Factors influencing the choice of English as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) — a South African perspective

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In accordance with the South African Constitution and the South African Schools Act, the Department of Education's Language-in-Education policy aims to promote multilingualism and the development of the official languages and to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners. The majority of South Africans prefer English and not their home language as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) after the first four years of schooling. Why? In an attempt to address the issue of choice of LoLT, in this article I report, against the background of a literature overview, on an empirical investigation on the perceptions of a group of educators and student educators, on the importance of languages in politics, education, science and technology, trade and industry, and cultural activities, as well as on educational matters pertaining to the LoLT. I explore the problematic sociolinguistic issues concerning the choice of English over home language as the LoLT.

Introduction

The South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a:art. 29) and the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b: art. 6) acknowledge the right of all learners to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where this is reasonably practicable. In accordance with the Constitution and the Schools Act, the Department of Education's Language-in-Education policy (DoE, 1997:1-2) and the Working group on values in education (James, 2000:8-10) aim to promote multilingualism and the development of the official languages and to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners. According to research findings (Kotzé, 2000:1-5; Smuts, 2000:1-5; Vermeulen, 2000:265; Von Gruenenwaldt, 1999:205; Sarinjeive, 1999:130; De Witt, Lessing & Dicker, 1998:119) the home language is the most appropriate medium for imparting the skills of reading and writing, particularly in the initial years of schooling. In a research project that was undertaken during 2000 by the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) (Die Burger, 12 September 2000:9), 90% of the participants indicated that they were in favour of home language education. Despite the afore-mentioned research findings and support for home language as language of learning and teaching (LoLT), the majority of South Africans opted for English and not their home language as LoLT after the first four years of schooling (NEPI, 1992:13; Webb, 1999:69-70).

In an attempt to address the issue of choice of LoLT, this article explores two factors that may determine the choice of the LoLT, namely the number of speakers, as well as perceptions of the role and functions of language in specific areas of life. The perceptions of a group of educators and student educators on the importance of languages in politics, education, science and technology, trade and industry, and cultural activities, as well as educational matters pertaining to the LoLT, are investigated. A literature overview of factors that have an influence on the choice of LoLT will also be given.

A literature overview of factors that have an influence on choice of LoLT

Language-in-education

Research findings (James, 2000:8-9; Kotzé, 2000:1-5; Smuts, 2000: 1-5; Vermeulen, 2000:265; Desai, cited by Visser, 2000:11; Von Gruenenwaldt, 1999:205; Sarinjeive, 1999:130; De Witt *et al.*, 1998: 119) indicate that it is important that children should learn to think and function in their home language up to CALP (cognitive/academic language proficiency) level and then the child may transfer to the new language the system of meaning he/she already possesses in his/her own home language. Learners are therefore more successful in acquiring second language literacy if they have already mastered strategies for negotiating meaning in print in their home language. Learning and changing over to a second language is a traumatic experience; it takes a learner up to seven years to acquire adequate skills in a second language (De Witt *et al.*, 1998:119; Nkosi, 1997:2).This may significantly delay, sometimes permanently, learners' academic development (De Witt *et al.*, 1998:119; 122). Free State educators contend that black learners' lack of proficiency in English is the most important reason for the high Grade 12 failure rate in the province during 1999 (Smith, 1999:2).

Despite these reasons why home language education is an educationally sound policy, the majority of South Africans prefer English and not their home language as LoLT. Why?

Several academics (for example, Desai, cited by Visser, 2000:11; Rossouw, 1999:101; Lemmer, 1995:92; Chick, 1992:284; Reagan, 1985:76) are of the opinion that there is a lack of suitable textbooks and material for the specialised language needs of second language learners (L2). This conviction is supported by Indigenous African Language (IAL) educators. In a press interview (Jones, 2001:1), IAL educators accused the South African government of not making African language textbooks available. Initiatives in producing texts for children in IALs have been cautious, and have had mixed results. Gough (1994:10-11), however, is of the opinion that the development of learning material in IALs is not an insurmountable problem. In his view, there are piles of IAL learning material gathering dust somewhere in Department of Education storerooms. He suggests that publishers and educators should use these textbooks (which probably exhibit the influence of the apartheid era) as a point of departure for preparing new publications.

The lack of IAL learning material does not mean that educators do not use IAL in their classrooms. African language speaking educators often use their bilingual or multilingual competences as they grapple to interpret a syllabus resourced in English to African language speaking children (Bloch & Edwards, 1998:16).

In the light of the insistence of learners on English as LoLT, cognizance must be taken of Mondstuk's (1996:2), Rossouw's (1999: 101) and Lemmer's (1995:91) observations that educators in traditional black schools often lack the English proficiency that is necessary for effective teaching. Educators do not have the knowledge and skills to support English language learning and to teach literacy skills across the entire curriculum. Dedman (as cited by Nkosi, 1997:2) is of the opinion that a large number of African educators educate in "an English dialect". Van den Berg (2000:10) warns that this may have negative consequences for the learners — learners often imitate their role models' (read educators') (wrong) pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.

If the most important stumbling block in the use of IALs as

LoLT, namely a lack of educational material, is compared with the problems facing learners who use English, and not their home language as LoLT, the former problem should not be insurmountable.

The role of language in the economic sphere

English is seen by many IAL speakers as the dominant language of trade and industry. Knowledge of English is therefore perceived to be essential for economic empowerment (Mondstuk, 1996:2; Webb, 1992:114; Reagan, 1985:76). According to Kaschula and De Vries (2000:3), it is ironic that English is regarded as the language of trade, because it is spoken by a small minority and it thereby excludes a large proportion of the population from participating in the economic mainstream. Despite this discrepancy, English is still acknowledged as the language of economic empowerment. Webb (1992:107) and Beukes (1992:47) stress that upward mobility is impossible without proficiency in English. According to Beukes (1992:47) the unwillingness of many black South Africans to use IALs as LoLT stem from their fear that they will remain 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' if they are not able to converse fluently in English.

The importance of language in cultural activities

Language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture (Misimang, 1992:142). Bokomba (1998:1, cited by Sarinjeive, 1999:128) stresses the role that language plays in the cultural identity of children. Bloch and Edwards (1998:13) are of the opinion that "the tendency to ignore or trivialize home languages in school may have very damaging effects hardly conducive to the feelings and comfort which go hand in hand with successful learning". The possibility exists that if English is the African child's most important LoLT, the child can become anglicised — at the expense of his/her own cultural heritage (Matsela, 1995:50; Webb, 1992:114; Mawasha, 1987:114). Matsela (1995:50) has observed the following inclinations in his fellow Africans: outright dislike for or indifference to cultural and traditional artefacts, values and ways of behaving and relating; and "hurried and slipshod assimilation of the so-called modern culture's obvious and translucent ways and items".

Mtuze (1990:13) believes that the development and use of IALs as LoLT will ensure that African learners "will have pride and not shame in the culture of their own family and the community".

The importance of language in the political arena

There is a fear amongst some researchers (Beukes, 1992:44-45; Chick, 1992:284) and journalists (Swanepoel, 1995:51) that the promotion of English as LoLT at the cost of IALs may promote neo-colonialism. It may interfere with the goal of a truly democratic society by putting power in the hands of an English-speaking elite. According to Mawasha (1987:111), this is quite possible in a country like South Africa, where "knowledge [has] replaced the spear". According to Swanepoel (1995:51), only 30% to 35% of South Africans have enough English language skills to engage in a meaningful political conversation in English or to understand an English news broadcast. Research done by the PANSALB (as quoted by Beukman, 2000:4; *Afrikaner*, 15-21 September 2000:1) has found that only 22% of non-English speaking South Africans are able to understand statements made by Government in English. A total of 27% of the participants in the PANSALB research project indicated that they had a basic comprehension of English, 19% seldom understand Government communiqués, whilst 2% have no understanding of English. Despite these findings the majority of politicians and other public figures choose English to address their audiences at public meetings (Jones, 2001:1). According to a spokesperson of the Pan African Language Project (SABC, 20 May 1998) English is used in 85%, Afrikaans in 10% and IALs only in 5% of the debates in Parliament. Because Parliament does not have the necessary translation facilities, Members of Parliament must give prior notice if they want to address Parliament in an IAL or in Afrikaans. De Wet and Niemann (1998:13) note that it is difficult to see how a government can hope to govern a country efficiently if it communicates in a language (English) that is understood by only a small percentage of the population. Despite these arguments against the use of English as the most important language in the political arena, it is seen as the linking language which may foster national unity (Lemmer, 1995:83; Chick, 1992:285). Home language, on the other hand, has a bad image amongst some IAL speakers. It is associated with the inferior education offered under the Ministry of Bantu Education and its successors. During the apartheid era, home language education was seen as a strategy by the government to prevent Africans' upward mobility and thereby to ensure a perpetual reservoir of cheap labour. Parents' memories of Bantu Education, combined with their perceptions of English as a gateway to a better education and economic empowerment, prompt the majority of black parents to favour English as LoLT (Van Louw, 1998:3; De Wet & Niemann, 1995:8; Lemmer, 1995:83; Cluver, 1994:7; Lenake, 1993:56; Cluver, 1992:117; NEPI, 1992:13; 29; Reagan, 1985:76).

Demographic factor

English and Afrikaans as home languages are widely but thinly spread across the country. Their function as home language of the white population, has ensured their dominance in many spheres of civic, political and economic life in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa (McLean, 1999:10).

On the other hand, IALs are concentrated in specific geographical areas of the country. The classification of the heterogeneous African languages as separate languages imposed boundaries and relationships not always consonant with the distribution and histories attributed to varieties by their speakers. Broadly, the Nguni varieties are recognised as Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, and Ndebele; the Sotho varieties are recognised as Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, and Tswana; whilst Venda and Tsonga are classed separately (McLean, 1999:10).

The eleven official languages account for the home languages of more than 98% of the population. These eleven languages are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Languages spoken in South Africa

Languages	Numbers (in millions)	%
Nguni varieties		
Zulu	8.8	21.96
Xhosa	6.8	17.3
Swati	1.0	2.57
Ndebele	0.6	1.55
Sotho varieties		
Southern Sotho	2.7	6.73
Northern Sotho	3.8	9.64
Tswana	3.4	8.59
Venda	0.9	2.22
Tsonga	1.8	4.35
English	3.6	9.01
Afrikaans	6.0	15.3

Sources: Central Statistical Services, 1997:1.14; Ridge, 1996:16

The remaining 1.32% is needed to bring the total to 100%. This is made up of languages from many parts of the world, often referred to as modern "heritage languages". Most of the population of Indian origin use English as a home language. Of the modern European languages, Portuguese figures prominently. There is also a well-established German-speaking community. Several of the 11 official languages are used in communities beyond South Africa's borders. Lesotho has Southern Sotho as its main language. Swati is the main language of Swaziland, Setswana is the main language of Botswana and there is a large Ndebele-speaking population in Namibia (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1998:6; Ridge, 1996: 16-17).

English is the home language of only 9.01% of the South African population, yet it is the LoLT of more than 90% of South African learners (Strauss, Van der Linde, Plekker & Strauss, 1999:10-11). Perceptions with regard to language use and status, and not the number of home language speakers, are key factors that determine the number of learners that choose a specific language as LoLT.

Empirical investigation
Background to the study

Because perceptions play an important role in the way languages are considered and used (Ornstein-Galicia, 1996:68-70; Du Plessis, 1994: 321-322; Pütz, 1995:245-283, Beukes, 1992:43-47; Edwards, 1985; Dittmar, 1976), an empirical study was undertaken to ascertain prevalent perceptions among full- and part-time BEd Hons students studying at the Bloemfontein and Queenstown campuses of the Free State University as to the importance of languages in selected areas of life, as well as the use of English and IALs as LoLT.

To achieve these objectives, the Languages in Contact and Conflict in Africa (LiCCA) standardised questionnaire was used (see Pütz, 1995:273-282). The following general research questions were posed with regard to the differential status of languages and the use of specific languages (English and IALs as LoLT):

- Which languages are important or not important in the following areas of life: politics, education, science and technology, trade and industry, and cultural activities?
- Is home language an important tool for effective teaching and learning?
- Does the respondent use language switching to enhance teaching and learning?
- What are the language abilities of the respondents (educators)?

The respondents to the research project were selected by means of simple random sampling from the numerical student number lists. English and Afrikaans questionnaires were made available to the respondents.

The data collection procedure consisted of preliminary contact with the students on the campuses to be used. This was followed by the development, pre-testing and dispatch of questionnaires to the various destinations. Collected data were then collated and analysed. Tables 2 and 3 show the different language communities and professional profiles of the respondents.

Table 2 Sample and language communities

Language	Questionnaires delivered	Questionnaires returned	Percentage of questionnaires returned	Language distribution of respondents (%)
Afrikaans	70	48	68.57	27.43
S. Sotho	80	45	56.25	25.72
Tswana	20	10	50	5.71
Xhosa	120	66	55	37.71
Zulu	10	6	60	3.43
Total	300	175	58.33	100

Table 3 Professional profile of respondents

Language	Part-time students (educators)	Full-time students (educators)	Total
Afrikaans	32	16	48
S. Sotho	33	12	45
Tswana	8	2	10
Xhosa	56	10	66
Zulu	5	1	6
Total	134	41	175

The research findings are not representative of the different language communities in South Africa (compare Tables 1 and 2). The attitudes of the respondents with regard to use of languages in specific areas of life, as well as the use of specific languages as LoLT, will, however, be compared with those of the broader South African language community — as reflected in the literature study.

Research findings

The research findings are reported in this section. Attention is firstly paid to the respondents' views on the importance of languages in specific areas of life; thereafter, the educational implications of these findings for the LoLT is discussed.

The responses of participants to the question of the importance of languages in certain areas of life are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 shows that, without exception, the respondents of all the language communities, who took part in the research project, indicated that English was the most important language in the area of politics, education, science and technology, as well as trade and industry. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that, with the exception of two Xhosa-speaking respondents who indicated that English was not an important language in the political arena, none of the respondents was of the opinion that English was not important in politics, education, science and technology, as well as trade and industry. With the exception of the Afrikaans (45.8%) and Tswana (60%) respondents, none of the members of the other language communities indicated that their home language was an important educational tools. Table 4 also shows that the respondents acknowledged the importance of all languages in cultural activities. The fact that there is not a significant difference among the different language communities' evaluation of the importance of the language groups may be seen as an acceptance of the role that home languages play in cultural activities.

Tables 5, 6, and 7 highlight respondents' views of LoLT, as well as practices and abilities with regard to LoLT.

A significant percentage of respondents (72.6%) either strongly agreed or agreed that home language education would enhance teaching and learning. It was furthermore noticeable that all the Afrikaans- and Zulu-speaking respondents believed in the effectiveness of home-language teaching.

Table 6 summarises the respondents' answers to the question: "Do you use language or code switching to enhance teaching and learning?"

The fact that a very high percentage of respondents (78.9%) used language switching confirms their belief that home language is important in education (compare Table 4).

In the light of the negative research findings with regard to the English language proficiency of the majority of South Africans generally, and black South Africans in particular, the respondents were asked to evaluate their own English language skills. Their answers are reported in Table 7.

Although only 24.0% of the respondents considered that they speak, write and read English like native speakers, the majority of Afrikaans and IALs respondents still produced a very positive assessment of their own English language skills, rating themselves as "proficient and fluent".

Comparative discussion of findings and literature and recommendations

The role of the educator in the acquisition of a second language in a print-poor environment must never be underestimated (Von Gruenenwaldt, 1999:207). It was found in the literature study that a substantial number of educators lack the necessary English language skills for effective teaching and learning. From a comparative analysis of research findings by Lemmer (1995:91) with regard to the English proficiency of educators and the participants of the research project's own perception of their language proficiency, a noticeable difference can be observed (compare Table 7). Although there is no obvious explanation for this difference, it may be ascribed to the fact that the

Table 4   The importance of English, Afrikaans and IALs in certain areas of life

Areas of life and language communities	Important							Not important					
	English	Afrikaans		IALs			English		Afrikaans		IALs		
	N	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Politics													
Afr.	48	40	83.3	14	29.2	6	12.5	-	-	2	4.2	8	16.7
S.Sotho	45	28	62.2	-	-	16	35.6	-	-	6	13.3	-	-
Tswana	10	10	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	60
Xhosa	66	56	84.8	2	3	4	6.1	2	3	12	18.2	16	24.2
Zulu	6	5	83.3	-	-	2	33.3	-	-	2	33.3	2	33.3
Total	175	139	79.4	16	9.1	28	16	2	1.1	22	12.6	32	18.3
Education													
Afr.	48	32	66.7	22	45.8	12	25	-	-	-	-	2	4.2
S.Sotho	45	35	77.8	6	13.3	2	4.4	-	-	4	8.9	2	4.4
Tswana	10	8	80	2	20	6	60	-	-	-	-	-	-
Xhosa	66	56	84.8	7	10.6	4	6.1	-	-	12	18.2	7	10.6
Zulu	6	6	100	2	33.3	-	-	-	-	2	33.3	2	33.3
Total	175	137	78.3	39	22.3	24	13.7	-	-	18	10.3	13	7.4
Science & technol.													
Afr.	48	42	87.5	14	29.2	4	8.3	-	-	3	6.3	8	16.7
S.Sotho	45	37	82.2	2	4.4	6	13.3	-	-	4	8.9	5	11.1
swana	10	10	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	60
Xhosa	66	57	86.4	6	9.1	3	4.5	-	-	12	18.2	10	15.2
Zulu	6	6	100	2	33.3	-	-	-	-	2	33.3	5	83.3
Total	175	152	86.9	24	13.7	13	7.4	-	-	21	12	34	19.4
Trade & industry													
Afr.	48	42	87.5	16	33.3	5	10.4	-	-	2	4.2	6	12.5
S.Sotho	45	31	68.9	3	6.7	8	17.8	-	-	4	8.9	4	8.9
Tswana	10	10	100	2	20	2	20	-	-	-	-	-	-
Xhosa	66	57	86.4	11	16.7	6	9.1	-	-	8	12.1	9	13.6
Zulu	6	6	100	3	50	-	-	-	-	2	33.3	4	66.7
Total	175	146	83.4	35	20	21	12	-	-	16	9.1	23	13.1
Cultural activities													
Afr.	48	11	22.9	46	95.8	11	22.9	15	31.2	2	4.2	21	43.8
S.Sotho	45	15	31.2	9	20	35	77.8	21	43.8	10	22.2	5	11.1
Tswana	10	4	40	-	-	8	80	2	20	3	30	-	-
Xhosa	66	21	31.8	10	15.2	46	69.7	3	4.5	11	16.7	-	-
Zulu	6	3	50	2	33.3	6	100	1	16.7	1	16.7	-	-
Total	175	54	30.9	67	38.3	106	60.6	42	24	27	15.4	26	14.9

Table 5   Respondents' views on whether or not learners in general will learn more effectively if they are taught in their home language

Language community		Strongly agree	Agree	Dis-agree	Strongly disagree	Total
Afrik.	N	36	12	-	-	48
	%	75	25	-	-	100
S.Sotho	N	20	10	11	4	45
	%	44.5	22.2	24.5	8.8	100
Tswana	N	2	4	2	2	10
	%	20	40	20	20	100
Xhosa	N	18	19	21	8	66
	%	27.2	28.9	31.8	12.1	100
Zulu	N	-	6	-	-	6
	%	-	100	-	-	100
Total	N	76	51	34	14	175
	%	43.4	29.2	19.4	8	100

Table 6   Respondents' indication whether they use language or code switching to enhance teaching and learning

Language community		Yes	No	Not applicable	Total
Afrikaans	N	35	4	9	48
	%	72.9	8.3	18.8	100
S.Sotho	N	35	10	-	45
	%	77.8	22.2	-	100
Tswana	N	8	2	-	10
	%	80	20	-	100
Xhosa	N	60	6	-	66
	%	90.9	9.1	-	100
Zulu	N	-	6	-	6
	%	-	100	-	100
Total	N	138	28	9	175
	%	78.9	16	5.1	100

participants were all post-graduate students. Mawasha (1987:115) recommended that language proficiency in English should be a re-quirement in educators over and above expertise in subject matter content. Educator training programmes should also include specialist

Table 7 The respondents' evaluation of their own English language proficiency

Language community		1	2	3	4	5	Total
Afrik.	N	16	26	6	-	-	48
	%	33.3	54.2	12.5	-	-	100
S.Sotho	N	8	28	9	-	-	45
	%	17.8	62.2	20	-	-	100
Tswana	N	2	8	-	-	-	10
	%	20	80	-	-	-	100
Xhosa	N	2	4	-	-	-	66
	%	33.3	66.7	-	-	-	100
Zulu	N	14	46	1	1	-	6
	%	21.2	69.8	1.5	1.5	-	100

1. Excellent – like a native speaker
2. Not perfect, but proficient and fluent
3. With some difficulty, but I can make myself understood
4. Only with great difficulty
5. Just a few words

programmes to improve the English language proficiency of prospective educators.

The majority of respondents (see Table 6) indicated that they use language (i.e. code) switching to enhance their teaching. The majority of respondents also indicated that they believed that home language education enhanced teaching and learning (see Table 5). These perceptions and practice with regard to home language as an educational tool are in line with research findings on the importance of home language as LoLT.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (79.4%) indicated that English was the most important language in the South African political arena. Only 16% indicated that IALs had a role to play in South African politics. If one compares these responses with Kader Asmal's statement on the role of education in fostering a democratic South Africa, it is clear that a change of heart is imperative. Asmal (1994:2) stated:

> "Educational matters are naturally crucial to development beyond the education sector ... we need to have the right conditions for the nurturing of a democratic environment. All children thus need to feel that they are equal when they enter the formal educational arena. They need to feel that their languages, their religions, their home environments, their home customs ... are all equally important."

Research has shown that the respondents are aware of the value of home language for educational activities. However, "the validation of our African languages in education will only be successful if it is supported by the economic and private sector" (Asmal, 1994:2).

According to Kaschula and De Vries (2000:1), the death of apartheid has paved the way for changes regarding the status and use of IALs. Theoretically, the new constitution provided status and an official role for all South African languages. However, in reality, it would seem that English remains the preferred LoLT. O'Connor (2000:5) and the Department of Education (DoE, 1999:13) are of the opinion that people underestimate the value and role of their own language. It is therefore of the utmost importance that people be made aware of the economic, political, cultural and educational value of their languages. A policy to develop and promote IALs is unlikely to be successful without the active support and participation of the community towards which it is directed (Sarinjeive, 1999:131; Mtuze, 1993:48; Reagan, 1985:76).

There is a belief among some researchers (see Anthonissen & Gough, 1998:39-46 for a discussion of the discourse on the standardisation of IALs) that to raise IALs "out of the doldrums of self-doubt and over-dependency on foreign languages to a reasonable level of self-confidence and self-reliance ... promoting and enhancing their use as 'high-function' languages" (Matsela, 1995:53), they must be standarised. Although arguments raised by Alexander (see Cluver, 1992:

125-126 for a synopsis of Alexander's proposals) in favour of the standarisation of the Sotho and Nguni languages have received a somewhat hostile response (Sarinjeive, 1999:130; Anthonissen & Gough, 1998:45; Msimang, 1992:141), his suggestions are supported by proposals made by a task team appointed by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (*Die Burger*, 4 March 2000:1; Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1998:6). According to the task team, one language each from the Nguni and Sotho language families, as well as Venda, Tsonga, English and Afrikaans must be used and/or developed as languages of science and technology (*Die Burger*, 4 March 2000:1; Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1998:6). From a linguistic perspective, there is no reason that IALs in South Africa cannot be developed to the highest level as LoLT: the history of the evolution of Afrikaans has shown how, given favourable circumstances, a language that serves a very narrow range of essentially domestic purposes for its users may be expanded so that it may serve a very wide range of purposes in government, education, science and technology and the economy (Chick, 1992:283; Combrink, 1991:104).

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