This study examined the ways in which teachers of English as a second language (ESL) perceive the semantic and syntactic constraints that govern word use and the strategies they use to explain lexical anomalies to students. Twelve native speaking ESL teachers from 2 university-level intensive English programs were asked to identify, categorize, and explain lexical anomalies in each of 14 sentences. It was found that 3 teachers did not identify any categories for any of the 14 anomalies and that 7 teachers categorized fewer than 4 of the anomalies. The label that was most frequently used was "connotation," while only one teacher used "collocation," a basic term in lexical research, to categorize inappropriate idiomatic usage. The results of this study indicate that certain categories of inappropriate usage, especially animate/inanimate collocations and positive/negative collocations, are fairly transparent to ESL teachers. Although teachers did not consistently identify lexical categories, their explanations revealed considerable insight into what limits word use in these categories. The explanation strategy of illustrating word meaning by showing the relations between two or more words and by giving examples were often used appropriately in spite of inappropriate categorizations.

(MDM)
Teachers Perceptions of and Strategies with Lexical Anomalies

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TESOL Annual Convention and Exposition - Atlanta
April, 1993
Introduction

It can be argued that language is lexically driven and that vocabulary is consequently a key component of second language instruction. In reality, however, practical vocabulary instruction is conspicuously lacking from both the curriculum and the everyday interaction in most ESL and EFL classrooms. English instructors are trained in neither the teaching of vocabulary nor in the handling of everyday questions from students about individual words. The typical teacher is far less prepared to address vocabulary needs than s/he is to address those that occur in grammar, reading, oral language or composition.

This situation is occurring in spite of the fact that language learners are acutely aware of the crucial role played by vocabulary. ESL or EFL students are painfully aware of the disadvantage they face because they lack the extensive vocabulary that native English speakers have been acquiring since infancy. They frequently lament that they have many ideas, but lack the words to express them. The fact that it's far more typical to see language learners carry dictionaries for language reference rather than grammar books implies that they know at some level that a knowledge of words is going to serve than better than a knowledge of grammar.

One reason for the shortage of attention given to vocabulary instruction may lie in the difficulty that native speakers of English have analyzing and describing intuitive judgements about
lexical items. Are native speakers attuned to the semantic and the syntactic properties of words? Should they be? Is it true that once a native speaker learns a new word, he or she "... forgets the details about the word's form and use and considers it merely an appropriate label for the concept in question" (Bauer, 1983)? The ability to "explain" meaning is an uncommon skill, and intuitive sense about word use is complex and unidentifiable to most native speakers (Cruse, 1986). How then does a native speaking English instructor respond to students' questions and vocabulary errors?

In order to gain insights into these questions, this paper will address the ways in which ESL teachers perceive the semantic and syntactic constraints that govern word use and the strategies they use to explain lexical anomalies. Which lexical categories and lexical features are familiar to them? Is there consensus amongst teachers in the terminology used to describe these categories and features or are teachers using different terms to refer to the same phenomena? Do some categories stand out as more difficult to identify and describe than others? How much information do they give students when faced with a lexical anomaly? Do they rely on examples in place of categories or explanations? The ultimate goal of this study is not to investigate the features of accurate categorization of lexical anomalies, but rather to investigate how native speakers of English perceive such anomalies and how they choose to address them as part of language instruction. It is hoped that this pilot
study will lead to more information about how native speaking language instructors address lexical anomalies and will also lead to insights about how to further investigate this area.

Lexical Errors and Lexical Analysis

The lexical errors that are investigated here are subtle. They are the type that occur very frequently in the speech and writing of second language learners. They indicate incomplete semantic or syntactic knowledge of a word. For a learner to pass beyond the receptive level of knowledge of a word to the productive level, s/he must know not only what the word refers to, but also where the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (Gairns, 1986). Such a notion of boundaries might be used to explain lexical anomalies that are due to connotations:

1. *The family was struck by a series of very happy events.
2. *The man bought drugs at the drugstore.

The word "struck" in sentence #1, connotes a negative event, while the word "drugs" in sentence #2 has adopted a specific connotation of illegality to native speakers. Both sentences indicate that the speakers have a general understanding of the words (maybe a "dictionary" understanding), but that they don't understand the limitations placed on the words by assigned connotations.

Another area of word knowledge that a learner must have involves an awareness of the linguistic environment in which a word is likely to occur. Anomalies of this type are known as errors of collocation, and might occur as follows:
3. *I like my coffee mild.
4. *I was so nervous that my hands were vibrating.

The use of "mild" in sentence #3 is anomalous because "weak" and "strong" usually collocate with coffee instead of "mild" and "powerful." Similarly, the word "vibrating" in sentence #4 doesn't collocate with human references, so would be better replaced by "shaking." Such errors occur frequently, perhaps because learners are led to assume that the lexicon is an open system which allows an infinite combination of items (Seal, 1981). In reality, certain generalizations and restrictions are made "... in order to oil the wheels of communication to produce ease and speed of comprehension. ..." (Seal, 1981). These generalizations and restrictions are difficult to learn because there are no 'rules' of collocation and it is difficult to group items by their collocational properties (Gairns, 1986). Nevertheless, the notion of collocation provides a useful framework for expanding a learner's knowledge of a word.

The process of separating meaning and grammar is complex and controversial, and beyond the scope of this paper. It is generally agreed, however, that although such a separation cannot be done, attempts to do so are important and some insights have been achieved in mapping the respective domains of grammar and meaning to lay a groundwork for further study (Cruse, 1986). It should be pointed out that it's impossible to disentangle semantics from grammar completely, at least partly because many grammatical elements are themselves bearers of meaning (Cruse, 1986). This difficulty accounts for some of the problems that native speakers
encounter when trying to explain anomalous sentences.

Method

It is believed that the best way to tap people's semantic knowledge is "to elicit intuitions ABOUT meaning" rather than OF meaning (Cruse, 1986, p. 10). The average native speaker of English knows a lot more about a word than s/he can explain. It is also believed that semantic knowledge of words is best investigated with words in meaningful contexts.

As a matter of fact, there is no reason why language-users should be specially attuned to the semantic properties of words. We do not communicate with isolated words; words are not the bearers of messages; they do not, of themselves, 'make sense'; they cannot, taken singly, be true or false, beautiful, appropriate, paradoxical or original. A linguistic item must in general have at least the complexity of a simple sentence to show such properties. Words contribute, via their own semantic properties, to the meanings of more complex units, but individually they do not occasion our most vivid and direct experiences of language" (Cruse, 1986, p. 9).

Primarily for these reasons, this study used contextualized lexical items and informants were asked to comment on their impressions of them and their strategies for explaining them to students.

Twelve native speaking ESL teachers from two university-level intensive English programs were asked to identify the lexical anomalies in each of fourteen sentences. Most of the respondents had no formal training in lexical analysis or vocabulary teaching but were experienced in dealing with such anomalies in the classroom. The ESL teaching experience of the informants ranged from two to twelve years.

The instructions asked the informants to first decide if the
sentences were anomalous or not. If they were, the informants were asked to answer two questions about each one. First, could the anomaly be categorized? Although categories are controversial and little consensus was expected, it is believed that the attempt to categorize lexical errors is desirable because such generalization reflects similarities between items. Second, the informants were asked how they would explain the errors to the students. They were directed to duplicate the terminology they would use with the student, and to keep the explanation brief. The goal was to obtain explanations that were as natural as possible. The informants were told that we were interested in the type of natural responses they use in vocabulary instruction or in response to students' questions and that their answers should reflect what they tell students, not all they know about a word.

The responses were then tabulated. Several specific aspects of the information were of particular interest. First, how many respondents chose to not identify a category? It was considered interesting that many of the respondents disregarded the instruction to note a category and relied instead on explanations alone. The tabulation of category identification can be seen in TABLE I. Second, the data were examined with attention given to how many "appropriate" categories were identified? "Appropriate" is here used to identify a category with explanatory value. It wasn't expected that all of the semantic and syntactic rules that govern the use of the word would be captured by the chosen category. Rather, the category labels were judged in light of
their value in explaining at least one significant feature of the word and their potential in guiding a student toward accurate experimentation with the word. As a result of this broad definition, several different categories were judged as "appropriate" (See TABLE II). The chosen terminology was of interest, as was the degree of consensus in terminology.

Third, the strategies of explanation used by the teachers were of interest. How many respondents named inappropriate categories followed by appropriate (explanatory) explanations? Related to this was the question of how many responses included inaccurate categories followed by inappropriate explanations? These distinctions are described in TABLE I.

The explanatory value of the teachers' explanations was of particular interest, as was the contradiction between an inappropriate category and an appropriate explanation. The explanations were considered a more accurate reflection of what happens in the classroom than the categories alone because of the way the instructions were worded. In order to further examine the teachers' strategies, we examined how many responses included an explanation only, how many used an example only, and how many used both (See TABLE III).

Finally, it was of interest to ascertain which categories were most difficult to categorize and explain. This, of course, is a subjective judgement, but some insights were gained by comparing the categories as a whole in terms of appropriateness. This information is described in TABLE IV.
It was not the design of this study to prove the existence of a fixed list of correctly-named categories, but it was considered important to gain insights into how teachers analyze and describe what they know. In order to best capture how the teachers actually deal with these tasks of analysis and description, categories were selected that were of high frequency in student discourse; in fact, most of the sentences were taken from actual student work. The labels assigned by the researcher to these categories were intended to be descriptive and explanatory, not definitive. The five categories that were examined were "Animate/Inanimate Collocations," "Positive/Negative Connotations," "Specific Connotations," "Goal/Source," and "General Lexical Collocations." For reference to the sentences used in each category, see TABLE I. For reference to the respondent labels that were also considered explanatory, see TABLE II.

Discussion

Several significant insights into vocabulary instruction can be gained from this data. First it's interesting to note that three of twelve teachers did not identify any categories for any of the fourteen items and seven teachers categorized fewer than four of the anomalies. It is interesting that ten of the fourteen respondents disregarded to some degree the instruction to note a category. 42% of all responses included no categories. There are several possible explanations for this. In some cases, the category might not have been known to the respondent. In some
cases a category may not have seemed useful. In others, a category might have been especially difficult to name (e.g., "Degree" and "Goal/Source"), and in still others there may have been more than one factor at work, making a single category seem inadequate. Although these responses do not reveal the informants' motives, they do suggest that teachers are able to access significant explanatory information whether or not they choose to name categories. This was especially true in the categories of Positive/Negative Connotations, Animate/Inanimate Collocations and Specific Connotations. In the 96 responses in these three categories, there wasn't one that contained what was considered an inaccurate or unhelpful explanation. In the category of Positive/Negative Connotations, for example, although only 26% of the responses included actual categorizations, nearly all of the explanations contained the words "positive" or "negative."

Several observations can be made about the nature of the labels used for the categories. The label that was most frequently used was "connotation." Out of the 65 responses where this term would have been appropriately used, it was used 28 times (43%). Only three of the twelve informants never used the term.

It was surprising to note the lack of use of the term "collocation;" only one respondent used this term. The respondents bypassed this category label quite effectively in the three sentences considered Animate/Inanimate Collocations by describing the reasons they collocated: humanizing an inanimate object, adjective for animate, dehumanization, etc. (See TABLE II).
Of the 36 responses for Animate/Inanimate Collocations, 33% identified no category, 31% identified an appropriate category, and 19% overcame inappropriate categories with appropriate explanations (e.g., unexplanatory categories such as "awkward," "word choice," "constraint on meaning," and "idiomatic phrase" were followed by references to animacy, inanimacy, or to a "set phrase"). The category label was less effectively bypassed for the two sentences considered General Lexical Collocations. This category contained the largest number of inaccurate category labels and inaccurate explanations. In most cases the references to "mild coffee" in sentence #8 and "attractive weather" in sentence #13 were categorized with great (unexplanatory) generality: "incorrect description," "awkward," "not idiomatic in English," and "constraint." In two other categorizations and several other explanations, attempts were made to assign the problem to the wrong feature. For example, in the case of "mild coffee," a respondent guessed that mild "implies a human capacity to be gentle." In the case of "attractive," respondents surmised that this term is used for humans only, that it deals "more with appearance," and that "you must have the ability to join that which attracts." It seems that the general concept of collocation was unfamiliar to most of these respondents and that these anomalies were quite difficult to explain unless accompanied by another generalizing feature.

The concept of collocation is a basic one in lexical research; these responses support the suggestion that lexical research has not "trickled down to the practicing language teacher" (Seal,
Collocation may be particularly difficult for native speakers to explain because it is part of the "shadowy area between grammar and meaning" (Nation, 1990). It has also been suggested that the difficulty may be because native speakers store and process lexical items as much by collocations as by single units, and that nonnative speakers appear to be "combining lexical items according to their knowledge of each individual word" (Seal, 1981, p. 7). The data collected here (In particular, see TABLE IV) supports the suspicion that the unconscious process of collocation is especially difficult for the native speaker to identify and describe.

The category referred to as "Degree" proved difficult to label; 75% of the respondents chose not to label either of the two anomalies in this category. This is not surprising or even discouraging: formal terminology for this category is not used in the literature. Rather than trying to design a category that would describe this anomaly, the teachers tended to explain the anomaly by comparing the two sentences. The two words were "influence" (in sentence #4) and "determines" (in sentence #10); 54% of the sentences were explained with reference made to both of these words; in other words, "influence" was used to explain "determines" and "determines" was used to explain "influence" in over half of the responses. The questionnaire might have influenced this result by its use of these two closely related items, but in fact comparisons between contrasting words were frequently used as a strategy for explanation. This is actually a widely recommended
strategy; comparing and contrasting related words is important for "developing a greater sensitivity to meanings" and for adding to existing knowledge, "not of lists of independent facts, but of sets of relationships" (Nagy, 1989, p. 10).

There was also considerable difficulty describing the errors in the category of "Goal/Source." This category, more than any other, might be considered more grammatical than lexical. Although the informants chose to not categorize 75% of the anomalies here, there was considerable explanatory value in the explanations given.

The respondents showed the greatest tendency to rely on examples in sentence #5: 83% of the respondents used examples as part of the explanation. The teachers' use of examples as an explanation strategy might be partially determined by the wording of the sentence and the ease of slotting a more appropriate word in its place. (In the case of sentence #5, the antonym "lent" was suggested to replace "borrowed"). Examples were used by 67% of the respondents in sentence #6, another case where the wording of the sentence made word substitution easy. In three cases, examples were used without any explanations. All three of these cases were in the two categories that were seemingly most difficult: "General Lexical Collocation" and "Goal/Source." Perhaps examples are easier to access than explanations. Considering the small size of this sample, and the impossibility of substantiating motives from this data, little can be generalized from this result; we can, however, recognize the high frequency of still another teaching strategy (that appeared even though unsolicited): the use of
It was interesting that the one informant who had the highest occurrence of inappropriate categories, (twelve of fourteen) also had the highest use of examples. This teacher was the only one who used a category, an explanation and an example for every sentence. The categories were judged "inappropriate" for their generality and lack of explanatory value ("awkward," or "awkward category" was used eight times; "wrong word category" was used twice). Five of the explanations were appropriate, and all of the examples were appropriate. This shows an effective strategy for dealing with a lack of access to formalized lexical categories.

Finally, it's interesting to note which sentences the teachers identified as having no errors. One informant responded "Ok Intermediate" on sentences #2, 6, 7, 10, 11, and 13, followed by an explanation. This was interpreted as meaning that this instructor chooses to accept an unspecified level of anomaly from a certain level of student, correcting only those who are more advanced. This strategy might be challenged because it seems arbitrary. For example, in the "Positive/Negative" category, sentence #2 ("The reporters exposed the candidate's list of military honors." and sentence #11 ("Wearing too much make-up enhances facial wrinkles and blemishes.") were considered ok for intermediate use, while sentence #9 ("The family was struck by a series of very happy events.") was not because "struck is only used for negative ideas." The same randomness was seen in category of Animate/Inanimate Connotations. Two of the sentences were considered "ok
intermediate," ("I was so nervous that my hands were vibrating." and "The lawn mower was disabled.") while one was corrected on the basis of being appropriate only for people and diseases ("The mechanic told me to sell this car because it was incurable.").

This same tendency was seen, albeit to a lesser degree, in the responses of three other teachers. In most cases, explanations were not given, so we can't know the reasons for these selections. Since few teachers are trained in making generalizations about vocabulary errors, it is understandable that such seemingly ad hoc judgements occur. It seems that these corrections would be more effective if there was more consistency in the generalizations made about word use.

**Suggestions for Further Study**

This pilot study raised several issues about native speaking teachers of English. Pursuit of these issues would require several revisions to the approach that was used here. First, it appears that there are certain types of errors that native speakers have trouble categorizing but no trouble explaining. It may therefore be useful to disregard the option of "categorizing" the errors, and evaluate only the explanations. In some of the categories, there was considerable consensus in the terminology used in the explanations (Animate/Inanimate Collocations and Positive/Negative Connotations), while in others there was not. It seems like a deeper analysis of the explanations, including more comparisons within a larger sample of responses, would give more insight into
the native speaker's process of analyzing the intuitive principles behind the word's use.

It seems that the most interesting results were in the categories of connotation and collocation. In a future study, I believe I would limit my investigation to these two areas, including more samples in each category, and mixing those that seem transparent ("Animate/Inanimate", "Positive/Negative") with those that do not. A follow-up interview might be used to investigate which areas teachers were most confident about. The interview might also be a good way to investigate how much teachers can generalize or categorize lexical knowledge.

It might be interesting to investigate a few teachers in more depth, paying attention to contrasting levels of experience and education. As in the case of one informant already mentioned, it might be indicated that strategies are consistent for a given teacher for the purpose of dealing with uncertainties. It would be interesting to know more about their training to see whether education or experience is more influential.

In addition to the information from the questionnaire, it would be useful to observe teachers and to note their word-correction strategies. It wouldn't be possible to control the types of errors that occur with this method, but the strategies used by the teachers would be more likely to be representative of classroom reality. The observations would have to occur before the questionnaire (so the respondents wouldn't know what was being observed), and the content of the lesson would have to contain a
fair amount of new vocabulary. It would be useful to know if teachers' strategies of explanation vary according to class level, category of anomaly, structure of sentence or the judged importance of the word. It would be especially interesting to know how often teachers actually stop during class and think about the intuitive reasons they use a word the way they do.

Another way to investigate teachers' intuitions and strategies would be to have them evaluate several controlled explanations, presumably of other teachers. This might be a way to gain more insights into teachers' motives for what and how much they think students should be told about a word. It would be less effective at investigating spontaneous intuitions about words than the method that was used in this study, but it might serve to "prime the pump" for those who have particular difficulty providing ad hoc explanations, but do have some sense of lexical generalizations.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that certain categories, especially Animate/Inanimate Collocations and Positive/Negative Connotations, are fairly transparent to teachers. Although teachers don't consistently identify lexical categories, their explanations reveal considerable insights into what limits word use in these categories. In other categories, particularly in the area of General Lexical Collocation, teachers find the errors far
less transparent and consequently use familiar labels inappropriately.

The results of this study offer some insights into the strategies that teachers use to deal with what they don't know about words. The strategies of illustrating word meaning by showing the relations between two or more words and by giving examples were often used appropriately in spite of inappropriate categorizations. If the frequency indicated here is of any consequence, the most difficult strategy is categorization, the second most difficult is explanation, and the easiest is exemplification.

It seems unfortunate that teachers are left to their own resources when learning to address spontaneous questions about vocabulary errors, but it's not surprising. First, there are few rules to guide lexical acquisition. Second, it will always be difficult for native speakers to identify what they do intuitively. Finally, it's difficult for a teacher to feel out of control in the classroom and to face a class without clear (pre-planned) answers. To step aside and acknowledge uncertainty about a word is very difficult for many teachers. Teacher training communities would be well advised to raise the consciousness of language teachers so that they see the merit in asking themselves questions about why they use words the way they do and to consider the classroom a place where teachers can stop and think about internalized rules. This will not address all lexical difficulties, but in that it leads toward any explanatory information about how a word is used,
it is productive. The ideal vocabulary-learning environment is one in which experimentation is the norm for teachers and students alike and where students follow the teachers' example of asking the right questions about how words are used.
# TABLE I
CATEGORIES AND EXPLANATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OK</th>
<th>NC</th>
<th>AC</th>
<th>IC AP EX</th>
<th>IC IN EX</th>
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</thead>
</table>

**ANIMATE/INANIMATE COLLOCATIONS**

1. The mechanic told me to sell this car because it was incurable.
   
   OK NC AC IC AP IN EX EX
   
   0 5 4 3 0

6. I was so nervous that my hands were vibrating.
   
   2 4 3 2 0

   1 informant: "I'd get back to the students later with the answer."

7. The lawn mower was disabled.
   
   3 3 4 2 0

**POSITIVE/NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS**

2. The reporters exposed the candidate's list of military honors.
   
   3 4 4 1 0

   1 Informant who said "ok" added: "assuming the list was fake."

9. The family was struck by a series of very happy events.
   
   7 3 2 0

   All of those in NC used the words "negative" or "not positive" in the explanation.

11. Wearing too much make-up enhances facial wrinkles and blemishes.
   
   2 7 3 0 0

   5 of those in NC had the word "positive" in the explanation. 3 used "positive connotation."

**SPECIFIC CONNOTATIONS**

3. He bought drugs at the drugstore.
   
   3 4 3 1 0

   1 respondent didn't answer.
12. They were singing a gay song.

DEGREE
10. The weather determines how much ice cream a store will sell.

GOAL/SOURCE
5. She borrowed me the money I needed.
14. The fence and the car collided.

GENERAL LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS
8. I like my coffee mild.
13. The weather was so attractive that we hated to stay inside.

1 NC used the word "connotes" in the explanation.
1 of the respondents counted as "Inappropriate explanation" actually had no explanation.

0 8 3 1 0
0 10 1 0 1

3 3 0 0 4
2 respondents didn't answer
The 4 with incorrect categories gave examples, but no explanations.

3 4 1 0 3
1 respondent didn't answer.
TABLE II
TERMINOLOGY USED FOR CATEGORIES

(The number in parenthesis refers to the questionnaire item for which this category was used.)

ANIMATE/INANIMATE COLLOCATIONS

**Appropriate categories:**
- appropriate collocation (1)
- humanizing an inanimate obj., humans, & humanization (1,7)
- adjective for animate (1)
- appropriate for machinery (6)
- dehumanization (6)
- mechanical device (6)
- Animate (7)

**Inappropriate categories**
- Awkward (1, 6, 7)
- Word choice (1)
- Constraint on meaning (1)
- idiomatic phrase (6)

POSITIVE/NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS

**Appropriate categories:**
- Negative/positive connotation (2,9,11)
- Connotation or positive connotation (2,11)
- Negative/positive collocation (9,11)
- Positive collocation (11)
- Mixed connotation (9,11)
- Wrong connotation (11)

**Inaccurate categories:**
- Awkward (2,9,)
- Constraint (9)

SPECIFIC CONNOTATIONS

**Appropriate categories:**
- Mixed connotation (3)
- Connotation (3)
- Awkward/Not good connotation (3)
- Cultural connotation (12)
- Unintentional social connotation (12)

**Inaccurate categories:**
- Informal English (3)
- Numerous definitions (12)

DEGREE

**Appropriate categories:**
- Too indefinite (4)
- Strength of the relationship (10)
Inappropriate categories:
Constraint (4)
Not quantifiable (4)
Awkward (4, 10)
Verb for a person (4)
Verb showing causatives (10)

GOAL/SOURCE
Accurate categories:
Direction of the action confused (5)
Problem in direction (5)
Verb for the person receiving (5)
Incorrect analysis of verb usage (14)

Inaccurate categories:
Wrong word category (5, 14)

GENERAL LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS
Accurate categories:
Unlikely collocation

IC:
Incorrect description (8)
Awkward (8, 13)
Not idiomatic in English (8)
Constraint (8)
Humanizing an inanimate object (13)
Humans only (13)
### TABLE III
THE USE OF EXAMPLES AND EXPLANATIONS

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<td>Questions from Questionnaire</td>
<td>Respondents</td>
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THE USE OF EXAMPLES AND EXPLANATIONS  
(Continued)

Explanation only:   
Sample only:   
Both: 

Roman Numerals:   
Arabic Numerals:   
Questions from Questionnaire   
Respondents

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List of References


