The hybridity of Singapore English: a case study of stylistic variation across two situations

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Abstracts

Standard Singapore English (SSE) and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) have been studied from many angles as to identify differences in their phonological, grammatical, and morphological structures. However, previous studies on the continuum of the switch between SSE and CSE by Singaporean are very limited. Hence, the aim of this case study is to implement the new Cultural Orientation Model (COM) by Alsagoff as an approach to analyze the conversation of formal and informal situations by focusing on three reflected variables: phonological, morphological and a discourse marker. Result shows that phonological variable of non-standard variant occur more compared to the informal situations, specifically the voiced alveolar stop [d] taking place of voiced dental fricative [ð] in word-initial position. In terms of morphological variable, the uninflected verb form was a complete absence in a formal situation, specifically the deletion of inflectional affixes such the affix '-ed' to denote past tense and the '-ing' affix to denote the progressive form. Lastly, the discourse marker 'like' was more frequent in informal situation. This shows that although CSE is valued in Singapore, the use of SSE by Singaporean is still preferred in formal context to integrate themselves with a global audience. Singaporean appears to negotiate between two opposing macro-cultural orientations by choice: globalist and localist. Result provides qualified support for COM by Alsagoff. Recommendations on utilization and further research are also discussed.

Introduction

SG is NOT Beijing or Shanghai or Fujian or Canton, or UK or USA .... we're uniquely Singapore lah!! And as a born and bred Singaporean .... I really think locals should be proud of their unique regional quirks, including Singlish. So what if we can't enunciate [sic] perfect Queen's English, so be it. Ditto Beijing-perfect Mandarin.

(Leimgruber 2011:14)

Language is a powerful tool for communication, and its variation is inherent in its usage (Lippi-Green, 2012). This can be observed in Singapore, where two main varieties of English coexist: Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE). A speaker's choice in using each variety is not random, but governed by his awareness of social relations. Due to such diverse multilingual population in Singapore, the characteristics of Singapore Standard English (SSE) and Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) or Singlish are being studied from many angles and perspectives by linguists. Different approaches and models have been developed as attempts to better understand various angles of such coexistence. Major

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approaches such as the continuum and the diglossia approach, however, were limited and gaps were found in the perspectives in relation to Singapore English There are several models that linguists have attempted and used to analyze Singapore English (Wang, 2015 : 69-80). Wang (2015) summarizes three major models that linguists developed to analyze Singapore English: disglossia model by Gupta (1994) and the expanding triangles model by Pakir (1991). Alsagoff (2010) claimed that such current available models do not sufficiently capture and reflect the true reality of language usage in context. For instance, current available approaches and models fail to explain different dimensions of Singapore English such as the grammatically distinct varieties of English in Singapore, the reasons of why basilectal variety is chosen over acrolectal variety, and the classification of how 'English-knowing bilingualism' affect Singapore English usage. As a result, different approach and model have been developed to better characterized and better understand the Singapore English and its position in the local and global positions: Cultural Orientation Model (COM) by Alsagoff (2010).

This case study will implement the Cultural Orientation Model by Alsagoff (2010) as a major approach to analyze the conversation of two situations (formal and informal) of Singaporean. This model adopts a cultural perspective in understanding the dualistic role of English in Singapore as both a global and local language. It argues that this duality is consistent with the cultural identity of Singaporeans who negotiate fluidly between two divergent orientations - the global citizen and the local Singaporean. According to the COM, hypothesis is made that speakers of Singapore English are able to avail themselves to a variety of linguistic and cultural resources to style-switch in different contexts. In a casual and informal context where interlocutors are from Singapore, a speaker is expected to orient to his localist identity by choosing to use CSE as a form of audience design, while in formal contexts, the speaker orients to his globalist identity and is expected to pay closer attention to his speech in choosing to use SSE to index his awareness as a global citizen.

Literature Review

In Singapore, English is used as an inter-ethnic lingua franca for the Chinese, Malays and Indians (Harada, 2009 : 69-81). These different groups of ethnicities resulted from the free port that was established in 1819 which attracted waves of immigrants. Today, there are four official languages in Singapore: English, Malay. Standard Singapore English (SSE) is, however, the language used in government, administration, and schools. Its vernacular is Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) or Singlish which consists of different from the standard in terms of its grammar and vocabulary choice. For instance, "tense agreement is highly variable and not compulsory" . As a result, SSE is considered the more formal and standard use of English which connects to the globalist position. Linguists have tried to explore the phenomenon of SSE and CSE from various angles and perspectives. Previous literatures have tried to distinguish the differences between approaches and models that are normally used in exploring Singapore English. For instance, (Wang, 2015 : 69-80). and attempted to summarize and explain different approaches and models when studying SSE and CSE. It was quite conclusive that the Cultural Orientation Model by Alsagoff was one of the most effective approaches in explaining the constant switch between the SSE and CSE as a negotiation of the two 'macro-cultural orientations'. The intention of this literature review is to provide previous account of models that have been used to understand Singapore English.

One of the popular models that is often used in studying CSE and SSE is that of Platt's (1975) model. Platt's (1975 : 363–374) considered CSE and SSE to be two extremes of varieties where 'lower' or basilectal extreme is closer to Singlish and 'upper' or acrolectal is closer to the Standard English. Such linguistic continuum is presented next to a social continuum. With three levels of proficiency along a spectrum, the highest proficiency level is associated with the acrolectal variety. This is closest to the standardized variety of language whereas the basilectal variety is associated with Singlish (Wang, 2015 : 69-80). In other words, those who speak the Basilect variety will be deemed as 'uneducated variety of Singapore English'. The drawback of this model is that it fails to explain why acrolectal variety is chosen and would sometimes switched to basilectal variety as desired (Wang, 2015 : 69-80). Figure 1 represents the 'relation between socio-economic factors and usage of sub-varieties of [Singapore English] available to speaker' (Platt 1975 : 369).
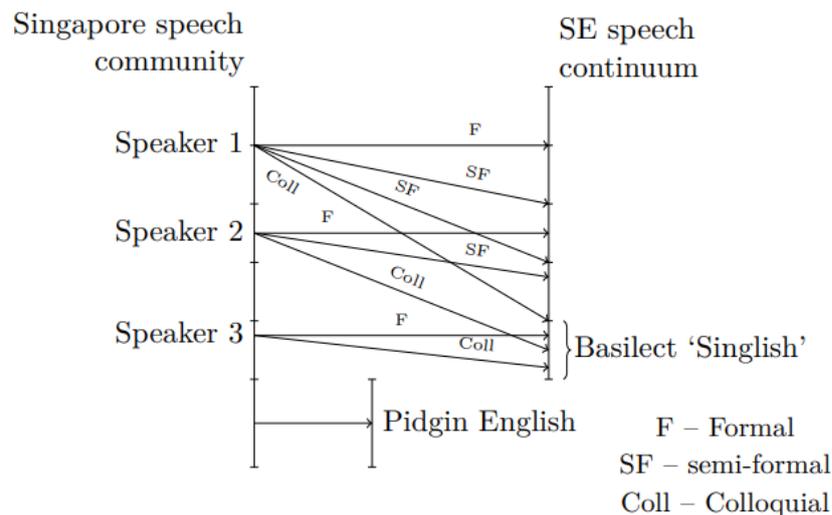

Figure 2: 'relation between socio-economic factors and usage of sub-varieties of [Singapore English] available to speaker' (Platt 1975 : 369).

Gupta (1994) later developed a diglossia model. In linguistics, diglossia refers to varieties of one language that coexist in a language community. This model perceives the SSE and SCE as two distinct varieties. The two varieties consist of the H and L-forms. The H-form which is used in a formal and serious situation, is associated with SSE (Wang, 2015: 69-80). and is held in high esteem by the speech community (Ferguson, 1959: 325-340.). SCE, on the other hand, is associated with the L-form which is used in a friendly and informal context. Major differences in the H and L forms are that of its grammar, lexicon, phonology, and even prestige (Ferguson, 1959: 325-340.). Alsagoff (2010), however, claims that such model does not reflect the true nature of SCE and SCE since the method of classification of the grammatical features are too limited.

Another model that was proposed was the Expanding Triangles of English Expression Model by Pakir (1991). This model 'ascertains that English-knowing bilingualism affects the way Singapore English is spoken' (Wang, 2015: 69-80). and how it links to their English proficiency. Figure 3 below shows how Pakir's (1991) model place and categorize the position

of SSE and SCE with SSE being associated with 'formal' and 'advanced' and SCE being associated with 'Intimate' and 'Rudimentary' (Pakir, 2019). However, Alsagoff (2010) mentioned that this model is similar to the diglossia model in terms of its classification, hence, similar weakness.
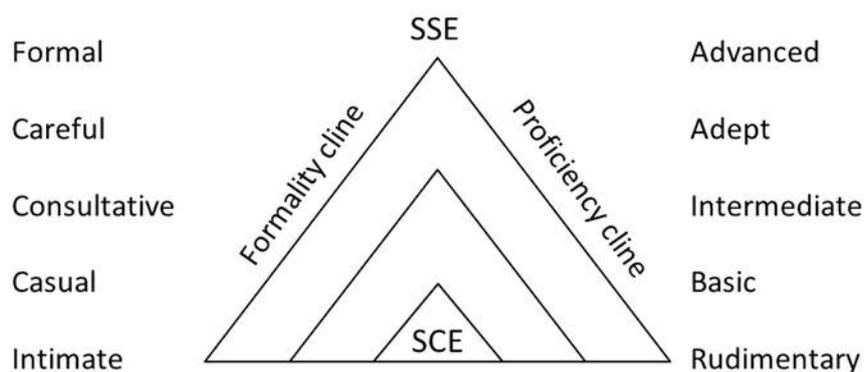

Figure 3: The Expanding triangles of English expression model by Pakir (1991, 2019).

The Cultural Orientation Model (COM) by Alsagoff (2010) could provide a richer picture when exploring the SSE and SCE as it takes 'cultural tension between "being/doing global" and "being/doing local" (Wang, 2015 : 69-80). into consideration. In COM, language variation is perceived as the negotiation between being/doing global and being/doing local (Garcia Viera, 2017 : 6). Although the variation of SCE does exist in the Singapore community, the SSE appears to serve a major role in the world market with its high status in Singapore. This model does not place speakers on the position of certain level of language proficiency when switching between SSE and SCE perse. Rather, COM is based on a negotiation between two opposing macro-cultural orientations by choice: globalist and localist (Garcia Viera, 2017 : 6). Marking the speaker as local pinpoints the desire to be a part of a community membership. Such ethnic marking such as 'lah' or 'lor' can be decreased or increased based on the preference or necessity when speaking.

Standard Singapore English (SSE)		Colloquial Singapore English (CSE)
Globalism	⟹	Localism
Economic capital	⟺	Socio-cultural capital
Authority	⟺	Camaraderie
Formality	⟺	Informality
Distance	⟺	Closeness
Educational attainment	⟺	Community membership

Figure 4: Features of the two orientations in the cultural orientation model
(Alsagoff, 2007: 39, Table 1)

The aim of this case study is to investigate SSE and SCE in formal and informal contexts with the focus on three variables: phonological (voiced alveolar stop [d] in place of voiced dental fricative [ð] in word-initial position), morphological variables (the occurrence

and the non-occurrence of inflectional affixes in verbs), and a discourse marker *'like'*. COM will be used as a framework.

Research Methodology

Background and Context

The participant in this study includes a 21-year-old Singaporean male with a Singaporean pre-university education. According to Anne Pakir's expanding triangles in which she argues that educated speakers are able to command a range of styles from SSE to CSE to suit the demands of context (Pakir, 1991). Thus, the participant is expected to have proficiency to use both CSE and SSE comfortably. To observe stylistic variation in speech, the participant was recorded in two different situations, with details as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

	Situation 1 - Feedback Session for Worship Team	**Situation 2 - Lunch conversation with National Service colleagues**
Audience	Youth worship team, aged 12-18. Approximately 20 people present. Mix of Singaporean and non-Singaporeans.	2 Males, the speaker's National Service (NS) colleagues. One male is a peer, while the other is a superior. All Singaporean.
Setting/Activity	Feedback session in church. Speaker is standing, everyone else is sitting.	Casual lunch conversation at a Thai restaurant.
Topics Discussed	Administrative issues in church: whether new rules should be introduced to regulate discipline on the worship team.	Casual conversation about giving money to people who ask for money on the streets.
Hierarchy/ Relationship	Speaker is in a superior position as he is the mentor (overall in charge of the Youth Worship team).	Mixed: Peer to peer relationship and superior-subordinate relationship.
Interactional Dynamics	Monologic, speaker had the longest turn, youths had shorter turns.	Speaker alternates between listening and speaking roles, quick turn-taking.
Topic Familiarity	High. Well-prepared for, though not scripted.	Mid. Speaker talks about his own experiences, before inviting others to share theirs.

Method

This formative case study takes a mixed-method approach where an audio recorder was used to retrieve the conversational data. Prior to doing an audio recording, the author provided the purpose and details of the study to the participants. Both participants acknowledged and signed the consent form. From each recording, a 3-minute segment that had a wide range of stylistic variation was selected. Variables were chosen based on noticeable occurrences and significant differences between recording 1   and 2. For the first variable, color coding scheme was used to highlight the possible words/phrases that were considered a standard variant (SSE) occurrence. For every occurrence of the non-standard variant (CSE) and standard variant, a score of '1' and '0' were attributed respectively. From here, the index scores were calculated for each situation. Thus, the greater the index score, the higher frequency of occurrence of the non-standard variant.

For the second and third variable, the frequency of occurrences of the variable in each situation was tabulated. The participant had evidently different lengths of speech produced in each situation, hence comparing the difference of the raw quantity of occurrences of the variable would be inaccurate. As a result, calculation of occurrences of variable per word was circumvented to ensure equal standard of measurement.

Research Result and Discussion
Variable 1
The first chosen variable is the use of voiced alveolar stop [d] in place of voiced dental fricative [ð] in word-initial position. For example, the realization of "then" ([ðɛn] in SSE) as [dɛn] in CSE. The table below summarizes the index scores for this variable:

Situation	Index score
1. Formal Feedback Session	13/46= 0.28
2. Lunch Conversation	18/28 = 0.64

Table 2: Index scores of occurrences in respective situations, calculated by no. of [d] over no. of [ð]

As observed above, Situation 1 has a lower index score as compared to Situation 2, indicating an overall lower usage of the non-standard variant [d] in Situation 1. This can be accounted for by style, attention to speech, and style as audience design.

In Situation 1, the higher degree of formality influenced the speaker to pay more attention to his speech, thus adopting the more standard variant of [ð], a trend that is observed amongst Singaporean speakers of English as it is regarded as the more prestigious form (Brown, Deterding & Low, 2000). Another reason for this inclination towards standard variant [ð] can be explained by style as attention to speech. The audience in the feedback session consisted of both Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans (Americans, British, Filipinos etc), and this heterogeneity in the (linguistic) backgrounds of the audience members may have motivated the speaker to tend towards using the dental fricative [ð] as it is considered to be the more institutionalized, standard choice. Thus, the usage of the standard variant in the formal feedback session shows an adherence to the "globalist orientation" (Alsagoff, 2010), in order to facilitate a discussion with an international audience.

In contrast, Situation 2 is set in as a casual lunch conversation with the speaker's National Service (NS) colleagues and it is observed that the speaker uses the non-standard variant [d] more frequently. Style as attention to speech may be used to explain this shift. Due to the low degree of formality in this situation, the speaker possibly paid less attention to his

speech, thus using the non-standard variant [d]. However, speech accommodation in creating style as audience design would be a better alternative to account for the higher usage of [d] in Situation 2. In Situation 2, the other two speakers uses CSE syntax and discourse markers (*lah*, *lor*), as observed in lines 11-12 and in line 16.

11   **B:**   I see the condition **lah**. But usually I won't buy it because
12   I **always bring** my own tissue
13   **A:**   [oh]… You JX? Do you do you have like a
14   how do you normally… do you think it is a good way
15   to support them or?
16   **C:**   I think do what you can **lor**

In order to align himself more closely to the speaking styles of his addressees, the speaker converges by adopting the non-standard variant [d] as it is one of the typical features of CSE (Bao, 1998). This convergence may be further accentuated by the speaker's position as subordinate to Speaker B. In the presence of Speaker B, his superior from NS, it is in the speaker's interest to orient himself closely to his superior's manners of speaking, for it will allow him to linguistically signal a desire for social solidarity with him outside of the workplace.

In fact, the participants of the conversation all being NS men might also be a contributing factor to the greater use of non-standard variant [d]. According to Pakir, Lim and Wee (2010 : 54), NS men are more aware of class differences as they are exposed to peers of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds when they enter NS. In order to neutralize these differences, speakers tend to lean towards using CSE as it has become "inextricably bound" with the sense of a Singaporean identity (Bokhorst-Heng, 2005). In order to bridge the ethnic and cultural boundaries that may exist between NS men, the speaker uses the common language of CSE to project a localist identity (Alsagoff, 2010) and to signal solidarity with other interlocutors as a form of audience design.

Variable 2

The second variable observed is the occurrence and the non-occurrence of inflectional affixes in verbs. Inflectional affixes are affixes which mark grammatical tense in English. While these affixes mark tense in SSE, verbs often appear in uninflected forms in CSE (Alsagoff, 1998 : 7). The deletion of inflectional affixes such the affix '-ed' to denote past tense and the '-ing' affix to denote the progressive form are prevalent. The table below summarizes the index scores for this variable:

	Average frequency of verbs appearing in uninflected form
Situation 1 (Formal Feedback Session)	0/469 total words uttered by speaker = 0
Situation 2 (Lunch Conversation)	5/309 total words uttered by speaker = 0.0168

Table 3: Average frequency of verbs appearing in uninflected form

As observed, there is a complete absence of the uninflected verb in Situation 1, but a noticeable frequency of uninflected verbs in Situation 2. Considering the results from the perspective of style as attention to speech, we are able to identify that the speaker in Situation 1 orients to the "globalist orientation" (Alsagoff, 2010). The globalist orientation holds that English is a sort of international currency and instrument of global participation because of its intelligibility and form (MOE, 2013). In this context, the speaker is aware that his audience comprises of an international mix of Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans who speak different varieties of English. As such, to facilitate conversation amongst an international crowd, the speaker chooses to use SSE which is seen as a mutually intelligible lingua franca which both Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans are able to understand.

In Situation 2, the dropping of the inflected affixes in speech was noted. It is important to note that the other two interlocutors (B and C) drop inflected affixes in verbs as well:

20	**B:**	<u>What happen?</u>
25	**A:**	Like basically I <u>walk past him</u> (then) <u>I walk back</u>
45	**C:**	if he <u>expose there's</u> a chance

Evident in the above examples, speaker B drops the '-ed' affix in 'What happen?' and speaker C drops the same affix in the word 'expose'. All interlocutors use CSE in this context, suggesting that style as audience design can be used as a possible explanation for why the speaker chooses to style-switch. Considering this from the localist orientation which states that CSE represents rapport, familiarity and intimacy (Alsagoff, 2010), the author was able to note how both the speaker and interlocutors use CSE to denote a sort of group membership by playing up their identity as Singaporeans. It is also interesting to note that both the superior (B) and peer (C) use the same linguistic features in the conversation. This can be analyzed as speakers using style as an act of marking their Singaporean identity: to de-emphasize the unequal hierarchy between them and at the same time, emphasize the group membership and community identity as Singaporeans. Since CSE may not be intelligible to users of other varieties of English, the choice to emphasize their group identity as Singaporeans and also their shared identity as Full-time NS men further foregrounds the function of the localist orientation for rapport building.

Additionally, we find that speech accommodation is something common across both recordings. Giles (2016) argues that accommodation is motivated by a desire for social approval from one's interlocutors, as a means to positively reinforce one's social identity (Dragojevic, Gasiorek & Giles, 2016). This is evident when the speaker converges to use SSE in Situation 1, a variety that is a mutually intelligible global language. On the other hand, in Situation 2, the speaker converges to use a variety that is exclusively shared by his countrymen. In both cases, the variant that is used serves to increase the social solidarity between the speaker and his addressees, and to seek affirmation and social approval from them.

Variable 3

The third variable we have selected is the use of the discourse marker *'like'* by the speaker.

Situations	Index score
Situation 1 (Formal Feedback Session)	7/469 = 0.015
Situation 2 (Lunch Conversation)	29/309 = 0.094

Table 3: Index Score for the occurrence of 'like' per word

As seen above, there is more frequent use of the discourse marker *'like'* in Situation 2 than in Situation 1. This increased use of *'like'* can be explained primarily by attention to speech. *'Like'* is typically associated with uncertainty or hesitation in speech (Fuller, 2003). Thus, *'like'* appears at a much lower frequency in Situation 1, where speech is somewhat premeditated and the speaker wishes to convey certainty, clarity and confidence to the audience, which he achieves by paying attention to his speech. In Situation 2, the speaker has not premeditated the conversation as it occurs in a casual context. This increases his use of *'like'* in areas of particular uncertainty and doubt, such as when expressing a potentially controversial opinion that may damage his positive face. In this sense, we can view *'like'* as a mitigation strategy to protect the speaker's positive face by conveying uncertainty when expressing a potentially damaging opinion. This is exemplified in Situation 2 when the speaker implies that people who beg for money are dishonest, but does not wish to damage his positive face as he is directly contradicting the opinion generally accepted by society and the opinion expressed by the other speakers:

13	**A:**	[oh]… You JX? Do you do you have **like** a
14		how do you normally… do you think it is a good way
15		to support them or?
16	**C:**	I think do what you can lor
17	**A:**	I always feel very… wary of them I don't… um **like**
18		I've had very bad experiences with giving money to
19		**like** people **like** in public it's **like** (uncertain) yeah

In lines 17-19, the participant uses *'like'* at a higher rate (index score 4/29= 0.14), compared to the average in Situation 2 (0.094). This can be explained by a desire to show uncertainty towards a potentially controversial accusation he is asserting, and to protect his positive face and desire to be seen as a good person. Although his frequent use of 'like' could also be interpreted as protecting the negative face of the addressee through hedging to avoid imposing his own opinion, it is likely that the speaker uses this strategy primarily to protect his own positive face as he is expressing a more controversial and potentially damaging opinion.

In line with this interpretation of *'like'* to indicate uncertainty and openness to other opinions, the few occurrences of 'like' in Situation 1 also occur in areas where the speaker invites opinions and feedback. The significantly reduced occurrence of *'like'* can be explained by the formal context, the premeditated speech and position of authority he is in. This gives more authority to his opinions and reduces the possibility of damage to his positive face, and therefore reduces the need for face saving strategies through discourse marker *'like'* to show uncertainty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this current study is to investigate different identifiable linguistic features found in SSE and CSE. This is to understand the switch of SSE and CSE in different situations. Cultural Orientation Model (COM) by Alsagoff was used to analyze conversational data as opposed to the previously available models. Singapore is a context that is worthwhile to explore since the existence of SSE and CSE can be clearly captured. The data collected sufficiently demonstrates that the speaker would use more SSE in formal contexts with a global audience (Situation 1), and CSE in informal contexts with a local audience (Situation 2). Both audience design as well as Alsagoff's globalist orientation were able to explain the increased use of SSE in Situation 1. In Situation 2, attention to speech and Alsagoff's localist orientation were able to explain the increased use of CSE. Results provide qualified support for COM by Alsagoff. However, it is recognized that style as attention to speech and style as audience design should not be seen as binary factors influencing style but as tools which work cohesively to enable a speaker to best negotiate social relations with those around him.

Recommendations for utilization and further research

As there are varieties of English that exists currently around the globe, this study could be used to support COM to analyze English in both global and local context. Various linguistic features could be used as evidence of how English is used in different situations without the label of proficiency level. Instead, the focus on globalist and localist orientation of an individual when using English is the emphasis in the analysis. Furthermore, other researchers especially in the field of sociolinguistics could capture the uniqueness of different features of English that exists due to the influence of an individual L1, culture and his/her wish-to-be position in society.

More research could be conducted to validate the result of the study. Future research could focus on additional phonological and morphological features and discourse markers. In addition, more varied situations are recommended. For instance, different formal and informal situations could be explored. The challenge, however, was the audio recordings. Once the participants know that they are being recorded, even with their permission, the conversation may not be natural. Therefore, further research should take participants' permission and comfort in having a conversation in consideration, especially in informal situations.

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