when he visited African countries and found that he used rhetorical devices to create political meaning for the United States by implying that America plays the role of world leader in dealing with the environmental side effects of pollution and promoting democracy as part of American foreign policy. These three ideas were used to create the concept of a 'new partnership' of America with African countries.

Another study using CDA is that of Samransook (2002) on the discourse analysis of “Premier Thaksin talks with the people” and “Chuan Online” programs. Samransook used the framework of Fairclough to analyze and compare the context of both prime ministers– Thaksin Shinawatra and ChuanLeekpai– and the forms and meanings of the issues that appeared on the programs. The research found that the speeches used in “Premier Thaksin talks with the people” emphasized policy issues, whereas the “Chuan Online” program’s speeches focused on encouraging morality or ethics or were epideictic in nature. There were five major argumentative points in the speeches: government reform, the transferring of military officers, eleven economic recovery laws, terrorism in the southern region of Thailand, and corruption in the form of fertilizer purchasing.

Jason Reeve (2011) analyzed the political speech of British Prime Minister Tony Blair using the CDA framework together with the functional approach to grammar. This is the framework which Reeve referred to as ‘critical stylistics’. He found that Blair used both ‘I’ and ‘we’ in referring to the government. Reeve pointed out that the social attributes reflected in use of the first personal pronoun had a persuasive effect and steered the British people toward supporting his policies and participation in the Iraq war.

Based on the review of the framework using political language research, it can be seen that there are many frameworks and that they vary for the purpose of analysis. Researchers have attempted to use specific frameworks, to reveal power, ideology and social attributes, such as persuasion, which is reflected in the language of politicians. In the next section, a clearer picture of how politicians use language to deliver their messages in order to manipulate their constituents will be presented. A comparison of how Thai and English political languages and social attributes reflect language as a form of power is presented.

### **Political Language and Social Attributes Reflected in Language**

The study of political language is of interest to all scholars because of the relationship between language and politics. This is due to the fact

that political language can reveal the power of politicians through their language, as previously mentioned. The research review shows that there are numerous papers regarding English-speaking society and some papers in Thai regarding the dominant language of political language. This section presents the social attributes and characteristic of the language used by politicians in English and Thai.

### **Political Language as a Language of Solidarity**

According to the Linguistics Dictionary of the Royal Academy (2011: 422), the meaning of solidarity is unity within a group through intimacy or sharing the same interest. Because solidarity is a way to show equality, it is an important factor in creating more equality in language. Terms of address and the first person pronoun can reveal the structure in which solidarity is reflected.

#### **1. Address Terms**

Research in Thailand reveals that the use of address terms is a major component of political language. Nusartlert (2013) found that the terms of address used by Thai politicians have components of kinship terms+ a phrase expressing respect to address the listeners or audience, such as ‘พ่อแม่พี่น้องที่เคารพ’ (*phoo mae pii nong thii kao rob*) literally, “respected parents and siblings” to refer to people with respect.

This characteristic demonstrates that politicians use language to express intimacy with the listeners by addressing the audience as family members even though they are not. An example follows.

(1) พี่น้องที่เคารพรัก แม้ว่าผมจะได้กล่าวถึงงานจำนวนมากที่เราจำเป็นต้องทำต่อไป แต่เราคงไม่ได้เริ่มต้นจากศูนย์ครับ

*‘Respected parents and siblings, although I have mentioned many kinds of work we need to continue, we are not starting from zero.’*  
(Thai politician’s speech in Nusartlert, 2013)

The use of kinship terms in Thai society began at the beginning of the Rattanakosin era (ca. 1782). According to Tingsabadh and

Prasithratsint (1986), Thais use kinship terms such as aunt, grandmother, uncle, among others to address people who are not their relatives to show intimacy. However, the kinship terms which politicians use are found only in the political register. As can be seen from the example (1), the politician used พ่อ+แม่+พี่+น้อง, meaning “father+ mother+ older brother+ younger brother” (folks). Since all members of the family are addressed, this makes political language different from other registers. The use of such terms of address is found only in Thai political language, and not in any other registers or in English-speaking societies.

## 2. The First Person Pronoun

The first person pronoun is the pronoun that people use to refer to themselves. Studies of the use of the first person pronoun reveal the relationship between people. Research by Brown and Gilman (1960), Wilson (1990: 46), Maitland and Wilson (1987), Mayr (2010: 44), Hakansson, (2012), Kenzhekanova (2015) and Nusartlert (2015) demonstrate that politicians’ use of the first person pronoun depends on the distance between the speakers and the listeners. In other words, it depends on how close their relationship is. An example is shown as follows:

(2) *We have increased our budget at a responsible 4 percent.*  
(President Bush 2001 in Hakansson, 2012)

(3) วันนั้นพวกผมทุกคนที่ทำงานอยู่ในฝ่ายรัฐบาลเสียใจทุกวันเสียใจอย่างที่สุด  
‘That day, we worked in the government department, sad every day, extremely sad’.  
(Nusartlert, 2015)

In examples (2) and (3), the politicians use the Thai and English first person pronoun ‘we’ with the meaning of inclusiveness to the Congress/Parliament in order to share responsibility instead of taking the responsibility alone. Other examples are shown in (5) (6).

(5) *Beyond all differences of race and creed, we are one country, mourning together and facing danger together.* President Bush 2002 in Hakansson, 2012.

(6) แต่ผมยืนยันครับ เราคุยกัน เปิดใจคุยกัน หัวใจท่านตรงกับผม  
‘...But I confirm, we talk, open our hearts to talk, your heart directly to mine.’

(A Thai politician’s speech in Nusartlert, 2015)

From the examples, it can be seen that the politicians used ‘we’ in the meaning of a plural inclusive audience. In other words, politicians use ‘we’ to include the audience to make them feel that they are performing an action together with the politician. This is how politicians use language to persuade the audience by creating intimacy through the use of first personal pronoun. Another example by female politicians is shown in (7).

(7) แล้วก็ความเป็นส่วนตัวต่างๆ เราต้องลดเวลาส่วนตัวของครอบครัวมาทำงานเพื่อส่วนรวม

‘For privacy we have to decrease family time to work for the public...’

(Thai female politician in Nusartlert, 2015)

However, research in Thailand argues that ‘we’ not only in the meaning of ‘plural inclusive audience’ can reflect intimacy, but ‘we’ in the meaning of ‘single exclusive audience’ can also reveal intimacy. Nusartlert (2015) found that Thai female politicians use ‘we’ in the meaning of exclusive listeners. However, ‘we’ was used by female politicians for non-serious topics or informal situations only. Nusartlert (2015) claims that politicians use ‘we’ in the meaning of exclusive listeners to show intimacy with the listeners in order to create solidarity. Therefore, it can be concluded that ‘we’ is used with the meaning of *including Congress*, and *including listeners* in Thai and English. However, ‘we’ with the meaning of excluding listeners is used only by

Thai female politicians. With certain meanings of personal pronouns in each utterance and the main purpose of creating solidarity, as mentioned above, it can be said that the style of political language can depend on gender.

### Political Language as Language of Persuasion

To persuade is to convince participants to agree with what a speaker says; thus, political language is considered the language of persuasion. These social attributes are reflected in the use of rhetorical questions, final particles, and repetition.

#### 1. Rhetorical Questions

The use of rhetorical questions is the dominant characteristic of both Thai and English political language. This is due to the fact that the politicians tend to use indirect language in order to avoid hurting the feelings of the audience. Prasithratsint (2004) proposes that politicians tend to use euphemisms and sometimes formal language to impress citizens. According to Al-Jumaily and al-Azzaawi (2009:14-16), for politicians to raise questions with and without answers is also considered rhetorical. These questions are asked by politicians without expecting an answer. In the case of getting answers, the answers might be provided immediately by the politician or by the listener after the question is raised. Here are some examples from Omozuwa & E.U.C. Ezejideaku (2007) and Chaicharoen (2015):

(8) *They told us they have reformed the economy, which economy?*

*(Daily Sun, Tuesday April 17, 2007:5 in V.E. Omozuwa & E.U.C. Ezejideaku)*

(9) *.... if you ask me have I done this work, I have. If you ask me is it enough, not yet. We have to move forward. (Chaicharoen, 2015)*

Examples (8) and (9) show that the politicians use rhetorical questions with and without answers, respectively. Politicians use such

questions to steer the audience toward following them. Although a rhetorical question not requiring an answer is used, the hidden answer or answers are provided in advance by the politician.

#### 2. Particles

Prasithratsint (2011:140) discusses the meaning of the final particle, which appears at the end of a sentence with no relationship to any part of the sentence. It is used to indicate meaning of modality. Nutthawut Chaicharoen (2015) studied particles used in political language and found that politicians used the final particle more than other type of particles and other registers to express politeness.

#### 3. Repetition

Repetition is common in political language and is used mainly in speeches. Dlugan (2012) proposes that politicians use repetition to persuade the audience to believe them. Van Dijk (1995) adds that politicians use repetition as a function of ideological control. The term repetition is sometimes recognized as 'Rule of three', 'Three-part list' and 'list of three' by Dlugan (2012), Beard (2000) and Decker (2008) respectively. Examples of repetition are as follows:

(15) *I'm very highly educated. I know words. I have the best words. (Donald Trump speech in Nunn, 2016)*

(16) *แต่ที่เขาจะเอาฉันไม่ใช่เงินของผมมันเงินของประเทศมันเงินของประชาชน*

*'...but the things they need is not my money. It's the money of nations. It's the money of the citizens.'*

Politicians restate their purpose in order to help the listeners remember what they would like them to believe. Therefore, the social attributes reflected in the use of repetition by politicians are persuasive. The purpose of using repetition, according to Nusartlert (2014), is not that of explicitness; instead politicians focus on restating words or phrases in order to emphasize information so that listeners will be persuaded. It is the language of persuasion with redundancy.

## Discussion and Implications

From the discussion above, it can be said that the objective and analytical approaches to analyzing political language allow us to see the ways in which Thai and English differ from each other. These works all reveal the characteristics of language and how it works to manipulate citizens. As can be seen, politicians use language to show intimacy and persuade people. Although the Thai and English political languages may differ in some aspects, both reveal the power reflected from the language use of politicians. Moreover, it is obvious that solidarity and persuasion play a major role as dominant social attributes reflected in political language. From the literature review, therefore, it can be affirmed that both Thai and English political languages are languages of persuasion and solidarity.

To implement public and academic areas from the brief overview of political language, social attributes reflected from language and analytical framework above, I would like to provide recommendations on how to apply the research to benefit institutions, along with implications for further research as follows.

1. In the area of politics and government, understanding the meaning of political language can enhance understanding among politicians, governors and citizens, especially in the current era of political chaos as can be seen on classical and new media.

It is suggested that politicians should communicate with citizens in a positive manner to deliver clear information. Citizens' awareness of political language should be acknowledged. The language policy should be implemented in terms of acknowledging the need for learners not only to communicate but also to acquire sociolinguistic competence. Therefore, the problem of misunderstanding by citizens caused by politicians can be solved.

2. In conducting research in politics, more studies should compare the use of language by female politicians with that of their male counterparts. Nusartlert (2015) mentioned the differences between the use of first person pronouns by male and female politicians. A study

of political language (i.e. metaphors, personal pronouns, repetition) and the difference in use between female and male politicians is needed. While the study of repetition by using the CDA framework is increasing, there are few studies that reveal the syntax to describe the structure of use. Therefore, more research on this topic should be conducted to reveal the social attributes reflected in the frequency of each structure's use. In addition, there is a gap between comparisons of the language of Thai- and English-speaking politicians which reveal language and culture. As can be seen, Thai female politicians use the first personal pronoun to show intimacy, which suggests that different societies use different persuasive strategies. Finally, although there are numerous studies describing political language, for the most part they describe political language with no frequency of use. In order to demonstrate the dominant use of language, studies need to compare political language with other registers along with statistics of use.

3. To integrate these research results into the classroom in Thai EFL and English TFL contexts, it is recommended that political language should be integrated into all tasks in order to enhance four communicative competences at the university level. The idea of communicative language teaching (CLT) in which the teaching of language for communication should focus on four competencies was introduced by Swain (1984:112) and Canale (1984: 4). These are grammatical competence (structure), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to interpret social meaning), discourse competence (the use of pronouns or the use of parallel structures), and strategic competence (the ability to use verbal and non-verbal language to solve communication problems).

By this, it is suggested that the example of the language of politics should be integrated into language classrooms to enhance communicative competence as it contains language with distinctive structures, social meanings, distinctive discourses, and clear pictures as examples of verbal and non-verbal language from politicians.

This teaching should be implemented into English courses in public relations, mass media (language in newspaper, radio, and

television), as well as into critical and analytical reading in Thai and English, and language and communication. Through examining politicians' speeches, talks, and interviews in the media, authentic tasks can be created and task-based activities can be assigned by adapting these resources accordingly.

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