

More to give than just the div:

# semantics

and how to get them right

Hidde de Vries, Beyond Tellerrand, Düsseldorf, 2021

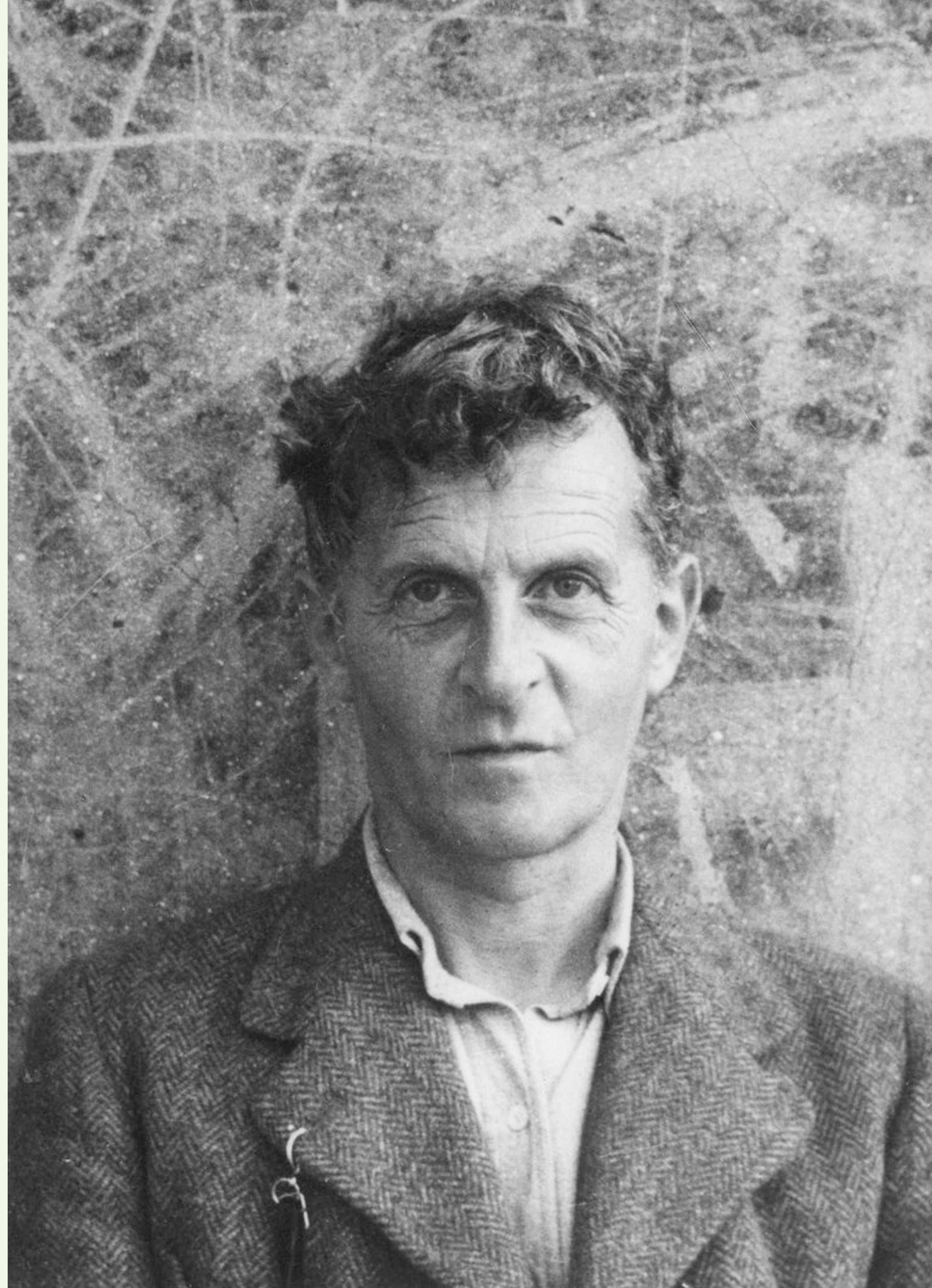
# semantics



# Correspondence theories of meaning

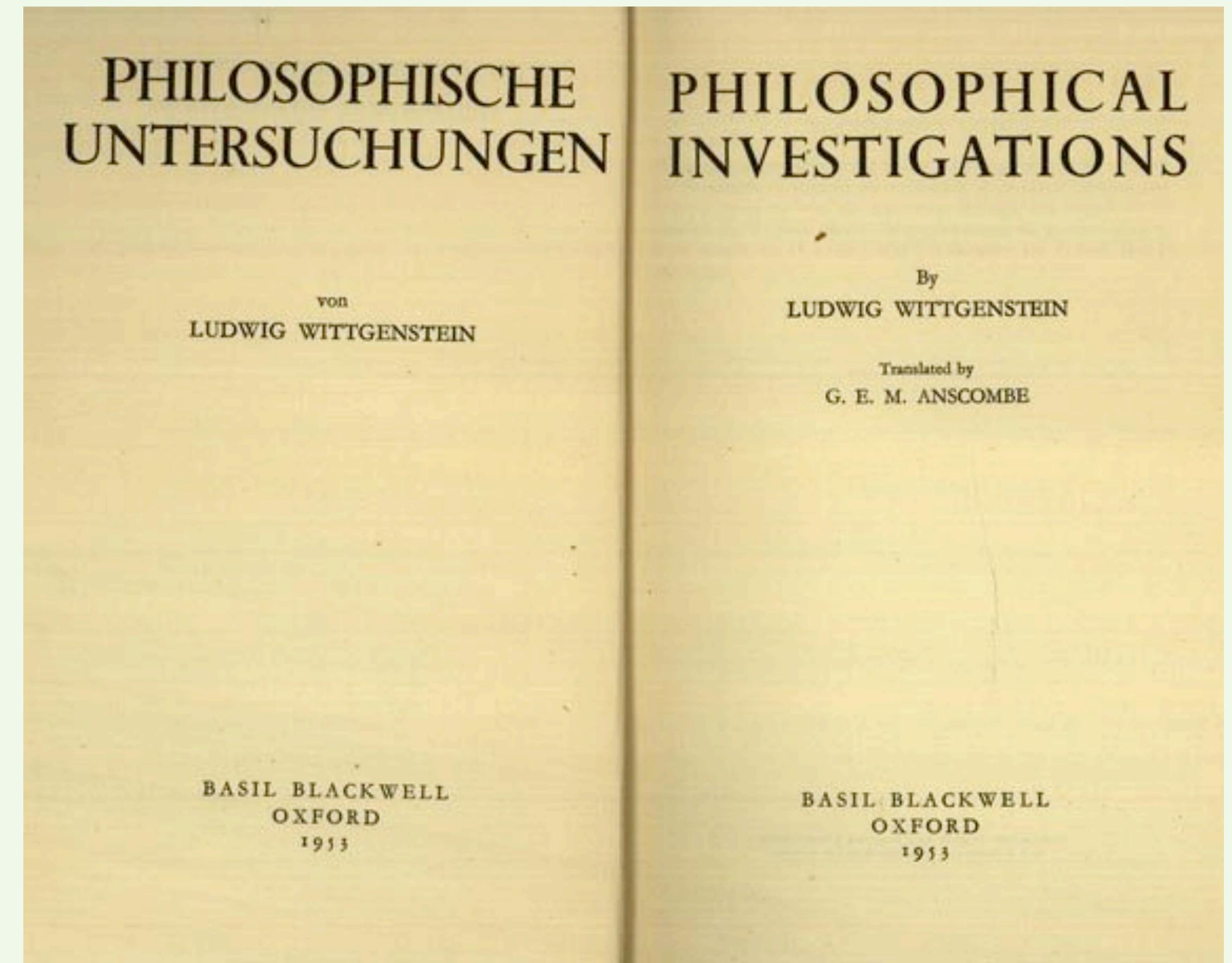
# Wittgenstein: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (1953)



Wittgenstein: no such thing as  
a **private language**, there can  
only be meaning if it's shared

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (1953)

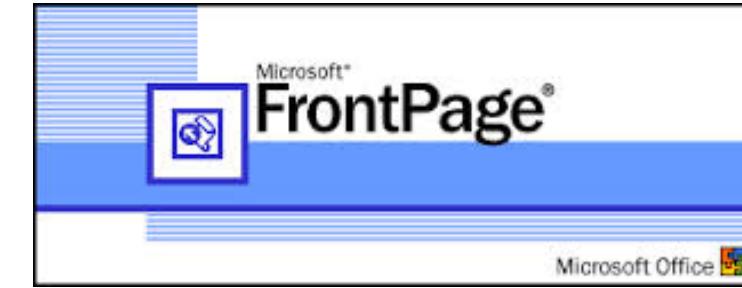
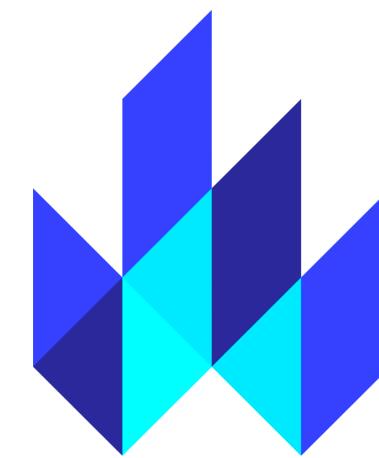
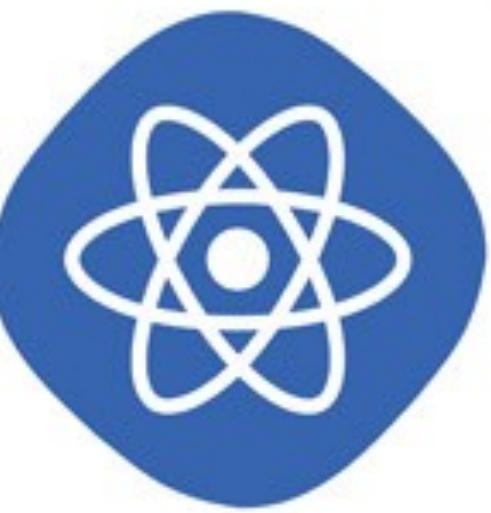


# Your design system is a shared language.

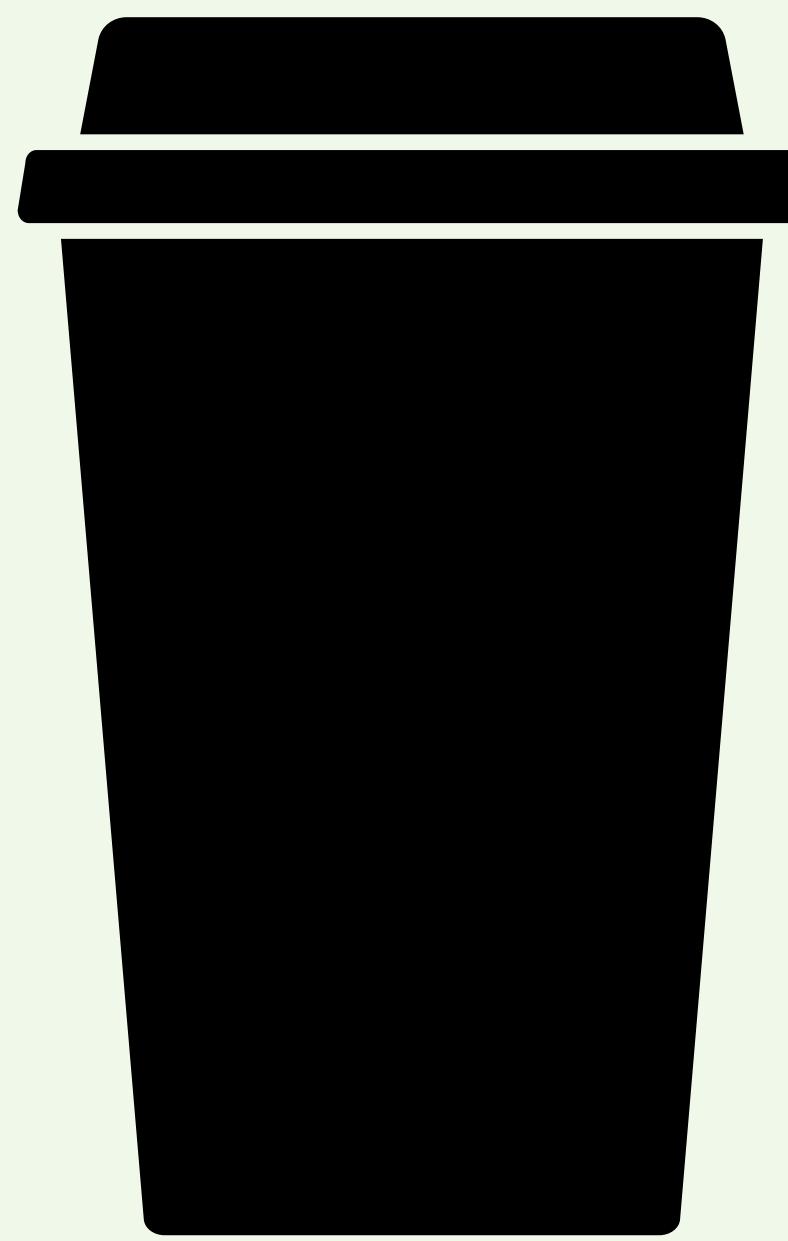
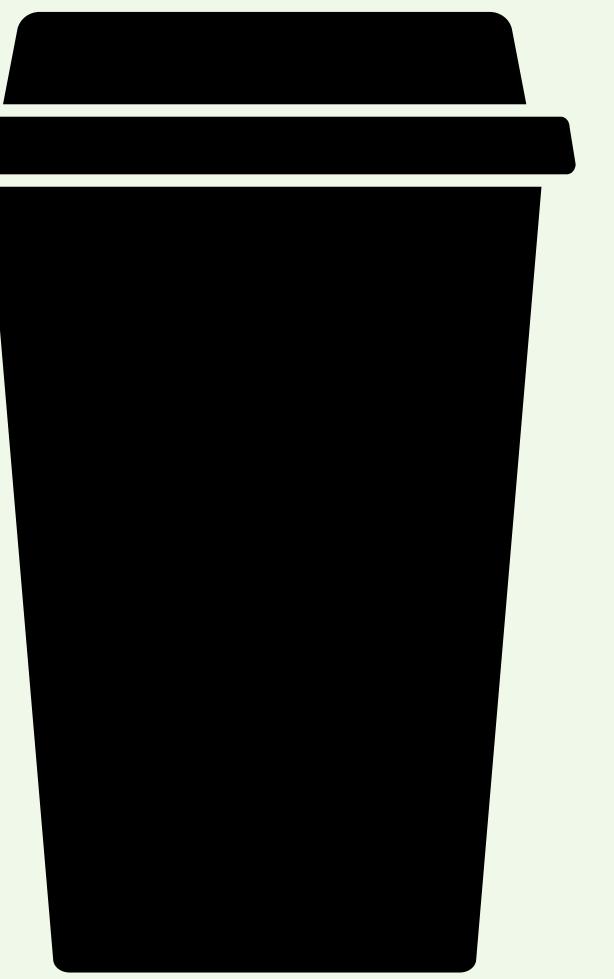


# Your API is a shared language.

Your Vue/Svelte/<custom-element> component names  
are a shared language.

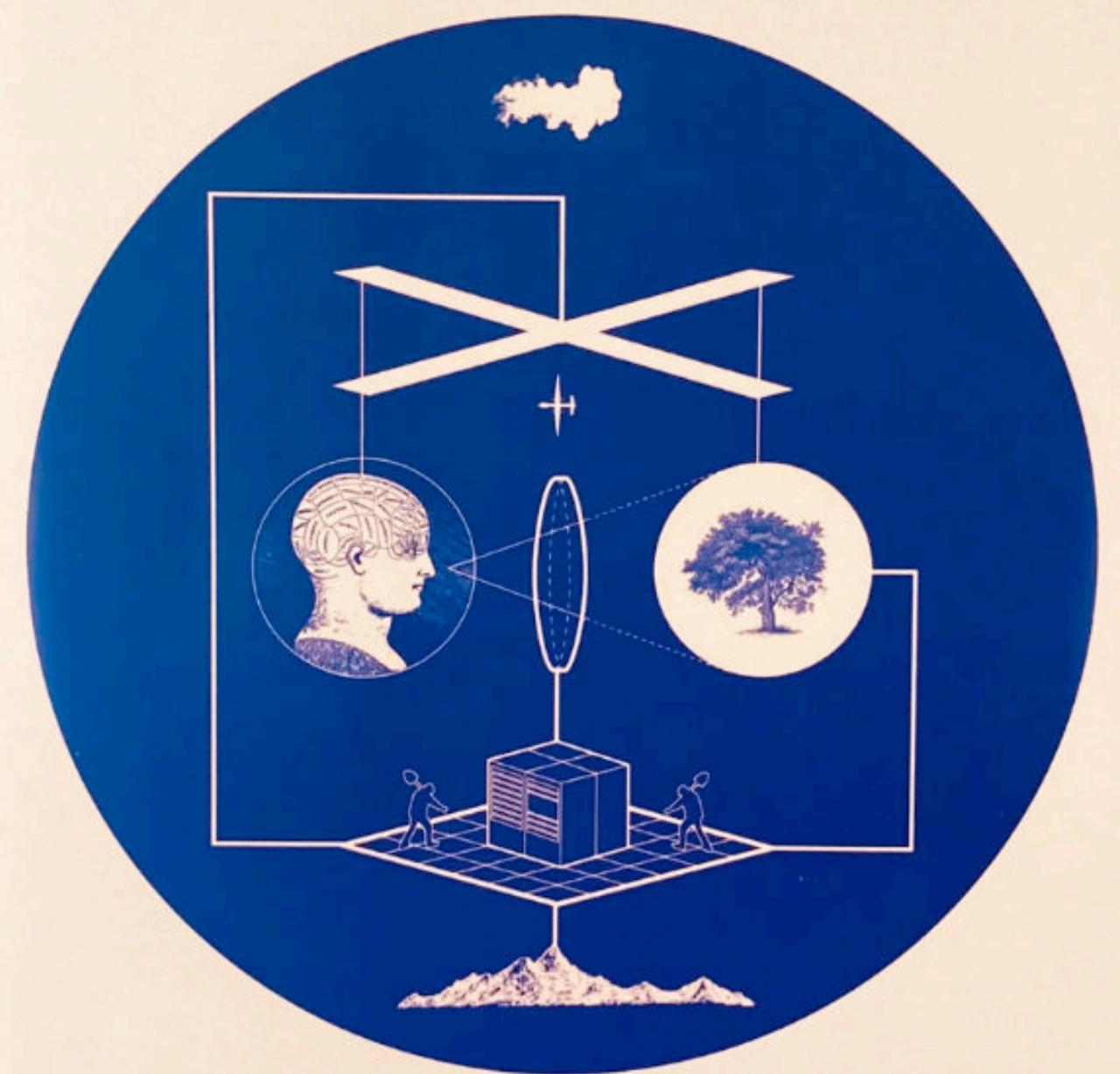


Classification depends on  
place and culture



Classification is hard  
and AI aren't great at it

KATE CRAWFORD



ATLAS OF AI

# Semantics on the web

For the web, you could  
have a lot semantics...

```
<?xml version="1.0"?>
<purchaseOrder orderDate="1999-10-20">
  <shipTo country="US">
    <name>Alice Smith</name>
    <street>123 Maple Street</street>
    <city>Mill Valley</city>
    <state>CA</state>
    <zip>90952</zip>
  </shipTo>
  <billTo country="US">
    <name>Robert Smith</name>
    <street>8 Oak Avenue</street>
    <city>Old Town</city>
    <state>PA</state>
    <zip>95819</zip>
  </billTo>
  <comment>Hurry, my lawn is going wild<!/>
  <comment>Hurry, my lawn is going wild<!/comment>
  <items>
    <item partNum="872-AA">
      <productName>Lawnmower</productName>
      <quantity>1</quantity>
      <USPrice>148.95</USPrice>
    </item>
  </items>
</purchaseOrder>
```

```
</xsu:documentation>
</xsd:annotation>

<xsd:element name="purchaseOrder" type="PurchaseOrderType">
<xsd:element name="comment" type="xsd:string"/>
<xsd:complexType name="PurchaseOrderType">
  <xsd:sequence>
    <xsd:element name="shipTo" type="USAddress"/>
    <xsd:element name="billTo" type="USAddress"/>
    <xsd:element ref="comment" minOccurs="0"/>
    <xsd:element name="items" type="Items"/>
  </xsd:sequence>
  <xsd:attribute name="orderDate" type="xsd:date"/>
</xsd:complexType>

<xsd:complexType name="USAddress">
  <xsd:sequence>
    <xsd:element name="name" type="xsd:string"/>
    <xsd:element name="street" type="xsd:string"/>
    <xsd:element name="city" type="xsd:string"/>
    <xsd:element name="state" type="xsd:string"/>
    <xsd:element name="zip" type="xsd:decimal"/>
  </xsd:sequence>
</xsd:complexType>
```

...but for accessibility,  
we need one,  
agreed-upon set

HTML is a standard way for your  
website to declare its semantics

**HTML is not a way to declare  
what stuff looks like on a page**

It's a way to declare  
what stuff is on a page

HTML semantics are  
not behaviour, but are  
often tied to it



Multi device web

# HTML enables...

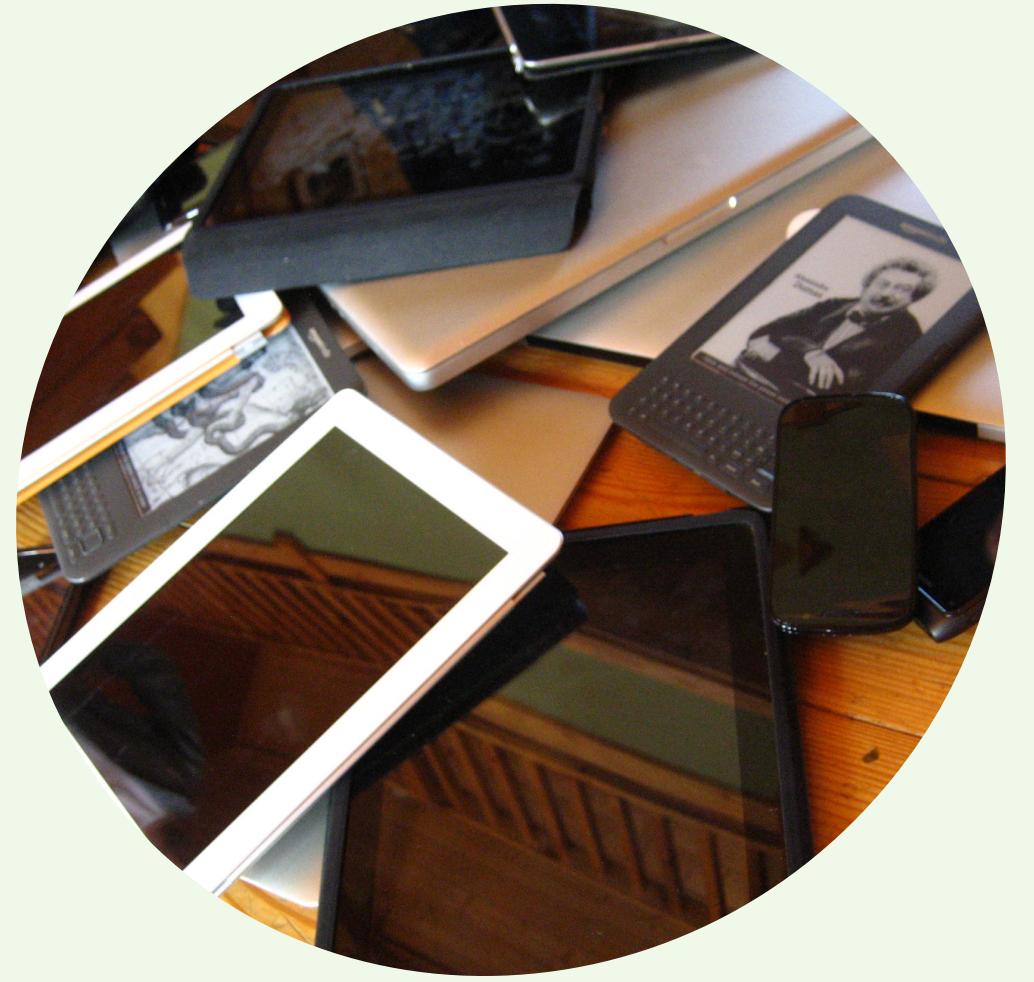


This NeXT machine was used to develop and run the first WWW server, multimedia browser and web editor



Multi device web

# HTML enables...



Multi device web

**Heading 1**

**Heading 2**

Content

Default stylesheets

HTML enables...



Multi device web

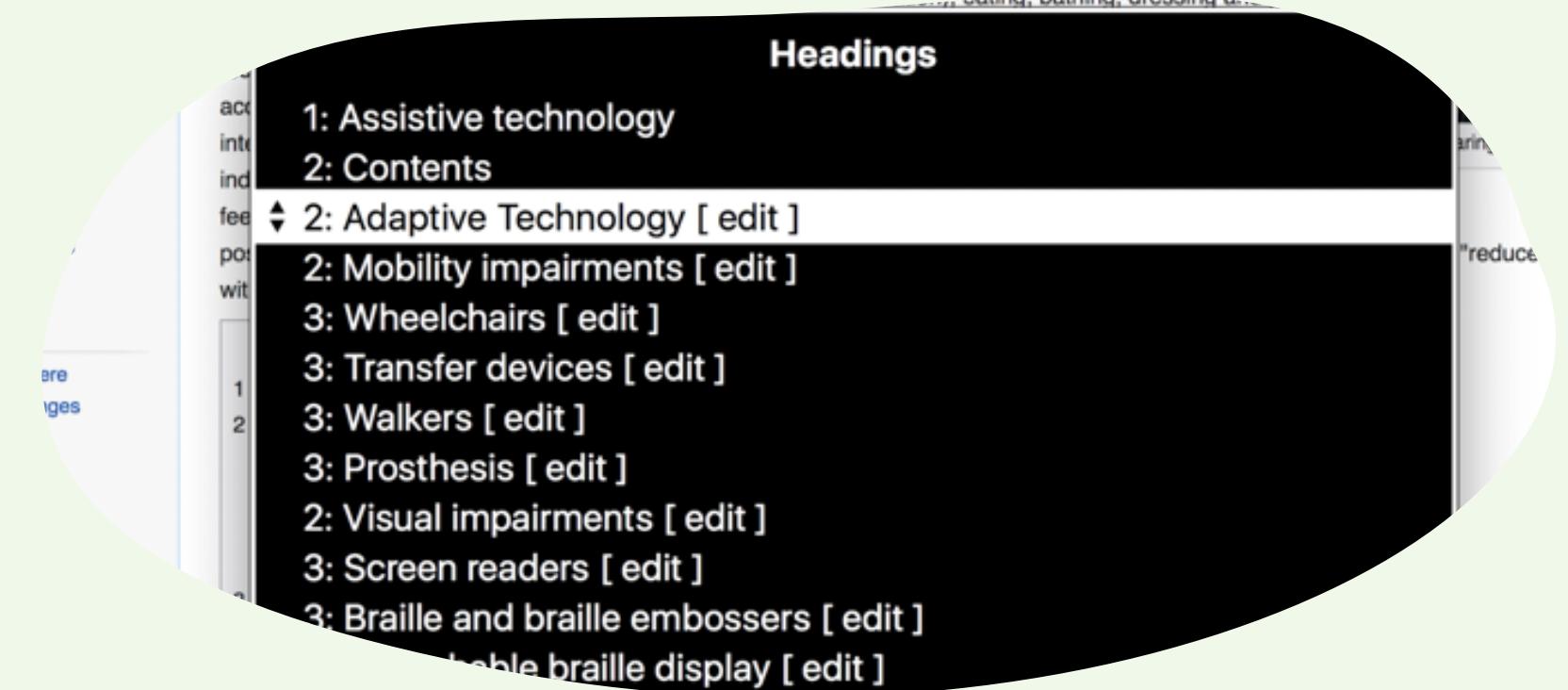
# Heading 1

## Heading 2

Content

Default stylesheets

# HTML enables...



‘Browse by heading’



Multi device web

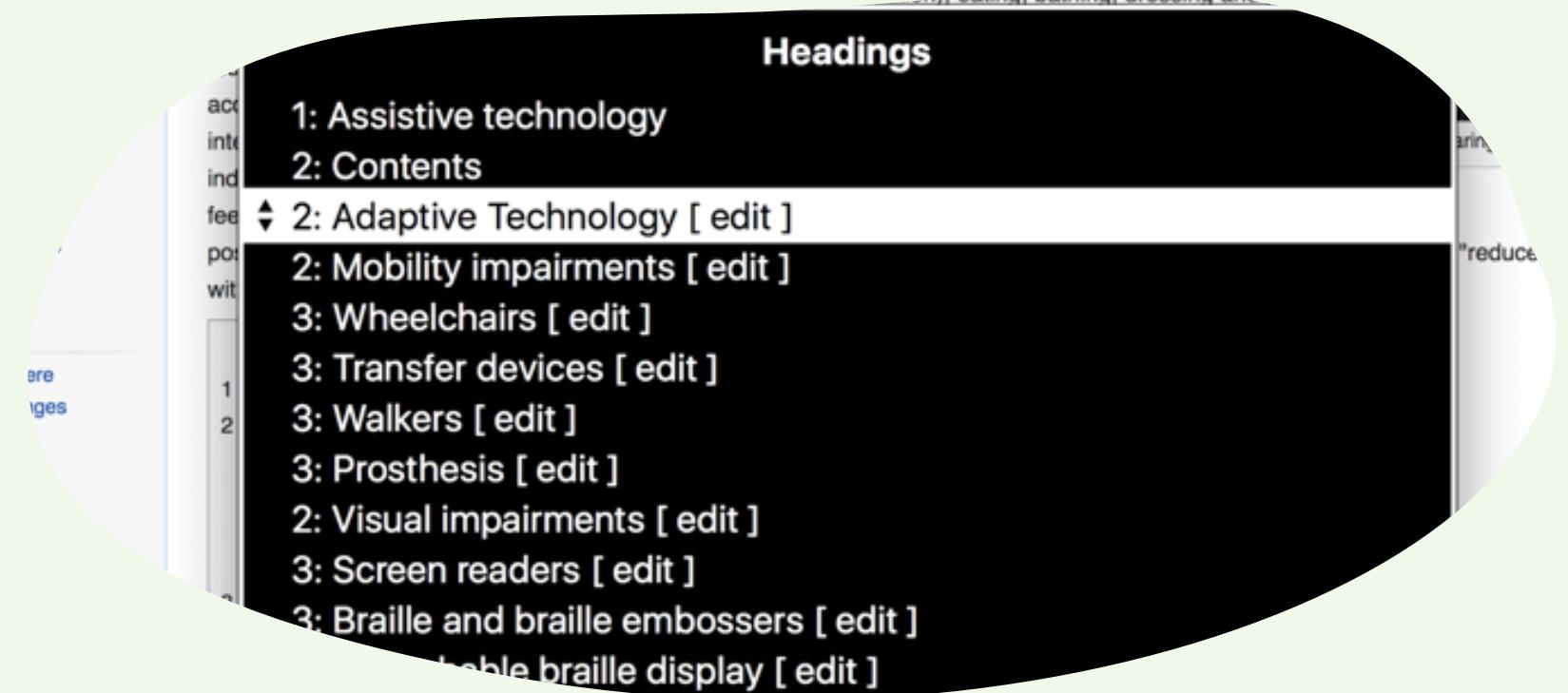
# Heading 1

## Heading 2

Content

Default stylesheets

# HTML enables...



‘Browse by heading’

Default behaviour

Cook rice



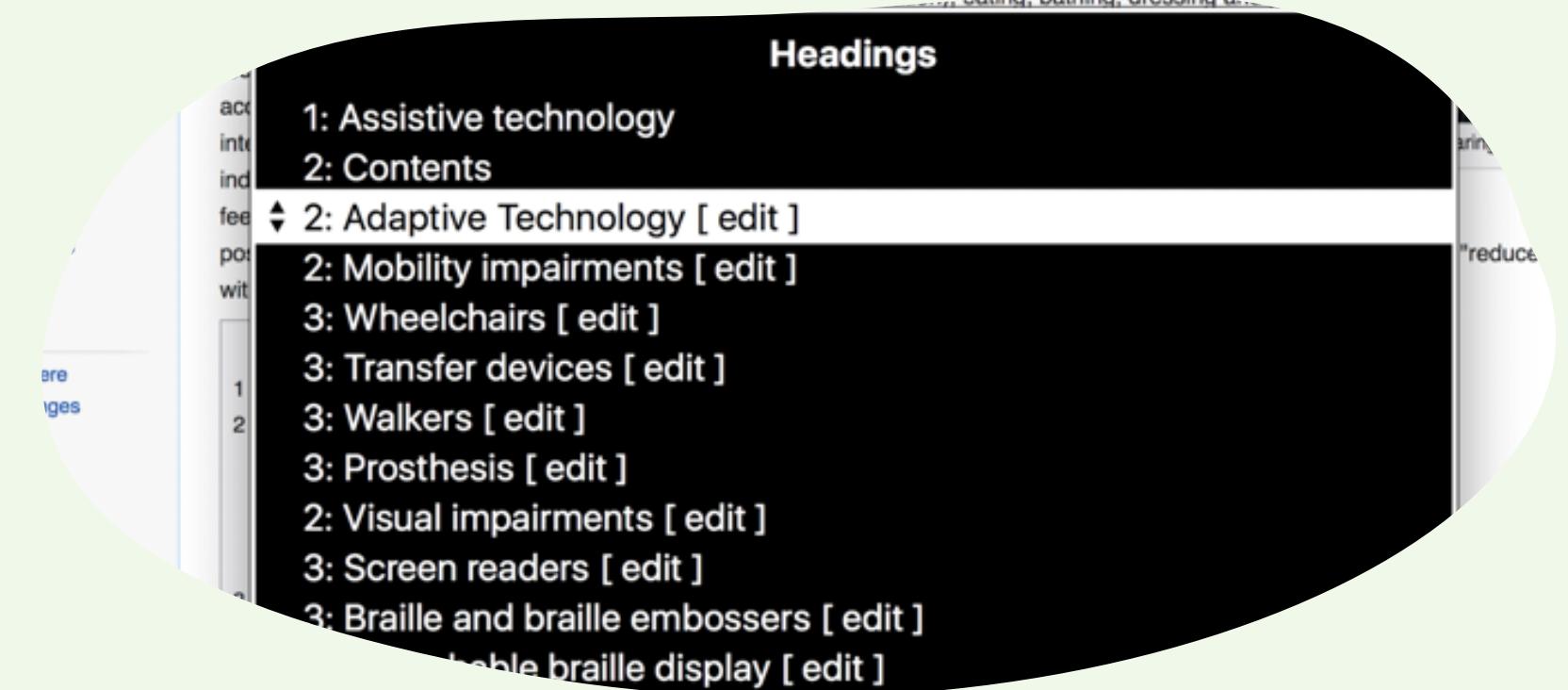
Multi device web

# Heading 1

## Heading 2

Content

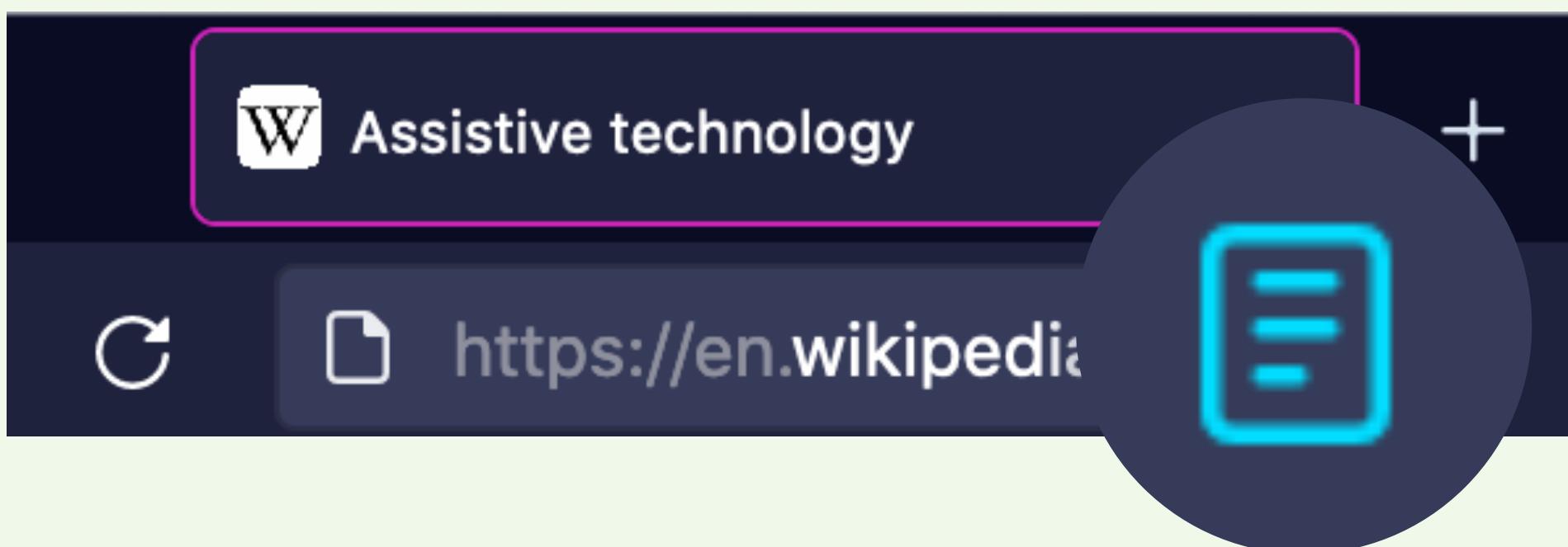
## Default stylesheets



‘Browse by heading’

# HTML enables...

Reader mode



Default behaviour

Cook rice



Andrej Karpathy ✅  
@karpathy

...

## Browsing the web, 2021

The screenshot shows a news article from InfoWorld titled "How Docker broke in half". The article discusses the company's decline from a game-changing container company to a shell of its former self. It features a photo of Scott Carey, UK Group Editor, InfoWorld. Below the article, there is a section with the heading "Docker didn't invent containers" and a quote about Docker enabling developers to "containerize" their code.

**How Docker broke in half**

The game changing container company is a shell of its former self. What happened to one of the hottest enterprise technology businesses of the cloud era?

By Scott Carey  
UK Group Editor, InfoWorld |

tom.ruethai / Shutterstock / Docker

Docker didn't invent containers—the method of packaging up computer code into compact units that could be easily ported from laptop to server to server—but it did take them mainstream by creating a common set of open source tooling and reusable images which suddenly allowed all developers to build their software once and run it anywhere.

The ease with which Docker enabled developers to "containerize" their

6:47 AM · Sep 9, 2021 · Twitter Web App



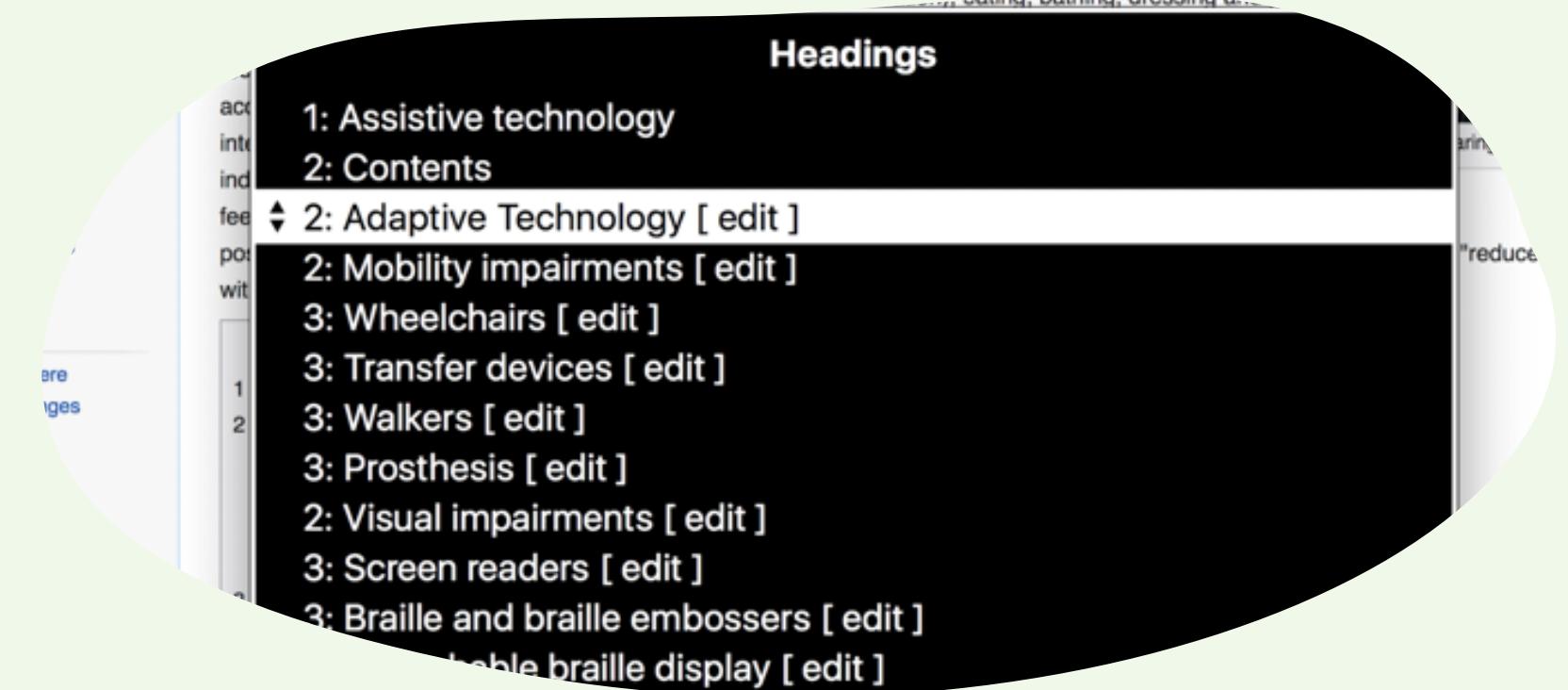
Multi device web

# Heading 1

## Heading 2

Content

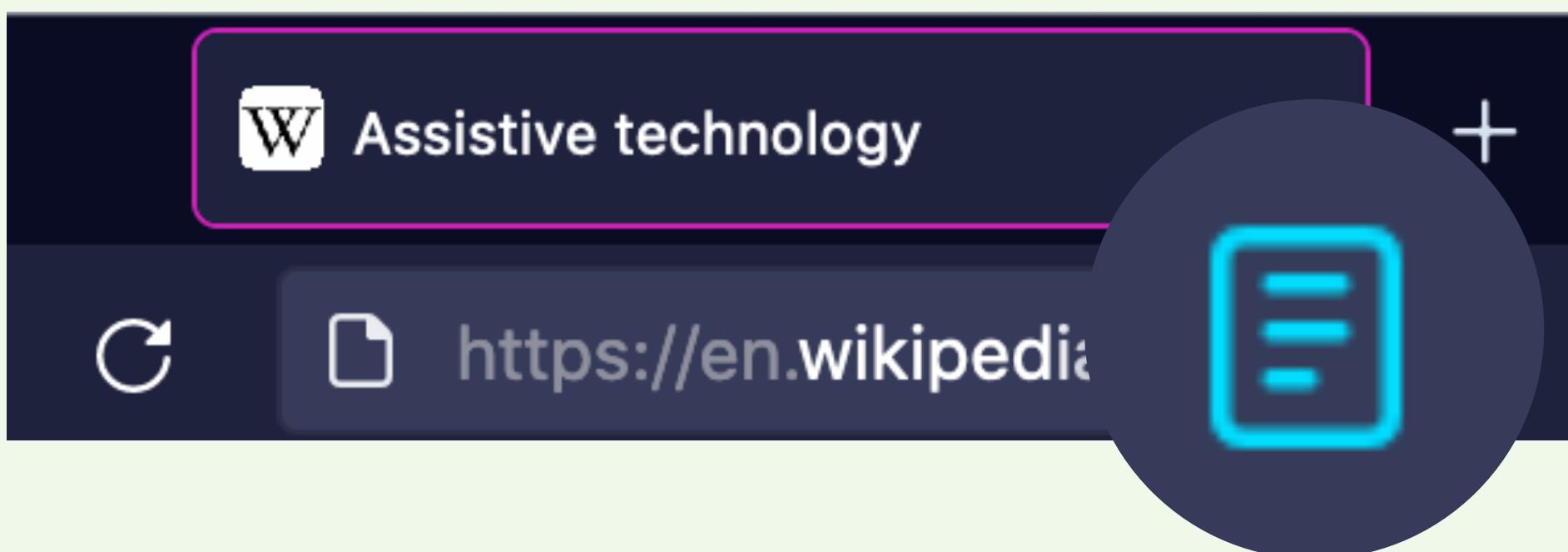
## Default stylesheets



‘Browse by heading’

# HTML enables...

Reader mode

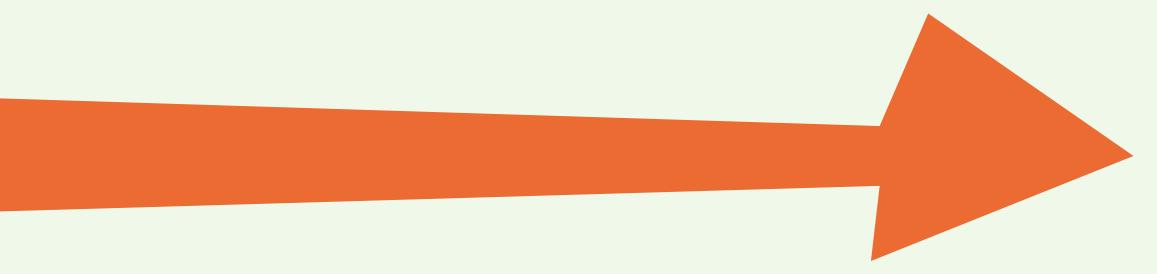


Default behaviour

Cook rice

HTML points machines  
at what stuff is

HTML points assistive  
technology at what stuff is



# Hire for HTML expertise

# In practice

Semantics in HTML is in  
`<element>`

Semantics in HTML is in  
`<element attribute>`

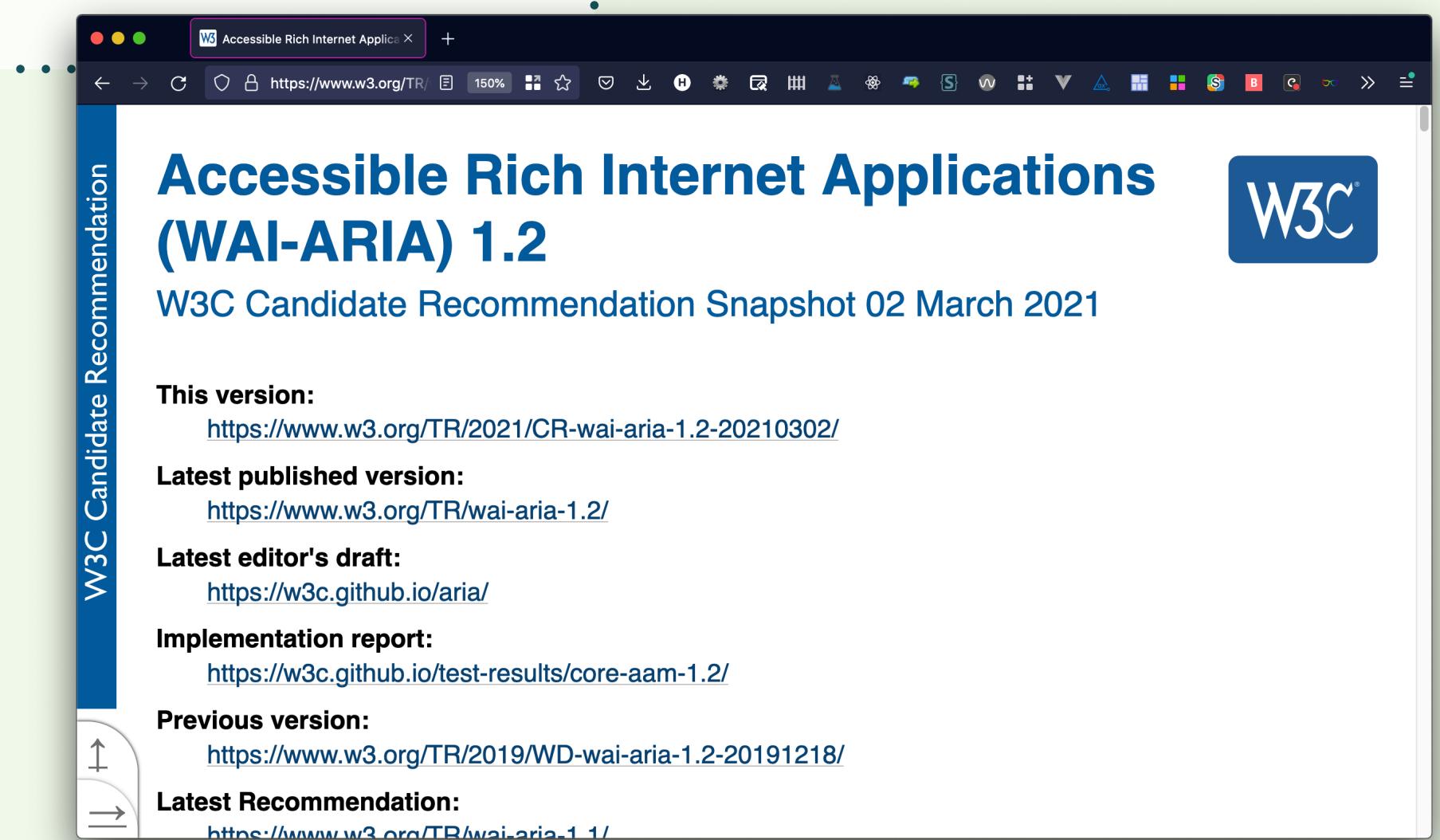
Semantics in HTML is in

`<element attribute="value">`

WAI-ARIA defines  
semantics beyond HTML

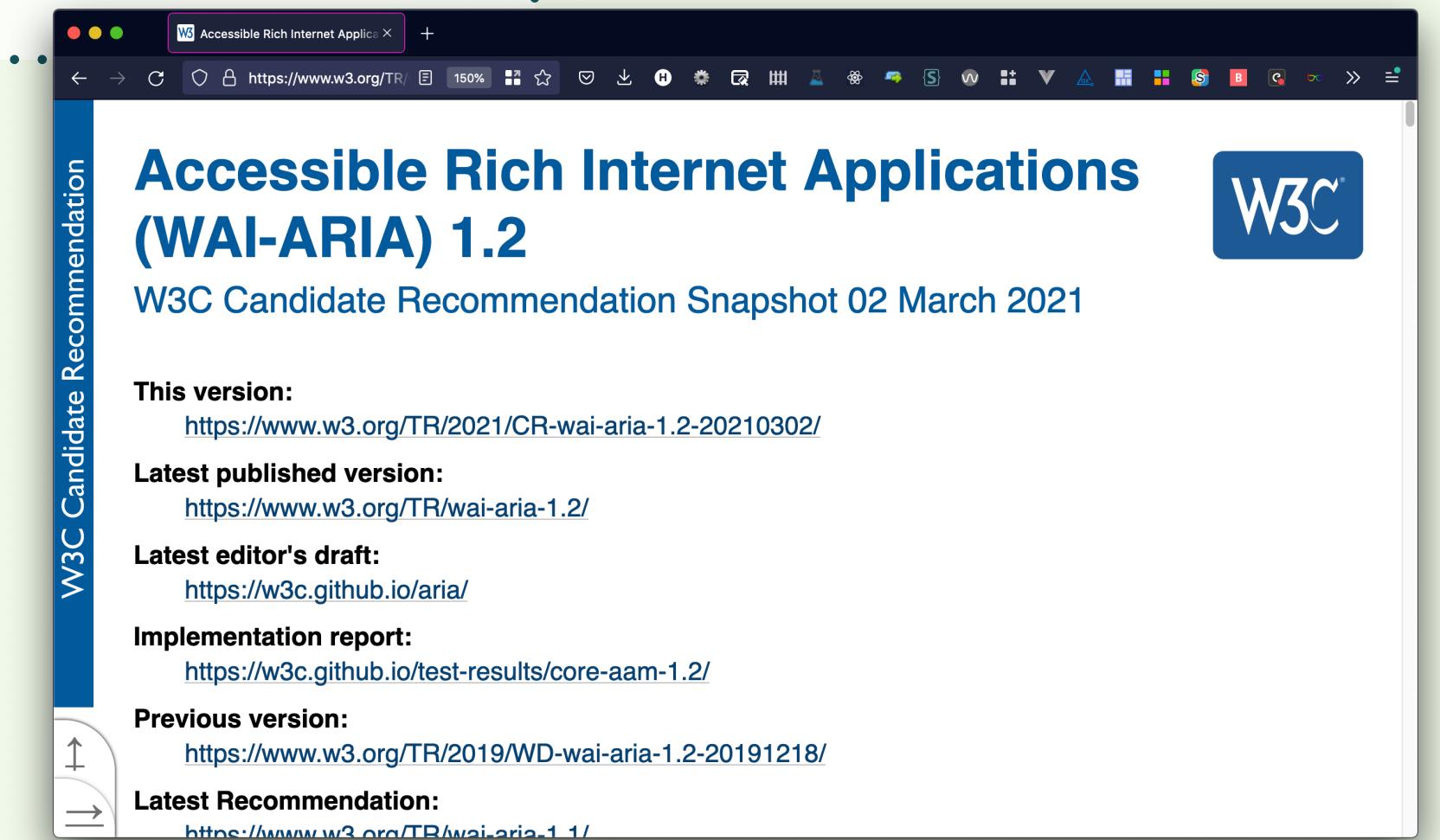
“WAI-ARIA is designed to provide semantic information about objects when host languages lack native semantics [...]”

Accessible Rich Internet Applications (WAI-ARIA) 1.2, §8.4



“ host languages [...] can evolve and provide new native features that correspond to WAI-ARIA features [so] there are many situations in which WAI-ARIA semantics are redundant

Accessible Rich Internet Applications (WAI-ARIA) 1.2, §8.4



# Multiple ways to get to one semantic

<button>

Semantic HTML element

<div role="button">

Semanticless HTML element with WAI-ARIA role for semantics

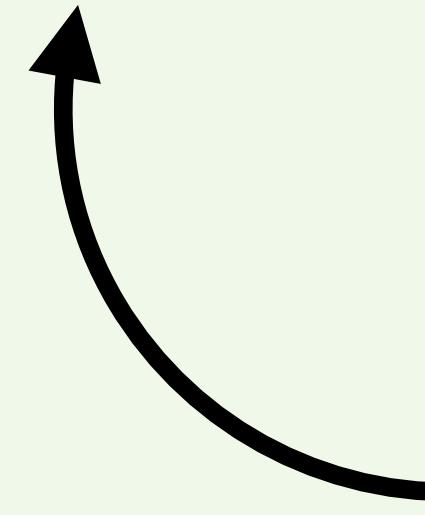
# Multiple ways to get to one semantic

`<button>`

Semantic HTML element

`<div role="button">`

Semanticless HTML element with WAI-ARIA role for semantics



use if possible

# Speaking of buttons...



**Cory LaViska**  
@claviska

...

**Unpopular opinion: in a design system, a "link" and a "button" should be one component.**

10:01 PM · Oct 5, 2021 · Twitter Web App

Products

Add to cart

Products

Add to cart

the right semantics:  
the right HTML  
element\* in the DOM

\*or: the right role

CNN International - Breaking News

https://edition.cnn.com

World US Politics Business Health Entertainment Style Travel Sports Videos Edition

NEW PODCAST: Tug of war | COVID-19: Vaccination tracker | TRENDING: Astroworld tragedy | Tuvalu minister | Obama speech | US reopens | George Harrison

# US is reopening its borders to global epicenter of Covid-19



The country ends a 20-month travel ban at the same moment Europe is battling a surge in cases

Global Covid-19 cases surpass 250 million



## Obama takes swipe at Trump over 'active hostility' on climate

- See an ethical farm with 6,000 chickens
- Fossil fuel lobbyists outnumber any single country at COP26
- Minister stands in suit and tie in sea to speak



## CIA Director had rare conversation with Putin

Sierra Leone tanker blast deaths rise to 115

US seizes \$6 million in ransom payments

**Analysis:** Biden basks after huge victory

**Analysis:** Nancy Pelosi is the most effective speaker ever

Gay footballer says he would be 'scared' to play at 2022 World Cup in Qatar

Bodies of three missing French climbers recovered in Himalayas

Ethiopia appears to be detaining people 'based on ethnicity,' commission warns

Crime scene technician testifies in trial of men charged with killing Ahmaud Arbery

CNN International - Breaking News

https://edition.cnn.com

World US Politics Business Health Entertainment Style Travel Sports Videos Edition

NEW PODCAST: Tug of war | COVID-19: role: link

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NATHAN LARSEN/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES

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agedy | Tuvalu minister | Obama speech | US reopens | George Harrison

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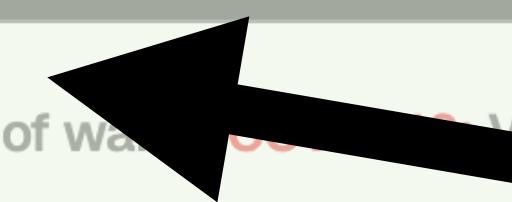
CNN International - Breaking News

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NATHAN LARSEN/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES

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role: link

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role: button

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@hdv

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### News and buzz



A decades-long photography series about girlhood takes a tragic turn

China tightens grip on outspoken CEOs

Goldman Sachs: Inflation will likely get worse before it gets better

Short squeezes are pushing these stocks to the moon

Author claims news organizations are in 'woke stranglehold'

### Featured



What you need to know before traveling to the US

### Spotlight



**Analysis:** Xi is rewriting history. But it's the future he wants to leave his mark on



Max Verstappen wins Mexican Grand Prix ahead of Lewis Hamilton as he edges towards F1 title



West Ham topple Liverpool's unbeaten run in five-goal thriller

CNN International - Breaking Ne X +

https://edition.cnn.com

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**News and buzz**



A decades-long p series about girlh tragic turn

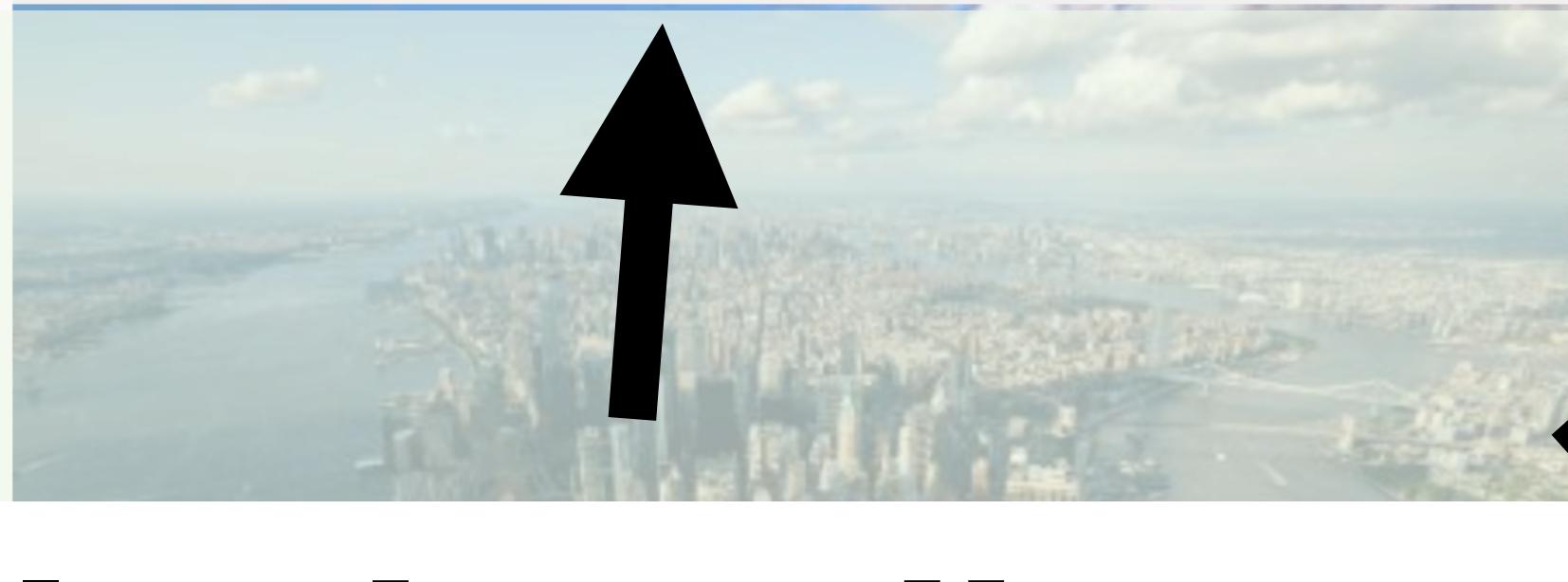
China tightens grip on outspoken CEOs

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Author claims news organizations are in 'woke stranglehold'

**Featured**



role: heading

What you need to know before traveling to the US



Archaeologists unearth 'slaves' room' at Pompeii

**Spotlight**



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What the end of the Covid-19 pandemic could look like

Ted Cruz accuses Big Bird of spreading propaganda



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## Concertgoer sues Travis Scott

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Crime scene technician testifies in trial of men charged with killing Ahmaud Arbery

French cop survives stabbing attack

Czech parliament won't have any Communist party members for first time in 76 years

Video shows aftermath of assassination

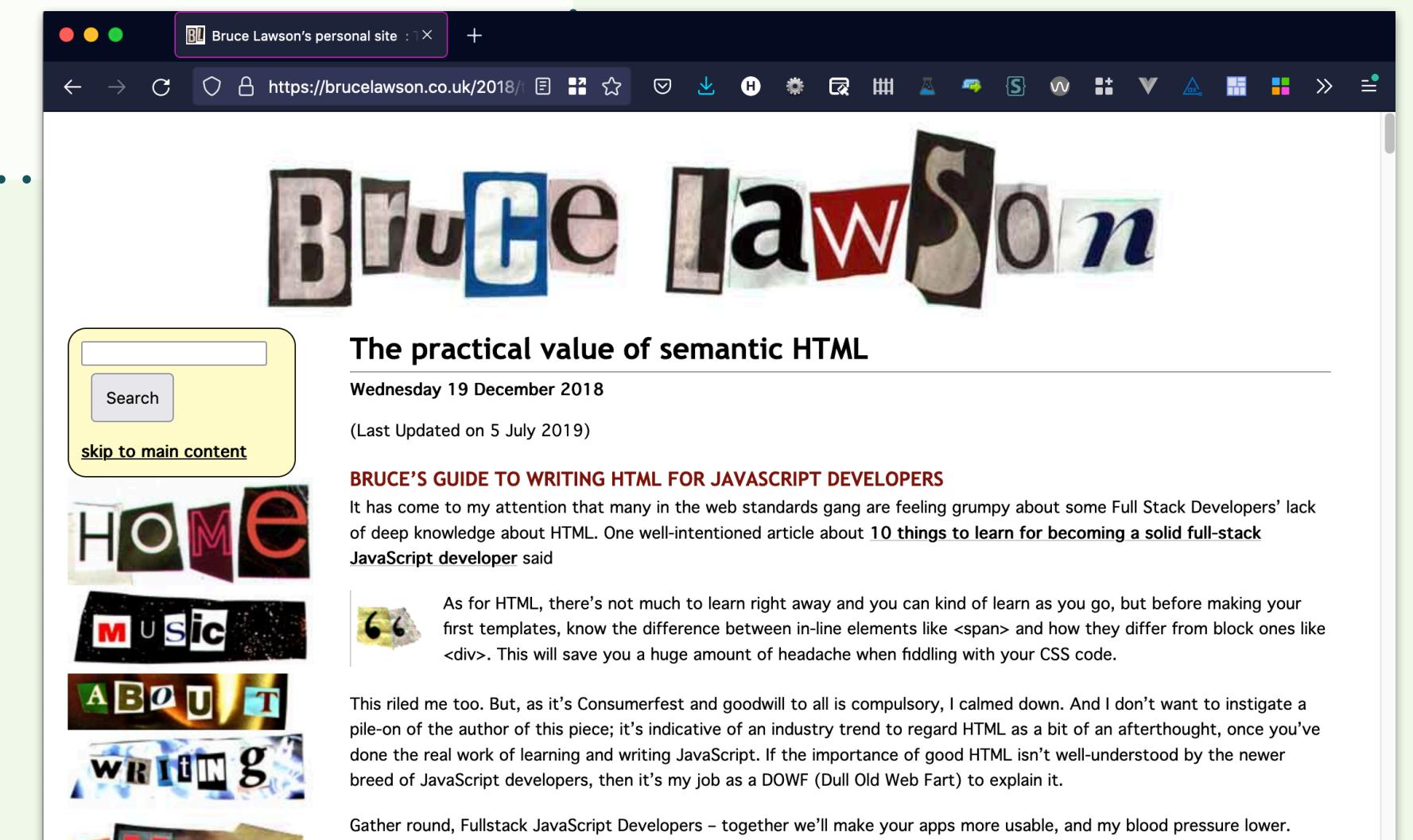
# Key questions for your design system

Can it output the right semantics? Does it encourage the right semantics in docs?

**meaning = use**

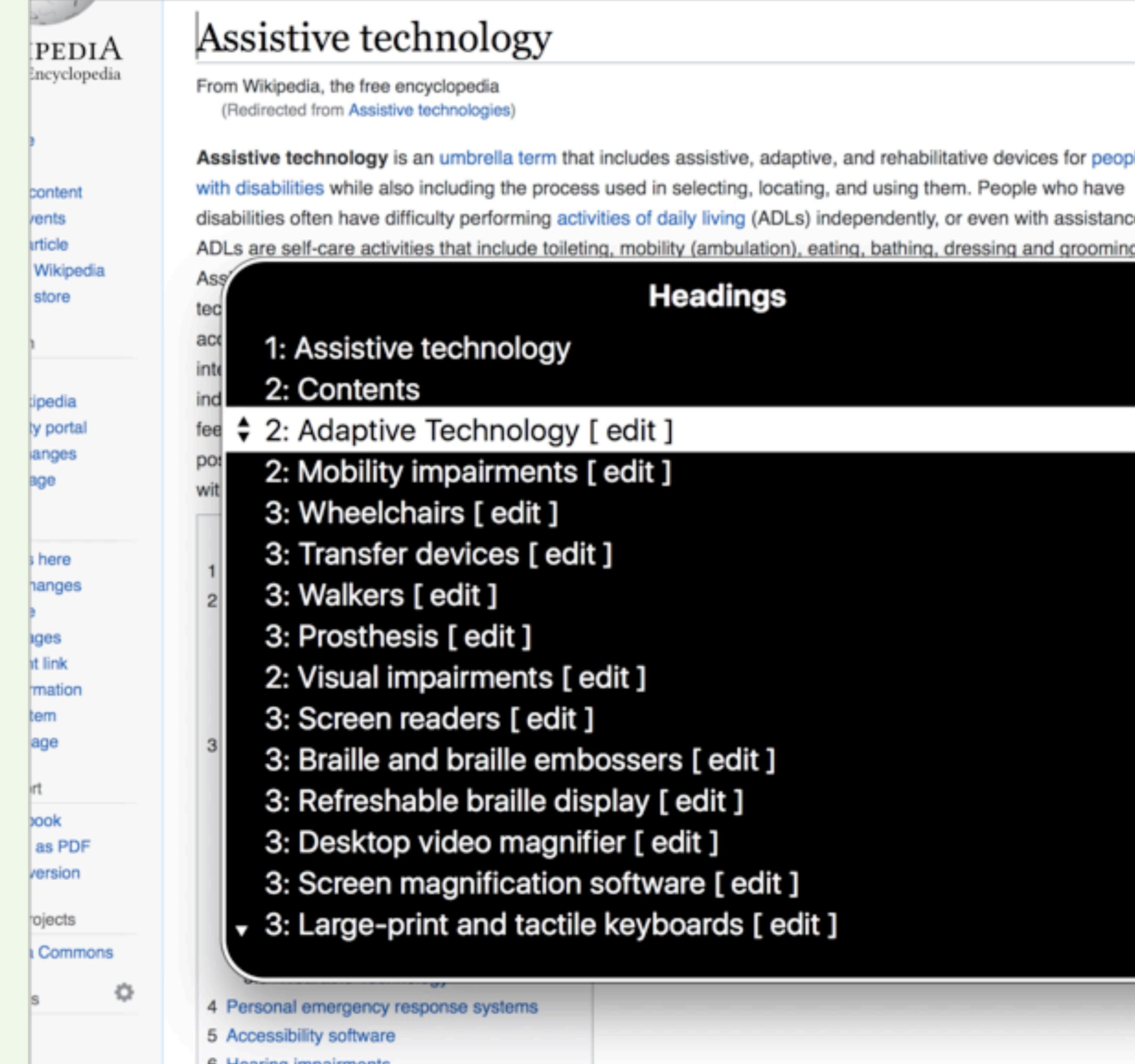
“ (...) semantic HTML, a posh term for choosing the right HTML element for the content. This isn't a philosophical exercise; it has **directly observable practical benefits**.

Bruce Lawson, “The practical value of semantic HTML”



If you use `<h1>`,  
`<h2>`, `<h3>`...,  
people can:

- see headings in reader mode
- navigate by heading



The screenshot shows a Wikipedia page titled "Assistive technology". The page content discusses assistive technology as an umbrella term for devices used by people with disabilities. A navigation sidebar on the left contains links like "content", "events", "article", "Wikipedia store", "Help", "Special pages", "Recent changes", "What links here", "Logs", "Information", "Template", "Category", "Book", "Download as PDF", "Version history", "Projects", "Media Commons", "Settings", and "Help". A "Headings" section is highlighted in white, showing a hierarchical list of headings:

- 1: Assistive technology
- 2: Contents
- 2: Adaptive Technology [edit]
- 2: Mobility impairments [edit]
- 3: Wheelchairs [edit]
- 3: Transfer devices [edit]
- 3: Walkers [edit]
- 3: Prostheses [edit]
- 2: Visual impairments [edit]
- 3: Screen readers [edit]
- 3: Braille and braille embossers [edit]
- 3: Refreshable braille display [edit]
- 3: Desktop video magnifier [edit]
- 3: Screen magnification software [edit]
- ▼ 3: Large-print and tactile keyboards [edit]

Below this, there are numbered links 4 through 6.

open-borders.pages — Edited

View Zoom Insert Table Chart Text Shape Media Comment Collaborate Format Document

I. Introduction		4
Structure		5
The debate: closed borders versus open borders		5
Who wants to cross borders?		7
Perspective		7
2. The case for closed borders		9
The right to self-determination		9
The freedom of association argument		10
Preservation of culture		12
Associative ownership		14
Summary		17
3. The case for open borders		18
Carens' case for open borders		18
All humans are equal		21
Applicability of democratic justification		22
Emigration requires immigration		24
Multiculturalism		25
Summary		26
4. The feasibility of open borders		28
The political reality		28

Select paragraph styles whose text will appear in the table of contents:

Paragraph Styles	#'s
<input type="checkbox"/> Body	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Blockquote	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Bibliography entry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Header 3	
<input type="checkbox"/> Header 1	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Header 2	
<input type="checkbox"/> Header & Footer	
<input type="checkbox"/> Footnote 1	

Range Entire Document

Paragraph Styles +

Body

Title

Subtitle

Heading

Heading 2

Heading 3

Heading Red

✓ Body

CAPTION

Header & Footer

Footnote

# If you use <button>, people can:

- find it in the TAB order
- press it with just a keyboard
- submit the form, even if your JavaScript failed

If you use <ol>, <ul> or <dl>, people can:

- Hear it's a list and with how many items
- Still see it's a list in reader mode

If you use autocomplete on inputs,  
users can:

- Tell their browser to fill in data for them
- Assistive tech can announce input purpose
- Use plugins for personalisation, e.g. with icons

If you use `table` with a `caption`, `th`s for headers and `scope` attributes for direction:

- Assistive tech can provide useful affordances to end users

The HTML spec  
is the place to find  
out how to use HTML

[developers.whatwg.org](https://developers.whatwg.org)



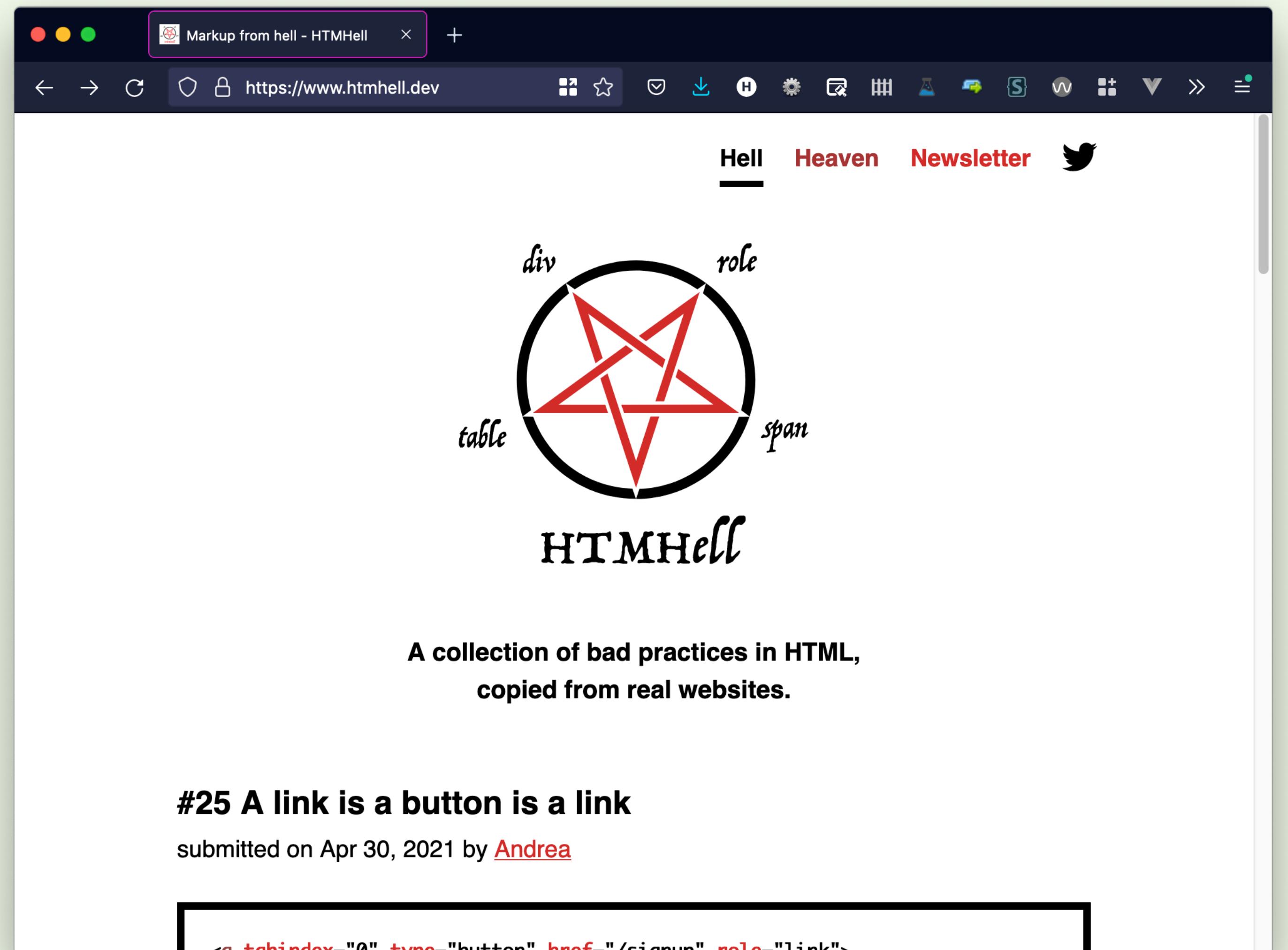
# HTML: The Living Standard

*Developer's Edition — Last Updated 18 September 2017*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 [Introduction](#)
  - 1.1 [Is this HTML5?](#)
  - 1.2 [Background](#)
  - 1.3 [Audience](#)
  - 1.4 [Scope](#)
  - 1.5 [History](#)
  - 1.6 [Design notes](#)
  - 1.7 [HTML vs XML syntax](#)
  - 1.8 [Structure of this specification](#)
  - 1.9 [Privacy concerns](#)
  - 1.10 [A quick introduction to HTML](#)
  - 1.11 [Conformance requirements for authors](#)
  - 1.12 [Suggested reading](#)

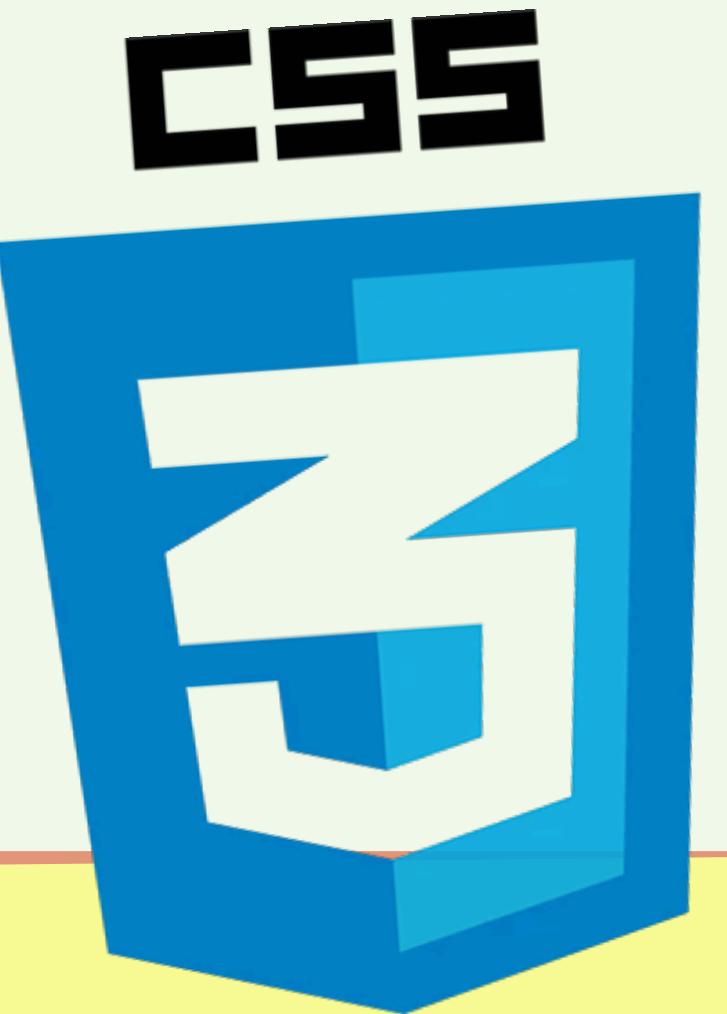
# HTMHell collects examples of how not to use HTML



@hdv

# Intentions vs reality

Sometimes, semantics are  
undone if you use specific CSS



# display overrides semantics

```
display: block;  
display: inline;  
display: grid;  
display: flex;  
display: contents;  
display: none;
```

# Safari / macOS 10.15.6

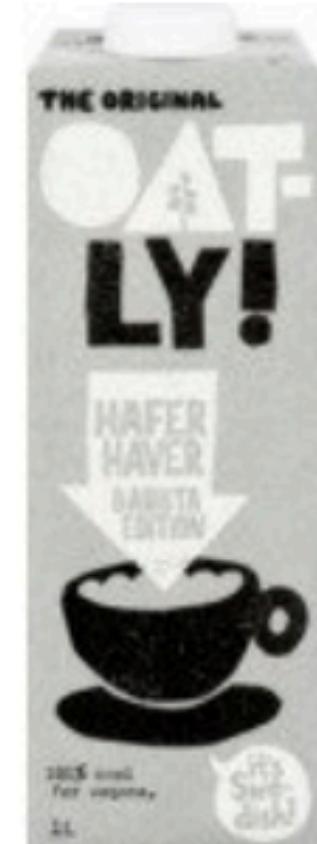
CSS	<table>, etc.	<ul>, <ol>, <dl>	<h#>	<button>
display: flex	✗ <sup>1</sup>	✓ <sup>4</sup>	✓	✓
display: grid	✗ <sup>1</sup>	✓ <sup>4</sup>	✓	✓
display: block	✗ <sup>2</sup>	✗	✓	✓
display: inline-block	✗ <sup>2</sup>	✗	✓	✓
display: contents	✗ <sup>3</sup>	✗	✗	✗

# Lists can lose list semantics when you set list-style-type: none (in Safari)

- courgette
- feta
- basil
- garlic



25% KORTING



2.65  
**1.99**  
1 l

Oatly! Haverdrank Barista Edition



3.59  
200 g



1.65  
1 l

AH Amandel drink ongezoet



1.65  
1 l



1.79  
1 l



0.88  
1 l



James Craig 💉 (he/him)

@cookiecrook

...

Replying to [@pgrucza](#) [@rob\\_dodson](#) and 5 others

Correct. Check the test case linked in that Bugzilla tracker. Lististis on the Web was one of our biggest complaints from VoiceOver users prior to the heuristic change. FWIW, all browsers have similar heuristic checks for layout tables.

6:24 PM · Jan 12, 2019 · Twitter Web App



**James Craig** 💉 (he/him) @cookiecrook · Jan 12, 2019

...

This decision was all about the users' experience on the majority of pages where web developers are not paying attention to the screen reader experience. Definitely open to change suggestions (including updating the heuristic) that make it better for authors w/o penalizing users.

4

1

3

↑

Sometimes, semantics are undone  
when you nest unexpectedly

# Semantics in summary

```
<details>
  <summary>Ingredients</summary>
  <ul>
    <li>courgette</li>
    <li>peas</li>
    <li>basil</li>
    <li>feta</li>
  </ul>
</details>
```

► Ingredients

# Semantics in summary

```
<details open>
  <summary>Ingredients</summary>
  <ul>
    <li>courgette</li>
    <li>peas</li>
    <li>basil</li>
    <li>feta</li>
  </ul>
</details>
```

- ▼ Ingredients
- courgette
  - peas
  - basil
  - feta

# Semantics in summary

```
<details>
  <summary>
    <h2>Ingredients</h2>
  </summary>
  <ul>
    <li>courgette</li>
    <li>peas</li>
    <li>basil</li>
    <li>feta</li>
  </ul>
</details>
```

## ▼ Ingredients

- courgette
- peas
- basil
- feta

# Semantics in summary

```
<details>
  <summary>
    <h2>Ingredients</h2>
  </summary>
  <ul>
    <li>courgette</li>
    <li>peas</li>
    <li>basil</li>
    <li>feta</li>
  </ul>
</details>
```

**Content model:**  
Phrasing content,  
optionally intermixed with  
heading content.

# Heuristics in the platform and assistive technologies

When you set `text-transform: uppercase`, some assistive technologies will read it like an abbreviation

[Buy tickets](#)[Your tickets](#)[Stations and destinations](#)[Travel information](#)[Travelling with us](#)[Help and support](#)

# Christmas tickets on sale now

Book early and save for a fun-filled  
Christmas.

[Book now](#)

Book up to 7 January 2022 on selected routes

[Buy tickets](#)[Check your journey](#)

`::before / ::after`  
is included in accessible name calculation

# ::before / ::after is included in accessible name calculation

```
<button>Buy product</button>
```



Buy product

# ::before / ::after is included in accessible name calculation

```
<button>Buy product</button>
```

```
button::before {  
  content: " денежн";  
}
```



денежн Buy product

# ::before / ::after is included in accessible name calculation

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the title bar "W3 Accessible Name and Descriptio X". The address bar shows the URL <https://www.w3.org/>. The main content area displays the "Accessible Name and Description Computation 1.1" recommendation from W3C, dated 18 December 2018. The page includes the W3C logo and links to different versions of the specification.

**Accessible Name and Description Computation 1.1**

W3C Recommendation 18 December 2018

**This version:**  
<https://www.w3.org/TR/2018/REC-accname-1.1-20181218/>

**Latest published version:**  
<https://www.w3.org/TR/accname-1.1/>

**Latest editor's draft:**  
<https://w3c.github.io/accname/>

**Implementation report:**  
<https://w3c.github.io/test-results/accname/>

# The future

Our design systems  
commonly contain things that  
are not built into HTML

Sometimes, our design systems  
contain things that do exist, but not  
with our desired level of **style-ability**

“

We hope to make it unnecessary to  
reinvent built-in UI controls



**Open UI**

Open UI Homepage, <https://open-ui.org>

# Goals of OpenUI

Document component names as they exist today

A common language for describing UIs and design systems

Browser standards for web app components

# Goals of OpenUI

Document component names as they exist today

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Browser standards for web app components

# Goals of OpenUI

Document component names as they exist today

A common language for describing UIs and design systems

Browser standards for web app components

# Could AI guess semantics?

# Conclusion

Semantics only works if shared (use the HTML standard)

Semantic HTML has many benefits, some unexpected

Beware of how CSS, ARIA and AT can impact semantics

# Thanks for listening!

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hidde.blog

Links on [talks.hiddedevries.nl](https://talks.hiddedevries.nl)

