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Sociolinguistic perspectives on English in business and commerce

1 Introduction

For many decades, English in its multiple forms has served as one of the most important languages of business, both in Europe and worldwide. Though it originally emerged in this role given the economic and political power of countries where it is spoken as a native language (the UK and later the US), over time it has come to be understood as the most widely used *lingua franca* in international business transactions, from the simple sale of a hot dog on the street to the trans-continental merging of large companies. The selection of English as the language of these transactions may pass unnoticed, may be carefully negotiated beforehand, or may be the result of strict top-down regulation. It typically occurs in a multilingual milieu, encompassing the individual repertoires of the speakers involved, their expectations regarding language choice, and the broader sociolinguistic context.

There has been no shortage of inquiry into the varieties of English used in this communication, the textual structure of business genres, the micro-analysis of interactions in BELF (Business English as a *lingua franca*), or mapping out the needs that contemporary employees have as regards English and the resulting proposed methods for organizing and teaching it (for overviews, see Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2007, 2013; Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, and Karhunen 2015). Though these strands of research have been highly productive, they tend to draw attention away from a number of basic realities. These include: (1) differences in the extent and significance of English as a *lingua franca* in specific contexts, (2) the use and value of languages other than English in business communication and (3) the particulars of the selection and use of various languages in conjunction with specific sectors and organizational levels.

As for the first point, the often-declared function of English as a neutral language in a broad range of business situations may somewhat misleadingly suggest that this neutrality is of a universal character. It also may gloss over the fact that speakers enter these situations with different levels of competence (Ehrenreich 2010) and varying language biographies (Nekvapil and Nekula 2006a, 2006b; Nekvapil and Sherman 2009a, 2009b). Here, we acknowledge two concurrent research findings: (a) the fact that language choice tends not to be neutral and typically reflects power relations (cf. Vaara et al. 2005; Gazzola and Grin 2013; Lüdi et al.

2016), and (b) the fact that actual communicative needs in business and workplace situations require practical solutions, often formalized as “language strategies”, which include the selection of a single lingua franca for predetermined situations.

In certain contexts, the position of English as a lingua franca is a relatively new one. This means that many employees have not learned English in a formal setting and are, in fact, encountering it for the first time at work. English, either in an advanced form or just a few words, may be an addition to an already rich plurilingual repertoire. This repertoire may include other lingua francas such as German or Russian, particularly in the central and eastern parts of Europe. Here, people following individual professional trajectories frequently had to initially learn one language such as German or Russian, then another, typically English (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009a). In other regions, such as Scandinavia, English knowledge is widespread and the past decades have brought about a gradual shift from the utilization of receptive multilingualism to the preference for English, invoking the public lay perception of “domain loss” (Haberland, Lønsmann, and Preisler 2013). At the same time, national languages in many European countries enjoy a strong position locally, and there is a general understanding that they should be used whenever possible. Further afield, as more and more countries become major players in global business, particularly those in the Far East, Kachru’s (1986) inner-circle varieties of English may not have the capital they once did, and in fact, what have been traditionally understood as advanced English skills may not necessarily be connected to positions of power. And when native speakers and companies based in the inner circle become involved, the neutrality of English may in fact disappear entirely.

Regarding the second point, a number of large-scale studies have shown that the knowledge of languages other than English does carry economic benefits, and the success of companies of all types rests on, in addition to the knowledge of English, systematic and concerted attention devoted to these other languages. As Hagen et al. (2006: 6) point out in summarizing their ELAN study, which addressed the question of the relationship between language knowledge and profits in both multinationals and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMES), “... the picture is far more complex than the much-quoted view that English is the world language.” Overall, the major talking points of this study’s results were that (a) extensive business loss is attributed to the lack of language skills, and (b) successful companies do pay attention to language issues and develop strategies in this area.¹ A subsequent inquiry, entitled PIMLICO (Promoting, Implementing,

¹ See also the application of the ELAN survey to more than one thousand companies in Catalonia, the ELAN.CAT study (Strubell and Mari 2011).

Mapping Language and Intercultural Communication Strategies in Organisations and Companies, see Hagen 2011), with a focus only on SMES, confirmed the economic significance of active behavior toward language on the part of companies, commerce organizations, states and international organizations, and identified specific best practices of an extensive range of “language strategies”. A third study, ARCTIC (Assessing and Reviewing Cultural Transaction in International Companies, see Hagen et al. 2013), which was limited to several regions of the United Kingdom, in addition to confirming and broadening the findings of the previous studies, indicated that the adoption of the exclusive use of English in non-English speaking markets, though it may be generally sufficient from a networking perspective, may create problems for the localization of products and services. These findings have also been supported by research on the position of “foreign” languages on national and international job markets and on the value of linguistic diversity from the position of companies, or even the entire states (see Grin et al. 2010, who, based on economic analysis, suggest links between knowledge of foreign languages and a country’s economic prosperity) as well as individual job-seekers (Heller 2010; Kelly-Holmes and Mautner 2010; Hogan-Brun 2017).

The above-mentioned line of investigation has included both multinational companies and SMES, which brings us to our third point – different sectors of the business world, as well as levels of company hierarchies, create different types of communication situations. These situations, as described in detail by Duchêne and Heller (2012) are the product of several decades of global socio-economic development, which has encompassed a shift in the location of manual-labor-based industries from former First World centers to various peripheries, and the birth of new economies, based on the provision of various services and of knowledge, both of which are materialized in the form of writing and speaking (Duchêne and Heller 2012: 325–326). The abundance of existing company case studies conducted in the former First World reflects this shift, demonstrating certain tendencies, including the predominance of certain sectors and a material base of interviews and ethnography conducted at top and middle-management levels. Studies of this type have been undertaken in banking (Kingsley 2009, 2013; Cogo 2016), manufacturing (Sunaoshi 2005; Sunaoshi, Kotabe, and Murray 2005; Piekkari, Welch, and Welch 2014) or the pharmaceutical industry (Lønsmann 2014), or in a combination of types and sizes of companies with a focus on specific countries or regions (Cyr, Nelde, and Rutke 2005; Truchot 2009; Angouri 2013; Lüdi, Höchle, and Yanaprasart 2013; Bothorel-Witz and Tsamadou-Jacobsberger 2013; Angouri and Miglbauer 2014). Small and medium-sized enterprises, which have a particular sensitivity to the local sociolinguistic context in which they operate, have been investigated by Incelli (2008) (mixed) and Cogo (2012, 2016) (IT sector). Yet in any given company, regardless of its size, multiple types of jobs

co-exist in a single, delineated space, from blue-collar machine operators to mid-level and top managers (cf. Gunnarsson 2014). The different groups of workers may not only come into contact only minimally, but may also enter the workplace with entirely different and often incompatible linguistic repertoires (see e.g. Deneire 2008, who speaks of an “English divide” among employees at different levels in a company in France, or Coray and Duchêne 2017, who discuss language as a potential “gatekeeper”).

These three highly contemporarily relevant considerations can only begin to be explored further and in more detail by taking an approach to English in Europe that is markedly different than the predominant ones. The purpose of this volume, then, is to present a perspective that is pioneering in character, concentrating on more sociolinguistic perspectives, and placing English in the context of local language ecologies, as opposed to exploring it in isolation, as an unquestionable, unavoidable given.

This is the final volume in the *English in Europe* series, which has thus far focused on overall attitudes toward English in Europe (Linn, Bermel, and Ferguson 2015), the spheres of academic writing (Plo Alastrué and Pérez-Llantada 2015) and higher education (Dimova, Hultgren, and Jensen 2015), and responses to the role of English as a lingua franca (Tatsioka et al. 2018). It complements its predecessors in a number of ways: (1) by exploring the domains (business, economics) thus far unrepresented in the previous series volumes, and by doing so through the prism of sociolinguistics and/or the sociology of language as opposed to analyzing the textual structure of business genres or taking a language pedagogy approach, (2) by expanding the regional coverage of these topics, with several studies based in Central Europe (the Czech Republic and Austria), while at the same time considering contexts which interact with Europe even though they are physically outside of it (Asia, Africa), (3) by considering English as just one of several languages at play in the ecology of the countries and research sites which are the object of analysis, and (4) by focusing not only on the position of languages as declared in documents of various organizations (for example, businesses themselves), that is, language policy, but also everyday linguistic practices as observed in business contexts.

2 Interactions and policies

The first part this volume’s title, “English in Business and Commerce”, evokes an extremely broad image, predominated by the strong research traditions mentioned above. As sociolinguists, we view English as more than the sum of its

varieties, hence we found it necessary to further specify the volume's focus. The sphere of business and commerce, in our view, is characterized on the one hand by micro-level issues of communication occurring on a day-to-day basis, to which we generally refer as “interactions” and on the other hand by macro-level issues, typically addressed by large institutions, not only companies themselves, but also business associations, universities or regional or national authorities, which we group under the heading of “policies”. Devoting attention to these two aspects corresponds to our previous body of work on language in multinational companies (see Nekvapil and Nekula 2006a; Nekvapil and Sherman 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2018), utilizing Language Management Theory (Nekvapil 2016), which considers the interplay of the micro- and macro-aspects of behavior toward language.

At the heart of the study of *interactions* in the business context is the basic function of language for communication, which, given the international dealings of many companies, is often the very first function to be managed. In other words, there exists the general idea that employees in the workplace context, as well as the producers and buyers of goods and services, need to be able to understand one another. This need may arise in the context of different types of talk, be it negotiation talk (Marriott 1990), production-level collaborative talk (Sunaoshi 2005; Sunaoshi, Kotabe, and Murray 2005), meeting talk (Firth 1996; Poncini 2003; Markaki et al 2010, 2013, 2014) or informal talk during meals or in between official interactions (Skårup 2004; Pullin 2010; Negretti and Garcia-Yeste 2015), written genres such as e-mails (Incelli 2013; Fairbrother 2015) or an entire range of other communicative situations. Key is the question of *what employees do when they do not understand each other*, or even in anticipation of not understanding one another (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009b). In addition, further functions of language, such as for identity purposes or for the protection of selected networks, i.e. the “secretive” function (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009a) may be the object of management as well. Moreover, being linguistically equipped for mutual understanding, as people interacting in BELF situations typically are, may not be sufficient for the communicative and other needs that they have. Rather, there can still be “significant norm discrepancies” (Marriott 1990: 56) among the participants. Differences in expectations regarding rituals for (verbal) behavior, frequently viewed as culturally-based (Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003; Spencer-Oatey 2008), ultimately create barriers to successful business transactions even in spite of shared linguistic resources. The question which remains, then, is how these barriers are overcome on both the micro- and macro-levels.

The large-scale management of the full range of interactional activities discussed above, i.e. *policy* may take a number of forms, such as documents bearing the actual title of “company language policy”, published guidelines for certain interactional situations, or even signs placed in strategic locations on company

premises, reminding employees to stick to a single language (typically English) during meetings. It also may not be written at all, but nonetheless understood by all employees as the generally agreed upon or prescribed practice. The most common example of this is the position of English as the official company language for certain communicative situations – it is common, when doing research in a company, for interviewed employees to state that English does have this official function, but that this fact is not written anywhere or that the employee does not know where. This study of this broadly conceived understanding of policy has evolved into a multidisciplinary endeavor. It has been partially inspired by the field of Language Planning and Policy (LPP), the socioeconomic basis for which has been elucidated among others by Cooper (1989) and which has sociolinguistic connections inspiring most of the papers published in this volume. Another strand, consisting in research grounded directly in economics, promotes a more nuanced approach to the “value” of language than the purely metaphorical one often assigned to it in other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology or linguistics (e.g. those based on various Bourdieusian concepts of non-monetary capital or the linguistic marketplace). Using quantitative approaches such as cost-benefit analyses, companies, like states and international organizations, can evaluate the effectivity of actual policy measures such as, for example, the establishment of English as a corporate language (see Grin 2003; Grin, Sfreddo, and Vaillancourt 2010; Gazzola and Grin 2013).

Finally, the business-centered exploration of “language strategies”, “language management”, “language regulation” or “language policy” has been discussed in numerous studies (Hagen et al. 2006, 2013; Hagen 2011; Piekkari, Welch, and Welch 2014; Sanden 2016). This includes the examination of formal planning efforts directed toward providing language teaching to employees, hiring speakers of specific languages, or utilizing the services of translators and interpreters, and it has a firm grounding in the fields of planning and management studies (see also e.g. Vaara et al. 2005; Welch, Welch, and Piekkari 2005; van den Born and Peltokorpi 2010). These strategies generally consider the needs of the company first, and acknowledge and utilize the employees’ individual experiences as a resource to this end. Sanden (2016), in her comparative study of the use of the term “language management”, draws links between sociolinguistic theorizing and the practically-informed approach to language issues. This latter approach is defined by its ultimate focus on non-linguistic goals, by the fact that it is practical, without any basis in sociolinguistic (or any other) theory, is based on idea that the management of language can have a positive economic outcome for the company, and considers the needs of the company employees as well as those of the company clientele. Interestingly, even despite differences in their points of departure, the two approaches take note of many of the same

phenomena. For example, Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (2014) discuss both organizational responses to problems, such as the establishment of a centralized translation department, and individual ones, such as utilizing one's social networks to solve a translation problem; Nekvapil and Sherman (2009b) point out that the act of pre-interaction management, or measures taken to avoid anticipated communication problems, can also occur on levels of varying complexity, from the individual to the entire organization.

3 Beyond the European context

Though most of the texts in this volume focus on the role of English and other languages in Europe, it is obvious that “Europe” as a unit does not exist in isolation. This is all the more the case given the growing position of Asia on the world market, with countries such as Japan, Korea and China featuring prominently as the home countries of large multinational companies, leading to an interesting cultural cross-pollination of procedures, standards, branding and actual practices, both in the headquarters and in the branches (Sunaoshi 2005; Sunaoshi, Kotabe, and Murray 2005; Nekvapil and Sherman 2018). In recent years, Asian countries have been characterized by strong ideologies of English in combination with generationally-tied knowledge of it, as well as a gap between general declarations for international marketing purposes and actual language competence (Seargeant 2009; Park 2009; Park and Wee 2012). Asian norms and hierarchical structures may strongly influence the way in which communication actually proceeds even in spite of the use of BELF, and the question at hand is how it is managed in the light of seemingly highly significant linguistic and cultural differences.

Meanwhile, in Africa, extensive sociopolitical, economic, and in turn, language planning challenges have loomed large for much of the 20th century and beyond. In the post-colonial context, contemporary nations have to decide which languages should be preferred, and in doing so, balance out the need for economic self-sufficiency with the need to preserve indigenous cultural heritage and ensure the provision of basic human rights. The situation in Africa differs from that in Europe or the Far East in that many local languages cannot compete with English when it comes to the level of cultivation in various domains, thus making them less advantageous on both local and international job markets. And as Kamwangamalu (2016) emphasizes, local elites may support African languages on the declarative level, but prefer English as the language of education for themselves and their families, with local languages viewed as reserved for the private sphere. In other words, the different functions of languages may find themselves in conflict.

Given the comparative and informative potential of situations beyond the borders of Europe, we have decided to include papers exemplifying these two continents, which provide initial hints into this vast set of issues.

4 Structure and outline of the volume

The core of the volume consists of papers given at a conference held in March 2014 with the same name as the volume, which was the final conference of the Leverhulme Trust project “English in Europe: Opportunity or Threat”. The changing role of English and other languages in the domains of business, commerce, the economy and the workplace, on the national as well as European and global levels was selected as the topic for the conference in Prague due to the tradition of research on multilingualism in companies there. At the same time, the conference aimed to place greater emphasis on the Central European region, which had been, and, unfortunately, continues to be under-represented in scholarship on the sociolinguistics of English worldwide (though some notable exceptions include Prendergast 2008; Przygoński 2012; Kalocsai 2013 or Sloboda, Laihonen, and Zabrodskaia 2016). This volume’s overall focus is identical to that of the conference. Based on the resulting papers and those which developed later, three approaches to the topic of English in business in commerce have emerged: (1) ideological and discursive perspectives, (2) specific case studies on the use and management of English in selected sites of business, and (3) the broader position of English and other languages on local and international labor markets, and the resulting implications for language and education policy.

The chapters in **Part 1**, “Ideologies and discourses on English in the business sphere”, explore the *idea* of English more than its actual use, focusing more on the background for the conception of policies than on actual interactions. In “Language standardization in sociolinguistics and international business: Theory and practice across the table”, Linn, Sanden and Piekari take an interdisciplinary approach to the issue of English in international business and expand it by seeking connections between historical sociolinguistics and business and organizational studies, engaging in what they refer to as “comparative standardology”. Both companies and nations engage in standardization processes. Their similarities and differences are illustrated using the Norwegian language situation, which has moved from management of tension between varieties of Norwegian to the management of tension between Norwegian and English, and the case of the Danish company Grundfos. Grundfos, a manufacturing company, has developed an explicit, bottom-up language policy that declares English as the official

corporate language, but acknowledges the position of the local language, Danish. The processes of its implementation neatly correspond to Einar Haugen's model of language standardization, which was originally based on the analysis of the Norwegian language situation with which the setting of Grundfos is compared.

This comparison is followed by a number of chapters devoted to individual national contexts. In "A language ideological landscape: The complex map in international companies in Denmark", Kamilla Kraft and Dorte Lønsmann explore the "language ideological landscape" in companies in Denmark, where the sphere of business is dominated by both English and Danish, and where the languages of the neighboring countries also play an important role. They demonstrate the importance of the local national environment even in the case of multinational companies (as discussed above). They uncover an essential conflict – the "natural" character of using Danish in Denmark is disrupted both by the use of English as a lingua franca and by the utilization of the receptive multilingualism in the Scandinavian space. Situations in which this disruption occurs then become the object of management. Some groups benefit more from the "naturalness" ideology than others, and, as they conclude "native speaker ideals and asymmetrical English competences challenge the neat representation of English as neutral and common ground" (69).

In "Managing, interpreting and negotiating corporate bilingualism in Wales", Elisabeth Barakos examines the ideologies of language use in the business sphere in Wales. Based in critical discourse analysis, she analyzes official policy documents and data from interviews conducted with managers from companies using Welsh. She shows that while Welsh does function on the declarative level and helps to increase the attractiveness of businesses and their corporate identities through their polylingual repertoire, the ad hoc management of actual language use allows Welsh to remain in a subordinate position to English. Part 1 finishes with a comparative perspective presented by Alessia Cogo and Patchareerat Yanaprasart, "'English is the language of business': An exploration of language ideologies in two European corporate contexts", which looks at ideologies regarding English in corporate contexts in Switzerland and Italy. Using interviews and ethnographic data, they argue that official policies and actual practices often diverge when it comes to the ideology of the strict separation of languages, otherwise known as OLAT (one language at a time) or OLON (one language only), which often appear at the declarative level of official policy. Company situations in which BELF is used, though they cannot take place without the use of English, also cannot be viewed as monolingual.

As we have seen thus far, individual companies, regardless of their size, make a fine basis for complex case study research, which is the point of departure in **Part 2**, "The management of English in business and organizational contexts".

Focusing on the individual company, workplace or place of business as the research site, this section places the greatest amount of emphasis on individual interactions, be they “classic” instances of official or unofficial conversation (i.e. meeting talk vs. “water cooler” talk), or written communication in the form of e-mails or the linguistic landscape in a given commercial space. In “Making sense of language management in Danish international companies: A strategic view”, Sharon Millar applies the concept of strategic management to the use of language (English) in two Danish companies, arguing that despite the predominance of top-down policy characteristic for large companies, language strategies are deliberately left sufficiently ambiguous so as to accommodate the sociolinguistic situations in individual branches with their specific localization needs. “The management of everyday English interactions in the Japanese branches of European multinationals”, by Lisa Fairbrother, explicitly demonstrates an entire range of problems which occur even when English is used as the common language. Analyzing e-mail interactions and interview data, she shows that in the management of everyday interactions in European multinationals in Japan, linguistic and communicative inadequacies may be noted but not adjusted due to power relations. Two contributions, by Sonja Barfod and Neil Bermel & Luděk Knittl, demonstrate that English is not actually found in every single place we might expect it to be, and that even when we might expect it to be selected as a lingua franca, it is not always necessarily the first choice. In both cases, in the Scandinavian case in the former and the Central European case in the latter, “older” multilingual constellations are the most commonly exploited resource. Barfod, in “On the non-use of English in a multinational company”, takes a conversation analysis-based approach, scrutinizing videos of informal employee interactions in a Danish company, along with interview and observation data. Though English is the official “meeting language” in the company and is used in that pre-determined context, the “working language” is Danish and lunchtime talk reveals a significant degree of intercomprehension and adaptation among speakers of Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. The chapter “The linguistic landscape of a Czech heritage site: Recording and presenting the past and present of Hrubý Rohozec”, by Bermel and Knittl, looks at a tourist site and its immediate surroundings in the Czech Republic. Using the linguistic landscape approach, the authors show the ideological positions taken toward the use of specific languages. The town surrounding the tourist site displays mostly monolingual Czech signage, reflecting the site’s predominantly domestic orientation, with non-Czech texts motivated by instrumentality and rationality. The tourist site, a castle, is itself more multilingual, though through its foregrounding of Czech and with English as a lingua franca as the main foreign language, despite the fact that its noble family owners spoke many other languages, predominantly German, as

the authors write, “the castle’s multilingual past is reflected and transmitted in a very different multilingual present.” (225).

The chapters in the first two sections repeatedly reinforce the idea that business, despite its global development, is never done independently from national and regional contexts or from other spheres of life. As Piekari, Welch, and Welch (2014: 230) aptly observe “Individual national governments’ language policies matter as these affect what and how languages are taught...”. This is well illustrated in **Part 3**, “The position of English and other languages on local and international labor markets, implications for language and education policy”. The section combines a number of approaches that demonstrate overlap between the spheres of business and economics and the education sphere in particular. In “The value of foreign language skills in international business for native English speaking countries: A study on Ireland”, Tobias Schroedler examines the case of a native-English speaking country, Ireland, which is home to some of the top players in the IT industry and an exporting economy. Based on the analysis of secondary quantitative data and interviews with a number of local experts, he concludes that changes in Ireland’s language education policy in support of increased knowledge of French, Spanish and German would likely result in economic advantages for the country overall. In “‘It’s good to have a language under your belt’: The value of foreign languages in the Greek job market”, Zoe Kantaridou, Iris Papadopoulou and Jo Angouri consider newspaper job advertisements to assess the importance of foreign languages on the Greek job market, finding that language requirements are highly field-specific and are mostly connected with high-skilled positions. Though English was the predominant language required, the overall ecology of the languages represented is a global one, and the overall specification of the language requirements is highly ambiguous. Vít Dovalil, in “Qual der Wahl, or spoiled for choice? English and German as the subject of decision-making processes in the Czech Republic”, explores the question of foreign language education policy in relation to the Czech national job market, tying together the issue of ideologies and discourses of English and German with decision-making processes in schools and families. He argues that despite the proven economic value that German knowledge can have for Czechs, it is ideologically disadvantaged in favor of English, given the widespread view of English as a universally instrumental language and of German as an ugly, difficult, or non-utilitarian one. As a result, many pupils may not have access to language instruction that could provide them with a competitive edge.

In “Creating the international managers of tomorrow, today? Stakeholder perspectives on English-medium business education”, Miya Komori-Glatz and Barbara Schmidt-Unterberger analyze the relationship between stakeholder needs in the international business context and actual curriculum and teaching practices

in the context of a business university in Vienna, showing that even the students who would not necessarily have selected English as the medium of instruction on their own (preferring the local language, German) subsequently do find it to be a benefit. Alla Tovaes and Nkonko Kamwangamalu close the section by addressing the problem of language choice for education policy in post-colonial African countries in light of economic considerations, focusing on Kenya and South Africa in the chapter “Linguistic diversity and language-in-educational practices in Kenya and South Africa: Challenges and responses”. While both pupils and their parents associate English with greater stature and economic success, access to the language is somewhat limited, as quality English-medium education has only been available to certain segments of the population in these countries for reasons of cost. The authors conclude that if indigenous African languages, which are key to the spread of literacy, are to survive, their economic value must somehow increase. The authors suggest that this can be achieved through prestige planning which takes into consideration the complex sociolinguistic situation in the African context.

Overall, this volume provides highly relevant insights into the way in which one of the most important domains, the sphere of business and economics, influences the use and management of languages, and in the contemporary globalizing world, most visibly English. In this respect, it serves as a fitting conclusion to the *English in Europe* series.

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