

THE ERROR ANALYSIS OF LEARNING MANDARIN ENDOCENTRIC PHRASES AMONG THE MALAY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The Mandarin language has gained currency in the Malaysian education landscape. Particularly in tertiary educational settings in Malaysia, it is common to find Malay students learning the Mandarin language. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) is the largest university in Malaysia and it has the greatest number of Malay students learning Mandarin as a third language in the country. Almost all of the Malay students who study the Mandarin language at the university have no background in Mandarin. They are inevitably influenced by their mother tongue which is the Malay language. This paper aims to analyze Endocentric Mandarin phrasal errors commonly made by Malay students while studying Mandarin in UiTM. In addition, some teaching methods are also recommended to guide those involved in teaching and learning Mandarin. This study is conducted using a mixed method approach. Two research instruments were used in this study, that is question papers and interviews. 40 Malay students who were taking Introductory Mandarin Level II course in UiTM Shah Alam campus were chosen as the survey respondents. The results of the research revealed that there are 4 types of errors commonly made by Malay students in learning the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases, namely: (i) Omission of Measure Words, (ii) Reversed string order of Endocentric Phrases, (iii) Errors in Using Demonstrative Pronouns and (iv) Excess of the particle “de”. The most obvious mistake is the Omission of Measure Words and the Reversed string order of Endocentric Phrases due to the first language disruption. These errors have often resulted in structural and morphological inaccuracies.

Keywords: *Error Analysis, Mandarin Endocentric Phrases, Malay students, teaching methodology*

INTRODUCTION

In a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia, it is encouraging to note that non-Chinese speaking Malaysians have been learning the Mandarin language for a long time. In the past, occasionally you may find the odd non-Chinese students in the Chinese vernacular schools. However, in the twenty-first century, the existence of non-Chinese students in Chinese school is a common occurrence. For the past 10 years, the number of non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools has been increasing steadily.

According to the statistics by The United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia, in 2010, there were 72,443 non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools nationwide. However, the number of non-Chinese students increased to 87,463 in 2014. The statistics show an increase of 15,020 non-Chinese students (20.73%) within four years. Among them, Malay students increased by 10,671 (19.06%), Indian students 2,407 (23.6%), and 1,942 students from other ethnic groups (30.98%). This data indicates that non-Chinese students have been increasing rapidly from 2010. One of the factors encouraging this trend is that China continues to expand its global influence especially in terms of economy. Hence, being able to converse in Mandarin gives a job seeker an extra edge in this vastly competitive workplace (Pang, 2016, pp. 20).

In the tertiary education setting in Malaysia, it is common to see Malay students learning the Mandarin language, as it is observed in Universiti Teknologi MARA. Over the years, the number of students studying the Mandarin language has gradually increased. According to the statistics (done by the author), there were 788 Malay students studying the Mandarin language in the main campus in Universiti Teknologi MARA in 1994. This number has increased to 11,752 in the main campus and all branches nationwide in 2016. At present, Universiti Teknologi MARA has the greatest number of Malay students studying Mandarin language in a single educational setting in Malaysia.

Almost all of the Malay students who study Mandarin language at the Universiti Teknologi MARA have no background in the Mandarin language. When they learn Mandarin, they are inevitably influenced by their native Malay language. Due to the differences between the characteristics of the Mandarin language and Malay language, it is found that in the process of learning Mandarin, the Malay students generally face problems in grammatical aspects. This study focuses on the problems faced by the Malay students when learning Mandarin Endocentric Phrases and proposes teaching methodology to deal with the issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies on Learning the Mandarin Grammar among Malay Students in Malaysia

Recently, studies have been conducted to investigate the learning of Mandarin grammar among Malay learners in Malaysia. These studies include Ling (2011), Huang (2013) and Tan (2014). Ling (2011) carried out a research on error analysis on Mandarin directional complement among Malay students from a government secondary school in Kuala Lumpur. According to Ling, directional complement is an important element in the Mandarin grammatical aspect. It is an abbreviated directional verb to be used after a verb or an adjective in a sentence, which shows the direction of an object. Since its structure and method of use are complicated, its combination is flexible, and it has a wide range in extended meaning, therefore it causes higher error rate among foreign students whose mother tongue is not Mandarin. Malay and Mandarin languages do not have the similar directional complement to the corresponding syntax, hence it is difficult for the Malay students to master this grammatical section of Mandarin language. After analyzing the causes of 5 errors made by the students, namely, misplacing objects, missing verbs, incorrect used of directional complement, lack of directional complement and comprehensive error, Ling suggested 3 corresponding teaching strategies which include conducting Mandarin grammar tutorial classes, advancing the teaching of Mandarin grammar from basic to advanced level and adopting innovative ways to teach directional complement effectively. Huang (2013) studied the errors related to the Mandarin word order. The research focused on the categories and causes of errors. Apart from pointing out that there are differences between Malay and Mandarin languages, Huang also highlighted that the reason for the errors made by Malay students is due to the multilingual environment in the Malaysian society. In addition, the complexities surrounding the use of Mandarin adverbs, conjunctions and particles also cause students' inability to master the Mandarin word order. Tan (2014) studied the difficulties in learning Mandarin passive sentences. Tan also suggested ways to improve the teaching of Mandarin passive sentences to Malay students. At the beginning, the instructor can highlight the Mandarin simple passive words which has similar function as passive words in Malay language. Then the instructor can introduce and compare the passive sentence in both languages. The comparison between these passive sentences will definitely help students to understand easily. Exercises on the usage of the passive forms will also play an important role to strengthen students' understanding.

In Malaysia, there are also studies on learning Mandarin among non-native speakers from other tertiary institutions. Yong and Lee (2015) carried out a study on Mandarin grammar. They studied the types of linguistic errors in the usage of Mandarin Time Phrases construction among Malay learners in a technical university in Malaysia. The study shows five types of linguistic errors committed by the students in using Mandarin Time Phrases: (1) error in word usage, (2) confusion of numbers, (3) Hanyu Pinyin errors, (4) structural errors, and (5) omission of words. The study also revealed that the usage of Mandarin Time Phrases was influenced by the students' attitude, differences in structure between Mandarin and Malay, problems related to language transfer from their native language and lack of learning time.

Numerous studies were also carried out to help non-native speakers overcome the problems of learning Mandarin and improve the teaching of Mandarin. In a study by Mok (2006), few solutions were proposed to rectify the common learning problems including pronunciation and grammar learning problems faced by the non-native speakers in Universiti Teknologi MARA. Mok suggested using various teaching methodology such as comparing the similarities and differences between the places of articulation in Mandarin and Malay and using music to teach Mandarin tones. Besides, the instructors are advised to teach the Mandarin grammar step by step, starting from teaching vocabulary, illustrating sentence patterns before asking students to formulate sentences on their own. Lee et al. (2017) carried out another research on the usage of vocabulary learning strategies among high and low proficiency Malay undergraduates in a university. In order to enhance the mastery of Mandarin vocabulary among the low proficiency students, the researchers put forwarded few suggestions including conducting activities in the classroom such as role play and outdoor activities such as study visit as well.

The literature review shows that although there are existing studies on Mandarin grammar issues, there is still a lack in studies on the topic of error analysis on the use of Endocentric Phrases among Malay learners.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In linguistics, according to Richard et al. (2002, p.184), an “error” is the use of a word, speech act or grammatical items in such a way it seems imperfect and significant of an incomplete learning. In the second language acquisition processes, Hendrickson (1987, p.357) mentioned that errors are “signal” that indicate an actual learning process taking place and that the learner has not yet mastered or shown a well-structured competence in the target language. This view of point is also mentioned by Mohd. Daud Yusof (1989, p.76)

“Error analysis is a study of the errors made by students in learning the second language (L2). Usually, these errors are prevalent when L2 learners express opinions and thoughts, in verbal or written forms of the second language. The errors occur because they have not mastered the formulas of the grammar of the target language.”

In the UiTM context, most of the students do not have any basic knowledge of Mandarin. Therefore, they often make mistakes in the process of learning the language. This phenomenon is obviously reflected when they answer the questions in the given Mandarin written test or write Mandarin scripts. Majority of the errors made by the students are related to sentences that consist of Mandarin Endocentric Phrases.

THE STUDY BACKGROUND

“Piānzhèng Duǎnyǔ 偏正短语” (Endocentric Phrases)

According to Mandarin language terminology, “duǎnyǔ 短语” is a group of words which are combined with certain structuring rules without the use of punctuation (Huang, 2012, p.44). Different types of “duǎnyǔ” are formed by different combination rules of words.

This study focuses on “Piānzhèng duǎnyǔ” (Endocentric Phrases), a type of “duǎnyǔ” which is classified according to its internal structure (Yang et al. 2011, pp. 233). It is formed by two components which have a [modifier-head word] relationship. The modifier component precedes the head word it modifies. It plays a role to describe or limit the head word.

Endocentric Phrases are separated into two kinds, namely: (A) Nominal Endocentric Phrases and, (B) Endocentric Phrases where the second component is either a verb or an adjective. The difference between them is listed below:

	Type A Endocentric Phrases (Nominal Endocentric Phrases)	Type B Endocentric Phrases
Structure	Attributive + Noun	Adverbial adjunct + Verb or Adjective
Example	lǎnsè de yīfu (blue clothing) rè de kāfēi (hot coffee) liù hào de xiézi (size 6 shoes) zhè jiàn yīfu (this piece of clothing)	dàshēng di dú (read loudly) cūluè di kàn (look roughly) hěn kě'ài (very cute) fēicháng piàoliang (very beautiful)

Nevertheless, this study will only focus on the Nominal Endocentric Phrases due to syllabus constraints. When constructing the Nominal Endocentric Phrases, the particle “de” is inserted in between the attributive and the noun. Without inserting the particle “de” to Endocentric Phrases, there will be a slight change to the phrase structures and meanings as well. In an Endocentric Phrase which uses “de”, the relationship between the attributive and noun is a “temporary connection” and each of the component has more independency (Zhu, 2011, pp. 143-145). In other words, “de” is used to modify things more generally. It links the attributive (any kind of notional word or phrase can act as an attributive) to the noun and is used to describe it. For instance, in the phrase of “lǎnsè de yīfu” (blue-de clothing, blue clothing), “yīfu” (clothing) is the noun; the attributive “lǎnsè”(blue)describes the colour of “yīfu”. We could think of this as literally saying e.g. “blue’s clothing” or “clothing that belong to blue”.

Malay Noun Phrase (Head Word + Modifier)

According to the Tatabahasa Dewan (Dewan Grammar) (Edition 3) (2015), the Noun Phrases in the Malay language are built according to respective rules and arrangements. Although there are some exceptions, in general, the Malay Noun Phrases complies with the following rules, namely D-M Laws or D-M Rules. D-M Laws means the sequence of elements described (D) precedes the element that describes (M). The element described is the head word present in the first position, while the explaining element is the element of the illumination that comes later in the second position. For example:

Malay Noun Phrase (Head Word + Modifier)	
Noun Phrase	
Head Word	Modifier
warna (colour)	merah tua (dark red)
tahun (year)	baharu (new)
sekolah (school)	rendah (primary)
penutur (speaker)	jati (native)

From the survey, it can be seen that the difference between the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases and the Malay Noun Phrases is significant even though they both have a modifier to the head word. The element as an illiterate to the head word precedes the head word in the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases, while in the Malay Noun Phrase (D-M Law) its position is reversed, the element of the head word (D) precedes the element which describes (M). Therefore, it is not surprising that Malay students make mistakes when studying the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases because of their mother tongue or first language influence.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to find out the types of Endocentric Mandarin Phrasal errors commonly made by Malay students and the factors that cause these errors. In addition, this study also hopes to explore some of the appropriate teaching methods or techniques used to deal with Mandarin Endocentric Phrases to enhance the mastery of Mandarin language among Malay students. In summary, this study was conducted to answer the following questions:

- i. What kinds of Mandarin Endocentric Phrases are commonly used by Malay students?
- ii. What are the factors that cause Malay students to use the wrong Mandarin Endocentric Phrases?
- iii. What is the implication of these errors on the teaching of Mandarin Endocentric Phrases?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

40 students from Faculty of Chemical Engineering and Communication & Media Studies who were enrolled in Introductory Mandarin Level II course in UiTM Shah Alam campus were selected as the respondents of this study. These students were introduced to Hanyu Pinyin 汉语拼音 romanization system in the course. The respondents were non-native speakers of Mandarin and they were introduced to Mandarin Endocentric Phrases for the first time.

Research Instrument

A test with 10 questions consisting different Mandarin Endocentric Phrases typed in Hanyu Pinyin which can be found in the Introductory Mandarin Level II textbook were distributed to the respondents. In addition, interviews were also conducted to find out the reasons for their errors.

Research Procedure

Each student was required to take the test on their own in 20 minutes. They were not allowed to refer to their textbooks or any other materials. All their answers were then examined and analyzed. The errors were identified, and the frequency of each error was counted. In this process, the errors were highlighted to allow for follow-up interviews be carried out consequently. The aim of follow-up interviews was to further investigate the factors contributing to the errors from all aspects.

Data Analysis

The error patterns were listed and categorized. The frequency of each error pattern was counted, and the percentage was calculated respectively. The reasons for each error pattern were analyzed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table (1) – Frequency of Error in Each Question

Question	ERROR PATTERN				Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Omission of Measure Words	Reversed String Order of Endocentric Phrases	Errors in Using Demonstrative Pronouns	Excess of the particle “de”		
1	0	0	3	4	7	3.24
2	0	0	8	4	12	5.56
3	3	3	0	0	6	2.78
4	2	9	10	2	23	10.65
5	3	5	12	1	21	9.72
6	15	11	2	0	28	12.96
7	15	12	9	1	35	16.2
8	15	10	0	0	35	16.2
9	13	13	0	0	26	12.04
10	12	11	0	0	23	10.65
TOTAL	78	74	51	13	216	100%

Table (2) - Frequency of Each Error

No.	Error Pattern	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Omission of Measure Words	78	36.11%
2	Reversed string order of Endocentric Phrases	74	34.26%
3	Errors in Using Demonstrative Pronouns	51	23.61%
4	Excess of the particle “de”	13	6.02%
	TOTAL	216	100%

As shown in Table (1) and Table (2), all the errors made by the students are divided into four patterns, namely: (1) omission of measure words, (2) reversed string order of Endocentric Phrases, (3) errors in using demonstrative pronouns, and (4) excess of the particle “de”.

Table (1) shows the frequency of error in each question. Results revealed that the highest frequency of errors occurred in question no. 7 and no. 8 (16.20% respectively), whereas students made the least errors in questions no. 3 (2.78%).

Table (2) compares the frequency between each error. The highest frequency of error is omission of measure words (36.11%). The second highest frequency is the reversed string order of Endocentric Phrases (34.26%), the third highest frequency is errors in using demonstrative pronouns (23.61%), and the lowest frequency error is excess in the use of the particle “de” (6.02%).

Omission of measure words

The findings show that some students did not write the measure words for objects, that is “jiàn” (piece for clothing) and “shuāng” (pair for shoes). In the interview, some students admitted that they did not know the appropriate measure word for the objects clothing and shoes in Mandarin.

In fact, the usage of measure words in Mandarin is different from measure words in the Malay language. According to Lin (2009) who looked at the uses of measure words in Mandarin and Malay language, it was proven that even though similarities of measure words exist in both of the languages, there are obvious differences in meaning and usage between them. In the Mandarin language, when the demonstrative pronoun zhè (this) or nà (that) is used together with a noun, then a measure word must be added in between the demonstrative pronoun and noun. On the contrary, the demonstrative pronoun in Malay language can be matched with a noun directly, and it is not necessary to have a measure word in between. Therefore, students were influenced by their mother tongue and were confused when it came to learning the Mandarin measure words.

Reversed string order of Endocentric Phrases

The students were also confused about the correct string order of Endocentric Phrases. The following are some examples of the errors:

Correct string order (√)	Reversed string order (X)
liù hào de xiézi size 6 - de shoes (size 6's shoes)	xiézi de liù hào shoes - de size 6 (shoes's size 6)
rè de kāfēi hot - de coffee (hot's coffee)	kāfēi rè de coffee hot - de (coffee hot's)
lěng de kāfēi cold - de coffee (cold's coffee)	kāfēi lěng de coffee cold - de (coffee cold's)

Evidently, the reversed string order of Endocentric Phrases resulted in the incorrect order of the “attributive-noun”.

According to the students in the interviews, errors occurred because they were confused about the proper sequence of the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases. During the interview, some of the comments include “I don’t know the order of the phrases”, “I thought the order is similar to the Malay language string order” and “I am confused with the order”. This shows that they do not know the proper sequence of Mandarin Endocentric Phrases, where the modifier always precedes the head word. It is undeniable that the influence of Malay grammar has a clear impact in the construction of proper Mandarin Endocentric Phrases. The adjective in Malay language is normally placed after the object, such as “baju biru” (blue clothing), “kasut saiz 6” (size 6 shoes), “kopi panas” (hot coffee), “kopi sejuk” (cold coffee), etc. Thus, the Malay Noun Phrases + adjective and Mandarin Endocentric Phrases are significantly different in their construction. This explains the reason for the students’ errors.

Errors in Using Demonstrative Pronouns

In the test, there were 6 questions which included the demonstrative pronoun “zhè” (this) and “nà” (that). The results of survey showed that some students were confused in using the demonstrative pronoun, “zhè” (this) and “nà” (that).

It must be noted that when “zhè” (this) or “nà” (that) is used with a measure word, it becomes a modifier of a noun directly (Zhu, 2011, pp.143). Most of the errors revealed that students did not write the demonstrative pronoun preceding the measure word. Few of errors happened where both “zhè” (this) and “nà” (that) were wrongly selected in the Endocentric Phrases construction. Instead of using “zhè”, they used “nà” or vice versa. For example: “zhè jiàn yīfu” (this piece of clothing) was written as “nà jiàn yīfu” (that piece of clothing) and vice versa.

The occurrence of the students’ errors was due to their inability to memorize the Mandarin demonstrative pronouns properly. This was evident during the interview as some students mentioned that “I forgot the translation for the word ‘this’ and ‘that’”. This can be attributed to the fact that these students are not exposed to the language outside the Mandarin classroom. As a result, they were unable to master the usage of demonstrative pronouns in structuring Endocentric Phrases confidently.

Excess of the particle “de”

Mandarin language is different from the Malay language in many aspects. The usage of the particle “de” in Mandarin language does not present in the Malay language. Moreover, the grammar structure: [attributive + “de” + noun] is one of the most basic and important features of Chinese grammar. However, this grammatical structure does not exist in Malay language. As a result, Malay learners get confused easily with the usage of the particle “de”. They are weak in applying the particle “de”. The study revealed that some of them ignored the particle “de” in their answers but most of them placed an extra “de” in the phrase.

For example, the correct answer for “baju ini” (this piece of clothing) is “zhè jiàn yīfu” and answer for “baju itu” (that piece of clothing) is “nà jiàn yīfu”, however, some of the students’ answers were “zhè jiàn de yīfu” and “nà jiàn de yīfu” respectively. Both the answers had an excess of the particle “de”. In the interview, the students said that they mixed up these two answers with the translation of “lǎnsè de yīfu” (blue-de clothing) where “de” is placed between the attributive and the noun.

On the other hand, few students gave their answers “zhè de yīfu” and “nà de yīfu” for the same questions because they assumed that “baju ini” (this piece of clothing), “baju itu” (that piece of clothing) were similar to “bapa saya” (my father), “emak saya” (my mother) where the particle “de” should be placed in between two nouns. The weaknesses of students in comprehending the structure of Endocentric Phrases need to be addressed.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING TEACHING METHODOLOGY

According to Edward M. Anthony (1976), teaching method refers to a whole set of goals required in a set of procedures that are organized in accordance with the chosen approach. From the perspective of language teaching and learning, the method is the way or rules used to implement a teaching on a regular, neat and systematic basis.

In 1986, Richards & Rodgers proposed a teaching framework. Below the top hierarchy of “method”, there are 3 divisions namely, “approach”, “design”, and “procedure”. Their “design” referred to all major practical implications in the classroom, such as syllabus design, types of activities to be used in the classroom, and student and teacher roles; whereas “procedure” referred to different behaviors, practices and techniques observed in the classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, pp. 28).

In order to teach Mandarin grammar efficiently to non-native speakers, teachers have to use method which can be understood and accepted easily by the students when explaining and showing the rules of usage (Zhao, 2011, pp. 413). To achieve this aim, a few methods to teach the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases to Malay learners are suggested below:

Technique design

A technique consisting the correct sequence of Endocentric Phrases can be designed to enhance students’ understanding:

Demostrative pronoun	Measure word	Modifier/ Adjective	de	Noun/Object
Zhè (This) / Nà (That)	jiàn (piece)	lánsè (blue)	de	yīfu (clothing)
	shuāng (pair)	liù hào (size 6)	de	xiézi (shoes)

With the technique shown in the table above, students will be able to learn how to construct Endocentric Phrases faster, easily and more accurately.

Comparison with English language

Teachers should know that it is important to use different grammar teaching methods to suit students who speak different L1. For instance, when teaching students whose mother tongue is Japanese, the teacher should emphasize that the object must be placed after a verb in the Mandarin language (some exceptions are excluded), but this emphasis can be ignored when teaching students whose mother tongue is the English language (Wu, 2012, pp. 208-209).

In the context of UiTM, it is important for teachers to conduct comparative analysis between the Malay language grammar with Mandarin, as well as with English. The string order of [adjective + noun] in the Mandarin language is different from the [noun + adjective] order in Malay language but it is the same in the English language. In addition, most of the Malay students in UiTM are exposed to the English language since primary school, hence, they are familiar with the English language. Therefore, instructors can use the English language as a reference point when teaching the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases. For example:

Mandarin Endocentric Phrases	English translation
hóngsè de yīfu	red clothing
lánsè de yīfu	blue clothing
zhè jiàn yīfu	this piece of clothing
nà shuāng xiézi	that pair of shoes

Only by making comparisons between the three languages, the teachers will be more aware of the problems faced by the Malay students when studying the Mandarin Endocentric Phrases. In addition, with the knowledge of the background of students' difficulty learning the language, teaching will be more effective as instructors can find the appropriate teaching methods to enhance the mastery of Mandarin Endocentric Phrases.

Interactive and Collaborative Learning

To enhance students' competence of Endocentric Phrases, instructors can implement interactive and collaborative activities in the classroom such as role playing, working in pairs, playing games (such as match the modifier and noun game), and singing. Students are more inclined to be interested and active in the learning process when they are taught interactively. The students are given an opportunity to construct their own Endocentric Phrases, so they can memorize and recall the phrases easily. Through these multi-task activities, students will not only acquire the skills quickly, but they will also indirectly develop good personalities and gain a sense of community among their peers.

Innovative Learning

Research has shown that innovative methods and technologies can definitely enhance the learning process. Therefore, finding new and innovative methods of teaching is a crucial skill for the Mandarin teachers. Teachers must constantly update and improve their knowledge of their teaching methods and techniques by exploring current innovative ideas and practices.

Using proficient students to peer teach and capture common grammar errors in short presentation via video clips can easily get the attention of students. Students will be able to understand their errors better and remember the correct way of constructing Endocentric Phrases precisely. The video clips are then displayed in YouTube social media for public viewing. This will help students acquire the knowledge related to proper usage of Endocentric Phrases, hence reducing errors.

CONCLUSION

Malay students face many problems in learning Mandarin Endocentric Phrases. In this sense, the Mandarin instructors should investigate the causes or factors that contribute to this problem. Based on the findings, the instructors can apply appropriate teaching methodology to infuse and highlight the use of Endocentric Phrases in the classroom. Besides, instructors should be innovative and proactive in the teaching of Mandarin to elevate the teaching quality and deepen Malay students' understanding of the Mandarin language. Simultaneously, the Mandarin instructors also need to encourage students to upgrade themselves in the language skills using a variety of media. With efforts from both instructors and students, not only will students acquire Endocentric Phrases, they will also be able to improve their Mandarin proficiency in the shortest time.

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