Linguistic Identity:
What is it? Why is it important? And how can it be learned?

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概要

本論は、日本語では馴染みの少ない「言語同一性」もしくは、「言語認知」と訳される言語アイデンティティの 7 つの概念を対比させます。 そしてまた、それぞれの言語がいかに異なった意味分野を持つ傾向にあるかを示唆します。 ある言語で広く使われる単語が別の言語では、ないかもしれません。 本論は、言語とアイデンティティーの接点がなぜ外国語の授業において重要視されるのかについて言及しています。外国語学習者にとり、アイデンティティが対照言語でどのように「マークされるか」について理解をすすめることは、実用的な言語育成に役立つかもしれません。 それはまた、対照の言語カルチャーに関する洞察をより促すことにもなります。さらに、言語アイデンティティ・マーカーを変えることは、社会的な変化を促進するための方法であるかもしれません。

本稿は、外国語の授業で“アイデンティティ・アクティビティ”を行うための 4 つの実用的な方法を提示します。それは、アドバイスのためのコラム、ジャーナルへの投稿、仲間へのインタビュー、「成功した」言語学習者に関する本の書評を書くことが言語学習者としての理想のイメージ作りに役立ちます。

キーワード: 言語とアイデンティティ、言語心理学、比較言語学、ポストモダン社会構成主義理論

What is meant by the term "linguistic identity"? In English, this concept is centuries old and has been often associated with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1929, 1942/1956) – a controversial and generally discredited belief that languages determine thought and behavior. However, in the Japanese language it is difficult to come across widely used cognates for “linguistic identity.” Of course, literal translations such as "語学アイデンティティ" or "言語の同一性" or "言語認知" are possible. However, none of these expressions appear among the 158,000 entries of the Japanese WordNet database, nor in the 150,000-sentence Tanaka Corpus currently on the Tatoeba Project website. This suggests that the notion of "linguistic identity" – like terms such as "critical thinking" or "constructive criticism" or even "flirt" – are not so widely used in Japanese. Although it is possible to circumlocute and reach approximations, it is fascinating how diverse languages tend to have different lexical landscapes. In this regard, though "sprachliche(n) Identität" is not rare in German and "(l')identité linguistique" is a term encountered occasionally in French, I am intrigued by how my Chinese friends are flummoxed by a term such as "语言特性." In short, words that are common place in some languages might be rare in others.

This paper contrasts seven prevalent notions of linguistic identity, then underscores why identity-related issues are worth raising in foreign language learning contexts. Finally, it mentions some specific ways this can be done.

1. Eriksonian and Neo-Ericksonian Perspectives

Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) was one of the leading identity researchers of the previous century. He distinguished between *ego identity*, which we might term a "core self", and various *personal identities* representing the diverse – and at times conflicting – social or cultural roles we are expected to undertake. Phinney (1990, 1993) has

extended Erikson's ideas, exploring how language, race, and ethnicity impact identity. She also asserts we progress through telelogical stages, and that group membership often involves significant struggle for linguistic, racial, or ethnic minorities. For example, in bilingual contexts in which code-switching is frequent, identity-related conflicts have been well-documented. As Kanno (2003) points out in her description of bilingual and bicultural Japanese children growing up in multilingual settings, it often takes a lot of work for children to find their own voices. Gradually, most people reach what Erikson and Marcia (1966, 1980) term "identity achievement" – a condition in which their personal and ego identities are balanced. However, positive outcomes are by no means guaranteed. Uncertainty about which possible identity facets to incorporate and which to reject can lead to *identity diffusion* – a condition Marcia (1966, p. 552) describes as a lack of commitment to any particular set of values and a subsequent lack of clear sense of self.

Influenced by Erikson, in Marcia's view identity forms gradually through a process of exploration and commitment. Periods of relative stability are punctuated by periodic *identity crises* in which previous ways of viewing the world no longer seem viable. It is during such times that embracing a new paradigm appears increasingly imperative. What Marcia terms "exploration" entails experimenting not only with different ideas, but also different linguistic discourses, social registers, and possibly even languages. As individuals mature, they often become committed to some of the linguistic acts they continually perform. These may develop into mannerisms that become integrated into personal identity systems. Marcia reminds us that a healthy degree of self-esteem and personal autonomy are needed to reach a state of "identity achievement."

2. Social Identity Theory

Instead of conceiving of a single core self, social identity theorists postulate that our membership in various social groups has a crucial role in shaping the notions of who we are. For example, an individual might identify as a member of a given family, local community, profession, ethnicity, religion, or as a citizen of a nation. A good way to illustrate this is to think of a classical Greek drama in which different characters can be said to represent distinct "voices" or identity aspects. As the salience of one character increases, the salience of others tends to subside (Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, cited in Moss, 2016, par. 6). Hence, for some persons, identifying with a specific linguistic group may seem crucial to their self-concept. For others, a different set of values – say a specific ideology – may hold prominence. Metaphorically, we can say they are listening to different voices in a chorus. Social identity theorists tend to view group membership as a fulcrum for identity formation and they are particularly interested in how people categorize (stereotype) members of various groups. In particular, social identity theorists examine how out-group members are compared with in-group members. To enhance their own self-image, in-group members often formulate negative images of those outside their group. It is perhaps for this reason that Rajagopalan (2001) describes languages as "flags of allegiance" (p.17) and "rallying points" (p.19) of communal behavior. For those identifying with a particular linguculture, the norms of that group are often perceived as being "natural" or even superior to other groups. To enhance in-group solidarity, Tajfel and Turner (1986) report that out-group distancing and marginalization are common. For example, when Germany's rivalry with France heightened following Napoleon's invasion, a belief in a

German linguistic identity [Sprachgeist des Deutschen] became prevalent. Herder (1858, p.201), as a case in point, described language as a "tribal core" [Stamm] of a given group and many times throughout history language has been used as a rallying cry to promote group solidarity. Beliefs about the uniqueness of Japanese linguaculture and its superiority over others date back centuries. However, when tensions with China and the West heighted during the 1930s, those beliefs became formalized into the Japanese Education Ministry's *Kokutai no Hongi* (1937) [Cardinal Principles of the National Body]. That doctrine maintained that Japan is united as "one people, one nation, one language" and indeed "one blood" (Sec. 2, par. 7). That belief has been echoed by prominent Japanese politicians as recently as 2005 (Japan Times, 2005, par. 2).

3. Situated Learning Theory

Although Lave and Wenger's Situated Learning Theory (1991) is primarily about *learning*, it can also be interpreted as a theory of *identity*. Just as learning is viewed as a largely unintentional consequence of authentic activity occurring within a given cultural context, identity formation may arise through similar processes. To Lave and Wenger, identity is not abstract or isolated from the environment: it is embedded in extended social milieus and holistically embodied in biological hosts. In 2012 Wenger made this point clear when stating:

> Learning can be viewed as a journey through landscapes of practices. Through engagement, but also imagination and alignment, our identities come to reflect the landscape in which we live and our experience of it. Identity itself becomes a system, as it were. (p. 5)

Wenger describes identity as a "trajectory" and likens it to a "journey" both within and across various communities – a path involving distance as well as time. Her ideas resonate closely with the *future selves* concept of Markus and Nurius (1986). In their view, envisioning a positive future self provides a motivational force for learning, which can impact self-concept or identity. The distinction between self-concept, identity, and persona varies from author to author, and sometimes even within the same author's writings over time. This makes broad generalizations difficult. However, Lee and Oyserman (2012) summarize one key point of Markus and Nurius by stating, "Generally speaking, individuals are motivated to reduce the gap between their present and future positive possible selves while increasing the gap between their present and future negative possible selves" (p. 1).

A pivotal concept in Situated Learning Theory is the notion of "communities of practice." Any group meeting regularly to learn to do something better is in fact a "community of practice." In multilingual contexts, speakers sharing the same language have the potential to become "communities of practice" if they develop collective identities and sets of norms through sustained interaction. According to Wenger (1998), each community of practice imposes a set of criteria and expectations for membership. Linguistically, we can say that when persons are addressed without the use of any "foreigner talk" (Ferguson, 1971, cited by Suleiman Alfallaj, 2016) or without interpersonal distancing strategies (Denckla and Bornstein, 2015, p. 148) they are likely accepted as full participants in a given linguistic community. Power struggles are

often inherent in the process of community membership, and some communities do restrict the power of ethnic, linguistic, or ideological minorities.

4. Feminist Identity Perspectives

Tannen, Butler, Norton and many others have studied how power relations influence language use and identity. Researching conversation styles, Tannen (2012) has observed how they vary not only across genders, but also across languages and social roles. Extending Austin's (1962) notion of *performative utterances*, she suggests conversational rituals develop within socialized hierarchies and these help forge identities over time.

Tannen also details how *linguistic markings* have a normative social function in shaping identities (1993, 2007). In other words, there is an inherent bias in language and in many spheres women stand out from men. She also mentions how gendered positions within each family tend to shape identities and notions of what sort of language use is appropriate.

Moreover, Butler (1991) astutely reveals how identity categories such as "lesbian", "Jewish" or "Xhosa speaker" tend to constrain certain behaviors and to encourage others. In other words, identity can be regarded as an ongoing social performance. Adopting industrial age metaphors, it is almost tempting to suggest that identities are "manufactured" by societies. However, instead of viewing identities as *a priori* sovereign selves, Butler adopts a phenomenological view that they develop organically *in situ* through a process of constant iteration. In fact, she maintains that only through the continual repetition of a performance is the illusion of a uniform identity maintained.

Like Butler, Norton (1995, 2000) frequently employs socio-economic metaphors to describe human behavior. Central to her theory of identity is the notion of *investment*: an attempt to accumulate economic and symbolic capital in order to obtain symbolic and material resources. Investment is understood as a fulcrum wherein "identity, ideology, and capital" intersect (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 36). Echoing Bourdieu (1977), Norton asserts that people invest in activities such as foreign language learning strategically to obtain real or imaginary gains. Although most people conceive of capital in terms of monetary assets, Norton (2013) underscores that languages are in fact symbolic assets that are often linked to pecuniary opportunities. Prendergast (2008) has even used the term "linguistic currencies" to describe the value of hegemonic languages such as English, Chinese, and Spanish in contrast to endangered languages such as Gondi (spoken in some parts of India) or Picard (used in one part of France).

5. Narrative identity theory

Instead of viewing identity as an essentialized or fixed product, narrative identity theory regards identity formation as an ongoing discursive process that is meditated – to no small degree – by language. Hence, identity is seen as situationally constructed and fluid. According to Linde (1993), McAdams (2001), and Adler (2010), identity is "stitched together" by linguistic narratives – essentially discursive stories – that give structure, meaning, and coherence to individuals and their communities. Since narratives are the stuff of language, "linguistic identity" might be understood as a

reflexive process by which we both construct – and also are constructed by – the stories we tell (and are told) about ourselves (Bruner, 1987 p. 693). Williams (cited in Somers, 1994, p. 605) encourages us to regard each governing narrative in our lives as merely a "presiding fiction" that is continually reconfigured and renegotiated. She further points out how each governing narrative imposes boundaries on those who "follow" a given story, compelling some behaviors and inhibiting others. From this perspective, we can be viewed as both the authors of our own narratives, as well as embedded participants in them. Anderson (1997) aptly summarizes this by stating:

> The self is an ongoing auto-biography; or, to be more exact, it is a self-other, multifaceted biography that we constantly pen and edit. The self is an ever-changing expression of our narratives, a being-and-becoming through language and storytelling as we continually attempt to make sense of the world and of ourselves. (p. 216)

One thing that many multilingual people have noticed is that when they tell their "stories" in different languages, some parts of those stories actually change (Kramsch, 2004, par. 5). For example, the Japanese and English writings of Yone Noguchi – who referred to himself as Noguchi Yonejirō in Japanese – differ markedly in flavor and subject matter depending on the language used (Horii, 2012; Morita, 2013).

Many narrative identity theorists are concerned about the notion of *self-authorship*. Observing how many stories are imposed on us because of our gender, race, age, nationality, religion, or language(s), Baxter Magolda (2004, 2010) suggests that we can progress through successive stages of self-authorship. In the initial stage, identity is outwardly assigned and persons merely follow the scripts they have been given. In other words, they are playing roles without realizing other options. At the next stage, people begin to question their identity-positions and the ways that they have been framed. In the third stage, there is an attempt to develop (and to defend) ones chosen beliefs and role assignment. In the final stage, individuals develop sufficiently robust internal identity constructs that they can maintain a degree of self-authorship. Although this theory is not without critics such as Rowland (1989) or Miller (2005), the importance of fostering autonomy and a sense of "ownership" regarding ones chosen beliefs holds widespread credence.

6. The Boas-Jakobson Theory

Though few linguists today endorse entirely deterministic notions regarding linguistic identity, support for a weaker version known as the Boas-Jakobson principle is ongoing. This theory maintains that each language offers varying linguistic affordances (van Lier, 1996, 2004) that make it easier to express certain ideas. However, almost any idea can be expressed in any language through compounding, borrowing, eponym and so on. Labuschagne and Heidema (2011) summarize this stance by affirming, "… language facilitates or encourages some thoughts by making certain concepts accessible" (par. 27). For example, Japanese is often more nuanced than English when describing relative age: expressions such as *senpai, kōhai, ani, otōto, ane, imōto* force speakers to indicate who is older or younger. Moreover, as Nakamura (2010) suggests, whereas Japanese is highly indexical of gender, English is less so. Nevertheless, if an English speaker wishes to mark gender, it is certainly possible. As a case in point, the Japanese question, *Sono ato kimi wa doshita no?*" (Tatoeba Sentence

#1192213) identifies the speaker as female and addressee as likely male. However, the English translation, "What did you do then?" is gender-neutral. Conversely, English is more nuanced than Japanese in terms of expressing grammatical number. In English, it is often a necessity to indicate singularity or plurality. In Japanese, this is generally not necessary. Boas and Jakobson suggest that language and cognition do not influence each other in simplistic, unidirectional ways. Instead, they assert that they are co-embedded and have some impact on shaping the identities of speakers, who also shape the linguistic landscapes around them.

7. Current Counter-Theories

Dismayed by the messy semantic boundaries between terms such as identity, ego, persona, consciousness, and self-concept – and the likelihood of conflating such abstract nouns – some theorists have been tempted to scrap the notion of linguistic identity entirely. In fact, most post-modernists prefer terms such as "subject-position" or "subjectivity" to "identity" since those terms underscore the various ways we are typecast by others and/or define ourselves. Althusser (1970) chronicles in detail how individuals are "subjected" or relegated to various subject-positions by Ideological State Apparatuses – which basically amount to socially sanctioned belief systems. What he does not do is underscore how individuals can creatively reposition themselves or "speak back" to existing hegemonies – an issue that postcolonial scholars such as Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin (2002, 2006, 2013) have consistently brought to light.

Pinker (1997, 2007) regards language as an innate interactive "mental module" along with visual cognition and some psychomotor skills. He likens language to a sort of "cognitive machinery" through which we conceptualize the world. Pinker echoes Kant in suggesting that language fosters certain conceptual categories. Many of our conceptual concepts are in fact based on linguistic metaphors. Hence instead of suggesting that we have *one* unified identity, contemporary theorists such as Pinker, Fodor (1983), Jackendoff (2002) envision the mind as a network of disparate operational modules. Which module dominates our awareness at any given moment depends partly on environmental conditions. Kendrick and Griskevicius (2013) liken mental modules to "subselves" and posit that humans have seven such basic operational functions: self-protection, disease-avoidance, affiliation, status, mate-acquisition, mate-retention, and kin-care. Griskevicius (2013) and other modular theorists such as Kurzban (2012) have even hinted that we have multiple personalities, each with a different evolutionary goal. Although brain researchers have had some success in mapping the language centers in the brain, the neurological evidence for most specific "mental modules" remains elusive.

In summary, at this point in time it seems fair to say linguistic identity is a widely contended issue. Although a single theory with broad support has yet to emerge, I believe that there is ample evidence to say that language interacts with thought and behavior in interesting ways – particularly in multilingual contexts. A person who might perform one task adeptly in one language is unlikely to perform it with the same level of dexterity in another, and this often impacts both self-concept and self-positioning. For such reasons, the issues raised in the ongoing debate about linguistic identity are, in my view, highly relevant to both language educators and foreign language learners.

Why raise identity-related issues in foreign language classes?

There are three compelling reasons for teaching concepts related to linguistic identity in classroom contexts.

First, if *pragmatic appropriacy* is a goal, then identity markers must be understood. Each language uses deictic markers in a myriad of ways. For example, Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor (2014) show how English in the United States is often used as a racial marke. They suggest that in ethnically diverse classes, effective communication requires an ability to appreciate (and use) multi-ethnic dialects. Often this entails a degree of dialect switching since Afro-American Vernacular English ("black talk"), Mexican American English ("Chicano talk"), and Standard American English ("white talk") differ in numerous ways. Teachers in those parts of Japan where the local dialect differs significantly from standard Japanese – or those teaching at schools for ethnic Koreans or Chinese – face similar issues. As Hill (1998) attests, since language is highly indexical of social status and identity, it is worth understanding the link in depth.

Second, learning about identity-related issues can provide a window to better understand a given linguaculture (Crozet, Liddicoat & Lo Bianco, 1999). For example, any student of Japanese or Korean soon learns that relative age is an essential identity marker. The aptness of a given expression in those languages often depends on the respective ages of the interlocutors. Both of Japanese and Korean linguacultures have well-defined protocols regarding social distance and the degree of familiarity that can be expressed among interlocutors of varied ages. Foreign students of these languages sometimes inadvertently break those protocols. Therefore, an awareness of those protocols can often facilitate smoother interactions.

Third, if a student *does* want to change a given linguistic convention, and assert themselves in an markedly unexpected way, it is best do so consciously – not accidently. As Hayman (2014) implies, a deliberate protest is often preferable to an accidental gaffe. For example, now an increasing number of Japanese feminists intentionally use words such as *boku,* a term that that was formerly reserved for men (Nakamura, 2010). To consciously break a rule or to reframe an existing linguistic social code, it is first necessary to understand how that norm works. Looking at language as an "identity matrix" allows us to examine essentialized assumptions about specific social relations, and then to challenge those assumptions when necessary.

Ways of teaching "linguistic identity" in class

Here are four brief ways that "identity work" can be done in foreign language class contexts. I have used these activities with university-level EFL students in Japan, but they can be adapted to many other learning environments.

(1) student language learning advice columns - Ask students to give advice about foreign language learning in a "Dear Abby" format, then share their ideas with each other and reflect on which strategies for dealing with specific learning problems are most apt. One advantage of this activity is that it often helps some students realize their difficulties are far from unique. In terms of identity, this exercise can also de-stigmatize many common language learning problems. However, a caveat emptor is needed: most students know little about cognitive psychology, and/or have little experience giving advice in a foreign language. As a result, their comments might be merely a potpourri of conventional truisms. For this reason, I have found it necessary to encourage reflective

discussions about the advice offered. At the very least, this activity can prime participants to consider some common problems pertaining to language learning and identity roles, underscoring how perplexity is often a feature of the foreign language learning experience.
Some possible questions to explore include:

Q: I do not feel I am a good English learner. Everyone seems better than me. What should I do?
Q: When I traveled to central Asia, I could not understand their English - it seemed "strange." What should I do? I hope to travel again, but lack confidence in my English . . . .
Q: I am forced to study English, but dislike it. I need the graduation credits, but do not want to be in class because English seems unrelated to my future. What is your advice?
Q: I seldom remember English words well. When I see a new word, I usually look it up in a dictionary, but then soon forget it. It makes me feel dumb. How can I remember new words more effectively?

(2) guided journal explorations - Encourage students to examine identity-related issues through reflective journaling and then to share their insights with peers. Reflective journals have been used in educational contexts for decades (Adams, 1990; Bean, 1996; Tsuumura, 1991;). Reflective journaling often allows students to think about their own learning, essentially adding an "experiential" or "deep" element to their learning experiences. Although some teachers ask students to write about whatever comes to mind, I prefer to have them focus on specific issues. Some possible journal questions include:

Q: How have your attitudes towards English changed since you began learning it?
Q: Do you feel different when speaking English and your native language? If so, how?
Q: Some people say, "Most people in [name of country] are not good at learning English." Do you agree or disagree? Why?

In the process of writing about these issues, students often become aware that identity is not a constant – it may appear to change in diverse linguistic mileus. This is a big discovery for some language learners.

Two practical issues need to be addressed in this activity. The first concerns *language policy*: some students might not be competent enough to express themselves adequately in the target language, and some teachers lack proficiency in the students' native language(s). Hence from the onset it is necessary to be clear about which language(s) can be used in the journals. In some contexts, bilingual journaling might be a valid choice.

Second, the *target audience* needs to be clarified from the start. Since some students might write very private things, they need to know in advance who will read their entries. Informed consent is also necessary for this sort of activity and it can only succeed if there is trust, a respect for privacy, and discretion regarding comments. Some teachers prefer to treat each student journal as a two-way dialog (Roe & Stallman, 1995). Personally, I prefer students to work in self-selected groups of 3-4 other peer readers and to collect their writing assignments just twice a semester. This keeps the teacher workload manageable, but also enables students to get regular feedback from each trusted peers.

(3) peer interviews - Have students do a 5-10 minute interview with someone they consider a "successful" foreign language learner. Make sure they digitally record and transcribe those interviews. After this, students give a 3-5 minute introduction of each

"successful" learner. This type of activity has three advantages. First, as Murphey (1996) points out, students are more likely to identify with successful "near peers" than with distant, seemingly unrelated figures. Some will see those peers as role models or potential ideal selves. Second, students might actually learn some useful tips about language learning strategies through this activity. Finally, this type of activity can improve their listening and speaking skills. Some possible interview questions include:

Q: What has been your biggest challenge in learning a foreign language(s)?
Q: How do you overcome setbacks or disappointments while learning a foreign language?
Q: How do you feel when switching languages? When is it most difficult?
Q: What has helped you most to become better at English?
Q: What advice would you give others wanting to improve their English?

Some interviewees are likely to repeat predictable truisms about language learning such as "just study hard." Encourage students to reflect on statements that seem overly simplistic and, when appropriate, gently nudge them towards considering alternative views.

(4) student book reviews - Ask students to review any book on how to master a foreign language, then give a 5-minute presentation about that book to their peers. Because reading a full-length text in a foreign language many seem too daunting for some students, I offer students the option of reading a text in their native languages, then a writing short review in English. This may enable them to know more about language learning skills, and perhaps see the authors as role models or "ideal selves" (Dörnyei, 1990, 1994). Some points that book reviews should cover include:

Q: What is the main idea of this book? What other books is this text similar to?
Q: How did the author become proficient in their target language(s)?
Q: What "bad" foreign language learning habits does that author recommend avoiding?
Q: How do this author's ideas differ from your ideas?
Q: Do you recommend buying this book? Why or why not?

Students might need to go through several drafts of their reviews before they are adequately polished. Also, some students may have a tendency to simply read from their papers when giving presentations. Such students may need several practice sessions, coaching, and it might be good to demonstrate with some sample book reviews.

Additional ways of doing identity work include guided imagery meditations evoking ideal future self scenarios as described by Meghan (2014) and Jenkins (2015). Edwards (2006) and Bijani and Nejadian (2014) also describe how foreign nicknames can sometimes help bridge the gap between self and "Other" for some students. However, it is worth noting that not all students welcome this practice and hence offering them a choice seems essential. Finally, Ferlazzo (2012) and Newfields (2016) have shown how films - or film clips - can be used to stimulate identity-related discussions in foreign language classes. Films that involve cross-lingual or intercultural conflict such as *English Vinglish* (2012) or *The Princess of Nebraska* (2007) are often particularly relevant.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some contrasting notions of linguistic identity. It has also mentioned some reasons for discussing identity related issues in language classes, and finally outlined four specific ways to do so. The topic of linguistic identity appears to be fraught with seemingly contradictory evidence, but it also a rich field for discovery. Taylor (2013) highlights that complexity by stating:

> People's ideas about themselves are expressed and tested in social life through their actions. In turn, the outcomes of these 'tests' provide a basis for crystallizing, refining, or modifying identity based in part on how believable or defensible these identity images appear to be. In other words, living in society, people develop perceptions of what is and what is not desired in a particular context and display self images accordingly. (Location No. 294)

Hence identity in general – and linguistic identity in particular – might be likened to an ongoing formative assessment process. For this reason, I concur with Telford's (1994) suggestion that it might be best to conceive of identity as a *verb* rather than as a noun. Without the active and iterative process of *identifying* with something, identity can be said to lack existence.

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