Lunatics and idiots: The effect of semantic shifts on naming and labelling in the British Parliament, 1950–2000

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Abstract: This article studies the sense development, semantic shifts and use of words referring to people with mental illness in public discourse in the latter half of the 20th century. The focus is on the process of labelling or naming, which often reflects a more prevalent, societal attitude either in favor or against particular group memberships. The results show that while the old terms underwent a semantic change around the Second World War, their use continued in the latter half of the 20th century. Terms such as *lunatic* and *idiot* were used as intensifiers, for comedic purposes, and as distancing devices in intergroup relations and were no longer referential to medically diagnosed mental health conditions.

Keywords: people with mental illness, labelling, parliamentary discourse, group membership, social identity, representation

1. Introduction

1) In section sixty-seven, for the words **'lunatic or idiot, fatuous or furious person'** there shall be substituted the words '**person suffering from mental disorder** within the meaning of the Mental Health (Scotland) Act, 1960'. (Lord Craigton, 12 July 1960)[1]

The above extract (1) is from a parliamentary discussion about the Mental Health Act of 1960 which was designed as the first comprehensive revision of Scottish mental health law in over 100 years. The Bill was to establish, among other things, the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, which was to serve as an independent central body 'with the duty of exercising protective functions in respect of mentally disordered persons' (Mental Health Bill, HL Deb 5 July 1960 vol. 224 cc1011–26). The extract shows an example of how the previously used terms *lunatic* and *idiot* were to be changed into a more medically based term *person suffering from [a] mental disorder.*

The history of using terms such as *lunatic* and *idiot* goes far back. As early as the Victorian era, the English were fascinated by social and moral degradation, and digging up 'the dirt' on others (O'Reilly 2014). As with prostitutes, criminals and the sexually deviant, people with mental illness were classified as a 'filthy' part of society and a problem to be dealt with. At the time, the public use of derogatory terms was widely accepted (Houston 2000), visiting mental asylums like Bedlam was considered public entertainment (Arnold 2008), and people could be locked up in asylums on the request of legal guardians without any sort of medical consultation.

Over the decades that followed, both the legal and public perspectives on mental health issues progressed: psychiatric challenges became normalized as medical matters, healthcare standards improved, and the rights of patients and sufferers were codified in law. Along the way, the language of public mental health discourse

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[1] In all examples, direct labelling is marked in bold.

underwent various stages of development, with derogatory and dismissive terms gradually being replaced by medical terminology, and the focus shifting from people with mental illness as an anomaly to be expelled from civil society to being a personal and private challenge that requires and deserves help from society.

In this study we discuss the sense development, semantic shifts and use in public discourses of words referring to people with mental illness during the latter half of the 20th century (from 1940 to the present day). We identify the relevant lexical items using the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* and then investigate their use both quantitatively and qualitatively in parliamentary debates, as represented by the Hansard Corpus (Alexander, forthcoming). The quantitative trends are further contrasted with contemporaneous data drawn from Google Books (British), which allows us to examine the differences of lexical richness and frequency developments within the sense-family of *mental health* in the two registers (see Nevala & Tyrkkö forthcoming). By examining the complete lexical field together, we are able to identify turning points in the public discussion and dig deeper into the linguistic processes involved. One of these processes that we focus on is labelling or naming, which often reflects a more prevalent, societal attitude either in favor of or against particular group memberships. The different definitions and descriptions related to negatively evaluated groups like this are seen as a basis for creating and spreading public stereotypes (cf. Hintikka & Nevala 2017; Nevala 2019).

The study is structured as follows, we start by charting the sociocultural background for labelling people with mental illness in 1950–2000, as well as defining what we mean by the language and the representation of deviance. We then present our data and method. We provide examples of our data before presenting the results, followed by our conclusions.

2. Labelling people with mental illness

Labelling, naming and name-calling all belong to the general field of *socio-onomastics*, that is, the study of how speakers assign names to others (see e.g. Ainiala & Östman eds. 2017). Depending on the circumstances, the relationship between the individuals involved, and the intended and perceived purpose of the act, the act of associating a new lexical sign to someone can be a positive or a negative activity. A distinction can be made between *labelling*, where a person is typically assigned into a category or group of some kind (*British*, *patient*, *queer*), and *naming*, where a person is given a byname that is intended to either replace or supplement their official name (*Big Jimmy*, *Crooked Hillary*). Both labelling and naming are necessary linguistic acts, but they also have the potential of being used in a hurtful or derogatory manner (see, e.g. Tyrkkö & Frisk 2020). In particular, when labelling is used in a way that hides a person's identity and replaces it with membership in a group (such as nouns referring to race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender identity), the person's autonomy and subjecthood are challenged and they are typically stigmatised as the 'other'. The 'verdictive force' of nicknames and labels, as described by Adams (2009:84), thus making them a powerful means of harnessing social control over others (see also Adams 2008; Croom 2013).

Medical conditions and illnesses are considered sensitive subjects in most societies, with psychiatric conditions perhaps being the most stigmatized, as they are often seen as depriving a person of their social standing and independence. Consequently, the way the public label someone as a person with a mental condition is usually considered offensive and derogatory, and various linguistic strategies have been proposed as a way of mitigating such effects. As an example, Price (2019:3) argues that 'the [British] press use identity-first forms (identified as stigmatizing by mental health advocates) to refer to people with mental illness (e.g. 'a schizophrenic') more often than person-first forms (such as 'a person with schizophrenia')'.

In the present study, we focus on labelling with common nouns that refer to individuals with a mental health condition. More specifically, we focus on nouns such as *lunatic* or *idiot*, which were until the

early decades of the 20th century entirely neutral and acceptable (see Section 3). However, these terms have since undergone a semantic *substitution* (also *narrowing*, or *restriction*) that renders them unfit to use in reference to individuals with mental health conditions (Stern 1931). More specifically, this type of change can be described as a case of *taboo-induced replacement* (Hock & Joseph 2009:220–221), where words that become culturally inappropriate are replaced by others, and the primary referents of the original words may undergo a change of some kind.

2.1 A brief look into mental health in British society

Societies have long aimed at restricting the activities and rights of people with mental illness. Establishing clear lines between 'the sane' and 'the insane' has also meant seeking to legitimize the institutionalizing of people with mental illness. From the eighteenth century onwards, 'mentally ill' was used as a label that covered a wide range of real and supposed conditions from low intelligence and personality disorders to psychiatric illnesses. In Britain, around 5,000 people were held in specialized lunatic asylums before the year 1800, and it has been estimated that as many people with mental illness occupied various workhouses, bridewells and jails (Porter 2002:95; Scull, MacKenzie & Hervey 2014). In 19th century England, patient numbers climbed from approximately 10,000 to ten times the amount by the year 1900 (Porter 2002:112).

It was not, however, those who were clinically attested as mentally ill who were institutionalized – virtually all socially marginalized were considered mentally ill to some extent. The bulk of this group, such as paupers, criminals and streetwalkers, were seen as not only dangerous and monstrous but also as insane and idiotic (Porter 2002:92). Furthermore, women with their madness or hysteria, or ethnic or other minorities, were often described as ill and lacking reason (see e.g. Froelich 2016 on early modern women; Potts & Weare 2018 on modern women). Those imprisoned for homosexual acts would sometimes claim mental illness in order to be released, but unless the

person was then released into the care of a private physician, there was a danger of being confined to an asylum instead (Janes 2014).

Nineteenth-century British society often saw people with mental illness as 'filthy', which was reflected in the widely accepted use of derogatory terms in public discourses. Although mental illnesses were increasingly recognized as inherently medical issues, those that had them were also seen as deviant and perverse 'monsters' who constituted a threat, therefore needing to be locked up and kept away from respectable and proper citizens (Nevala 2019; see also Potts & Weare 2018 for the 21st-century use of the term *monster*).

Many mental institutions were known for their cruelty and corruption, and the idea behind the madhouses was to brutally tame those with mental illness through physical restraint, bloodletting, ice cold baths, purges, and vomits (Porter 2002:100). Visiting notorious mental asylums like Bedlam (Bethlem Royal Hospital in London) was considered public entertainment, and the well-to-do flocked in to see the psychotic mad. Gradually, over the course of the nineteenth century, practical psychiatry was transformed into a tool for restoring people with mental illness to health, instead of merely keeping them away from respectable society.

Both World Wars seem to have been a decisive turning point when it came to changes in general attitude to mental illnesses, with the prevailing discourses casting mental conditions more as personal challenge than as anomalies. The change can be observed in the overall lexis of mental health, and perhaps particularly so when it comes to the words that were acceptable to use in reference to individuals with mental conditions (Nevala & Tyrkkö forthcoming).

By the 1950s, developments in psychiatric care had permanently moved away from thinking of mental illness as something characteristic of socially marginal groups. The general attitude also changed in terms of patient autonomy. In the Victorian era, the medical staff treated mental patients essentially as objects, i.e. rarely listening to their requests and barely addressing or treating them as human beings (Scull, MacKenzie & Hervey 2014:30–31; see also Suzuki 1999). Patients in asylums had no say in what treatment was issued, a situa-

tion that persisted into the early 20th century; electric shock treatment was introduced to treat, for example, schizophrenia in the 1920s and 1930s. The development of psychiatric medicine in the early 1950s gave people with mental illness more agency, enabling many patients to maintain a 'normal' life with medication.

In many present-day societies, the segregation of 'the insane' from 'the sane' is no longer seen as a straightforward norm, and modern psychiatry is opting more for integration instead of segregation. Nevertheless, attitudes toward people with mental illness, particularly as portrayed in the media, still show remnants of the past negative discourses in the form of stereotyping (Birch 2011:84). For instance, Balfour (2019) found that people with schizophrenia are often represented in the British press as enacting violent crime. This seems to be a part of a broader tendency of representing people with mental illness in a contradictory way as both insane and morally culpable (Balfour 2020:538; Cross 2014). By representing people with mental illness as criminals, newspapers suggest to their readers that they are morally responsible for their crimes, and therefore blameworthy. However, people officially diagnosed with mental illnesses tend to receive reduced sentences on the grounds of diminished responsibility. In other words, they can be accused of the crime, yet not be held responsible for their actions.

2.2 The representation of deviance: Labels, names and social stereotypes

We have chosen a fairly broad definition of deviance from mental health norms. We include, firstly, such individuals that were seen by 'respectable society' as being disruptive, immoral, or dangerous in the eyes of the law (criminal mental illness), and secondly, those who were less or not so (medical state of mental illness). In general, the line between 'decent' society and the collective outcasts has, of course, been historically fluid. While there are certain common denominators between people with mental illness across the diachrony, there are

also groups within those with mental illness whose marginalization is and has been time or culture specific.

In discourse analysis, moral evaluation is 'linked to specific discourses of moral value' (van Leeuwen 2008:110). Representation of a particular individual or a group can manifest itself by the use of adjectives such as *healthy*, *normal*, or *natural*. This is what van Leeuwen (2008:109) calls 'moral legitimization' – it consists of the processes of evaluation, abstraction, and comparison. People are categorized on the basis of positive and negative values into different sociocultural groups. As Van Dijk (2009:141) states, giving attributes to the self and others concerns the interactional and societal context. This means that defining is not only governed by macro-level norms or shared knowledge, but it is also produced in micro-level interactions and situations. According to Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:3), different ideologies people support or maintain enter into face-to-face interaction and discourse practices where 'subconscious and automatic sociolinguistic processes of interpretation and inference' can lead to different outcomes. No interaction is thus value-free, despite it always being assessed according to an individual's norms and values. As Ochs (1993:289) understands it, social identity is usually something not explicitly encoded in language use, but rather a social meaning inferred in act and stance meanings. Social representation can be seen to evolve and vary in social interaction in response to the acts and stances of other interlocutors, but also according to the speaker's own attitude towards each interactional situation (Ochs 1993:298).

Often the values and norms of a particular group are also manifested in the negative labelling of other groups or their members, often by means of creating and maintaining negative impressions using 'labels of primary potency' (Allport 1986). This means that certain categorical and often simplistically binary characteristics, such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, or normal mental health/ mentally ill, carry more perceptual potency than others, and signal a difference from what is considered mainstream (e.g. moral distinctiveness). The division between what could be called neutral, positive, and negative labelling and naming reflects a more prevalent, societal

attitude either in favor of or against particular group memberships, as in the case of people with a mental illness versus those without one. Thus, for example, 'sane' people can relegate others with mental illnesses to an out-group by creating and using negative terms and attributes. Studies have shown that specific naming strategies exist for social outsiders such as criminals (Mayr & Machin 2012:57). Clark (1992:224) calls this process of extreme negative labelling *fiend naming*. When criminals and criminally insane people are referred to as monsters, they are depicted as being so evil and alien that they have to be placed outside decent society as abnormalities. Negative labelling then becomes a strategy based on the notion that no 'normal' person would be capable of such 'monstrous' behavior. As mental conditions are typically associated with unorthodox non-normative behaviors, references to mental conditions are an equally important means of signalling that a person or entity is strange or 'not normal' and therefore need not be taken into account when decisions are taken, or plans made.

In comparison, 'normal' people are often labelled positively with what could be called *angel naming*, respectively (cf. Nevala 2016 for the representation of crime victims). For example, this effect could be achieved by using the adjective *poor* and an age-specific noun alone, such as 'the poor girl', or by highlighting some positive quality of a person when that quality has no relevance to the situation at hand. In the British parliamentary data (see Nevala & Tyrkkö forthcoming), we have observed a strong diachronic trend towards more humane treatment of people with mental health conditions, with increasing voices calling for treatment in medical, rather than penal, institutions. For example, in late 19th-century parliamentary discussions, there already was a clear distinction between the terms *pauper lunatic criminal* and *pauper lunatic* (see Section 4.2 for further discussion of *lunatic*).

What is considered a mental disorder or illness has in the past been stereotypically labelled with attributes associated with emotionality, unreliability, hysteria, deviousness etc. Potts and Weare (2018:43) discuss critical labelling of women with mental illnesses and note that in

many court cases involving criminals with mental illnesses, certain labels are used that actually index cultural (mis)understandings about mental health disorders. One such label is the colloquial term *mad-woman*, which has been used to cover any medicalized term, such as 'psychopathic disorder' or 'antisocial personality disorder' (see also Froelich 2016 for the use of *madwoman* in Early Modern English). In our data, *mad(man)* is also used, alongside with words that entered vocabulary between 1870 and 1950, such as *crazy, crackpot, looney, deficient, defective, dotty, barmy, natural, nut-house* and *bin* (see Nevala & Tyrkkö, forthcoming). Notably, when a generic noun such as *lunatic* or *madwoman* is used for labelling someone as being mentally ill, the underlying message is that it is not important to be specific, that all people with a mental condition belong to the same group and it is natural to think of them as a collective, rather than as individuals.

3. Materials and methods

The present study analyses public discourse in the British House of Commons, with particular focus on a set of nouns that underwent a semantic shift during the early decades of the 20th century, from neutral labels for people with mental illness to offensive slurs or ostensibly comedic references. We are interested in discovering how rapidly this shift took place, whether both the old and the new meanings co-existed in the discursive space of the parliamentary floor, and what pragmatic meanings are given to the terms.

Although political language is the object of study, we would not define the approach taken as critical discourse analysis, as our aim is not to uncover expressly political or otherwise opaque motivations behind the use of these terms – even if the terms may have been used to describe political opponents. Consequently, instead of focusing on the 'critical', we see the study more from discourse-historical and lexico-semantic perspectives, and argue that the semantic shifts are evidence of a wider sociocultural change that discourse analytical methods can help bring into focus. As the primary data come from

two very large corpora, the study can be described as belonging to the field of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) (see e.g. Partington 2010 and Partington et al. 2013). The comparison of quantitative findings from the multi-billion-word Google Books corpus and the Hansard Corpus allows us to both contextualize the latter in light of the former, and to address the oft-cited shortcomings of purely qualitative discourse analysis, namely anecdotal evidence and cherry-picked data. Similarly, the detailed qualitative analysis of the Hansard data from the latter half of the twentieth century ensures the validation of the interpretations given to the observed trends.

3.1 The parliamentary record and the Hansard Corpus

The records of the British Parliament, conventionally called the Hansard, have been public documents since the early 19th century (see Vice & Farrell 2017 and Alexander forthcoming, for the early history of the Hansard and the linguistic implications thereof). The present study focuses on data from the House of Commons.

An important distinction needs to be made between the earlier Hansard, up to and including the year 1910, and the later Hansard. In its earlier years, the Hansard relied on journalists' notes and other written material, while from 1910 the Hansard has been based on transcriptions by the Parliament's own transcribers. Consequently, it is reasonable to state that the text type of the Hansard changes around 1910, going from a combination of reported speech and narrative description, with substantial proportions of official documents mixed in, to transcriptions of debates, described by the Parliament's own official descriptions as a 'substantially verbatim' record of what was actually said in the House (see Hiltunen et al. 2019). It is well known that the transcribers quietly correct features of spoken language that are deemed irrelevant, such as repetitions, false starts, and so on, as well as utterances that go against the official rules of 'unparliamentary' language, as defined in the Erskine May, the official description of parliamentary conventions named after the author of the first edition, Thomas Erskine May. The reliability of the Hansard as a record

and the linguistic implications thereof have been discussed by several scholars including Slembrouck (1992), Mollin (2007), and Alexander (forthcoming), with the general consensus view being that while some spoken-like features may not be entirely accurately recorded, the Hansard is otherwise a reliable dataset that allows large-scale analyses of the topics and discursive practices of the British Parliament (see e.g. Tyrkkö 2019; 2020).

The Hansard record was compiled into a linguistic corpus by the SAMUELS project at the University of Glasgow. The 1.6-billion-word *Hansard corpus* is currently available via both the English Corpora website (http://www.hansard-corpus.org) and the Hansard at Huddersfield website (https://hansard.hud.ac.uk/site/index.php). The authors used an XML-annotated version of the corpus provided by colleagues in Glasgow (for more details, see Nevala & Tyrkkö forthcoming).[2] Queries were run for the seven key terms (see Section 3.3.) and the standardized frequencies were calculated as normal. It is worth noting that unlike most corpora, which are samples drawn from and representative of a population, the Hansard is a complete record of the parliamentary debates and thus, statistically speaking, the corpus is the population rather than a sample.

3.2 Google Books

Google Books is a massive archive of digitized books compiled and made available by Google. It can be easily accessed via the Google Books service, which allows varying levels of preview access to individual books. It can also be accessed via the Google Ngram viewer, which provides quantitative data on word and phrase frequencies in the various language and/or country-specific iterations of the archive; in the case of English, there are separate datasets for British and American English. The latter data can also be downloaded or accessed using the Google Ngram viewer API (Application Programming Interface), although this is often technically challenging

[2] The authors are grateful to Marc Alexander and Fraser Dallachy at the University of Glasgow for access to the corpus.

due to the amount of data involved. Finally, it can be accessed using the Google Ngram viewer API (Application Programming Interface), which allows local scripts to make calls to a server and to receive the requested data in return. The reliability and representativeness of Google Books has been discussed widely in academia since at least Michel et al. (2011; cf. Laitinen & Säily 2018). It is our understanding that the general consensus is that despite its shortcomings, Google Books is a highly valuable resource when it comes to forming overall 'culturomics' style analysis of lexical prominence over time.

In the present study, we used the 32-billion-word Google Books British (v. 2019) collection and a custom script for making the API calls.[3] Data provided by Google on the overall unigram counts for each year were used to calculate the standardized frequencies of the seven terms of interest (see Section 3.3). Due to the amount of data and the lack of direct access to the concordance lines, we relied on the overall frequencies of the query terms without discerning between word classes or different uses of the terms.

3.3 Repertoire of relevant items and principles of classification

The lexis of mental health is extensive in English, and it goes without saying that it would be impossible to carry out a CADS-style mixed-methods study of the full repertoire of terms available at any given time, let alone over a timespan of two hundred years. For the present study, we focused purely on the terms of interest by drawing on a previous study by Nevala & Tyrkkö (forthcoming), in which we used the *Historical Thesaurus of English* to identify all known synonyms of several fields of mental health terminology and carried out a quantitative canvassing of the full range of terms in the Hansard. That investigation showed that relatively few terms were used with any regularity, and the majority either very rarely, or not at all. In the parliamentary context, this can be explained by the combination of a

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[3] The tool was written in Livecode 9.6.5. For more details, see Tyrkkö & Mäkinen (2022).

somewhat restricted range of topics, the nature of the debates, and to some extent the rules of conduct governing those debates, which proscribe against name-calling.

In the present study, our main research question concerns the use of terms that were once used in reference to people with mental health conditions, but during the 20th century turned into derogatory or colloquial expressions. By examining the complete lexical field, we have identified turning points in public discourse and explore the linguistic processes involved. One of these processes that we are particularly interested in is labelling or naming, which often reflects a more prevalent, societal attitude either in favor of or against particular group memberships. This focus limited the range of possible lexical items, leading us to select seven terms for quantitative analysis, and to further examine four terms in the qualitative study.

The quantitative part of the study compares standardized frequencies of the relevant word forms observed in Google Books Britain and the Hansard, focusing primarily on showing the overall trends. In the qualitative part, we first carry out a collocation analysis of the four terms to gain an understanding of their distributional semantics. We then discuss the terms' usage with manually selected examples identified through close reading of concordance lines.

4. Findings

The findings are presented in two parts. We begin by discussing the overall frequency changes in the use of the seven terms of interest over the 19th and the 20th centuries, to highlight changing lexical practices over time. While focusing on the Hansard, we start by presenting contrastive data from Google Books in order to show the extent to which parliamentary discourse differs from generic language use. Second, we focus on the latter half of the 20th century in parliamentary language and provide a qualitative analysis of the semantic shift that affected the terms in question and the pragmatics of using them in parliamentary debates.

4.1 Trajectories of lexical frequency

We begin the analysis with a look at what happened to the lexical frequencies of the seven terms over the last two-hundred years in both general English written texts, as represented by Google Books British (Figure 1), and in parliamentary language, as represented in the Hansard Corpus (Figure 2). The axes in the two figures are scaled similarly for clarity.

Beginning with the data from Google Books, it appears that the relative usage of the seven terms has remained largely stable for most of the timeline, with a general decline from the 1930s onward. *Lunatic*, *idiot* and *madman* have consistently been the most common terms, followed by *fanatic, maniac*, and *imbecile*. *Moron*, by contrast, has been very rare and only really in use in the 20th century; consequently, due to the relatively much lower frequency of *moron*, the item cannot be seen in the visualization.
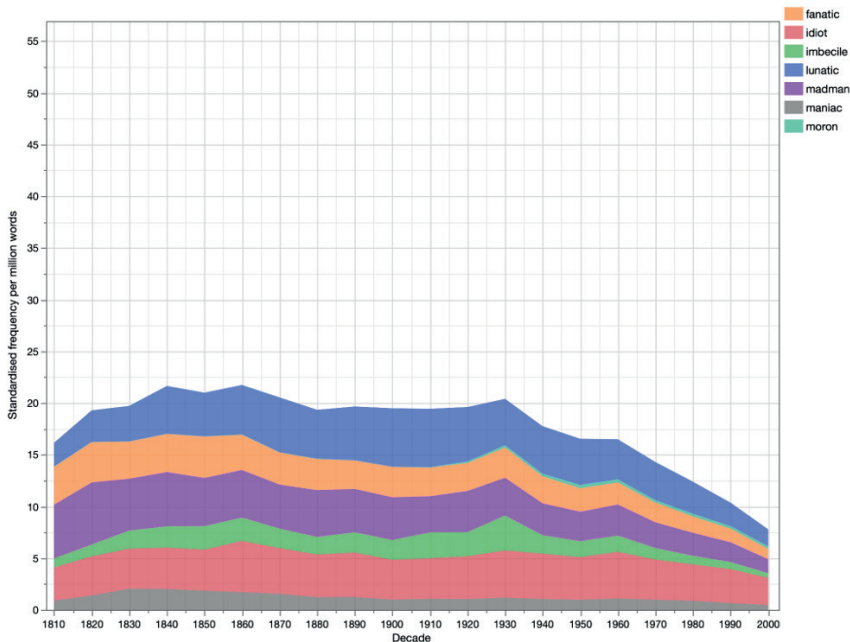

Figure 1: Trajectories of lexical frequency in Google Books British.

By contrast, the use of the seven terms has been much more varied in parliamentary discourse, owing largely to the oscillating nature of legislative topics, as well as the fact that for much of the timeline, the terms under investigation were considered either medical or generic terms for people with mental illness. Consequently, at times when mental health issues and the care of psychiatric patients were discussed, the frequency of references rose sharply, while at other times the frequencies dropped in equal measure. *Lunatic*, which was the generic term for people with mental illness, has been by far the most frequent term from the 1830s onwards, with *fanatic*, *idiot*, and *imbecile* seeing infrequent but steady use. *Madman* and *maniac*, two fairly common terms in generic English, have rarely been used in parliamentary discourse.

The extreme frequency of *lunatic* during the 19th century are explained by the continued debates in Parliament on how the care and containment of persons with mental illnesses ought to be arranged in society. As discussed in Nevala & Tyrkkö (forthcoming), the term *lunatic* was not only frequent in institutional contexts such as *lunatic asylum*, but also used as a generic term that could be used as a collective term in reference to a wide range of different sufferers. Premodifiers such as *criminal* and *pauper* were also frequently used with *lunatic* when referring to specific subgroups of mental patients; *criminal lunatics* were violent offenders who needed to be incarcerated, while *pauper lunatics* were mental patients whose care could not be paid for by themselves or their families.
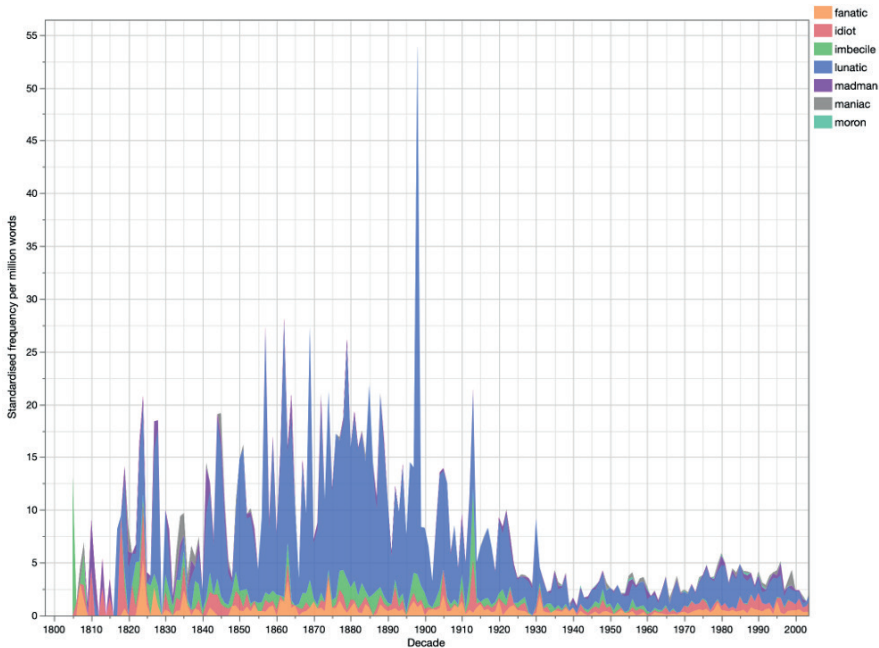
Figure 2: Trajectories of lexical frequency in the Hansard Corpus.

A notable difference between the two datasets is that while there was a clear overall reduction in the use of *lunatic* in particular, but also of the other terms, in parliamentary language since the 1940s, the decline in the use of the same terms was much more gradual in general English. The overall aggregate frequency of the seven terms remained at a plateau of c. 2.5–5 hits per million words throughout the 20th century in parliamentary discourse, while their frequency in the Google Books data decreased from approximately 20 to 7.5 hits per million words in the same period. This suggests that attitudes to the terms changed at different rates in Parliament than in general written English. When we visualize the rates of change by standardizing the frequencies for each term and then comparing the diachronic plots, we can see that the developments look somewhat similar (Figure 3).[4]

[4] Standard scores of z-scores are calculated from the mean and sample standard deviation. Standardization allows us to observe relative trends that are easily obfuscated by the magnitudinal differences.
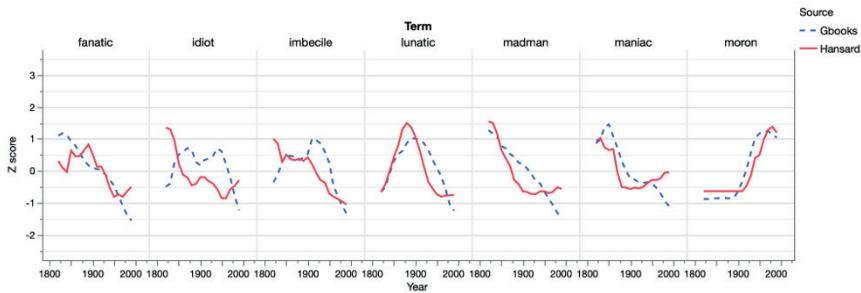
Figure 3: Comparison of diachronic trends over time by z-score.

Correlating the decade means we can see that only *lunatic*, *madman* and *moron* show a statistically significant correlation between the Hansard and Google Books, hence parliamentary language and general written British English followed a somewhat similar developmental pattern regarding these three terms.[5] In contrast, *idiot*, *imbecile*, *fanatic* and *maniac* do not show a significant correlation between the two populations (Table 1).

As discussed in Nevala & Tyrkkö (forthcoming), the 1930s appear to have been a turning point for societal attitudes to mental health. As modern psychiatric care developed and gained ground, a lexical shift took place that rendered the old terms archaic and unacceptable in polite use. Notably, while such shifts may take a considerable time in general language use, they may be observed much more swiftly in context-governed discourses (such as parliamentary debates) where the speakers are experienced in the rhetorical use of language and concerned about the impressions they make on the audience. Perhaps of equal importance, when terms disappear from formal use in official documents, titles of bills, and names of institutions, the need to use them referentially declines almost overnight.

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[5] R^2, or the coefficient of determination, indicates the proportion of the variance in the dependent variable (here, the Hansard) that is explained by the independent variables (here, Google Books). The F test is a statistic that indicates the ratio of explained variation and unexplained variation, and the p-value, calculated from the critical F-value, indicates whether we may reject the null hypothesis that data are not linear.

Table 1. Regression statistics for each term between the Hansard and Google Books Britain.

Term	R2	F-value	p-value
lunatic	0.419	12.98	**
idiot	0.154	3.28	ns
imbecile	0.03	0.56	ns
madman	0.495	17.6	***
fanatic	0.057	1.1	ns
moron	0.676	37.6	***
maniac	0.125	2.58	ns

(*** = p<0.001; ns = non-significant)

However, as Figure 2 also shows, while there was a substantial reduction in the use of these terms in Parliament from the 1930s onward, their use did not end entirely. Given that none of the seven terms have been considered inoffensive in the context of psychiatric discourse for well over half a century, the question is what situations give rise to their use in the parliamentary context? To answer the question, in Section 4.2 we turn to a qualitative analysis of parliamentary language during the period 1950–2000.

4.2 Lunatics to maniacs in the post-war period 1950–2000

In this section, we will concentrate on four specific terms used for people with mental illness in parliamentary discussions and debates in the post-war period, namely, *lunatic, idiot*, *madman* and *maniac*. As stated in the quantitative analysis (Section 4.1), all four terms have been among the most commonly used terms throughout the period being studied in the data from Google Books, but used more variably in the data from the Hansard. For example, *lunatic* and *idiot* have appeared in steady use, whereas *madman* and *maniac* have rarely been used in parliamentary discourse. All four terms have been more prominent in general English from the 1930s onwards, and are studied here in their micro-level context in order to show what kind

of connotations and meanings they have developed throughout their years in use in the latter part of the 20th century.

We begin the qualitative analysis by identifying the most statistically significant collocates of the four words to establish an overall sense of their use in context. The collocates were derived from the BYU English Corpora interface to the Hansard corpus (https://www.english-corpora.org/hansard/). Using a window of three words to the left and right of each keyword, we extracted the fifty collocates with the highest 'mutual information (MI) score' (an association strength measure widely used in corpus linguistics) and then visualized the shared and unique collocates of each term as a network graph using the open source network analysis tool Cytoscape (https://cytoscape.org) (Figure 4). The MI score is used as edge weight in an edge-weighted spring-embedded layout (a force-directed network paradigm that positions the nodes by minimizing the sum of forces in the network, see Kamada & Kawai 1989). Collocates with a negative connotation are marked in red.

While the technical sense of *lunatic* (in relation to parliamentary discussions on laws of lunacy, etc.) started to disappear during the first decades of the 20th century, the term persisted in colloquial use to refer to someone not fully in control of their mental faculties. The collocates show that references to the old meaning persisted to some extent as well, with the collocate list featuring terms such as *prisons*, *Broadmoor*, *asylums*, and *criminal*. However, references to lunatics were increasingly made as expressions of exasperation over someone else's lack of judgement or inability for rational behaviour. The term in itself seems to have been used without much connotation to violence, hence premodifiers such as *criminal* or *violent* that were frequently used with *lunatic* when referring to specific subgroups of people with mental illness.
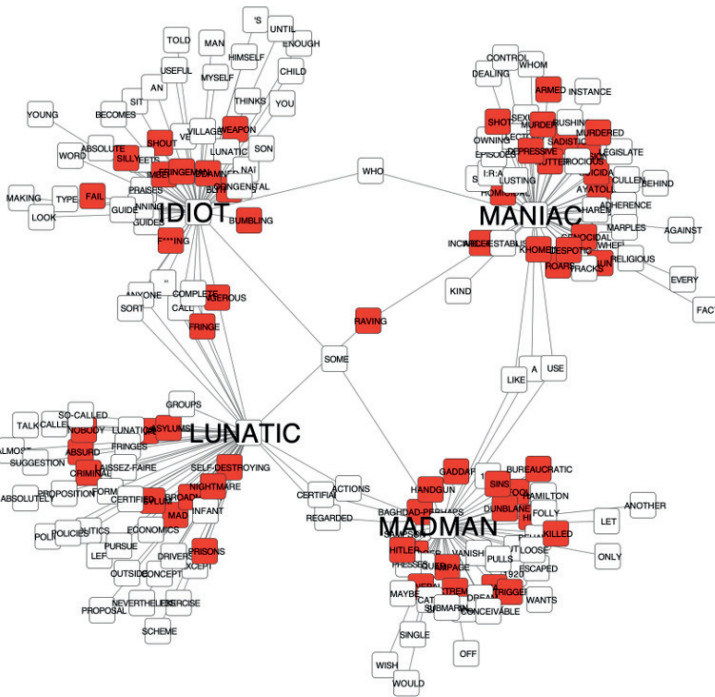
Figure 4: Network graph of shared and unique collocates of *idiot*, *lunatic*, *madman* and *maniac*.

Example (2) is an excerpt from Mr Nicholson's contribution to a 1953 debate on Anglo-American relations, where he uses *lunatic* as a general term for a person who asks irrational questions, someone less dangerous than 'a Russian agent'.

2) May I ask whether the hon. Member who asked the Question is a Russian agent or merely **a lunatic**?
(Mr Nicholson, 25 June 1953)[6]

This semantic shift continued for the remainder of the century. As with the previous example, (3) the word *lunatic* is used not in refer-

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[6] In all examples, direct labelling is marked in bold and contextual evidence is underlined.

ence to psychiatric illness but as a characteristic that can be applied as a label to people, situations and acts alike; the collocate list includes terms such as *policies*, *proposal*, *scheme*, and *politics*. The speaker, Mr Sproat repeats the term, labelling an entire chain of events as lunatic: the Lord President is illogical, which leads to 'a lunatic premise', which in turn leads to 'these lunatic proposals', which ends up in 'everything thereafter [being] lunatic' or '[the kind of] lunacy'. Being a lunatic is once more equalled with being illogical, not rational. Here, the use of lunatic also shows a juxtaposition between 'lunatic people' making foolish decisions and 'rational people' wanting to make wise decisions.

3) I was about to deal with it in one crisp sentence. That is the kind of **lunacy** into which we shall be led by **these lunatic proposals**. If the Lord President <u>never was logical</u>, if he starts from **a lunatic premise**, everything thereafter will be **lunatic**. That is what is happening with the Bill.
(Mr Sproat, 1 February 1977)

Whereas in the previous example the use of *lunatic* was targeted to a specific person or group, the example in (4), taken from the debate on the Firearms Amendment Bill, shows the use of the term as a label for any person who wants to buy a gun and is able to do so. Mental health is not validated in any way, medically or otherwise, therefore the premise for being a lunatic here is insanity and violent behavior. The speaker, Lord Campbell, refers to the Bill being 'flawed' and 'bad', meaning that if the Bill is not good, then a particular group of people – lunatics owning a gun – are placed outside the group of 'good and (mentally) sound people' like him.

4) I make only a short intervention. I find myself in some difficulty because I consider the whole conceptual basis of the Bill to be <u>flawed</u>. I do not agree with it. I take the

view that these guns are freely available and **any lunatic**
can obtain one. The Bill is <u>a bad Bill</u>.
(Lord Campbell of Alloway, 16 January 1997)

In addition to *lunatic*, there were other terms that could have differ-
ent connotations and uses in our data. Such terms include *idiot* and
madman, and of these two, *idiot* seems to have been generally consid-
ered as the more serious condition. The significant collocates of *idiot*
include various terms that reference lack of mental capacity, such as
bumbling, *blithering*, *lunatic* and *imbecile*. Examples (5) and (6) show
instances of *idiot*, first with a more technical or medical meaning and
secondly in a general use. In (5), the speaker talks about 'a helpless
imbecile', emphasizing the fact that the first girl cannot take responsi-
bility for her actions, partly because she is only five years old, partly
because of her lack of mental faculties. The second girl is even more
mentally deficient and not (criminally) responsible in the eyes of the
law, being underaged and 'a microcephalic idiot'. In (6), being an
idiot denotes being a person who foolishly calls people with learning
difficulties using descriptors like 'thick'. The excerpt clearly shows
the general attitude of the 1990s, where learning disabilities were
associated with mental deficiency, but at the same time the speaker
uses name-calling and labelling when he draws the line between a
preferable and acceptable behavior and something that should not be
approved of.

5) Let me drag out into the full light of day five cases on the
waiting list in Essex, one in my own constituency. The
first is a girl of five, **a helpless imbecile**, <u>destructive and
mischievous</u>. Her mother has been in <u>a mental hospital</u>
and threatens to murder the child. The second is a girl
of 13, **a microcephalic idiot**, living in a family of 10 in
the care of grandparents who are in poor health. She has
been known <u>to knock her grandmother down</u>.
(Mr Braine, 5 November 1952)

6) When Tim Bakewell was six years old he was diagnosed by **some idiot** as <u>thick</u>. I believe that term is quite often applied to people who turn out to be dyslexic. He was considered to be bone idle because he did not appear to be able to read. People believed that that must be his fault in some way. Now, at the age of 11, he receives treatment in a special unit within an ordinary school.
(Lord Renwick, 4 April 1990)

Interestingly, as we saw in example (5), the use of *idiot* often connotes violent behavior. The speaker refers to one 'idiot' girl who is 'destructive', the other one 'knocking her grandmother down'. Both descriptions are mentioned as if they were only appositions, not attributes denoting real danger.

However, in examples (7), (8) and (9), real violence is very much in focus. The term *madman*, or *mad person*, appears to denote danger and destruction in many cases in the second half of the 20th century, in relation to crimes involving shootings, stabbings or wars. The list of collocates includes terms such as *extremist*, *handgun*, *rampage*, *hell*, and *bureaucratic*, as well as several proper nouns such as *Hitler*, *Stalin*, *Baghdad* and *Gaddafi*. In (7), *madman* is equated with paranoid and violent behavior, which under war conditions may result in destroying the world 'with one blow'. The example is from 1955, but it could easily be from the present, as the similar reference to *a madman* being in control of nuclear weaponry is still used today.

7) It made it inevitable in war that a head of a State who found himself hemmed in by the forces used against him should be <u>a paranoic, a war criminal</u>, **a madman**. I ask the question, how is it possible in a modern war – prepared as we must be today, with the things we are called on to do now <u>to destroy with one blow </u>literally millions, maybe tens of millions – for a man to sit in control of such a situation and not be **a madman**? Indeed, even to contemplate the possibility of doing it as we are now makes one ask which of us is not mad at this moment

to be seriously considering settling the problems of the world by <u>destroying the world</u>?
(Mr Hudson, 10 March 1955)

In (8), the juxtaposition between 'legitimate, decent and honest people' and 'one awful, awful madman' is used in the discussion about gun control in Northern Ireland in 1996. The parliamentary debate in question took place after a school shooting in the Dunblane Primary School, where 16 children and their teacher were shot dead. The 'madman' in question, Thomas Hamilton, is described as 'awful and deranged', but even more so by way of the descriptions given to members of the 'decent' society, for example, people who are 'legitimate', 'decent', 'honest', 'innocent' and 'honourable' – everything the perpetrator supposedly is not.

8) Regrettably, the Home Secretary's statement means that the sins of <u>this awful, deranged individual</u> will be paid for by the many thousands of <u>legitimate, decent and honest people</u> who enjoy not a so-called sport, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Putney (Mr Mellor) put it, but a <u>leisure activity</u> that has great historic traditions and which they enjoy. The measures that he announced will be received with great dismay. He has got it completely the wrong way round. He is affecting many, <u>many innocent people</u> because of <u>the awful, awful acts</u> of **one awful, awful madman**. I think that he is wrong, and that his legislation will not be accepted by the majority of <u>decent, honourable people </u>in this country.
(Mr Carlisle, 16 October 1996)

Also in (9), the discussion about gun permits refers to the Dunblane massacre. Here, the term used is *maniac*, but just as in (8), the turn describes two opposite sides, i.e. someone who 'takes some mad action that causes great harm and injury' and members of the public who are the victims of that action. Also in the data as a whole, the collocates of *maniac* include terms such as *sadist*, *shot*, *homicide, gen-*

ocide, and *gun*. The term *maniac* denotes mental instability and violent behaviour, the public abiding to rules and regulations and being decent in the eyes of the law.

> 9) The point about **the maniac** is that it is not obvious that someone is **a maniac** until he takes some mad action that causes great harm and injury to other members of the public. It is a matter of having regulations and rules that protect the public in between the point where **a maniac or a mentally unstable person** thinks of taking some action and actually takes that action.
> (Mr Henderson, 18 February 1997)

Sex and sexuality are also associated with the term *maniac*, but notably not with the other terms under investigation. The list of significant collocates of maniac includes terms such as *sex*, *sexual* and *lusting*, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. Example (10) comes from the debate on the 1966 Sexual Offences Bill, which proposed to decriminalize homosexual acts between consenting adults. Leo Abse, the speaker, was a Welsh Labour MP with a noted interest in psychoanalysis and one of the main promoters of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults in England and Wales.

> 10) But when we are talking of all these men whose relationships, in private, are with adults who give their consent, we know that to talk of sending these men to prison is, as has been said again and again, as therapeutically useless as incarcerating **a sex maniac** in a harem: This is the position, and we all know it: There is no rehabilitative element at all in the punishment that is meted out.
> (Mr Abse, 19 December 1966)

In example (10), we see Mr Abse arguing that if the objective of punishment by incarceration is to be therapeutic, there is no such benefit to be found in incarcerating gay men in all-male prisons, the hetero-

sexual analogy of which is the harem mentioned in the text. The term *sex maniac* was a relatively recent coinage in British English at the time. According to data from the Google Books corpus, the concept emerged in the 1930s and its frequency increased markedly from the 1940s to the 1960s. The term occurs 15 times in the Hansard corpus, ten of which during the 1960s.

5. Discussion

The main focus of the present study is on semantic change in mental health terms and the use of formerly neutral but subsequently discredited terms for naming and labelling in the British Parliament. The data show that a subset of commonly used terms (*lunatic*, *idiot*, *imbecile*, etc.) underwent a process of semantic substitution around the 1930s and the 1940s, which rendered them largely inappropriate to use in formal and official contexts. Naturally, the shift was neither immediate nor complete, and we find some instances of these terms being used in seemingly serious manner up until the 1980s (example 11).

> (11) The honourable Gentleman listed some practical difficulties. He said that there is no test of capacity to vote for anyone else, but that we are creating a test of capacity for the voluntary mental patient. However, <u>one cannot appear on the register if one suffers from a legal incapacity to vote</u>, for example, if one is **an idiot or a person of unsound mind**.
> (Sir Mayhew, 18 October 1982)

Notwithstanding some occasional instances of archaic usage, the primary use of such terms underwent a gradual semantic change, shifting towards the colloquial as a result of advances in psychiatry and societal attitudes to mental health care. Rather than suggesting medically validated mental health issues, they came to be used in an exaggerated and sometimes jocular manner in reference to ideas, concepts and actions that the speaker considered ill-conceived, extreme or

offensive. Notably, the terms themselves were occasionally the topic of explicit discussion, as in example (12):

> (12) It is a serious point seeking clarification for the future guidance of honourable Members. Quite rightly and making a factual statement of the truth, my honourable Friend the Member for Renfrew, West, called the honourable Member for Worcestershire, South, an idiot. For the guidance of honourable Members, is **'idiot'** <u>a parliamentary expression</u>, because it may be that many honourable Members will choose to use it on future occasions?
> (Mr Lewis, 15 October 1972)

Semantic changes take time, and most of the terms discussed here retain some connection to the field of mental health. Consequently, while the use of these terms in naming and labelling can no longer be interpreted as a serious claim that the object of reference is the product of, or associated with, an actual mental health condition, the implication remains that there is an association between things the speaker does not approve of, or understand, and mental health. Likewise, such naming practices often serve as intensifiers, highlighting a person's incompetence and lack of reason.

What is particularly interesting here is the pragmatic purpose of such labelling in the parliamentary context. While it seems self-evident that many, if not most, of such references are intended to characterize the referent, we also find instances of self-characterization both directly and by means of disassociating oneself from the object. The former are almost invariably jocular in nature, as in example (13):

> 13) I thank my right honourable Friend for that answer. He will know that I am **a technological imbecile**, and that many customers of the Government do not have the skills to deal with such technology. What efforts have been made to make it user-friendly?
> (Mr Rooney, 17 December 1997)

By contrast, the latter usage is perhaps of greater interest, because it has more subtle rhetorical implications. For example, when the leader of another country is labelled as a *madman*, the speech act signals that the person's actions and arguments are so far removed from the speaker's own rational perspective that they must have a mental health condition. This notion is reinforced through the common use of mental health terms in connection with violence and threatening behaviour, as observed in the present study.[7] More significantly, the implied presence of such a condition would seem to suggest that the person is incapable of rational debate and their positions cannot be understood or meaningfully discussed (cf. Clark 1992). They are simply 'mad'. However, at the same time, the speaker is also making it clear to the audience that the speaker is the opposite of mad: rational, clear-headed, someone who can be trusted. In political language use, such as in parliamentary debates, there is considerable value in convincing the audience that you are a reasonable and rational person while at the same time labelling your opponents' views as something that cannot even be discussed rationally.

So we return to the premise of social, and societal, polarization through labelling and naming practices. As introduced in Section 2.2, the division between neutral/positive and negative labelling reflects a prevalent attitude either in favor of or against people with mental illness versus 'normal' people. A person with mental illness, whether labelled as *lunatic* or *idiot*, can stereotypically be dangerous, morally deviant and irrational in their behavior – something a respectable member of society does not want in their 'civil' in-group. This moral juxtaposition is not restricted to the macro-level attitudes we hold about people with mental illness in society at large, but it is also expressed in the way we reach micro-level situational conclusions about people who mentally deviate from us in our daily social interaction.

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[7] On the complicated issue of mental health conditions and violence, see e.g. DeAngelis (2021).

6. Conclusion

This study of naming and labelling with mental health terms in the British Parliament has shown how the old generic terms that underwent a semantic change around the Second World War continued to be used at a diminished frequency in the latter half of the 20th century. The terms were no longer referential to medically diagnosed mental health conditions, rather they were primarily used as intensifiers, for comedic purposes and as distancing devices. The latter helping speakers to portray political opponents, civil servants, foreign leaders and others as extremists and incompetent, whose actions and opinions are less than rational, and at times dangerous. Generally, the notion of deviance has been used as a basic means to make a division between the in-group of the 'sane' and the out-group of the 'insane'. Although in principle any type of behavior can be a called and considered lunatic or idiotic, the underlying moral stereotype may denote socially unacceptable, erratic conduct and even violence. When it comes to the actual labels used, cultural (mis)understandings about people with mental illness follow suit.

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