

THE ROLE OF SALIENCE IN PROCESSING PRAGMATIC UNITS

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Abstract

The goal of the paper is twofold. Firstly, it explains the relevance of the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1997; 2003; Kecskés 2001) to pragmatics research, arguing that although this hypothesis is a psycholinguistic theory it may contribute significantly to our understanding of pragmatic processing. Secondly, it will be claimed and demonstrated through examples that the salient meaning of lexical units constituting utterances in conversation plays a more important role in comprehension than has been believed by the supporters of linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic theories that consider context to be the main source of actual contextual meaning.

1. The Graded Salience Hypothesis

The Graded Salience Hypothesis (GSH) claims that in the initial phase of language comprehension, contextual and lexical processes do not interact but run parallel, and this stage is dominated by lexical access (Giora 1997; 2003). Salient meanings of lexical units are first accessed automatically and are then revised in the case of a misfit with context. Context becomes effective postlexically. Salient meanings of lexical units are determined by factors such as prior experience with the word or expression, familiarity, and frequency of encounters. As stated in the two goals of the paper given above, I will focus on two important claims of the GSH which are especially relevant to the processing of pragmatic units:

- (a) Salient meanings of lexical units are privileged meanings stored in the mind of individuals at a given time in a given speech community.
- (b) Context operates independently in the first phase of processing. It may be highly predictive, but it does not interact with lexical access and only becomes effective postlexically.

2. Privileged meaning

2.1. What is salience?

Geeraerts (2000) argued that systematic attention to salience phenomena is one of the major innovations of the cognitive approach which includes aspects of use in the description of lexical categories. It is emphasized that some senses are more salient than others because they are more readily chosen when using that category. Prototype theory showed “how the various semantic applications that exist within the boundaries of one particular category need not have the same structural weight within that category” (Geeraerts 2000, 79–80). Salience is where structure and use meet. In spite of this, salience is ignored in traditional lexical semantics which focuses on the description of various meanings of lexical items and structural relations among those meanings. Although the traditional approach gives a structured list of possibilities that language users may choose from in actual communication, the actual choices of the language users and the study of communication processes leading to those choices are completely ignored. In the cognitive approach salience directs attention to these important factors of human verbal interaction.

Salience is essential in the analysis of pragmatic units and pragmatic processing because it is usually seen as the structural reflection of pragmatic phenomena. This combination of semantic and pragmatic perspectives requires a slightly different understanding of the notion of ‘structure’ than is customary. Geeraerts (2000, 80) argued that “whereas linguistic structures would traditionally be seen merely as ordered sets of *possibilities*, adding pragmatic-based salience implies introducing *probabilities* rather than just possibilities.” This means that salience refers to the most probable out of all possible interpretations of a lexical unit. **The most salient meaning of a specific word, expression or utterance is the most conventional, frequent, familiar, or prototypical interpretation.** For instance: The most probable interpretation of the word *gay* is ‘homosexual’ rather than ‘merry’ or ‘lively’.

For pragmatic analysis, salience is important because words and larger lexical units such as idioms and situation-bound utterances usually have multiple meanings, and some of these meanings are more accessible than others because we ascribe greater cognitive priority in our mental lexicon to some meanings over the rest. This sounds reasonable. But why is this so? What determines whether a particular meaning of a lexical unit receives priority in the mental lexicon or not? What is the reason

the most salient meaning of the word *cool* is not ‘moderately cold’, which is given as the primary meaning (1) in the dictionary (Morris 1976, 292), but rather ‘excellent, first-rate’, which is given as meaning (8) marked as “slang”? Why is it that out of 30 native-speaker respondents all considered ‘easy’ as the most salient meaning of the expression *piece of cake* rather than the literal meaning of the lexical unit (Kecskés 2003, 130)? The answer to these questions seems relatively simple: because of prior experience and prior encounters with the word in relatively similar and typical contexts.

The fact that salience is based on prior experience has an especially important bearing on language processing of non-native speakers. Different experience results in different salience, and L2 acquisition differs significantly from L1 acquisition. Consequently, what is salient for individuals belonging to an L1 community will not necessarily be salient for the “newcomers”, the L2 learners. When acquiring another language, learners do two things. Firstly, they rely on prior knowledge which is the knowledge of the first language and the socio-cultural background that the L1 is based on. Secondly, they also give priority to certain meanings they encounter in the second language. However, the meaning which emerges as the most salient one in the case of a lexical unit in the L2 may differ significantly from what native speakers of the target language consider as the most salient meaning of that particular lexical or pragmatic unit. The next conversation illustrates this point:

- (1) (Aysa, a Turkish student is applying for a research assistantship. This is the end of her job interview:)

Professor: “Is there anything else you want to tell us about yourself?”

Aysa: “Uh, . . . no, nothing . . . When can I call for the result?”

Professor: “*There is no need to contact us. We’ll call you.*”

Aysa: “Ok, but, . . . uhm, . . . when?”

Professor: “Very soon.”

In this conversation the Turkish student has no idea that the professor’s words *There is no need to contact us. We’ll call you* actually mean refusal. Misunderstandings can only be comprehended fully by recourse to both parties’ cognition. In this case there is a clear discrepancy between what is salient for the professor and what is salient for the student.

This example shows us two things: firstly, that salience is based on prior knowledge and experience, and so it is a degree of familiarity, and

secondly, that salience is dynamic, and ready to change if use, environment, society, and speakers change.

2.2. What does salient meaning encode?

Giora (2003, 103) claimed that “privileged meanings, meanings foremost on our mind, affect comprehension and production primarily, regardless of context or literality.” What does salient meaning encode? How does it emerge as most privileged? Where does this “privilege” come from?

The most salient meaning(s) encodes (encode) standard context in which the given lexical item repeatedly occurs, on which we build our expectations about what may or may not happen, and on which our ability to understand and predict how the world around us works is based (cf. Violi 2000). The more encounters we have with this encoded meaning, the more familiar the situation(s) in which it occurs repeatedly may become. Factors such as frequency, familiarity, and prototypicality play a decisive role in shaping the “privileged” status of a particular **possible** meaning which may become the most **probable** one of all possible meanings of a lexical unit. The following example may shed some light on this phenomenon: I was supposed to have a meeting with one of my Ph.D. students who is a native speaker of English. She was late. When she entered my office, she said *Hello*, and gave the following explanation:

(2) Sorry. I was held up at a gas station. Not literally though.

This linguistic behavior of the student raises the question: Why did she find it important to add *Not literally though* after the use of the lexical unit *hold up*? Why did she think that I could misunderstand her? Was it because she knew I was a non-native speaker? Not really. I confronted her with these questions. She said that she did not want me to misunderstand her and think that there was actually a hold-up at the gas station. The student actually thought that the literal meaning of the verb *hold up* was ‘rob’ which is clearly the figurative meaning. According to The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Morris 1976, 628), the lexical entry *hold up* has the following readings:

1. to prevent from falling; to support,
2. to present for exhibit; to show,
3. to last; to stand up; to endure,

4. to stop or interrupt; to delay,
5. to rob.

So why was this confusion in the mind of this native speaker of American English? It is likely that what happened was that she equated the most frequent and familiar meaning, i.e., the most salient meaning, with the literal meaning. Is this something that is unique to one speaker only, or is it a generalizable fact? It does seem to be. The traditional linguistic approach claims that in most people's mind it is the literal meaning from which all other meanings derive. The belief about the primacy of the literal meaning is so strongly conventionalized that not everyone notices when there is a shift in the semantic structure of a word, and what was once the most familiar, most frequent, and most conventionalized of all possible senses gives way to another sense which takes over as the most salient sense but not as the literal meaning. The important thing is that from the perspective of the GSH it is absolutely irrelevant whether the most salient sense is the literal meaning or the figurative meaning of the lexical unit. The most salient meaning can be either literal or figurative. What is important in our example is that there was a shift in lexical representation which has not led to a shift in conceptual representation. This fact also confirms the need to differentiate between lexical semantics and conceptual semantics. The literal-figurative dichotomy makes sense for language analysis, but not for language processing, where it cannot be claimed that literal is always processed before figurative.

2.3. Conventionality and culture-specificity of salience

Salience is not something that is exactly the same for each member of a language community, but it certainly is the same for the majority. Some native speakers of English may argue that when they ask someone *How are you doing?* it is not a semantically empty expression for them because they mean what they say. Moreover, one and the same person can use this expression in its literal or figurative sense depending on the situation or individual communicative need. This may be true in the case of certain people and certain situations, but it can hardly be denied that this expression usually functions like a greeting or a conversation-opener, or just as a sign that the speaker noticed the recipient. Why is that so? Because this expression primarily encodes a standard context which is associated with its most frequent and familiar use. Nunberg

et al. (1994, 492) view conventionality as “a relation among a linguistic regularity, a situation of use, and a population that has implicitly agreed to conform to that regularity in that situation out of preference for general uniformity, rather than because there is some obvious and compelling reason to conform to that regularity instead of some other.”

Conventionalization is a culture-specific phenomenon. What functions are conventionalized and how these functions are lexicalized is culture-dependent. This is why something that sounds good in one language may sound odd in another. Hungarian Americans often try to use a Hungarian equivalent of an American English expression:

- (3) A: Kérsz még egy kis bort? ‘Would you like some more wine?’
 B: Nem, köszönöm, jól vagyok. ‘No, thank you, I am fine.’

It sounds awkward to use *jól vagyok* as an equivalent of *I am fine* in this situation.

Kecskés (2000; 2003) argued that lexicalization of a similar conventional event in different languages is motivated and culture-specific. There is a cognitive reason why one expression and not another denotes a situational event in this or that culture, or why one culture finds it important to use an expression in a given situation while the other ignores that. For instance, *please help yourself* is often used by Americans at the table to urge their guests to start to eat or take some more food. The original cognitive mechanism responsible for the situational meaning of the expression could be described as follows: Take as much as you wish. I don’t want to help you because you know how much you need → so help yourself to as much as you need. This culture-specific pragmatic property of expression is no longer maintained consciously. So no inferential reasoning is necessary to find out that the speaker asks you to help yourself not because he does not want to help you but because he thinks that you yourself know exactly how much you want to eat. The linguistic form has acquired a pragmatically motivated sense which became conventionalized.

3. Salience and context

3.1. The psycholinguistic view

The most important contribution of the GSH to our understanding of language comprehension and production is the explanation of the interplay of encoded meaning and contextual information in shaping actual communicative meaning. This has always been one of the major issues of language processing research. The idea of the priority of context and selective compliance with contextual information has dominated theoretical and applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and language teaching research for decades. This interactionist, direct access view (e.g., MacWhinney 1987) assumes that a strong context governs language processing and thus significantly affects lexical processes very early on. There is only a single mechanism that is sensitive to both linguistic and non-linguistic information. Comprehension does not involve a contextually incompatible stage at all. Context activates the contextually appropriate interpretation only. Because the direct access approach presupposes that contextual information interacts with lexical processes upon encounter, the first step—the one that taps the contextually appropriate meaning directly—is the only step (Giora 2003, 63).

An alternative to the direct access view is the modular view (e.g., Fodor 1983) which assumes that there are two distinct mechanisms: one bottom-up, sensitive to linguistic information and another, top-down, sensitive to contextual knowledge (both linguistic and extralinguistic). During processing all meanings of a word are activated upon encounter, regardless of contextual information. At times, the output of the linguistic module would cohere with contextual information; on other occasions, however, it would not and would require further inferential processes. So adjustment to contextual information happens later on and results in selecting the appropriate meaning while suppressing the contextually inappropriate meanings.

The GSH, which is considered a third alternative, claims, like the modular view, that there are two distinct mechanisms running parallel: an exhaustive but salience-sensitive mechanism that is receptive to linguistic information but impervious to context effects, and a predictive, integrative mechanism that is sensitive to linguistic and non-linguistic contextual information and interacts with lexical outputs. However, unlike the modular view (according to which all possible meanings are activated first, then “the lexicon proposes and context disposes” (see Bates

1999), the GSH assumes that the modular, lexical access mechanism is ordered: More salient meanings—encoded meanings foremost on our mind due to conventionality, familiarity, frequency or prototypicality—are accessed faster than and reach sufficient levels of activation before less salient ones. And the context does not always dispose, depending on the role of the so-called irrelevant meanings in shaping the final interpretation (Giora 2003). Gibbs (1994, 89–90) found that intended meaning of conventional utterances (idioms and indirect requests) has been processed without any analysis of the sentence's literal meaning. In Giora's interpretation, these findings demonstrate the effect of meaning salience rather than attest to context effects because the most salient meaning of idioms and conventionalized indirect requests (for instance: *Why don't you sit down?*) is their figurative meaning rather than their literal meaning.

Giora (2003, 11) gives a convincing example to show the interplay of lexical salience and context. In a discourse about computers the computer appliance meaning of the word *mouse* would be expected to be the first to occur to the participants. This demonstrates that a highly predictive context may make meanings available on its own accord very early on. Giora, however, argues that context would not penetrate lexical access. Although it has a predictive role that may speed up derivation of appropriate meaning, the context would not obstruct inappropriate, coded meanings upon encounter with the lexical stimulus. So a novice learning how to use computer software may activate the literal meaning of *mouse* since to him/her that sense is more accessible than the appropriate one.

3.2. The sociolinguistic view

How does salience relate to the internal interpretation of context and the cognitive theory of cultural meaning (Strauss–Quinn 1997; Gee 1999)? According to the latter, words and pragmatic units can create their own contexts because they represent cultural models, standard contexts that have psychological reality for the socio-cultural group which considers them as reflections of reality. This derives from the unique reciprocity between language and reality. Language does two things simultaneously: it reflects reality (the way things are), and constructs reality to be a certain way. Gee (1999, 82) argued that *reciprocity* is a good term to describe this property of language but *reflexivity* is a more commonly used term because language and context are like two mirrors which face

each other and “constantly and endlessly reflect their own images back and forth between each other.”

The GSH gives psycholinguistic support to the sociolinguistic “movement” that started with Gumperz (1982), who said that utterances somehow carry with them their own context or project the context. Referring to Gumperz’s work, Levinson (2003) argued that the message versus context opposition is false because the message can carry with it or forecast the context. Researchers, however, seem to hang on to the opposition because they focus on the foreground or message content, and it is the background that tends to project the context. Analyzing the relationship of situation-bound utterances (cf. Fónagy 1982; Kiefer 1996; Kecskés 2000) and context, Kecskés (2003; 2004) concluded that the actual contextual meaning is the result of an interaction between the activated world knowledge represented by the actual context and prior world experience (standard contexts) encoded in the pragmatic units the speakers have chosen to use. This unique, two-way and dynamic relation of present and past contexts makes discourse as vivid and expressive as it is. It also confirms what Gumperz (1982; 1992) has claimed: Social situations partially determine the choice of code, and yet that code-choice can partially determine situations.

Gumperz speaks about utterances, and the GSH focuses on lexical units: words and expressions. This, however, does not change the fact that there are no meanings that are context-free because each lexical item or pragmatic unit is always implicitly indexed to a standard context of reference. **Lexical and pragmatic units code the history of their prior contextual use.** So it can be argued that there are two types of contexts: one that is encapsulated in the lexical units as the result of prior and partly or fully conventionalized use, and another that is actual context and is activated in the process of verbal interaction (Kecskés 2003; 2004). Salient meaning emerges as the most conventional, familiar, and frequent out of this prior use. Actual context comes in as a regulator when there is discrepancy between the coded standard context and the actual context. In this regulatory process it is the actual context that has the final word.

3.3. Hierarchy of utterance interpretation

As a result of the latest psycholinguistic research, a view which considers utterance interpretation hierarchical has emerged. According to this, utterance interpretation starts with the lexical meaning of the word or

pragmatic unit. If it does not lead to the relevant interpretation, then the immediate context comes into play. If this does not result in a pragmatically appropriate interpretation either, the context should be extended (cf. Giora 1997; Bierwisch 1997; Bibok–Németh T. 2001). The hierarchy of interpretation looks like this:

- (4) Lexical interpretation → Immediate context → Extended context

This approach is in accordance with the two-level semantic (lexical semantics vs. conceptual semantics) theory (cf. Bierwisch 1997; Bibok 2000 and the relevance theory of Sperber–Wilson 1995).

Several researchers have come to support this hierarchy of utterance interpretation although they took different paths. While Giora (1997; 2003) called this interpretation the “Graded Salience Hypothesis”, Bibok and Németh T. (2001) took a different route via the principle of relevance which states that “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance” (Sperber–Wilson 1995, 260). This means that in communication we want to achieve more cognitive effects with less processing effort (cf. Wray 2002). Consequently, processing should start with the most obvious and/or most salient meaning of lexical units making up the utterance. However, this meaning is either relevant to the given context or not. So relevance and salience are not the same, although sometimes what is salient is also relevant.

Supporters of the two-level semantic theory, relevance theory and GSH approach all agree with the hierarchy of interpretation which basically supports a modular view. The difference is in their approach to the question of what meaning(s) of a lexical unit is (are) activated in the first phase of processing and what the role of context is in this phase:

Classic modular view: All meanings are activated and context selects the right one at a post-access stage. Examining the contextual behavior of ambiguous words, Gibbs (1996) came to the conclusion that people momentarily activate all the meanings of an ambiguous word, with context then working to clarify its meaning. Context becomes operative only at a post-access stage, guiding the selection of the contextually relevant meaning of the ambiguous word.

Modified modular view of two-level semanticists: According to the followers of two-level semantic theory (cf. Bierwisch 1997; Bibok–Németh T. 2001) underspecified word meanings are activated in the first phase of interpretation. This approach claims that lexical units get into the context underspecified. It is argued that the specification of word meaning in

context is achieved by conceptual shift. In other words, interpretations mean mapping underspecified semantic meanings onto fully determined conceptual meanings on the basis of our world knowledge.

The relevance theory approach: According to relevance theory, the linguistically encoded meaning acts as no more than a starting point for inferring the speaker's meaning (Sperber–Wilson 1995). Linguistic decoding (bottom-up process) needs the selection of appropriate contextual assumptions (top-down process) that assist the inferential process. Although Sperber and Wilson (1995) do not say this directly, they also refer to some kind of underspecified meaning in the first phase of comprehension because word meaning for them is only “a starting point” of the inferential process and becomes specific only in context.

The **GSH** differs from each of these three approaches in that it maintains that the most salient meaning(s) is (are) activated in the first phase of processing, and the activation process is graded with the most salient meaning coming first. It is important to repeat here the most important claim of the GSH: **In the first phase of processing lexical and contextual processing run parallel but do not interact, and context becomes decisive only in the second phase of processing.** Based on this claim it can hardly be maintained that word meaning is underspecified in the first phase of processing. Lexical meaning and contextual meaning are “equal partners” from the starting point of the comprehension process. They both represent world knowledge, but a different kind. Kecskés (2004) argued that world knowledge is available to interlocutors in two forms: encapsulated in lexical items based on prior encounters and experience (occurrence in prior contexts), and in the actual linguistic and extralinguistic context framed by the given situation. Meaning is the result of the interaction of the two sides of world knowledge. When language is used we both create context and situations (make things meaningful in certain ways and not others) and fit, adjust and adapt our language to these ongoing contexts and situations (e.g., Gumperz 1982; Gee 1999).

3.4. Types of processing in the GSH and their pragmatic relevance

The GSH claims that different linguistic expressions (salient–less salient) may tap different (direct/parallel/sequential) processes. **Direct processing** applies when highly salient meanings are intended. When, for instance, the most salient meaning is intended (e.g., the figurative meaning of conventional idioms, or the special communicative function of

situation-bound utterances), it is accessed directly, without having to process the less salient (literal) meaning first (Gibbs 1980; Giora 1997). We can take the figurative meaning of a conventional idiom as an example:

(5) Jim: "Joe, can you fix my car?"

Joe: "*Piece of cake.*"

If *piece of cake* is processed literally, it does not fit into the context. However, we do not look at the context first, rather we opt for the more accessible information. This situation also suggests that context affects comprehension after highly salient information has been accessed. If it is compatible with the context, no further effort is needed as the principle of relevance requires and the GSH claims. If, however, there is no match, the search for possible alternatives continues.

Parallel processing is induced when more than one meaning is salient. Conventional metaphors whose metaphoric and literal meanings are equally salient are initially processed both literally and metaphorically (Blasko–Connie 1993). According to the GSH, top-down contextual processes can be predictive and affect the availability of meanings very early on. However, these guessing, inferential processes do not interact with lexical processes but run parallel (Giora 2003, 22). Context plays a critical role in the first phase of processing in cases when a lexical unit does not have a dominant salient meaning so it may have more than one very frequent, stereotypical, familiar, and equally conventionalized meaning as in the following situations. The expression *What's wrong with you?* has two almost equally salient meanings:

(6) Sam: "Coming for a drink?"

Andy: "Sorry, I can't. *My doctor* won't let me."

Sam: "*What's wrong with you?*" (Maley 1980, 10)

In this situation the pragmatic unit *What's wrong with you?* is an inquiry about the health condition of Andy. This sense is triggered by the contextual cue *my doctor* which precedes the pragmatic unit. If, however, we change this contextual cue to *my mother-in-law*, the meaning of *What's wrong with you?* will change with it in the following way:

(7) Sam: "Coming for a drink?"

Andy: "Sorry, I can't. *My mother-in-law* won't let me."

Sam: "*What's wrong with you?*"

Here, the pre-text activates the appropriate sense of *What's wrong with you?* As said above, prior context can affect the accessibility of the meaning of a word or an expression. A prior occurrence of a word (*mother-in-law*) which is semantically or pragmatically (as in the example) related to a following word or expression (*What's wrong with you?*) may ease the processing of that word or expression: the selection of the context-appropriate sense out of the more than one possible salient senses. Concretely, the word *mother-in-law* triggers the other salient meaning of the expression which means something like 'Are you insane?'

When a less rather than a more salient meaning is intended (e.g., the metaphorical meaning of novel metaphors, the literal meaning of conventional idioms, a novel interpretation of a highly conventional literal expression, or the literal meaning of a conventional situation-bound utterance) comprehension seems to involve a **sequential process**, in which the more salient meaning is processed initially, before the intended meaning is derived (Blasko-Connine 1993; Gibbs 1996). This can be illustrated with the following conversation:

(8) (John has fallen into a hole and talks to his friend:)

John: "Bob, get me out of this hole, will you? *Give me a hand.*"

Bob: "OK, I am calling the firemen."

John: "Don't... just give me your hand."

The expression *Give me a hand* has its figurative meaning 'help' as the most salient. At the same time it can be used in its literal sense as well. The conversation shows that the misunderstanding happened because Bob processed the figurative rather than the literal meaning first. This can be explained by the fact that in the given situation both interpretations appeared to be relevant.

4. Conclusion

No matter from what perspective we are looking at language processing, the unique interplay of prior and actual knowledge reflected in the lexical units and context needs to get special attention. The GSH helps us reveal the mechanisms responsible for this interaction. The main claim of the hypothesis is that salient meanings are processed automatically (though not necessarily solely), irrespective of contextual information and strength of bias in the first phase of comprehension when lexical

processing and contextual processing run parallel (Giora 2003, 24). This assumes that while context can be predictive of certain meanings, it is deemed ineffective in obstructing initial access of salient information.

It was demonstrated that the GSH can contribute significantly to our understanding of pragmatic processing. In this study priority was given to issues concerning the interpretation of the role of lexical meaning and context in the process of comprehension. The GSH calls our attention to three important facts about context:

It is reasonable to talk about two types of context: prior conventionalized context encoded in the lexical units and actual situational context with its linguistic and extralinguistic elements. It was argued that the particular power of salience derives from the process of interaction between prior contexts (represented in lexical units) and actual contexts that result in what we call “what is communicated”.

Context is a regulator rather than a selector. Since not all possible meanings of a lexical unit are activated during language processing, there is nothing for context to select. However, when the most probable meaning is activated, context needs to rule whether that is the relevant meaning or not.

Although salience goes together with a certain kind of rigidity, it is not negative at all. Rigidity and search for novelty are equally present on our mind. Erman and Warren (2001) argued that about half of our written (52.3%) and spoken (58.6%) language consists of routines—prefabricated expressions whose meanings and forms have been conventionalized and lexicalized. These formulaic units usually have a salient meaning which creates the same or similar context for most speakers of that language community. However, salience and novelty are not enemies, in fact they are intertwined and feed on each other. Novelty often means change in salience rather than invention of something entirely new. On the one hand language relies on bleaching, on the other it looks for protection against it. The constant pursuit of novel experiences can be considered a reaction against the process of bleaching, of becoming salient, which is the result of repetitive exposure. Giora (2003, 35) says that how salience shifts is still a mystery. Not really. We at least know where to seek an explanation.

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