

Preparing our students for the future: Critical literacy in the Seychelles classrooms

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ABSTRACT: This paper problematises language use as being characterised by indeterminacy, heterogeneity and struggle. It discusses some of the issues that have resulted in a need for a critical literacy approach to language study. As the paper works towards a definition of critical literacy, it analyses the arrangements of power in society and the role of language in maintaining such arrangements. The current place of critical literacy in the English curriculum of the Seychelles is discussed, along with the possibilities and necessities for a critical approach to language study in the Seychelles classrooms. Finally, the paper reviews possible approaches for the teaching of critical literacy in secondary English classrooms of Seychelles.

KEYWORDS: Critical literacy, Seychelles, literature, language policy, English language hegemony, Kreol.

To understand the dynamic nature of the relationship between word and world [is to first] understand language as a social practice (Morgan et al, 1996, p. 9)

INTRODUCTION

The Seychelles archipelago of 115 islands is situated in the western Indian Ocean, north west of Madagascar. Sighted in 1502 by Vasco Da Gama, it only became inhabited after 1756 when France officially took possession of the islands through French settlers from Mauritius. In 1811, the British took control of the islands without opposition. This state of affairs remained until 1976 when the Seychelles was granted its independence from Britain. Today's population of around 81,000 inhabitants is made up of a harmonious blend of different races descending from African, European and Asian settlers. Over time the various cultures have blended to form a unique Seychellois culture.

The experience of colonisation by France and England has left the Seychelles with a legacy of three national languages – Kreol, French and English. Kreol is the first language spoken by over 94% of the population and was developed from a mix of 17th Century French with additional Malagasy, Bantu, English and Hindi words. The syntax is a mix of Hindi and French ("Seychelles – A country study", 1994).

The three languages do not share equal status in practice. English is the main language for banking, official business and education while Kreol is the language of primary education, culture, parliament, politics and increasingly that of litigation. French remains the language for Catholicism. There is, however, a growing increase in the use of Kreol in all these areas. The media carry news and entertainment items in all three languages based on availability of programmes and funding.

The first schools in the islands were built in the 1800s by Roman Catholic priests from France, Italy and Switzerland who made the medium of instruction French. After the education act of 1944, however, British authorities took over the administration of schools and replaced French with English as the medium of instruction (Shah, 2003). In 1981, Kreol was adopted as the first national language and decreed to be the medium of instruction in the primary public schools amidst opposition of parents and teachers. The aims of the new policy were to facilitate learning and help establish a distinct culture and heritage ("Seychelles – A country study", 1994).

Presently, Kreol remains the medium of instruction for students from pre-school to primary 2 (aged 3-7). From primary three to primary six (8-11 years), there is a gradual switch from Kreol as the medium of instruction to English. This is done by first teaching Mathematics in English and then moving on to subjects such as science and social science. French is introduced as a subject along with Kreol and English. By the time students reach secondary level, all subjects are taught in English except for physical education and French. Vocational subjects such as technical and agriculture are mostly taught in Kreol, although note-taking is done in English. English and French also remain as specific subjects.

Text analysis in the English classroom of Seychelles generally centres on a teacher initiation-student response-teacher evaluation procedure, which involves students in answering factual, inferential and vocabulary-related questions. Students are not generally encouraged to support an evaluative interpretation and, when they do, they are not trained to analyse texts as discursive constructions in which authors make decisions (consciously or unconsciously) about how to present certain versions of reality. In short, a very low level of thinking is reflected in the instruction.

IMPETUS FOR CRITICAL LITERACY

Language is a thinking process which allows students to learn and grow. Freire (1985) suggests that it is language that provides the tool for meaning-making. In this light, there is great concern that education systems have failed to address changes occurring in ways of thinking about the role of language. As a result, educators have failed to make use of language to improve students' competencies as thinkers.

Contemporary changes in the ways in which power and social control are exercised have led to a changed focus on the role of language in social life. Firstly, there has been a shift from the explicit exercise of power through force to a more covert practice in the routine workings of social practices (Fairclough, 1992). This means that the routines of language practices have become important in sustaining and reproducing power relations. Secondly, there have been significant changes in language practices in society. The nature of language in various types of work and the ways of talking in professional-client and other relationship has changed, leading to an increased focus on language use (Fairclough, 1992). Power is exercised in more subtle and implicit ways; for instance, the conversational style of language that takes place in the doctor's surgery can be characterised by strategies for this subtle exercise of power. Thirdly, given the view that changes in language practices lead to general social and cultural change, language itself is increasingly becoming a target for

change. These changes increase the relevance of critical approaches to language study.

If power relations are indeed increasingly coming to be exercised indirectly in language, and if language practices are coming to be consciously manipulated and inculcated, then language education needs to address the critical component of language use. According to Fairclough (1992), "people cannot be effective citizens in a democratic society if their education cuts them off from critical consciousness of key elements within their physical or social environment" (p. 6).

CRITICAL LITERACY: TOWARDS A DEFINITION

In order to arrive at a definition of critical literacy, it is appropriate to outline the organisation of and forces at work in society's social practices, as well as the place and role of language in this matter. According to Gee (1996) discourses are

ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or "types of people") by specific *groups of people*, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, bikers of a certain sort, business people of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort, African-Americans of a certain sort, women or men of a certain sort, and so on through a very long list. Discourses are ways of being "people like us". They are "ways of being in the world"; they are "forms of life" (p. viii).

This implies a way of thinking, feeling, reading, writing, behaving and so on that gives identity to a group of individuals or institution. Discourses are expressed through language, and different uses of language express different Discourses. Therefore, language is an inherent part of Discourse which is value laden and interest- or purpose-serving (Lankshear, 1997).

Post-structuralist approaches to discourse analysis that developed in Europe emphasise the fact that knowledges and truths are constructed by social institutions and naturalised through language (Moon, 1992). In any unequal relation of power, there is a person or persons at the top and others at the bottom. The values that society holds are prioritised and privileged, along with the people who enact these values. People may, therefore, be valued because of their gender, class, race or language. In a society where people are willing to accept such arrangements of power as natural, there is no need for coercion to maintain the status quo. Moreover, a person who is disempowered in one situation may be empowered in others. For example, a black man with a low level of education may be subject to oppression in his workplace because of his race and educational status. However, at home he may be subjecting his family because of the patriarchal order of the society of which he is a part. Language is one site for representing but also contesting such power relations.

The language policy of the Seychelles sets up the mechanism to improve the status of Kreol as a language that has power outside the realm of the home, by firstly placing it at the centre of primary education, and secondly by making it the language of the national assembly, politics and culture. However, the power struggle between Kreol, English and French rages. The absence of Kreol in the secondary and post-secondary curriculum serves to destabilise the apparent status that the policy tries to confer on

Kreol in the primary cycle. Also, a good majority of parents and teachers of primary students have been known to continuously give more attention to students' progress in English rather than Kreol and French. The fact that English remains the language of administration and business appears to bestow it with more power than the other two languages. The domains of administration and business are linked with financial and management power, consequently maintaining a higher status for English and those English-speakers who relish such positions. French, being simply a subject in education and a dying language of the Catholic mission finds itself in a continuous struggle to maintain some form of competition in relation to Kreol and English. The fact that the French Government continuously funds French expertise and resources for schools compared to the UK's lack of involvement in this aspect of language education is indicative of the power struggle that exists between the three languages and the comfort that English enjoys in policy and practice.

Language is deeply bound up with producing, reproducing and maintaining unequal arrangements of power. As a result, the meanings which are given and received in language, through texts, are not innocent. They are not merely descriptive, performative, factual or propositional (Janks, 1992). They are also ideological. Meaning lies in the text and in the social relations in which the text is embedded. All texts work to present a "preferred meaning" (Hall, 1980, p.7 in Janks, 1992). The text presents its preferred meaning to an implied reader who connives consciously or unconsciously with the text and is subjected by it. The implied reader is one who is established by the text as one who will respond in specific ways to the response-inviting structures of the text (Iser, 1978 in Abrams, 1993). As Althusser (1970) puts it, the text interpellates the reader, and if the reader accepts the interpellation, s/he is subjected by it. It is noteworthy that interpellation does not occur only in language but may occur through a range of other social practices such as the relationship between students and a teacher in the classroom. The students, seeing the teacher as the seat of all knowledge, passively absorb whatever is handed down and don't see themselves as able to question the teacher's knowledge or to provide personal input. In view of all this, many literacy scholars view literacy as inherently ideological and implicated in creating and maintaining social hierarchies, differences, advantages and disadvantages.

Critical language study exposes the workings of language conventions and practices in their ideological endeavour. According to Janks (1994) language can be used to maintain and challenge existing forms of power by showing students that there is nothing natural about the arrangements of society, and that they may develop the skills of reading against the grain and thus contest the status quo. A critical pedagogy helps learners recognise the power vested in the speaker or writer, and assists them in finding for themselves ways of speaking and writing which do not disempower themselves or other people. It encourages them to seek to actively empower others. Critical literacy, as Lemke (1995) argues, creates a new Discourse with the goal of re-framing both human and non-human elements in the name of social justice and more humane treatment for all.

Critical literacy is about positioning the writer as a worker with an agenda who makes use of language to represent some realities and not others. It is about reading beyond the face value of the text, and questioning the representations of reality in the text for example, the representation of women or blacks. A resistant reader refuses to accept

the reading position designated by the text by offering opposing content, other language and alternative emphases (Janks, 1992).

Gee (1997) defines critical literacy as "the ability to juxtapose Discourses, to watch how competing Discourses frame and re-frame various elements" (p. xviii). It is interested in what meanings are, where meanings come from, how they become fixed, what authorises particular meanings, and in changing notions of how we treat or handle texts so far as meanings and meaning-making are concerned (Gee, 1993). Developing critical readers and writers of texts, therefore, has to do in part with enabling them to detect and handle the inherently ideological dimension of language, and the role of language in enacting and producing power (Lankshear, 1997).

CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE SEYCHELLES ENGLISH CURRICULUM

The English in the Seychelles national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2001, henceforth referred to as ESNC) document does not make any provision for critical literacy in the teaching and learning of English. However, gaps exist in the document suggesting a need for a critical awareness of language. One of the aims of the ESNC is to "provide a sound base of skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for further study, work and leisure" (p. 6). Students are expected to express opinions on texts read (p. 11). The rationale for the subject stipulates that it enhances the students' "cognitive skills such as analysing, discriminating information, etc." (p. 5). "Discriminating information" implies the act of making judgements about texts using various skills and strategies. It is not definite what "etc" includes but all the gaps quoted above suggest that a critical orientation towards the study of language will ensure that students develop the skills that will enable them to generate in-depth and informed opinions of texts read. Critical literacy is crucial to understanding contemporary social practices and interaction; hence, it is necessary for study, work and leisure. A critical orientation to language study enhances students' ability to analyse and discriminate information.

The ESNC is underpinned by Hymes' (1972) notion of *communicative competence* which in turn advocates a communicative approach to the teaching of English. The notion of communicative competence is facilitated by the model of appropriateness described by Fairclough (1992). According to the ESNC, the learning of English involves students in learning about the appropriateness of language to social contexts. In carrying out social and functional activities, "learners will not only try to convey meaning effectively but must pay greater attention to the social context the interaction is taking place in. Their success is measured in terms of functional effectiveness of the language, as well as acceptability of forms used" (p. 38). Students will learn the situations in which it is acceptable to use the non-standard varieties of English (such as in speech with friends, advertising, songs, poetry, dialogue in novels or plays) and when Standard English is preferred.

The model of communicative competence appears to inhibit the development of critical literacy pedagogy in the Seychelles for several reasons. Firstly, the concept of appropriateness (which underpins the model of communicative competence) encourages the maintenance of the hegemony of Standard English. Inappropriateness of use leads to speakers or writers being judged as inept or rude. However, as

Fairclough (1992) argues, the concept of inappropriacy is marked by a racist and "classist" bias. Even in an almost mono-cultural society like the Seychelles students belonging to different socio-economic and friendship groups have different ways of using the English language. It has been noted by teachers in the country that the so-called academically weaker students have perfect command of a non-standard form of English that is not taught at school. Telling that group that their way of speaking is *just* not the right way is in actual fact marginalising the group, their class and values. The generalisation of a competence model of language on which the ESNC is based, presupposes unacceptable appropriateness models of language variation (Fairclough, 1992). This leads to some texts' or students' cultural ways of using language to be rejected as bad English. Secondly, the appropriateness model facilitates a shift towards seeing knowledge packaged in terms of competence, what people can do (Peters, 1994). If language practices can be neatly divided into what is appropriate or not, then language education can be reduced to skilling. The reality, however, is that matching language to context is characterised by indeterminacy, heterogeneity and struggle. Therefore, the concept of appropriateness is of considerable ideological and political significance and must be contested (Fairclough, 1992).

In order to contest the political and ideological domination of appropriateness of language in the Seychelles classrooms, critical literacy pedagogy is crucial. In scrutinising doctrines of and attitudes towards socio-linguistic practice, students will be able to make informed choices of their own linguistic practice based on, as Fairclough (1992) maintains, the estimates of possibilities, risks and costs of going against dominant judgements of appropriate usage.

SEYCHELLES ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

Evaluations of language classes and the position of the L2 learner in ESL settings suggest a need for adopting a critical pedagogy in the Seychelles classrooms. English holds a very important position in the education system of the Seychelles. Firstly, it is the medium of instruction from primary three onwards. Secondly, it is one of the core subjects in which students must perform successfully to gain access to post-secondary and tertiary institutions. The English language is, therefore, a passport to educational mobility. Viewed in that light, the English language and texts written in English are accorded an "over-deferent stance" (Wallace, 1992). Such an attitude towards text has disempowered students' assertion of themselves against the power of a text. The teacher's challenge is to help students to resist certain kinds of assaults presented by written texts. Teachers need to challenge the text's ways of talking about persons, places, events and phenomena and ways of talking to the reader.

An assimilationist model of literacy is often advocated in the Seychelles ESL classrooms. In line with Wallace (1992) has noted from other EFL/ESL settings, critical reading is not encouraged in the Seychelles' classrooms; students are not generally invited to draw on their experiences of literacy, or to articulate their understanding of it as a social phenomenon. Texts are not generally selected for their potential to challenge. They are more frequently seen as either vehicles for linguistic structure, as general interest material that will not arouse controversy, or as functional materials that model to L2 learners supposedly "model" behaviour in English language settings. Wallace (1992) rightly argues that what is missing in L2 learners'

teaching is the practice of placing reading activities and written texts in a social context; the use of provocative texts; and a methodology for interpreting texts which address ideological assumptions as well as propositional meanings.

While reading is a psycholinguistic process whereby the reader is continually predicting and sampling during the act of reading, it is also a social process where the reader reads as an individual and as a member of various discourse communities. The reader's interpretations of texts are socially determined, dependent partly on previous social experiences and the social context in which they are reading (Iser, 1978 in Abrams, 1993). As a result, readers' first language identities and experiences as readers inevitably influence their second language ones (Wallace, 1992). Recognising this enables students to understand the subtle play of language on meaning and allows them to bring other reading positions to the text. Students should be aided to understand how their own discursive baggage affects their reading positions.

Texts are not self-contained products. They exist in relation to other texts through genre or topical discussions. They encapsulate certain ideologically determined ways of talking or writing about persons, places, events or phenomena (Wallace, 1992). Their ways of talking about class, race and gender are socially determined, and naturalised by the writer and typical readers. In the Seychelles' classrooms, texts are mostly analysed with no reference to authorship, date and sources. Wallace (1992) maintains that a text's history is essential in meaning-making.

All texts construct a reading position for their reader. The language the writer uses "implies one range of possible audiences rather than another" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 84). In other words, the reader is part of the text. Wallace (1992) claims that L2 readers may have an advantage in that they are *not* the text's implied readers. This means that they can bring fresh and legitimate interpretations to written texts. Readers must understand that texts are writers' creations and must be critically enjoyed. They must also be taught how texts seek to subjectify the reader by creating reading positions for them to subscribe to. Given this understanding, readers learn to identify the writer's targeted readership and use their knowledge and experiences to present other subject positions that may subvert the targeted one.

In multilingual contexts, students need to understand how one's identity is tied up with the many languages that one speaks and the contexts in which those particular languages are privileged or marginalised. Students can be led to think about the relationship between language choice and power. Regardless of the fact that policies have been written to uphold and celebrate Kreol as the country's first national language, individuals' and groups' opinions differ on the prestige and relative importance of the three national languages. As students compare English, French and Kreol, they can be guided to understand how history and economic forces give some languages symbolic power (Janks, 1994, p. 50) and how the different languages people use portray them in different positions of power.

Critical language awareness is essential in promoting democracy. It is a prerequisite for effective democratic citizenship and should be an entitlement for citizens, especially children developing towards citizenship in the educational system (Fairclough, 1992). In the wake of a new multiparty democracy in the Seychelles, a new maturity of outlook is needed for the citizens. Critical literacy is crucial to help

students develop the skills required to make social and political decisions in an informed and critical manner. Students also need to develop a greater awareness of wider social practices, arrangements, relations, allocations and procedures which are spread and maintained through language.

TOWARDS CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES

A critical literacy approach to language learning is widely advocated as a means to make learners empowered language users. Critical literacy involve a critical perspective on particular texts, wider social practices, arrangements, relations, allocations, and procedures which are mediated by, made possible, and partially sustained through reading, writing, viewing, and transmitting texts (Kress, 1985, in Lankshear et al, 1997). A critical literacy approach may be adopted at both primary and secondary level. However, this paper considers approaches for the secondary level only.

In discussing the constitution of a critical response, Gilbert (1993) maintains that critical literacy must address the practices by which words enact social meaning and the practices by which we as social subjects make meaning. Classroom practices must explore how and why social subjects can make the range of meanings they can, in fact, make (Green, 1995 in Lankshear et al, 1997). It must also explore how language practices are used in powerful institutions like the state, the school, the law, the family and the church, and how these practices contribute to the maintenance of inequalities and injustices. For teachers, it means engaging with contemporary issues that are often controversial.

Fundamental to the act of reading is the reader's use of personal and cultural background experiences to interrogate a text, engaging in an ongoing negotiation to arrive at meaning. In order to successfully read at a higher level, the reader must be able to relate new information to prior knowledge so as to find answers to higher order questions. Critical reading implies that a reader is actively and constructively engaged in the process of reading. The reader is continually negotiating between what s/he knows with what s/he is trying to make sense of.

Several different approaches to critical literacy have been trialled and adopted in various settings. This paper discusses some that may prove appropriate for the ESL classroom in the Seychelles setting.

Many professional organisations support literature as a powerful tool for teaching critical reading. They argue that it offers students the opportunity to actively engage in texts while simultaneously considering ideas, values, and ethical questions (Collins, 1993). Through literature, students learn to read personally, actively and deeply (Sweet, 1993, in Collins, 1993).

In order for active reading to occur, teachers must create an atmosphere which fosters inquiry. Students must be encouraged to question, to make predictions, and to organise ideas which support value judgements. Students may, for example, be encouraged to analyse and question the representation of gender and race in narratives, and to propose alternative representations. Esterhuyse (1994) advises that

teachers should "create a safe space for optimal emotional and intellectual growth in young people before embarking on a journey to interrogate the social landscape" (cited in Granville, 2003, p. 12). This may be done by setting clear guidelines and ground rules for discussion. Students must be taught to listen with empathy and to accept differences as something that can be productive rather than destructive.

Understanding subject position is crucial in understanding multiple perspectives in social practices. Role-playing during reading sessions allows students to read from different subject positions. When students are engaged in activities where they take on someone else's role (they see through that person's eyes and feel through their experiences) they gain a new perspective on life and a new understanding of the other. This may be done, for instance, by reversing gender roles, or socio-economic or racial positions. Janks (1992) claims, however, that students must be given the opportunity to read as themselves so they can gain deeper awareness of their own position and make changes if necessary.

A range of non-literary authentic texts, that is, texts that were written for a purpose other than pedagogic and that represent a range of genres, may be effectively used to analyse language in use in current contexts. Wallace's (1992) critical pedagogy as developed for her EFL migrant class in London included such resources. According to her, critical reading involves responding to particular texts, as well as an awareness of what reading itself is. She aimed to enable learners to see texts and the reading of texts as problematic, to understand the political-ideological character of literacy as a social phenomenon, and to become more assertive in interacting with written texts.

For learners to develop an awareness of the role of reading in their lives, Wallace involved them in interviewing people in order to come up with a reading profile that was discussed and analysed. Students also conducted surveys about people's reader roles in relation to their family. In problematising power in relation to published reading material and the consumption of texts, Wallace required students to work with authentic texts around questions such as: What categories might each text fall under? Who produces them? For whom? Why?

To develop students' critical reading of specific texts, Wallace worked with a pre-reading/while-reading/post-reading procedure. She built her classroom procedure on Kress's (1985 in Lankshear et al, 1997) three questions: Why is this topic being written about? How? What other ways are there to write about the topic? Wallace also added two orienting questions of her own: Who is writing to whom? What is the topic?

In such an approach, pre-reading tasks may include asking what range of ways might be available for writing on the topic and why might the text have been written. While-reading tasks centre on how material in the text is presented. Post-reading tasks invite opinions regarding the text's intended audience, and considerations of other ways in which the text could have been written. In such sessions, students would need to make use of: their prior knowledge and experience to discuss possible contexts for the text; their knowledge of language use to analyse the presentation of material; and their knowledge of the text, the cultural context as well as language use to present opinions on the way the text positions the reader, plus other positions that the reader could take.

Examples of actual discourses in students' lives may also be used to develop a greater awareness of language in power relations. McKenzie (1992) used the school report to aid students in understanding the use and role of euphemism. In the process students learned how euphemisms function and why. They wrote their own euphemistic devices and critically analysed the contexts that gave rise to such forms of writing and where the reader gets positioned, as well as both the writer's and reader's struggle to create meaning. Such activities prepare students to make decisions about the risks and costs of going against dominant judgements of appropriate usage (Fairclough, 1992).

As part of learning to write, students should be given the opportunity to practise writing in different positions of power and be helped to realise the effects of their language choices on others. They must also be made aware of the risks that they take when they go against conventions of appropriacy so that they will be in a position to make informed choices when writing (Fairclough, 1992). These may be conducted through simulation activities, although authentic writing situations must be catered for as they provide students with real experiences in making decisions about language use.

To instil a critical awareness of social practices in students, an English teacher of a class of fifteen-year-olds might decide to explore a topic such as abortion with students. The teacher might make use of four different types of texts: a story of a teenage girl who falls pregnant and is deliberating on what to do; a scientific article explaining the process of abortion and its medical pros and cons; a letter to the editor from a human rights group condemning the act of abortion as criminal; and a passage from the Bible that reflects the latter's view on the topic. The class would discuss the different versions of right and wrong, and truth related to abortion, as presented by the texts. This could be done by making use of Whitehead's "questioning the construction of knowledge" activities (2001, p. 89). Students would discover how authors construct knowledge by answering questions such as:

- What is the topic of this text and what are the main important ideas in this text?
- Why did the author write about this topic?
- What else could be said about the topic? What has been left out?
- How is this text similar to, or different from, other texts on the same topic?
- What prior knowledge is the author assuming about you, the reader?

To help students synthesise knowledge and solve the character's problem, the teacher could make use of Whitehead's (2001) problem-solving grid to aid students with the process. The students would formulate the character's problem in the form of a question which reflects her ethical dilemma. Students would brainstorm solutions and fill in the grid. They would list the worth of each solution, discuss each solution and associated idea, and rank them using the A-E scale (A being an excellent idea, E being a useless idea). The teacher would ask students to come up with the best single solution; they would then compose a "best solution" statement.

CONCLUSION

Educating the individual citizen is inherently moral. It calls attention to the need to encourage learners to become independent thinking, learning and communicating participants in home, school and community. A new democracy brings with it new ways of employing language for the maintenance of power relations. In the wake of a new multi-party democracy in Seychelles, there is a need for reflective citizens that have a critical understanding of the tools of manipulation employed by those in power, so that these may be resisted and challenged. There is also a need for understanding and tolerant citizens for what is different from their own views, in order that the political and social peace that we have known continues. Consequently, I believe that a critical literacy language programme is essential. Such a programme will ensure that the Seychellois students (who are the future adults) take on board new ideas about their own society and the rest of the world with all their different facets, realities, injustices, in an informed and critical manner. It will provide them with opportunities to evaluate their own stance against those of others, as a result, producing critical literates, who are effective problem-solvers with empathy for their neighbour.

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