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POST BORDERS: INFORMAL BILINGUAL BLOGGING AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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Abstract. This paper describes an informal bilingual blogging environment that was created to develop intercultural communicative competence. After a consideration of ICC, the paper explores the opportunities for development of ICC that were created by three features of this blogging activity. A descriptive analysis shows that the design features of informality of topic, and intentional lack of strict language protocol, as well as attention to cultures of use of blogging were associated with users' display of ICC.

This paper outlines the role of an informal, bilingual blogging environment that was created to develop what Byram (1997) terms intercultural communication competence (ICC), and reports on the various displays and developments of ICC during a collaborative blogging project involving Canadian and Japanese university students. The paper's purposes are to explore the opportunities afforded by an informal, bilingual blogging environment, and to determine if such an environment is associated with an improvement in participants' attitudes towards intercultural communication.

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

As an extension of Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence, Byram (1997) proposes intercultural communication competence (ICC) as a model for teaching and assessing both verbal and non-verbal communication between speakers from different countries. In ICC, communication is not just a matter of information exchange, but "is focused on establishing and maintaining relationships" (Byram, 1997, p. 3). Byram argues that five factors influence a speaker's intercultural communication: skills to interpret and relate, skills to discover and interact, knowledge of self and interaction, education in critical cultural education and politics, and attitudes toward self and others (Byram, 1997).

An attitude beneficial for ICC can be described as: (1) a willingness to seek out interaction through equality, (2) a genuine interest in the other's point of view, (3) a readiness to interrogate one's own values and assumptions, (4) a readiness to examine one's own affective reactions toward others, and (5) a readiness to engage in culturally appropriate verbal communication (Byram, 1997).

These five points of attitude can be assessed within a curriculum of study. Assessment of ICC should be based on observable demonstrated action rather than stated preference, and evidence should be gathered over time rather than at a single instance (Byram, 1997). Belz (2003) elaborates, adding that such statements of preference are more generally and accurately “norm-referenced exhibitions of facts” (p. 72), which are not necessarily the most valid and reliable sources of data. This study examined the five points of attitude as they relate to ICC by using Byram's five suggested kinds of evidence: *equality* can be evidenced in speakers' choice of representation of their daily lives. *Interest in other points of view and interrogation of values* can be seen in speakers' choices to evaluate phenomenon in their own culture using explanations from another culture. *Examination of affective reactions* can be seen in reflective self-analysis. Finally, *engagement in culturally appropriate communication* can be seen in adaptations and change in speakers' methods of communication toward a common ground (Byram, 1997).

2. Informality in Task Design

On the topic of task design for internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (ICFLE), Legutke, Müller-Hartmann and Ditzfurth (2000) make the broad assertion, “appropriate content needs to be explored and meaningful tasks have to be developed that frame the use of resources and the production of learner texts” (p. 1128). However, what counts as appropriate content and meaningful tasks has been interpreted by ICFLE researchers in unusual ways. Kramsch, in Thorne (2005), writes, “[foreign language] teaching should be built on a philosophy of conflict...and where understanding and shared meaning, when it occurs, is a small miracle” (p. 14). This small miracle is indeed rare in the literature; many studies, such as Kramsch and Thorne (2002), Lee (2009), Ware and Kramsch (2005), and Belz (2003) uncovered *tours-de-force* of name-calling, disappointments and bruised egos.

It is no surprise why egos were bruised. In the four studies above, the participants' discussions centered on high-profile, confrontational and extremely sensitive topics. Lee (2009) moderated a discussion between Spanish and U.S. students on the inauguration of Pope Benedict, and Kramsch and Thorne (2002) encouraged discussion on hot topics like AIDS, drugs, sex and politics. Lee (2009) went so far as to ask participants “to produce a podcast on a controversial topic” (p. 431). Perhaps a quizzical application of Vygotsky's disruption-development argument (Belz, 2003) is the reason why so many ICFLE projects proudly report the disjunctions, the failures of communication, and the fighting among their participants, and even design tasks to incite confrontation. The decision to generate conflict is extremely risky, and is made riskier still by the fact that all participants are meeting for the first time, made riskier still by the participants lacking a shared genre of communication (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002), and further compounded by questionably reliable communication technology (Belz, 2003). Under these circumstances, the small miracles of understanding must have been very small indeed.

Despite a solid awareness among ICFLE researchers of the failures of online communication, O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) note that “surprisingly little research has

looked at the relationship between failed exchanges and the methodological aspects of the activity” (p. 626). Failed exchanges are often attributed to participants’ misunderstandings of argument roles, their lack of understanding of culture-specific patterns of interaction, or unworkable timetable scheduling (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002; Belz, 2003; Reeder, Nozawa & Berwick, 2009; Mompean, 2010). Rarely has it been proposed that communication fails because participants are asked by the moderators to discuss difficult and controversial topics that they may not yet be ready or willing to discuss. If it is the case that politics, religion and social welfare are more difficult topics to successfully negotiate than, say, discussions of breakfast, then it may be a failure of scaffolding when new learners become frustrated with their progress without having a foundation built on the more approachable topics.

We see no reason for conflict to be such a sought-after ingredient in ICFLE task design, especially in the first stages of participant interaction. One of our aims is to investigate whether culturally appropriate verbal communication can also be potentially developed and evaluated by using approachable topics of discussion. Admittedly, non-confrontational topics may not encourage the critical self-analysis that comes from Agar’s (1994) “contestation-invoked opportunities for development” (in Thorne, 2006, p. 14).

3. Language Choice and Task Design

While Thorne (2005) recommends that “the language use protocol should be explicitly presented to all participants” (p. 13), a study by O’Dowd (2005) showed that different language protocols did not affect participation levels whatsoever. Furthermore, many interesting language options are available to participants when no language use protocol is set, and participants can use these options as venues for expression and community building. Participants can choose to write a post in their base languages (sometimes called first or native language), their target languages (alternatively their second language, their additional language, or language of study) or some combination of these languages. If participants choose to write a post in more than one language, they have two options: they may encode the same information in each language (effectively writing the same thing in translation) or they may code-switch.

Code-switching (CS) is a matter of writing or speaking in such a way that the discourse alternates amongst two or more languages. CS may be used by speakers as an indicator of group membership (Bullock and Toribio, 2009). In a historical overview of sociolinguistic approaches to CS, Gardner-Chloros (2009) identifies three factors that contribute to CS in language contact: factors independent of individual speakers, such as overt and covert prestige, factors related to the speakers, such as social networks and attitudes, and factors within each instance of conversation, where CS becomes another conversational resource. Operating across these three factors is a phenomenon that Rampton (1995) calls “crossing,” where CS is used “by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language they employ” (in Gardner-Chloros, 2009, p. 102). The reason for CS in this type of situation is not out of necessity, nor is it to draw into the conversation the aesthetic connotations of the other language (Blom and Gumperz, 1972 in Gardner-Chloros, 2009), but instead CS is used

as an identifying resource—speakers switch languages to assume, or to relate to, the identity of the other peer group.

By leaving students to choose a language for communication it is possible to evaluate intercultural communication competence in terms of the language choice. If CS serves as a marker of group solidarity, then an increase in CS exchanges between two cultural groups may demonstrate Byram's (1997) Objective (e) of IC, where participants have developed their own mutually satisfying *modus vivendi*. CS may also indicate Byram's Objective (a), a willingness to seek out interaction through equality. In contrast, a profusion of base-language posts may indicate that no equality, no *modus vivendi*, and very little IC, has been developed.

4. Cultures-of-Use of Blogs

Technology is cultural. Thorne (2006) writes that “technologies, *as culture*, will have variable meanings and uses for different communities” (p. 21), proposing a cultures-of-use framework to make explicit the way in which certain technologies are considered appropriate for a given task within a given community. On the cultural appropriateness of the technology for the task, Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche, and Chase (2004) found that “bulletin boards, which cater to publicity, and learning platforms such as WebCT, which are based on the notion of Western-style efficiency, are not necessarily appropriate tools for international groups of learners, even though one of the main driving forces of Internet-based learning is internationalization of education” (p.100).

Blogging, as a shared yet personal activity, walks a fine line between publicity and privacy. Anecdotal reports suggest that blogs have a different culture-of-use for Japanese and North American users (Matsumoto, 2008; Harden, 2007). The culture-of-use of blogs deserves more analysis, in particular for the role it could play in developing intercultural communication competence. Since part of developing ICC involves, as Byram (1997) says, a “willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices” (p. 92) then questioning the values and presuppositions involved in blogging may be a sign of developing ICC. If a baseline culture-of-use for blogs in both Japanese and North American cultures could be established, and if participants begin to adopt the other group's culture-of-use, then such behaviour may indicate developing ICC.

5. The Study

5.1. THE POST BORDERS BLOGGING ENVIRONMENT

The participants in the study interacted for a period of 6 weeks by writing, posting pictures, and developing diagrams in a Wordpress blogging environment. The project, titled “Post Borders,” was a secure discussion forum hosted by a major Western Canadian post-secondary institution, and used asynchronous communication, after the strong support that the mode has seen from researchers and practitioners in ICFLE (Haucks and Young, 2008; Ware and Kramsch, 2005). The Wordpress environment

was also chosen in that it provided good support for participants to post pictures, hyperlinks, and video, enabling multiple modes of comprehensible input. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the Wordpress platform was its comment function, where participants could respond to each other's posts, and posters can respond to comments, a feature which can generate significantly long threads of discussion.

5.2. THE PARTICIPANTS

31 participants volunteered for the project, 22 from a major Japanese university, and 9 from a major Western Canadian university. The Japanese participants had been studying English in Japan for a number of years, and were, at the time of participation, preparing for a one-year academic study abroad experience at the Canadian university. The Canadian participants had no such common plans for academic study in Japan, but nevertheless had studied Japanese language at a secondary and/or post-secondary level.

As a moderator of the project, the first author posted and commented along with the participants in the study. He was often the first to post on a new topic, and his posts often received comments. We felt that since his posts and comments were taken up and commented on by other participants, a post-experience self-analysis of his behaviour as a Canadian participant is valid.

5.3. THE TASKS

“Post Borders” was built on a weekly schedule of discussion tasks. Given that even a small group of participants involved with asynchronous online communication can generate astounding amounts of text, tasks were chosen so that each participant could create a post or comment, and read all other posts and comments, within a reasonable time. In keeping with the informal approach outlined above, the tasks were light, friendly and approachable. Participants were asked to complete the tasks on a weekly schedule. The tasks were as follows:

Task 1. Introductions. Post a brief introduction of yourself.

Task 2. Blogs. Post a link to another blog. What's interesting about it?

Task 3. Breakfast. Post a picture of your breakfast.

Task 4. One-minute stories. Using the flashcards, create a five-line, one-minute story.

Task 5. “Culture” mind map. Collaborate on the mind map tree diagram by adding nodes to the word “culture.”

When the task was assigned, the blog moderator modelled each task. Figure 1 shows the moderator's introduction.

Hi!*April 18th, 2011 · 4 Comments*

マットです。よろしく！

バンクーバーで住んでいて、勉強していて、遊んでいる。

ブリティッシュコロンビア大学院で教育学言語学（きょういうがく
げんごうがく, I think... Language pedagogy)

いつもケーキを食べている。

Hi, my name is Matt. I live and work in Vancouver. I study Language
and Literacy at the University of British Columbia.

Here's a picture of me eating cake in Hokkaido.

Tags: Uncategorized

→ 4 Comments

Figure 1. Moderator's introductory post.

In order to explore participants' language choice, no language use protocol was made explicit by either the moderator or negotiated among the participants themselves.

In addition to the tasks above, the project included a pre-project survey modeled after Furstenberg et al.'s CULTURA project (2001; Reeder, Nozawa & Berwick, 2009). Through free-word associations, the survey asked participants about blogs, culture, Japan and Canada. However, instead of the syntactically challenging CULTURA questionnaire types such as sentence completion and troublesome situation reactions, participants were asked to self-report their intercultural experience and confidence on a scale.

6. Findings and Analysis

Data for analysis was drawn from all posts and comments made by study participants and the moderator, as well as from responses to the preliminary survey. Results and analysis are organized by the research topics set out in the previous section.

6.1. LANGUAGE CHOICE

Participants' posts and comments were coded according to four linguistic choices:

Base-language (BL): posts or comments made in the participant's base language (English for Canadian participants, Japanese for Japanese participants).

Target-language (TL): posts or comments made in the participant's desired language of study (English for Japanese participants or Japanese for Canadian participants).

Translation (Tr): posts or comments made in both English and Japanese where the same content was encoded in each language.

Code-switch (CS): posts or comments made in both English and Japanese where different content was encoded in each language.

TL-type posts were prominent in both posts and comments, and while Tr-type responses were nearly absent from all comments, accounting for only 16% of all comments, the Tr type accounted for 45% of all initial posts.

6.1.1. Base-language (BL) type posts

For BL posts, the language of the comments was strongly related to the language of the post; Japanese base-language posts received Japanese base-language or Japanese target-language replies, and English base-language posts received English base-language or Japanese target-language replies, with occasional code-switching type comments.

6.1.2. Target-language (TL) type posts

For TL-type posts, the language of the comments seemed related to the language of the post, with Japanese target-language posts receiving mainly Japanese replies, but also English-language replies as well. Code-switching type comments were occasional in TL type post replies.

6.1.3. Translation (Tr) type posts

Translation-type posts were the most common type of post. The comments were primarily target-language and code-switch type. Base-language replies to translation-type posts were rare.

6.1.4. Code-switching (CS) type posts

CS posts, though infrequent, received between 0 and 4 comments. Comments were primarily CS-type, with occasional target-language or base-language comments. It seems that the language of the initial post was related to the language of the subsequent comments. This could be a case of participants adapting their language to the language choice of the poster, or it could be a case of participants relying on a single language type and then interacting only with others who post in that same type.

As noted, the proportion of translation-type posts is much higher among the posts than among the comments. The difference can be accounted for by heavy commenting by a handful of students who were very much interested, and influential, in making CS-type posts.

Raven, a Canadian participant, made a much higher percentage of CS-type posts than the average. Other students such as India, a Japanese participant, seem to have adopted Raven's CS strategy, even though they did not use CS in previous posts. The following (abbreviated) exchange of comments to Raven's introduction shows India's switch from TL to CS-type posts:

India: [TL-type]

Hi, [Raven]! [...]

It's nice to meet you.

I also like EXILE, and I often watch their TV program and listen to music [...]

Raven: [CS-type]

こんにちは～インジアさん！ [Tr: Hello, Ms. [India]!]

Nice to meet you, too.

I haven't seen their TV program yet. [...]

India: [TL-type, with Japanese name]

[...]One of their TV program is EXILE魂(たましい).

In that, they sing songs and talk freely with some guests, which is sometimes funny! [...]

Chi: [CS-type]

Hi [Raven]!

Thank you for your comment:)*

EXILE好きなんだね～♪ [...] [Tr: Wow, you like Exile, don't you?]

Raven: [CS-type]

[...]I know NEWS, too!

However, I am only familiar to 山下智久 (山P) and 手越祐也 .

ところで、インジさんはよくひみつの嵐ちゃんを見る？ [...] [Tr: About that... does Ms.[Jin] watch Secret Storm?]

India: [CS-type]

Yes! 感想楽しみにしてます～(^o^)/ [Tr: Tell us what you think.]

Yes. At first, it was so hard for me, too, but now I can say all of their name [...]

In this exchange, India first responds to Raven's Tr-type post with a with a TL-type comment. After Raven's turn with a CS-type comment, India makes a another TL-type comment, but this time with a Japanese name ("EXILE魂(たましい)"). After one more CS-type post from Raven, and another from Chi, India switches to a complete inter-sentential CS-type comment.

This influential behaviour fits with Bullock and Toribio's (2009) claim that code-switching serves as an identifier of group solidarity. In the short exchange, participants found that they had a common interest (Japanese pop music) and began to adopt each other's language conventions. The convention of code-switching, was neither exclusively Japanese nor English yet functioned like Byram's (1997) common *modus vivendi*, a key element in developing ICC: participants had an interest in each other's lives, and adapted their methods of communication toward a common ground.

6.2. INFORMALITY IN THE POSTS

Posts and comments to several informal discussion topics were examined for evidence of developing ICC. In a total of 46 posts and 106 comments, there was no evidence of conflict or aggravated misunderstandings. While the pervasively genial attitude was not without its shortcomings, it was nevertheless associated with several aspects of ICC.

6.2.1. Breakfast Task

Participants were asked to post a picture and a description of the breakfast that they had that morning. As a representation of daily life, the breakfast-sharing task gave us the opportunity to observe the choices that students made in terms of their attitudes toward each other's culture, as well as the personal identities that they chose to put forward.

The breakfast topic did not receive as many posts as either the blogging topic (discussed below) or the introductory posts. Nevertheless, four Canadian and two Japanese participants posted a description. Only one breakfast could be said to be culturally distinctive: “チョコラBB,” a ready-made-in-Japan breakfast drink that is not widely available outside the country. The benefits of this breakfast were outlined by a Japanese participant, who enjoyed its convenience. The チョコラBB post received three comments from Canadian students, who asked a few questions about the drink, and suggested some places in Canada where it could be found. Despite the apparent triviality of discussing a breakfast drink, and despite the possible stigma of discussing this in a university setting, the exchange demonstrated a development in ICC; As Byram (1997) suggests, interest in the daily life of others can promote beneficial ICC attitudes.

Also generating some commenting was Violet's (Canadian participant) breakfast, which involved chicken, rice, cucumbers and tomatoes. Regardless of whether the breakfast was distinctively Canadian or Japanese, it was obviously healthy, and this feature was the basis for an exchange between Violet and Day, a Japanese student. Day asked, in English, for ways to eat healthily, and Violet responded with a few tips in English. Day probably had ample resources for Japanese-style healthy eating, but her question represented an instance of positive ICC; she was looking for alternative explanations, and showed a genuine interest in Karen's point of view on the subject as she reframed the task into the question of what was a healthy breakfast.

6.2.2. Blogging Task

Not all interaction in the project developed, or even demonstrated, ICC. The open, “ecological” (Basharina, 2009) nature of the tasks allowed participants a good deal of freedom within the task outline to discuss and even reframe a variety of topics, and to

comment or not on whichever topics they chose. Because of this open approach, many discussions gravitated toward Japanese popular culture to an intractable degree.

The blogging topic was a particularly strong case. Participants were asked to post a link to a blog that they thought was interesting. The geographic origin or language of the blog was not specified in the task outline. However, Canadian students posted about Japanese blogs 50% of the time, while Japanese students posted only about Japanese blogs. Although posting about a blog tends toward a statement of preference, and may not qualify as evidence within Byram's model (which looks for evidence in observable action) the disparity in behaviour between the two groups is worth examination. It seems that in the blogging task, the Canadian participants demonstrated some element of ICC, namely an interest in the daily life of others and the other's point of view, but the task did not elicit a similar response from the Japanese participants.

In the pre-project survey participants were asked to write three words that they associated with the prompt word "blog" which were placed by content analysis into two conceptual sets: words that related to privacy, and words that related to publicity, such as share, communication, or exchange. The findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' responses to survey prompt « blog » by type.

Word set	Canadian participants, word count	Japanese participants, word count
diary-private-secret	2	5
share-communication-exchange-conversation	5	3

Analysis of the free-word association question gave results that seem to be in line with current culture-of-use theory. While both groups commented on the public-private phenomenon of blogging, Canadian participants reported fewer "privacy"-type words than Japanese participants. In addition the complimentary case is also true; Canadian participants reported more "public"-type words than Japanese participants. This suggests that the two groups had different notions of the role of a blog; perhaps for the Canadian participants, blogs are for publicity and sharing, while the Japanese participants' responses seem to indicate that for them, blogs function as a personal diary-type activity (despite the fact that they are posted in a highly public medium).

The pattern was repeated in participants' responses to the blogging topic, where participants were asked to post a link to their favourite blog. The linked blogs were placed into two broad categories: blogs that were concerned with the daily activities of a single person ("personal" blogs) and blogs that dealt with either impersonal topics (such as cooking) or dealt with multiple people (such as general celebrity blogs).

Of the six links posted by Japanese participants, all led to "personal" blogs about young Japanese women. The focus of each blog was clearly demonstrated in their headers, an example of which appears in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Maeda Atsuko Official Blog header. Reprinted from ameblo.jp/atuko-maeda

Featuring prominently in each header was a bold stylized image of each blogger, clearly indicating that the blog is exclusively concerned with the very person immortalized at the top of the page. Although the sample of Japanese participants' contributions is small and cannot be reliably generalized beyond the population of the study, it is a fair point of comparison against the Canadian participants' contributions. Of the six links posted by Canadian participants, two led to personal blogs and four led to non-personal blogs. One blog posted by a Canadian participant appears in Figure 5.

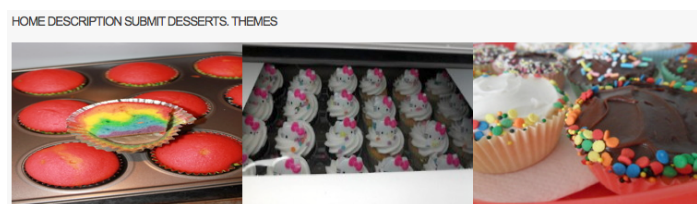


Figure 5. Drool over desserts header. Reprinted from fuckyeahdesserts.tumblr.com



Figure 6. Tokyohive header. Reprinted from www.tokyohive.com



Figure 7. Suzanne's Blog header. Reprinted from plaza.rakuten.co.jp/zansu

Only one of the Canadians' blog headers bore any resemblance to the blogs headers in the previous group (Fig. 7), which we discuss below. The only other blog with human figures represented is *Tokyohive*, (Fig 6) which differs from the previous group's headers in that it represents multiple figures, and that the text does not necessarily tell the name of the figure. However, *Tokyohive's* header does a good job of describing the purpose of the blog: it is an agglomeration of Japanese celebrity news.

An analysis of the type of blogs linked to by the participants seems to support the culture-of-use pattern that is suggested by the survey data, and generally supported by Thorne's (2006) culture-of-use theory. Since the task asked "Got a blog you like? Post a link" without defining what kind of website would constitute a blog, the participants' responses show what each group of participant believes to be, for them, a prototypical blog. Japanese participants seemed to show that personal diary-type websites were prototypical blogs, while Canadian participants tended to show that informative or non-personal entertainment website were prototypical blogs.

If these generalizations about culture-of-use hold true, then in terms of Byram's ICC, a move away from the base culture-of-use toward the target culture-of-use would constitute a development in ICC attitude. This connection seemed to hold true in observations of participant's behavior. One link in particular pointed to a blog that did not fit within the group norms. *Suzanne's Blog Zansu* (Fig.7) is a personal blog linked to by a Canadian participant. However, this participant demonstrated among the highest levels of ICC, evidenced in other behavior. Throughout the project this particular Canadian participant posted extensively in Japanese, used creative code-switching, and had one of the highest levels of participation. Further, the complementary case is true; participants like Violet who posted links to highly prototypical blogs had relatively low levels of ICC, evidenced by a large percentage of base-language posts and overall lower levels of participation in discussions. Although this pattern does not support the claim that participants' ICC developed as a result of the blogging task, the anomaly in culture-of-use as an index of ICC offers a descriptively-consistent explanation.

7. Conclusions and Limitations

It is certainly the case that “the experience of communicating and interacting in interculturally competent ways is difficult to describe in its complexity” (Byram, 1997, p. 105). Evidence for ICC is subjective and multiply interpretable, and the observable behaviour is influenced by a number of factors unrelated to ICC. It is a limitation of this brief study that a more extensive assay and rigorous analysis of the participants’ behavior was not possible.

Nevertheless, a few tentative conclusions can be made about the effects of blogging on ICC. Contrary to the advice of many ICFL researches, it does not appear necessary in all cases to explicitly define language use protocol, and in some cases leaving the protocol undefined can be beneficial. We found that giving participants the option to use base-language, target language, translation or code switching can be beneficial, in that it serves as a venue for group solidarity that is not available when a language protocol is fixed. The study found that informal, approachable tasks can aid participants’ ICC in terms of an interest in the Other’s daily life. Finally, we found that participants seemed to approach blogging environments with different cultures-of-use, and that stepping outside the respective cultures-of-use was related to ICC.

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