

# The role of cultural scripts in non-native speech generation

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*The article analyses the way non-native speech can be brought closer to authentic speech (that of native speakers) via a number of key parameters. Arguments are offered in favour of the view that approximation is necessary due to intensification and expansion of international contacts causing the need for deeper cross-cultural understanding. Language teachers face the challenge of forming and developing non-native speech habits exceeding the level of communicative sufficiency. The level of non-native speech needs to be raised so that it sounds like authentic speech. The script-based approach is offered as a solution to the problem. These are dialogues, which reflect the foreign language as it is actually used in practice, focusing on current language usage and culture. Cultural scripts, as they are known, are viewed as constituent parts of the ethnic culture constituting the cognitive substratum of verbal communication. Native speakers' verbal behaviour 'moves along the tracks' of cultural scripts. Therefore, the scripts must be embedded into students' linguistic and cultural competence and included in the generative models of speech. The research is based on English language material contrasted with Russian language material. The article is intended for experts in speech production and foreign language teaching.*

**KEYWORDS:** *speech generation, linguistic and cultural competence, authentic speech, non-native speech, idioethnic speech, cultural script, communicative sufficiency*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When developing non-native speech habits at the advanced level of teaching a foreign language, language teachers face the challenge of bringing students' speech closer to that of the native speakers in a number of (ideally – in all) respects. An effective means of achieving this goal is arranging the language material under study to provide so-called cultural scripts or scenarios (Minsky, 1974; Fillmore, 1985) representative of

the native speakers' ethnic culture. The study focuses on this aspect of the language – culture interconnection.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Drawing a parallel between natural and artificial languages will be useful here. As is known, an artificial formalised language is a semiotic system consisting of the informational component (a set of signs) and the procedural component (a set of

rules). In accordance with the rules, the language signs are combined into utterances constituting a text in a formalised language (Church, 1996). If the rules are observed, the procedure enables the language user to generate texts that are completely correct. The formal correctness of the texts is guaranteed by the formalised language system itself.

Unfortunately, teaching a foreign language and developing non-native speech habits is often based on equating natural language to formalised systems to some degree. Many language teachers believe that knowing the natural language system automatically guarantees generating correct utterances and texts. As a result, teachers introduce a certain vocabulary and some grammatical rules and then give their students tasks in oral or written composition, expecting correct speech production. However, generating speech in natural language is regulated not only by the rules of its system but also by the prescriptions of its norm and usage traditions, speech register and genre, the requirements of style, the rules of speech etiquette, the communicators' social, cultural, psychological, age, gender and other characteristics, i.e. by factors that are not laid down by the formal language system and thus need to be mastered separately. Learning the foreign language system is a necessary but insufficient condition for generating speech which is as close as possible to that of native speakers.

One can acquire the necessary skills only in discourse, i.e. using language in its sociocultural context, taking into account the above-mentioned prescriptions and requirements.

Those who have mastered only the system of the language being studied generate utterances and texts, consciously or subconsciously applying the norm, usage traditions, stylistics and etiquette of their own native speech and involuntarily manifesting the peculiarities of their ethnic mentality. As a matter of fact, people in this situation do not possess the genuine generative models of the language being studied. Instead, they resort to the generative models belonging to their own mother tongue, inserting foreign words into them at the last stage of generation (see Table 1).

The formulae in the third column do not contain language errors; they do not violate the rules of the language system. They just deviate from the norm (the generally accepted ways) of expressing ideas. Such speech is not idioethnically correct and is not authentic. Students of English should learn to generate utterances like those presented in the first column of the table above. To achieve this, they must replace Russified generative models by genuine English models in their linguistic competence. By way of illustration, some Russian students of English were asked to express in English the idea of interrupting someone's

Table 1

*Cross-application of language norms and its consequences*

ENGLISH LANGUAGE NORM	RUSSIAN LANGUAGE NORM	LITERAL TRANSLATIONS FROM RUSSIAN MADE BY RUSSIAN STUDENTS
I am hungry / thirsty	Есть / пить хочу	I want to eat / drink
Stay away!	Не подходи!	Don't come up!
He ran out of supplies	У него кончились запасы	His supplies came to an end
He was breathalysed	Его проверили на содержание алкоголя в крови	He was tested on presence of alcohol in his blood
The plane is boarding at Gate One	Посадка на самолет производится через выход номер один	Boarding the plane is taking place at Exit Number One

vacation. The Russian respondents offered the following versions: (1) *He was returned from his holiday.* (2) *He was asked to come back to work when he was on vacation.* (3) *He was called from his leave.* (4) *The Boss demanded that he should return to work when he was on holiday.* (5) *They called him back from his leave,* etc.

None of the respondents offered the standard formula – *He had his leave stopped* – or – *his leave was cancelled* unanimously recommended by the members of the control group (native speakers of

English). The Russian respondents said that the formula would never occur to them.

Another example is the Russian respondents' attempts to render the idea of a medical contraindication: (1) *I may not raise heavy things.* (2) *I am prohibited to raise heavy objects.* (3) *The doctor told me not to raise anything heavy,* etc. The standard formula – *I mustn't do heavy lifting* – or – *I mustn't lift anything heavy* – recommended by most of the control group members, did not occur to any of the Russian respondents.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the enquiry confirm the assumption that many standard (generally accepted) ways of expressing ideas in English are missing in Russian students' linguistic competence. When speaking English, they have to resort to Russian standard speech patterns or invent their own formulae.

The traditional approach to teaching English in Russia implies mastering the basics of the language system (phonetics, grammar and vocabulary) plus (as a kind of decoration of speech) learning some set expressions. This results in acquiring habits of Russified English speech that meets the demands of communicative sufficiency (it is grammatically correct and intelligible, which is enough for short term purposes) but differs from authentic speech in many ways.

If communicative sufficiency is the final goal of teaching and considered adequate to meet practical requirements, then the existing methods of teaching foreign languages may be left intact. The question is, however, what depth of cross-cultural understanding is required under modern sociocultural conditions? The expansion and complication of international contacts in all spheres of human activity necessitates deeper penetration into the 'core' of foreign cultures and languages. Without this it is impossible (or at least very difficult) to hold international discussions on complicated issues, make adequate translations,

comprehend others' cultural values, reach consensus on key points or find solutions to global problems. Hence the growing importance of acquiring linguistic competence exceeds the level of communicative sufficiency.

Ideally, at this higher level, non-native speech must conform to all the canons of authentic speech, i.e. speech generated by native speakers. In practice, the ideal is not always attainable but in the process of education one must strive for it, going beyond the limits of communicative sufficiency as far as possible.

The degree of non-native speech approximation to authentic canons depends on the training course duration, the quality of the educational materials, the means and conditions of training, the teachers' qualifications and the students' learning abilities and diligence. If the final goal of education is the maximum approximation to the above-mentioned canons, then language teachers must reject the widely practised principle whereby they must first teach students to speak English in a Russified manner and only then, at advanced stages, acquaint them with some of the peculiarities of authentic speech.

It is like building the lowest storey with construction defects, then destroying it, then rebuilding it correctly, then erecting the next storey, etc. The ineffectiveness of the method, with

its waste of time and effort, is evident. Why instil speech patterns bound to be annulled later on? Why mislead students by instructing them to say *medical sister* (a word-for-word translation of Russ. *медсестра*) instead of *sister*, *ward sister* or *trained nurse*; or *sanitary book* (Russ. *санитарная книжка*) instead of *health record*; or *many-flat house* (Russ. *многоквартирный дом*) instead of *block of flats*; or *professional orientation* (Russ. *профориентация*) instead of *career guidance*? Isn't it better to acquaint Russian students with the English phrases everybody uses from the very start?

Correct speech habits must be developed, beginning at the initial stage of language learning. No matter how laborious identifying and teaching what native speakers actually say may be, it is, in the long run, much less laborious than correcting and re-teaching words and phrases to break already formed conditioned reflexes. (In many cases they are never broken, so language school graduates retain non-normative formulae in their language memory for the rest of their lives and persist in using them in their speech in the language they have studied.)

The issue under discussion goes way beyond the range of practical educational and methodological issues. It also involves the theoretical problem of the ethnic specificity of speech generation. In different languages, the same idea is often formulated in different ways. Analysing

*'The issue under discussion goes way beyond the range of practical educational and methodological issues. It also involves the theoretical problem of the ethnic specificity of speech generation'*

peculiarities in expressing ideas is an inherent part of socio- and linguocultural studies that have both theoretical and applied (primarily didactic) value.

Let us consider some principles of teaching non-native students of English to generate speech closely approximating that of native speakers. It will hardly ever occur to Russian students of English that, for instance, low heel shoes or calf length boots should not be called *half-boots* (a literal translation of Russ. *полуботинки*), a vacuum cleaner – a *dust sucker* (Russ. *пылесос*) or a machine-gun – a *bullet-thrower* (Russ. *пулемёт*), etc. Most students realise that English words should be looked up in the dictionary rather than coined for the occasion by copying the structure of Russian words but often they do not extend this rule to set expressions. Somehow many of them think it possible to translate a day-care centre using a literal translation from Russian (a *children's garden* as in Russ. *детский сад*), milk powder – *dry milk* (Russ. *сухое молоко*), cod-liver oil – *fish fat* (Russ. *рыбий жир*), etc. Our teaching

experience shows that students can be weaned from using Russified word combinations. It is enough to point out that they are as inadmissible as the above-mentioned pseudo-words of the *half-boots* kind and that genuine set phrases should be looked up in dictionaries or checked on Google –

just like genuine words. However, it is not these gross deviations from the English norms that constitute the main problem. This is represented by subtler cases of verbalising ideas regulated by tradition and etiquette rather than the language system rules. Cf. Table 2:

Table 2

*Cross-application of language norms and its consequences*

ENGLISH LANGUAGE NORM	RUSSIAN LANGUAGE NORM	STUDENTS' FORMULAE
I booked seats in the stalls	Я купил билеты в партер	I bought tickets to the stalls
Hold the line	Не вешайте трубку	Don't hang the receiver
I had a tooth cavity filled I had a filling	Мне поставили пломбу на зуб	A stopping was put on my tooth

Such examples are numerous. They show that Russian students of English don't use the standard (normative) ways of expressing ideas in English. In order to cope with the problem, we must first of all make an inventory of ideas.

At first sight, the goal seems absurd. Human thinking is boundless and infinitely diverse. But we do not mean listing all ideas – this is indeed absurd. We do not set a grand goal of teaching students creative thinking in a non-native language. We set a much more restricted goal –

developing skills of routine communication within the boundaries of a standard set of topics comprising the so-called actual culture. Inside each of the topics the number of standard ideas is limited and therefore countable. For instance, a set of topics in a training course aimed at preparing students for a business trip abroad may include: *Railway / Air Travel; Staying at a Hotel; Using Public Transport and Public Conveniences; Making Telephone Calls; Business Visit / Negotiating a Contract; In the Bank; Going about Town / Sightseeing; Shopping; Eating Out; Social Events /*

*Entertainment; Homeward Bound*. Each of the topics may be arranged as a cultural script explaining to its participants their role behaviour (both verbal and non-verbal) in conformity with the norms of the host culture and language. *When in Rome, do as the Romans do* (and importantly – speak as they speak).

The verbal provision of a cultural script is a complex of role texts (unlike stage roles, they admit a certain variety and improvisation within the limits of an invariant). These ‘dramatic’ texts contain standard nominations, set phrases, speech patterns and routine formulae (clichés). This is what we call *the inventory of routine thoughts* in their standard verbal form.

This approach may be called thesaurus-based or script-based: the students’ verbal thinking ‘moves along the tracks’ of a script and its language provision, which raises the ideoethnic level of their speech as non-native users and corresponds to the norms and traditions of authentic English speech. The reality is that native speakers of English generate their speech exactly that way – on the basis of cultural scripts belonging to their culture. Cultural scripts in their totality make up the cognitive substratum of culture.

The script entitled *Ordering a Taxi by Phone* may serve as an example. It includes the roles of a customer and a dispatcher. The language provision

of the script will probably contain the following phrases: *I would like a taxi, please. Can I get a taxi to the train station? Can I book a taxi for 7 p.m.? How much will it cost me to go from ... to ...? How long do I have to wait?*

The script *Taking a Taxi* includes the roles of a passenger and a cabdriver. The language provision of the script might contain the following phrases: *Are you free? Take me to this address, please. Could you take me to ...? How much will it cost? I am in a hurry. Could you speed up, please? Would you mind making a short stop? Could you please wait for me here? Could you drop me / stop here? Let me off at the next corner, please. Keep the change. May I have a receipt, please? Thanks for the ride.*

The language provision of the scripts also contains response cues. Together with the stimuli, they constitute the material for making up dialogues and arranging role-plays.

Students who do not know the clichés and speech patterns have to use word-for-word translations from Russian, which may lead to communicative failures and frustration during an actual trip. Clichés are obviously not just a supplementary means of expression. They are not mere speech decoration. They are what speech mostly consists of. Mastering them is an absolutely necessary condition of forming non-native speech habits.

The language system offers many ways of expressing one and the same idea but the norms and traditions of speech limit this diversity to one or two (seldom three) forms and establish levels of gradation of preference. It is desirable that every student of English should know and use these normative forms instead of inventing their own forms or borrowing forms from their mother tongue. Only in spontaneous communication, in case the student does not know the required authentic form, is using non-normative forms permissible, provided that the message is successfully conveyed. But at first opportunity the student should make inquiries about the correct form of expression and add it to their linguistic competence.

At the initial stage of being acquainted with a certain script, students should not be allowed to generate spontaneous speech, because excessive freedom of self-expression at this stage is fraught with the risk of generating non-normative speech under the influence of the students' native language and culture. There is a danger of non-normative speech patterns taking root in the students' language memory and staying there for a long time, if not forever. That is why, like actors in rehearsal, students should reproduce texts of model dialogues and scenes. Further on, as they master the plot, the roles and the language provision of the script, they may be allowed to improvise and vary the content of the script

scenes. The students' own initiative will grow in proportion to the growth of their knowledge of the script and its language provision, going through a process of reproducing model texts without initiative / simulation game with minimum initiative / role play with broader initiative (Livingstone, 1983; (Cho, 2015) / spontaneous speech with maximum initiative allowed within the script. In other words, students will act out a script before moving into role-play, allowing a greater degree of improvisation. This is more likely to prevent non-normative speech patterns from settling in the students' minds, which is obviously an outcome to be avoided.

From the linguistic perspective, the growth of freedom of self-expression must manifest itself by inserting lexical variables into speech patterns, recombining parts of the dialogue and modifying the plot of the script to suit the situation. But if an element of the script is correlated with a normative name, a clichéd formula or a stereotyped dialogue, students should reproduce them as they are and refrain from coining their own phrases. It is only under these conditions that students' non-native speech regarding a given situation may get as close as possible to that of native speakers. Native speakers are tied to cultural scripts, too. In standard sociocultural situations, they do not so much produce their own statements as reproduce clichés. The following typical dialogue may serve as an example.



- *Hallo, this is Mr. M. speaking. Is Mr. N there?*
- *We don't have a Mr. N. here. What number are you calling, sir?*
- *(So-and-so).*
- *I'm sorry, that's a wrong number. You must have misdialled.*
- *Sorry to have troubled you.*

The dialogue consists almost entirely of clichés. So, native and non-native speakers find themselves using the same script and the same language. This is how the script-based approach works. In real communication, people are regularly involved in combined situations that fit into more than one script. However, before proceeding to them, students should learn to navigate mono-script situations.

A cultural script has a typical structure that sets certain role relationships between its participants. Within the script, verbal communication is first of all role communication corresponding to the socio-semiotic parameters of the speech situation and the cultural norms valid in the given community in the given historical period. According to Halliday (1978), the communicators must take into consideration the topic of conversation, the role structure of the situation and the purpose of communication. The communicative strategy depends on these factors.

Incessant reproduction of sociocultural

programmes of behaviour determines reproduction of scripts. Every script is characterised by a certain degree of formalisation and institutionalisation. For instance, the script of a military ritual is regulated by military statute and is strictly formalised, whereas the script of a birthday party is not regulated by official norms and varies within the boundaries of a rather loose plot. As noted in a number of studies, British culture is generally characterised by a stricter regulation of role behaviour within standard scripts than Russian culture. Even informal social events (a party, an at-home, etc.) are characterised by stereotyped topics for discussion, contents of conversations, language forms, as well as event procedures, dress code, table manners, etc. To the representatives of the Russian culture, who are used to a greater freedom of behaviour, a greater meaningfulness and sincerity of conversations, British participants in social events seem to be either puppets or actors repeatedly performing in a tedious play. But this stereotyped nature of communication strategy is not determined by the British communicators' personal characteristics. It is determined by the cultural prescriptions they follow.

Such is the tradition. The determinism of both verbal and non-verbal role behaviour leads to the standardisation of verbal formulae comprising the scripts' language provision. Some clichés exist only within one script, e.g. *Sorry, wrong number* is used only in telephone conversations. Other

clichés are used in more than one script but, as a rule, in one and the same inter-script interaction, such as expressing gratitude: *I appreciate it!* – *My pleasure.* / *The pleasure is mine.* Such formulae are too situation-dependent to be considered language units. Nevertheless, they are mastered alongside language units in the development of spoken communication and become part of linguistic, communicative, cultural competence. The communicative approach to developing non-native speech habits suggests replenishing the language material with a wide range of clichés tied to certain scripts and inter-script interactions. Otherwise, deviations from the English speech norm will arise, influenced by the Russian speech norm.

The standardised nature of sociocultural situations accounts for the standardised nature of the messages conveyed, which, in turn, accounts for the standardisation of language means. Only poets can create new ways of expressing ideas and feelings, but even poets spend a lot of time and effort doing it. Ordinary speakers, who do not have the same poetic talent and no time to think what language forms to use to express ideas, often fall back on clichés and expressions based on common usage. That is why clichés and speech patterns are widely used in speech.

Importantly, speech is not generated automatically by language regarded as a logical device

(Chomsky, 2014). Language is not an agent but an instrument of communication. Speech is generated by a human personality involved in social and cultural relations. Therefore, an ethnic language should be mastered in close connection with its corresponding sociocultural differences.

Sociocultural differences may be presented as a system of scripts constituting the cognitive substratum of verbal communication. The sociocultural specificity of the scripts determines their idioethnic appropriateness and authenticity of speech. Cultural scripts should be included into models of speech generation in order to make the models more appropriate to the psycholinguistic reality. This requires creating a unified metalanguage for describing both language and culture.

In the 20th century, a goal was set to create a cybernetic model of natural language, i.e. ‘a logical automatic device simulating linguistic competence’ (Kibrik, 1987, p. 6). So that an automatic device should be able to generate speech indistinguishable from human speech, it was planned to supply it with ‘a full, sufficient and explicit description of all language objects and rules’ (Apresyan, 1981, p. 32).

Looking back, the idea was clearly utopian. Is it possible to apply an algorithm to what von Humboldt called ‘the spirit of the nation’?

Simulating linguistic competence means simulating a human personality. At a certain stage, the simulator will be unmasked, just like the robot from Isaac Asimov's sci-fi novel *The Caves of Steel* who pretended to be a human being but was unmasked by a robopsychologist who asked the disguised robot a few questions and received inappropriate answers (Asimov, 2014). To be unmasked, a logical device must become the object of its impersonation, i.e. a language personality that has not only rational but also emotional and intentional qualities.

Full formalisation of the process of speech generation is hardly possible and hardly needed. What is really needed is heuristic algorithmisation of speech that implies taking into account not only the factors of the language system but also discursive (psychological, cultural, social) factors. Leaving intact the Chomskian interpretation of speech generation as following the rules of selection and arrangement of language for expressing ideas, let us enumerate ten factors largely determining the selection and the arrangement of language use, 'the ten commandments' if you like.

1. The system of language that prescribes how it is admissible / inadmissible to speak, but within the boundaries of admissible speech forms allows a wide range of periphrases (alternative forms of expressing one and the same idea).

2. The norm of speech that prescribes how it is customary / not customary to speak within the range of possibilities provided by the language system and establishes the preferences in choosing the language used to express ideas.

3. Communicative register that defines the choice of language with regard to the topic of conversation (the field), the *dramatis personae* of the script (the tenor) and the purpose of communication (the mode), according to Halliday (1978). The register includes usage traditions and speech etiquette. The strictness of the prescriptions varies depending on the register.

4. Speech genre that defines the choice of speech forms (oral / written), the communicative regime (formal / informal) and the normative and functional styles. In their turn, these factors define the choice and combination of the language used.

5. The amount of extralinguistic competence common for the participants of a communicative act. It determines the degree of implicitness / explicitness of the message conveyed.

6. The amount of linguistic competence common for the participants of a communicative act. It influences the choice of the language stratum in a particular act of communication (literary language, colloquial language, jargon, language for specific purposes, etc.). For instance, an attempt to use a

professional language when speaking to a non-specialist will lead to a communicative failure. Therefore, a specialist tries to avoid professional terminology.

7. The type of discourse determined by different parameters (institutional / interpersonal; formal / informal; theoretical / practical).

8. The recipient's personal characteristics defined by age, gender, race, nationality, world outlook, education, intellect, traits of character, appearance, and a number of other aspects. These must be taken into account by the speaker when choosing what language to use. This relates to tolerance, political correctness, tact and recommendations concerning the complexity / simplicity of the speech form.

9. The speaker's linguistic identity, which determines the peculiarities of their idiolect (personal preferences in using language, the individual style of speech, culture of speech, etc.).

10. Communication channel characteristics: aural or visual; natural or artificial (technically mediated); with or without disturbance; with high or low carrying capacity, etc. They define the choice of language means as well. For instance, low audibility makes the speaker change the phonation (voice quality) properties of speech. For example, slow down and raise the volume. Other physical conditions of communication can be

mentioned here, too. For example, the limitation of screen time on TV requires from newscasters a higher speed of speech. In order to maintain intelligibility, rapid speech must be very distinctly articulated.

The list may be incomplete, but it still shows clearly how many factors have to be taken into account to generate genuine idioethnic speech rather than its Russified surrogate.

When generating spontaneous speech, one must bear all these factors in mind simultaneously and choose language instantly. This is usually done automatically. To acquire spontaneous speech habits, ideally one should be born into it, grow up and master the actual culture or, at least, get a general education in the bosom of the culture, get imbued with the national mentality and ideology, absorb the national system of values and share the nation's interests and aspirations – in a word, the spirit of the nation. One must think and feel and express oneself like native speakers.

Hence a conclusion that may sound silly on the face of it but is correct in its essence is this. In order to speak English like a native, one must be a native or at least acquire a second language identity. That happens among natural bilinguals, so deeply-rooted in the national soil is perfect language proficiency. (The latter includes not only knowing the language system but also how to manage speech habits in the context of discourse.)

*'Hence a conclusion that may sound silly on the face of it but is correct in its essence is this. In order to speak English like a native, one must be a native or at least acquire a second language identity'*

Community, ethnic culture and ethnic language are semiotic phenomena. Their ontological kinship is the basis for their interaction that manifests itself in social and cultural codes' expansion into natural language and their joint participation in speech generation. Today, social semiology and cultural linguistics have gained priority in the circle of the humanities. It has become practically impossible to study language apart from community and culture. The above factors cannot be strictly algorithmised. A compromise between the logical and discursive description of speech generation can be reached as follows. On the one hand, a generative model should still be regarded as a set of formalised rules regulating the choice and arrangement of language. On the other hand, the social, cultural and psychological factors of speech generation should also be taken into account. This is supposed to result in creating a heuristic (non-strict) algorithm of speech generation. It is meant not so much for rigid regulation of the process as for giving mild instructions concerning the above-mentioned

choice and arrangement of language, allowing a certain freedom of creative individuality. This will enable researchers to model the balance between the common and individual components of speech generation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Every language has its own peculiar system of generative models. Native speakers use the models to generate authentic utterances and texts. They acquire the models early in their childhood, in the process sociocultural and speech development. As for those who learn a non-native language in the classroom, they have at their disposal mostly rules from a manual and translations of words from a bilingual dictionary. The result is a hybrid style of speech that is constructed in the speakers' native language at the initial stage of generation and in the study of language at the final stage. A paradoxical situation arises. Many Russian students of English generate English speech without possessing the genuine models of production. What kind of speech is produced as a result? Is it English speech or an ersatz speech style that bears 'birthmarks' of Russian linguistic, communicative and cultural competencies? What prescriptions, besides those of the language system, must be followed in speech generation? This study formulated them in the most general way in the 'ten commandments' list. Revealing their full content requires further development of the generative theory in its discursive aspect.

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