

AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF REGISTER VARIATION: AUDIENCE DESIGN AND SPEAKER ORIENTATION*

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This paper presents cross-linguistic evidence of register (i.e., language style and code choices) as 'speaker orientation' to complement Bell's (1984) theory of register variation as 'audience design'. In doing so, I suggest that Finegan and Biber's (1994) four observations be enriched by an additional observation with respect to societal norms, namely, certain linguistic features are culture-specific and speaker-oriented. Drawing from my Chinese data, I show that the source of 'humor' in code-switching could be derived from bilinguals' creative language play instead of the 'promiscuous' use of code-switching itself, contrary to Seigel (1995), and that the structure of marked choices is not necessarily 'flagging', contrary to Myers-Scotton (1993). Building chiefly on the rich insights of Bell (1984) and Finegan and Biber (1994), I propose that register variation derives from considerations of the nature of audience, societal norms, functions, situations and status.

INTRODUCTION

Bell's classic paper (1984) on language style as audience design¹ has attracted a great deal of attention over the years. After questioning the validity of Labov's proposal that style shift is the product of one factor: "Style can be ranged along a single dimension, measured by the amount of attention paid to speech" (Labov 1972, p. 208)², Bell argues for what he calls "the style axiom" (p. 151), which posits that "speakers design their style for their audience" (p. 159), i.e., "style is essentially speakers' response to their audience" (p. 145). Bell also argues that bilingual or bidialectal code choices can be accounted for by audience design as well (p. 145). Bell's theory, built on linguistic accommodation theory of Giles and his colleagues (e.g., Giles & Smith 1979), has been very influential in sociolinguistic studies on stylistic variation, but the reception of his theory has not been entirely uncritical. Based on her longitudinal study of variation in the production of Trinidad Creole and Standard English verb forms by three preschool children in the Trinidad sociolinguistic complex, Youssef (1993) argues that audience-oriented speech is not always conditioned by the addressee, but by the child's discernment of which person was of primary importance for him or her among the group of listeners³. Finegan and Biber (1994, p. 336), based principally on sociolinguistic insights of Labov (1972), Kroch (1978) and Bell (1984), have made four observations in regard to social and style variation:

- A. Certain linguistic features serve to mark both dialect and social situation.
- B. Patterns of linguistic variation across situations of use within a speech community and patterns of linguistic variation across socially ranked status groups in that community are parallel.
- C. Patterns of linguistic variation across situations of use within a speech community are systematic, with more 'literate' situations typically exhibiting a more frequent use of explicit and elaborated variants, and more 'oral' situations exhibiting a more frequent use of economy variants.
- D. Patterns of linguistic variation across socially ranked status groups within a speech community are similarly systematic, with higher-ranked social groups exhibiting more frequent use of the elaborated and explicit variants and lower-ranked groups exhibiting more frequent use of the economy variants.

They argue that Bell's theory offers an explanation for the parallel patterns of variation across registers and dialects (observations A and B⁴), but it does not address the internal

* I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Adrienne Lehrer, and Dr. Malcah Yaeger-Dror and the L2 Use Editor, Terri Cononelos, for insightful and constructive comments on earlier versions of this paper.

systematicity of register variation (observation C) and of social dialect variation (observation D). Rickford & McNair-Knox (1994), drawing from their two most recent interviews with Foxy Boston, an 18-year-old African American teenager in East Palo Alto, a multiethnic, low-income community located just east of Stanford University, argue that Bell's hypothesis of audience-influenced style shift does not fare well, since the amounts of Foxy's zero shift caused by addressee differences range from 22 percent (zero *is*) to 30 percent (zero *is + are*), while the amounts caused by topic change within each interview are much higher: 75 percent for zero *is* and 73 percent for zero *is + are* (For details, see Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994, p. 258-260)⁵. Ladegaard (1995) argues that the explanation provided by audience design appears to be too static, and he argues for persons, roles and power relationship between interactants in speech situations⁶.

This paper will first address the adequacy of language style as audience design from the perspective of societal norms governing Mao Zedong's⁷ (Mao's henceforth) conversational style, and of code choices as audience design using the data I gathered while attending a Spring Festival party in 1994. It will then discuss Bell's theory from the perspective of code-switching due to language attrition. Finally, building chiefly on Bell's (1984) theory and Finegan and Biber's (1994) arguments, the paper proposes that register variation (i.e., language style and code choices) derives from considerations of the nature of audience, societal norms, functions, situations and status.

THE ASSUMPTION OF AUDIENCE DESIGN REEXAMINED

In the light of Bell's (1984) language style as audience design, we would expect that Mao's conversational style would vary when he was talking to his bodyguard or to a well-known western journalist. But this was not the case. Mao's conversational style did not seem to vary according to different audiences. His 'imposing' style was evident in the following dialogue that he had in winter 1957 with his security guard Sun Lianzhong (Leung and Kau 1992, p. 804):

Mao: Is it easy to study [physics and algebra]?

Sun: Physics is easy because it deals with things we do personally and things we can see; it is also easy to remember. Algebra, however, is difficult.

Mao: You *must* study algebra well! Many of the calculations in physics and chemistry have to be done with algebra. *If you don't study algebra well, you won't do well in physics and chemistry either. Don't be afraid of difficulties.* (italics all added)

Sun: We are not afraid of difficulties. We will certainly study well.

When he talked to Sun, Mao was giving orders or instructions instead of having a conversation involving "give and take" or "social negotiations" (Schiffelin 1990). This was evidenced by the use of *must* and the structures of *If you don't... you won't* and *Don't*. Mao's conversational style remained constant even when he was talking to a western writer. The following is part of a conversation that Mao had on November 11, 1956 with Gunther Weisenborn (GW in short), a well-known German writer (Leung & Kau 1992, p. 152-153):

GW: I am going to write a book about my trip to China.

Mao: You *should not* write only about positive things, but *should* write about the negative things in that book. It is important also to point out the shortcomings....

GW: Is it possible for other West German authors to visit China?

Mao: Of course. No matter which West German author, as long as he or she wants to come, may come and may stay for as long as he or she should want to, one or two or three months. We can invite them to come. Those who do not want to be invited can also pay for their own passage. *No matter what, no one starves in China.* All writers can come-writers of the Left, center, and Right, even people who are against China. *Let all of them come see for themselves.*

GW: No, it is probably better not to let them all come; I don't think this is right.

Mao: *No, it is right to let them come.* In every country, there are people on the Left, people in the center, and people on the Right. (italics all added)

The use of *should* and *should not* and other linguistic features such as *let all of them come see for themselves*, since *no matter what, no one starves in China*, and Mao's refusal to admit that he is wrong (*No, it is right to let them come*) all speak for Mao's invariant 'persuasive' style despite the fact that his audience this time was not his security guard. Mao's invariant conversational style has a great deal to do with the Chinese concept of *dengji*⁸ ('social stratification'), which could be traced back to the Confucian rhetoric for the ruler-subject relationship (Knapp 1992, p. vi), dictating that social harmony could be achieved only when persons of lower social status (e.g., subjects) obey the order of persons of higher status (e.g., rulers). The Confucian rhetoric fits nicely with Mao's instruction: persons of a lower rank should obey the order of persons of a higher rank and all party members should obey the order of the Central Party Committee (Mao 1972). Though Mao did not state explicitly that the Central Party Committee should obey the order of its leader, this was taken for granted by Chinese people. Since Mao was the leader of the Central Party Committee, he was Almighty and everybody was under his rule or control. Thus language style as audience design was simply not relevant for Mao under the norms of Chinese social stratification.

Examples of Mao's invariant conversational style present cross-cultural evidence that certain language style is culture-specific and speaker-oriented instead of being designed in the light of audiences. This observation could enrich Biber and Finegan's four observations, since it was not addressed in their paradigm. Hence observation E to follow observations A-D discussed previously:

E. Certain linguistic features are culture-specific and speaker-oriented.

By 'culture-specific and speaker-oriented', I mean that certain cultural constitutions do not require speakers to design their speech in the light of their audiences. Rather, speakers 'orient' their speech in accordance with their respective normative structures, as in the case of Mao's conversational style⁹. Thus, observation E, simple as it is, appears to add richness to the repertoire of style observations.

It is worth pointing out here that societal norms can also govern code choices among bilinguals. A fitting example is Gibbon's (1987) study of Chinese students at the University of Hong Kong. The social rule stigmatizes the use of English among Chinese students at the University of Hong Kong, where switching to English could be perceived as *fassn wai* 'it turns my stomach' or *suhng yéuhng* 'admires the west' (Gibbons 1987, p. 30)¹⁰. All this indicates that instances of communication behavior are never free of the cultural belief and action systems in which they occur (Hymes 1972a, cited in Schiffrin 1994, p. 8).

CODE-SWITCHING AS AUDIENCE DESIGN REVISITED

Bell (1984) argues that "audience design also accounts for bilingual or bidialectal code choices" (p.145). This is basically the position of speech accommodation theory (Giles, *et al* 1987). Speech accommodation theory (SAT) is a model accounting for style variation in speech on the basis of the speaker's social psychological adjustment to the addressee. Giles *et al* suggest that, in many social interactions, speakers desire their listeners' social approval, and use modification of their speech towards listeners' code as a tactic to gain their approval (i.e., convergence). But in other situations, speakers may wish to disassociate themselves from listeners by accentuating their linguistic differences (i.e., divergence).

While code-switching as audience design has been documented in some of the speech communities, it does not mean that it can account well for bilingual or bidialectal code choices that occur in other speech communities. Code-switching as an expression of 'humor' is a fitting example.

Siegel (1995) reports that humor is provided simply by the switch from Fijian to Hindi. Siegel explains that Hindi is not normally used for communication among Fijians, so when a Fijian switches to Hindi among other Fijians, it is almost always a clear signal to the Fijian listener(s) that the speaker is joking. The switch from one dialect to another for humor has been extensively documented in the literature. Blom and Gumperz (1972) report that the local Ranamal dialect is used for humor instead of the standard Bokmal. Rubin (1970) notes that Guaranti rather than Spanish is used in Paraguay for joking. In an Australian Aboriginal community, Gurindji rather than Kriol is used for humor in joking relationships (McConvell 1985, 1988). Examples of dialect humor are also found in Farsi (Saville-Troike 1989, p. 188) and Fiji Hindi (Siegel 1987, p. 209). Ferguson (1959) states that when a particular variety of language is considered appropriate for humor, it is often an informal variety, say, a local dialect in a situation of classic diglossia. But ‘humor’ is not necessarily restricted to an informal variety or a local dialect. Code-switching can be humorous in its creative use of two ‘standard’ languages. The following Chinese example¹¹ is a case in point (English italicized):

- Zhangsan: Zuijin ni kangjian Xiao Wang¹² meiyou? ‘Have you seen Little Wang recently?’
 Lisi: Kangjian le. Shangzhou women hai yiqi qu yijia zhongguo caiguan chi le wanfan. ‘Yes. Last week we went to have dinner together at a Chinese restaurant.’
 Zhangsan: Ta zuijing zenmeyang? ‘How has he been recently?’
 Lisi: Hai keyi le. Zhishi ta aishui lanjiao. ‘He’s fine. But as usual he did not want to get up in the morning.’
 Zhangsan: Ta jiren ruci *lazy*, hebi laimei *study*? ‘Since he’s so lazy, why did he come to study in the States?’
 Lisi: Hai bushi gan chaoliu. ‘He just follows the trend.’
 Zhangsan: You shihou wo xiang dao buru quge jiaojiao *lady*, shenge pangpang *baby*. ‘I sometimes think [he] should marry a pretty lady and have a cute baby.’
 Lisi: Bi kai wanxiao le. ‘Don’t be kidding.’

First, the switching is between Putonghua and English, neither of which is considered ‘local’. Secondly, unlike the Fiji-Hindi switching (Siegel 1995), where “humor is provided simply by the switch from Fijian to Hindi” (p. 97), the humorous effect in the Chinese example is achieved by the ‘poetic’ and ‘creative’ use of both Chinese and English. Note that all the four English words (*lazy*, *study*, *lady* and *baby*) have the same rhyme, each word having two syllables. They match very well with the two-syllable Chinese words (*ruzi* ‘so’, *laimei* ‘come to the States’, *jiaojiao* ‘beautiful’ and *pangpang* ‘cute’) that serve as their modifiers, which in turn match rhythmically with other two-syllable Chinese words (*jiran* ‘since’, *hebi* ‘why’, *quge* ‘marry’ and *shenge* ‘give birth to’). All this combines to create a humorous effect. This appears to run counter to Siegel’s argument (1995, p. 101-102): “it is not creative language play which is the source of humor but rather the ‘promiscuous’ use of code-switching itself in situations where strict separation of language is the norm”, since our Chinese data shows that it is not the ‘promiscuous’ use of code-switching itself which is the source of humor, but rather the creative language play in code choices between Chinese and English. The richer repertoire of code choices available to bilinguals enables them to switch competently from one code to the other in verbal communication.

The ‘rhythmic’ and ‘parallel’ structure of our Chinese example also exhibits the “aesthetic effect” (Myers-Scotton 1993, p. 139), but it does not show the exact same features of what she calls “structural flagging” (Myers-Scotton 1993, p. 141-142). Myers-Scotton states that structural flagging occurs principally at two levels. First, the content of a marked choice is often a repetition of what has already been said in the unmarked medium of the exchange; secondly, marked choices are very typically phonologically flagged. Nothing in our Chinese example is repeated nor are marked choices (English) phonologically flagged. Phonological flagging, if it did exist in our Chinese example, should involve at least both unmarked choices (Chinese) and marked choices (English), since the humorous effect is not achieved by the marked choice alone.

Despite the fact that speakers cannot entirely ignore addressees in making choices, code choices as an expression of ‘humor’ seem to be more speaker-oriented than audience-designed, since they “better represent the imprint which speakers wish to make for themselves on a conversational exchange than anything else” (Myers-Scotton 1993, p. 141). In other words, speakers appear to focus more on their own position in expressing the meaning(s) of code choices than on their “response to their audience” (Bell 1984, p. 145). Code choices as a speaker-oriented expression of ‘humor’ find further evidence in the use of Spanish loan material in English. Citing “Grassy-ass” in a thank-you greeting card in which it shows Hawaiian dancers dressed in grass skirts, Hill (1995) states that although Spanish speakers might find them irritating and offensive, such code choices directly index what she calls “a speaker’s sense of humor” (p. 206). Its humorous effect lies in “a language game” (Wittgenstein 1958) the speaker plays between the sound of the Spanish expression *gracias* (‘thanks you’) and that of the English expression ‘Grassy-ass’. Thus, “the speaker’s meaning is primary” (Clark 1992, p. xv) in these cases of code-switching.

CODE-SWITCHING DUE TO LANGUAGE ATTRITION

Language attrition is defined as a form of individual language evolution by which an individual loses (part of) his/her competence or proficiency in a particular language (Andersen 1982, p. 84). There are four types of language attrition (Van Els 1988, p. 4):

1. Loss of L1 in an L1-environment, e.g., dialect loss within the dialect community;
2. loss of L1 in an L2-environment, e.g., loss of native language by migrant workers;
3. loss of L2 in an L1-environment, e.g., foreign language loss; and
4. loss of L2 in an L2-environment, e.g., second language loss by aging migrants.

Relevant to code-switching are type two and type three of language attrition. I will, however, focus my discussion on type two of language attrition, since my current data appears to be most illustrative of this type of language attrition. One of the reasons bilingual speakers switch codes is that they have lost lexical items in their L1 because of cultural change. A case in point is Chinese residents in the United States switching to English when they talk about, for instance, doing grocery shopping¹³:

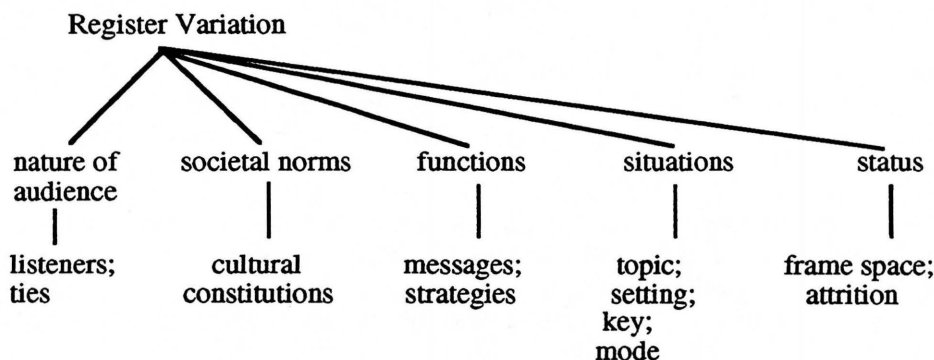
- Lady A: Zhen shang naojin. Sucai you zhangjia le. ‘It’s really troublesome. Vegetables’ price is rising again’.
- Lady B: Yidian bucuo. *Spinach, lettuce, tomato, green beans* duo bi yiqian gui le haoduo. ‘Yes, indeed. Spinach, lettuce, tomatoes and green beans are getting much more expensive than before.’
- Lady A: Shenme shi *lettuce*. Wo ke conglai mei maiguo. ‘What is lettuce? I have never bought [it].’
- Lady B: *Lettuce*, zhongwen jiao shenme laizao? jiu shi.. [a short pause]¹⁴ ‘Lettuce, what’s the Chinese for it? it is...’
- Lady A: Shi bu shi ‘da bai cai’? ‘Is it Chinese cabbage?’
- Lady B: Bu shi de. Meiguo ren chang yonglai zuo *salad* de. ‘No. Americans often use [it] for salad.’
- Lady A: Na shi bu shi ‘shengcai’? ‘Is it ‘lettuce’?’
- Lady B: Dui le, shengcai. Ni kai, lai meiguo mei jinian ba zhongwen duo gai wang le. ‘Yes, lettuce. You see I’m losing my Chinese although I’ve been in the States only for a few years.’

The dialogue above shows clearly that the speaker’s switch to the English word *lettuce* is a result of her attrition of the L1 (i.e., Chinese) word for it. This kind of switching is ‘speaker-oriented’ in the sense that speakers ‘orient’ towards L2 code choices because of L1 attrition. Obviously, such examples of code switching could not be adequately accounted for by Bell’s argument of code choices as audience design.

CONCLUSION

I have presented, from the perspective of societal norms governing Mao's conversational style and the code choices of Chinese students at the University of Hong Kong (Gibbons 1987), cross-cultural evidence of register as 'speaker orientation' to complement Bell's theory of register as 'audience design'. In doing so, I suggest that we could enrich Biber and Finegan's four observations by offering an additional observation with respect to 'societal norms', namely, certain linguistic features are culture-specific and speaker-oriented. Drawing from my Chinese data, I have shown that the source of 'humor' in code-switching could be derived from speakers' creative language play instead of the 'promiscuous' use of code-switching itself, contrary to Seigel (1995), and that the structure of marked choices is not necessarily 'flagging', contrary to Myers-Scotton (1993). I have also argued that Bell's theory fails to account for speaker-oriented code choices due to language attrition. In the light of these findings and taking into consideration the rich insights of Bell (1984) and of Finegan and Biber (1994), I propose that register variation derives from considerations of the nature of audience, societal norms, functions, situations and status.

'The nature of audience' takes into account not only "addressees", "auditors", "overhearers" and "eavesdroppers" (Bell 1984), but the dynamic relationships among participants in speech situations, such as power relations (Ladegarrd 1995) and "strong" or "weak" ties (Milroy and Milroy 1985) that a speaker has with his or her (group of) listeners. Speech accommodation (Giles, *et al* 1987) largely arises from consideration of 'the nature of audience', too. 'Societal norms' also govern register variation, as in the case of Mao's conversational style, and the code choices of Chinese students at the University of Hong Kong (Gibbons 1987). 'Functions' are manifestations of meanings such as 'prestige', (e.g., using *r* in New York City, Labov 1972), and 'humor' (e.g., the Chinese example discussed above). 'Functions' should be seen as 'dynamic factors' (Myers-Scotton 1993, p. 57) or 'pragmatic factors' (Romaine 1995, p. 161) ranging from "attitude" (e.g., an in-group marker, Benttähila & Davies 1995: 86), "politeness" (Li 1995) to "marking personalization vs. objectivization (e.g., talking *about* action vs talking *as* action) as a discourse strategy" (Gumperz 1982). 'Situations' entail topic, setting, "key" (Hymes 1972b), and "mode" (Halliday 1989), the last of which refers to Finegan and Biber's observation C. Topic, setting and key could be situations influencing language style (e.g., Youself 1993, p. 273; Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994, p. 258) and code choices (e.g., Appel & Muysken 1987, p. 118; Søndergaard 1991, p. 91; Myers-Scotton 1993, p. 57) independent of what Finegan and Biber refer to as "literate" or "oral" situations, thus broadening the scope of observation C. 'Status' recognizes not only language variants among socially ranked monolingual groups, with socially higher-ranked groups showing more frequent use of the elaborated variants and lower-ranked groups showing more frequent use of the economy variants (i.e., Finegan and Biber's observation D), but also "greater resources", "more means" (Romaine 1995, p. 173) or a wider "frame space" (Goffman 1981, p. 230) available to bilinguals than monolinguals, as in our example of 'creative' uses of 'humor'. 'Status' also accounts for code-switching due to language attrition for the obvious reason that the status of language attrition of Chinese leads to the code choice of English. The following diagram is thus an illustration of these considerations that give rise to register variation:



This alternative account is an answer to recent calls for more explicit theory building (e.g., Finegan and Biber 1989: 3). It shows that code choices could be placed in the larger framework of register variation (e.g., Gardner-Chloros 1991: 186; Halmari & Smith 1994: 442). While Gardner-Chloros (1991: 186) views code-switching as being “strongly associated with an informal, chatty register”, and Halmari and Smith (1994: 435) focus their discussion of code-switching on prosodic and syntactic features, such as shifts in voice quality, interrogatives, lexical markers, deictic terms, tense changes, and imperatives within the framework of Auer’s (1984) contextualization strategies, I have shown, perhaps from a macro-perspective, that code choices, just like style variation, are the result of considerations of the nature of audience, societal norms, functions, situations and status. I hope that this alternative account contributes to the whole gamut of studies on language variation, and that it offers a more comprehensive account of the rich varieties of language style and code choices.

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NOTES

1. Clark and Murphy (1983) also used the term “audience design”, which appears to have its roots in “recipient design” (Garfinkel 1967).
2. It is not the intention of the author to discuss the Labovian paradigm of style shift. Interested readers could refer to Wolfson (1976), Macaulay (1977), Romaine (1978, 1980), Baugh (1979), Cheshire (1982), Dressler & Wodak (1982), Traugott & Romaine (1985), Finegan & Biber (1994), and Rickford & McNair-Knox (1994) for a critique.
3. “Listeners” could be said to be part of the audience.
4. There is a slight inconsistency in Finegan and Biber’s discussion of Bell’s theory. On the one hand, they say Bell’s theory accounts for observations A and B (p. 319). On the other, they argue that Bell’s theory accounts for observation B only (p. 337).
5. For topic-shifting as a motivation for style-shifting, see also Shuy (1975) and Kachru (1978).
6. Persons, roles and power relations in speech interactions could be factors related to the audience design. Thus Ladegaard’s argument seems to be inherently part of Bell’s theory.
7. Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was the Chinese Communist leader (1949-1976).
8. Kuhn (1991: 229) defines *deng* as ‘the major division’ and *ji* the minor.
9. Mao’s conversational style appears to be paralleled in accounts of adult caregivers’ invariant speech patterns to young children in Kaluli and Western Somoan society (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin 1990), Trackton (Heath 1983), K’iche’ Mayan (Pye 1992) and Javanese communities (Smith-Hefner 1988).
10. This example appears to contradict “the markedness model”, which “sees speakers as making choices, not because norms direct them to do so, but rather because they consider the consequences” (Myers-Scotton 1993: 153). It is the norms rather than the consequences that direct the Chinese students at the University of Hong Kong not to switch to English, for ‘consequences’ will not result if there exist no such social norms.
11. This example is taken from the data I gathered in 1994 when I was invited to attend a Spring Festival party at one of my friends’ house. I observed and recorded some of my friends’ conversations.
12. To maintain the anonymity of the interlocutors and the person involved in the conversation, I use *Zhangsan* and *Lisi* for the interlocutors and name the third person *Xiao Wang*.
13. This example is taken from the same data corpus I gathered in 1994.
14. The transcription here (‘two dots ..’ for ‘a short pause’) follows Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn, Cumming, and Paoline (1993).

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