

Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure: A Definitional Analysis with Implications for Classroom Teaching

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Abstract

Pragmatics has been a field that has been considered by some scholars to be rather difficult to define and/or not sufficiently important to be considered distinct to semantics. It has also not always received sufficient attention in L2 learning. A clear definition of what pragmatics is in terms of context and meeting truth conditions is presented as well the potential for ambiguity in defining cross-cultural pragmatic failure from other types. The analysis demonstrates the importance of such understandings of pragmatics and some of the implications for teaching it particularly in the L2 classroom, so that students can be better equipped to avoid cross-cultural communication problems.

1.0 Introduction

Linguistic research has seen a marked increase particularly since the 1950s when Chomsky developed his grammar-based approach to language acquisition (Chomsky 1957). Considerable research expansion has also resulted in more attention on second language acquisition inclusive of semantics and pragmatics described succinctly in Mangubhai and Son (2003, p.1.26) respectively as "the study of meaning" and meaning derived through context. From their perspective, pragmatics deserves attention but has been put in a category containing four types of meaning. However, others such as Charles Morris (in Thomason, 1973, p.161) considered that the study of language should be parceled into syntax, semantics and pragmatics while certain researchers at least in the past have seen pragmatics as a fuzzy area, possibly not deserving of being categorized as a

separate and main field. (Thomason,1973, p.162).

Hence, one of this essay's goals is to better gain insight for practicing instructors at all levels as to both what exactly pragmatics is and how it might be important -or in contrast how it might be rather amorphous and indistinct to semantics (and other linguistic fields). Further in elaborating or defining pragmatic meaning, this in turn along with a fuller understanding of culture can better help to isolate cross-cultural pragmatic failure from other types of communication failure. In addition, as a preview, the essay attempts to specifically show potential for ambiguity in describing cross-cultural pragmatic failure from that which may be more related to individual character and beliefs. The implications of such analysis will be lent to acquisitorial pragmatics and in further demonstrating the need for various students of L2 to become more competent in pragmatics consistent to the cultural models of relevance.

2.0 Core Definitions

According to one view made in the 1970s, a period described by Jung (2001) as an early developmental phase of major research into pragmatics, "The status of pragmatics is much less clear, if such a discipline exists at all, it is very under-developed" (Thomason 1973, p.162). The definition of culture may be also less clear with some considering it largely related to ethnicity while sociologists and others (Dash, 2003) consistent to Stern (1992) may see it as inclusive of social groups, some of which may be independent of ethnic consideration. The word failure in the title may be more obvious at least in its lexical form. According to the Standard Encyclopedia dictionary (1966 p.288,) semantically it means "turning out to be unsuccessful, disappointing or lacking" while in Collins (1989, p.151) it relates to being "below the required standard".

To further the investigation of pragmatics, let us look at this very word "failure". One might say to a friend who received a prize that "You turned out to be a great failure." Without reading into the utterance and considering the context, it simply means what it says. That is to say that the friend is considered as unsuccessful or below a required

standard. This might provide the opposite meaning that was intended from a pragmatic perspective, taking context into account. When the addressee cannot fathom such a meaning then this is an example of pragmatic failure. That which is related to cross-cultural failure is referred to as pragmalinguistic failure whereas that which has a non-cultural basis due to the social relationships and positions between individuals is referred to as sociolinguistic failure (Thomas, 1983, p.99) If the two friends were of the same culture(s), for example, pragmatic failure would likely fall within the sociolinguistic category.

But returning to distinguishing semantics from pragmatics, Thomason (1973) believed that pragmatics should focus on implicature; involving the way in which meaning is read into utterances. Leech (in Thomas,1983, p.92) separates pragmatics from semantics by describing the former as "intended meaning" and the other as sentence meaning. For some linguists, this may seem a simplistic delineation without further development, as sentence meaning at times could be the intended meaning. As well, Thomas (1983) writes of how such a definition obscures the various levels of meanings. Hatch (1992, p.260) seemed to narrow pragmatic meaning to "that which comes from context rather than from syntax and semantics." Again, a separation is implied between pragmatics and semantics. This does not seem to sufficiently define the former term. Thus, if the word "failure" in the example of "You turned out to be a great failure." takes on some other meaning than its direct semantic meaning, are we any longer talking about semantics? Leech's previously referred to separation (in Thomas, 1983), at first glance would seem to be somewhat hazy on this.

However, Green (1996, p.5) provides useful elaboration by definition when he stated, "Semantics is compositional and is basically truth conditional." As Poole (2000, p.11) states, "the disparity between what we intend to communicate and what we actually say is central to pragmatics." But in the above example use of "failure" in respect to a friend, what if the addressor was trying to be ironic and or slightly comical within an appropriate context. The word "failure" could infer the antonym as in the case of one having finally after many unsuccessful attempts achieved something successful while there were many doubters except for the friend who maintained loyalty. Hence, in this case, the intended meaning does not meet the overt truth conditions that Green (1996) sets for semantics.

However, do we have an understanding though really of how important pragmatics might be to language? As a hint to its key relevance to communication, Thin (1984) states, "literal meaning has little, if any relevance to the use of spoken language in social life." Just (2001, p.34) further supports such a view when he penned, "much of what we state about others, we have not derived from their statements but from their behaviour." If what Thin (1984) and Just (2001) seem to say ring true, then a fair contention consistent to Green's definition (1989) and views of Leech (in Thomas, 1983) and Morris (in Thomason, 1973) would be to see pragmatics as a subject of linguistic importance -even arguing for the consideration of it as a distinct field. Leech (in Jung, 2001, p.3) sees pragmatics as dealing with what semantics overlooks and views such a perspective as a consensus one. On the other hand, his encapsulation of how pragmatics can be separated from semantics unfortunately seems to need re-enforcement.

In this essay then, the truth and compositional conditions set for semantics will be very much kept in mind in ensuring that what examples are referred to and analysed in the following sections as being representative of pragmatics -are so in fact. The context conditions in shaping pragmatic meaning as laid out by Mangubhai and Son (2003) and referred to by Hatch (1992) will be also applied in distinguishing examples falling within pragmatics over those more strictly relating to semantics. It is not to get too steeped in the discussion as to whether pragmatics is a separate field, but the interpretive quality of pragmatic meaning and its importance as a subject need to be considered before teachers decide to what extent and how they wish to cover it in their syllabuses -or whether they wish to include it at all.

If as Just (2001) and Thin (1984) infer that one's beliefs or concept of the other are seen as potentially affecting the interpretation or added meaning the addressor understands or the addressee may wish to add (or place over any literal or base semantic meaning), then culture with its distinguishing belief basis may represent a useful subject for pragmatics. As von Raffler-Engel (1988, p.73) so well articulates, "...conversation partners react to what they assume to be the interactant's basic belief system." Green (1996, p.2) especially

demonstrated this when he wrote, that the "central notion is that pragmatics must include belief, intentions (or goal) plan and act." It re-enforces an anthropological view by stating that a language learner without sensitivity and understanding of pragmatics -including the beliefs and intentions of the speaker within a given culture- may find their words achieve an opposite end to what was intended.

Mangubhai and Son (2003) on the other hand have preferred not to explicitly separate pragmatics but to lump it into a broad "meaning" category. By not explicitly separating the two may not have serious consequence for some, but I would argue the very clear separation of the two has the effect of possibly making it evident to the student of linguistics that pragmatics deserves more significant attention than a non-separation would infer. Also, by simply describing as Mangubhai and Son (2003, 1.35) have done, that pragmatic meaning is primarily *context* driven, it does not appear to separate out sufficiently what pragmatics is contrasted against other types of meaning. "You are a liar" can be inferred as a truism by the one who uttered it. But its real intended meaning may be partially context derived. Without context, it may have no relevance to the addressee and even may be dismissed as the ramblings of a madman, for instance. (Whether relevance can be subsumed under context may be debated, however.) So the semantic meaning may have been the intended meaning. Yet the quote meets Green's compositional and truth meaning (1989) attached to the definition of semantics. Whereas describing my friend as a "failure" does not meet these truth conditions, context in this instance is however important in deriving the pragmatic meaning that in fact he is not a failure. Therefore, can context be encompassing element to distinguishing pragmatic meaning from other meaning? The example, though limited would indicate the answer would be in the negative and that Green's compositional and truth conditions (1989) need to be also kept in mind with context in distinguishing the two fields. Otherwise we could be left with the fuzziness as referred to by Thomason (1973).

3.0 Theoretical Considerations and Limitations

First, it is necessary to examine some of the limitations one may wish to keep in mind in

separating and defining pragmatic failure due to cross-cultural misunderstanding from that which is more related to non-cultural characteristics of a group. Again one refers to the separation of paralinguistic failure from socio-linguistic pragmatic failure in Thomas (1983). It is important to the teacher of pragmatics in that if he/she is going to make assertions about where there is primary cross-cultural risk of pragmatic pitfalls for a certain group of learners that she/he needs to get it right. That is not to say that at times there may remain some ambiguity as to what key pragmatic risk learners might need to be aware of in making their utterances in L2.

For example, Dash (2003) puts forward views about the problem of culturally stereotyping individuals in second language acquisition, which can blind the instructor from identifying the needs of the individual language student. Merrison (in Sheffield Hallam Working Papers, n.d.,p.7) in reviewing passages on contrasting politeness in British English and Japanese usage in Saeko Fukushima's recent book on requests and culture, states the importance of "not continuously making ethnocentric generalizations in our attempt to theorize politeness." Englebert (2003) brings up an interesting point in communicative misunderstanding along cultural lines where he cautions the need to separate individual character from cultural character.

Beyond such limitations, Hudson (in Huttar and Greyson, 1986,) writes of the important link between culture and speech act theory. As she mentions, one needs to consider different cultures and specific cultural systems and categories at times in describing or examining certain speech acts. This has some implications for pragmatics. For example, there may be a difference in the illocutionary effect of certain performative verbs in one language -say the Walmatjari language, which she uses to make her point- to that of English. Without sensitivity to the contrasting cultural differences that contribute to such illocutionary differences at the pragmatic level, cross-culturally based confusion can result between Walmatjari people and outsiders not versed in such differences.

Gee (1999) seems to make some allusion to what Hudson (in Huttar and Greyson, 1986) is referring to but in a broader context of a "cultural model" in respect to discourse analysis.

He uses the example of the word "bachelor" to have more than a simple meaning of an unmarried male based on the western cultural model in his reference to Filmore (in Gee, 1999). Consistent as an example of pragmatic meaning underlying marital status, in certain non-western cultures an unmarried woman over thirty may be seen by many older people in particular as someone who is an "old maid". Anecdotally, I witnessed the case of a middle age single western woman being told that she was an "old maid" by a senior male from a certain non-western country I lived in for several years. He may of thought he was being mildly critical, and even somewhat sympathetic whereas the individual female took fairly strong offense. He may have also felt that his seniority in this age hierarchy oriented country allowed him to make such a statement and that it would be looked upon as representing a kind of positive paternal concern for her being single; considered a rather disharmonious state by many in that country. He may have thought it was a good ice-breaker to generate some small talk preceding getting to better know her on a friendly basis. Making certain direct personal remarks in that culture at an early stage of being introduced is considered more as model behaviour than in a western one.

However, might it be theoretically argued that had a number of older males in a western culture heard such a remark by the non-western male in the example, would he have given it a different pragmatic meaning -or different degree of force of meaning- sufficiently to classify the non-western male's utterance as pragmatic failure. And theoretically, when is miscommunication a real failure or a slight misunderstanding that deserves not to be classified as failure. The difference in definitions between Collins Pocket Reference Dictionary (1989) and the Standard Encyclopedic dictionary (1966) as quoted earlier; the latter inferring something perceived as very negative and the former simply saying something is not up to standard, indicate that even describing failure can be disputed or at least interpreted differently. There is again a degree of subjectivity in pragmatics and pragmatic failure that may make us more understanding of Thomason (1973) who wondered whether pragmatics can be considered a subject at all.

Another definition related question is when is pragmatic meaning perfectly transferred by the addressor to the addressee with the addressee fully understanding the meaning, but not

liking it because of strong differences in cultural beliefs? Are these examples of failure or cases of simply a negative judgment of the utterance. If the western lady understood the non-western male in the previous example of him trying to be sympathetic and grandfatherly, but she took offense because of these differences in beliefs across cultures, then would such an example constitute cross-cultural pragmatic failure? I would say if one's view is more in line with Grice's concepts of cooperation (in Green, 1989, and Nunn 2003) then a negative reaction pragmatically speaking brought on by the possible lack of cultural knowledge about the addressee could be argued as being a case of pragmatic failure. So when the implicature and illocution of the addressor is not to create a non-cooperative pragmatic meaning, but in the broadest sense he has done so, then it can be contended that cross-cultural failure has taken place. Cooperation after all is the general norm -though not always in some instances as Hatch (1992) shows, further adding complexity in defining cross-cultural pragmatic failure. But if the non-western man's intention in the theoretical example was to insult, then he has succeeded and this cannot be seen so much as cross-cultural pragmatic failure, but possibly as intolerance or even cultural clash.

I also remember someone in the non-western country in question as asking me whether I lived alone in my bedroom. Somehow this seemed to have violated the western idea of privacy and contained an intrusive meaning. (Interestingly Thomas (1983) wrote of sometimes the overall poor competence of the L2 speaker as creating unintentionally pragmatic failure, which had more to do with problems of basic grammatical and semantic competence than pragmatics.) But for individuals from that non-western country, certain questions, which might seem too personal for a western person and consequently impolite may be perfectly polite or much more acceptable in their own culture. It is this question of politeness, which may have received some of the most attention in cross-cultural pragmatic failure. As Hanza corroborates, (in Sheffield Hallam Working Papers, n.d., p 1.) " for more than fifteen years, politeness has been one of the most productive areas of research in pragmatics and sociolinguistics." Thus, this may be a specific area that teachers would like to address if they choose to touch on pragmatics.

Brown and Levinson (in Dashwood, 2004, p.5.6) add that in order to satisfy the needs of being polite, speakers should be wary of being ambivalent to pragmatics. They saw face, both positive and negative as central to politeness. They defined it in terms of Goffman (in Levinson and Brown, 1997 p. 61.) who saw face as "with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or losing face". They further went on to describe it as something that is emotionally invested. Their view is that consistent with saving face, people co-operate and they assume that others will do so (Levinson and Brown, 1989); concepts in line with Grice (in Hatch, 1992). This supports the view that teaching of pragmatics as one that should be cooperative focused. But what is deemed cooperative for one culture may not be for another.

For example, in Malagasy culture as pointed out by Keenan (in Dashwood, 2004, p.5.5) individuals may deliberately give untrue answers or withhold information for seemingly the most innocuous situations where there appears to be no risk from a western perspective. For western inter-locutors with Malagasy people, they may feel this to be rude and disingenuous. Yet an understanding of the cultural model as referred to by Gee (1999) -including the key and shared cultural assumptions between Malagasy people- might prevent or at least mitigate pragmatic failure at times. If such "white lies" for lack of a better term, were deemed as uncooperative in that culture, then why would that culture not be in a perpetual state of conflict, which it seems it is not. Are the Malagasy people non-cooperative or is there some western bias in defining cooperative pragmatics.

Another example of cross-cultural failure " is based on the experience of Just (2001) working as an anthropologist in a Greek fishing village. He writes of returning from a dangerous fishing voyage with a Greek fisherman who he befriended. They did in fact get back but Just (2001) thinking he would be more valiant and modest by doing so admitted to the villagers in equivalent words that he had never been so scared in his life while on the boat. Just (2001, p.38) in his defense stated "an admission of cowardice amounts to an assertion of fearlessness" in the context of his story and in terms of a British or Australian cultural idiom. Such idioms I would more generally include as being part of the cultural model as referred to by Gee (1999). In Just's view that idiom relates to ones willingness to

be the first to admit to being very scared as providing a certain modesty that prevents others from calling one a coward. But consistent to the Greek cultural model, one never admits to being a coward.(Just, 2001, p.36) Just therefore in hindsight viewed his performance from a Greek point of view as a "disaster"(p.38). This indeed represents cross-cultural pragmatic failure it would seem and the seriousness of misunderstandings that can be generated from it.

But Just (2001) also ventured whether the value put into his words might be discerned differently in another village where some villagers might not quite see it as a "disaster" the way the local fishermen saw it. This again points out the need to be sensitive to intra-cultural variation when making interpretations as to what constitutes cross-cultural pragmatic failure (potential) in one local context over another. From a sociolinguistic perspective, one can see significant variation at a dialectic to idiolectic level, which may affect pragmatic meaning. "Our flat life" in England might relate to being bored by living in an apartment whereas it might mean in United States as having a boring life overall. The lexical meaning difference of the word "flat" between the two English dialects can effect a different pragmatic meaning. This is also an interesting demonstration of the way semantics can shape pragmatic output, which goes contrary one might contend to the school of thought, which wishes to separate semantics too firmly from pragmatics. It also demonstrates the importance at times of sociolinguistics in shaping pragmatic meaning.

An apparently simpler and clear example of pragmatics is from Mangubhai and Son (2003) who refers to an example of a teacher saying "the chalk is on the floor". The chalk on the floor is the basic semantic meaning. But given the context, the intention of the teacher may be to have a student pick it up and may represent the pragmatic dimension (Mangubhai and Son, p.1.35). Now theoretically, if the target group were of a culture that was not given to individual initiative and worried about doing something wrong in front of the class, students might not understand their teacher wanting them to pick up the chalk especially if the context contained there being more chalk on the board in close proximity to the teacher. Certain western teachers, say in certain non-western classrooms could wait some time almost indefinitely before any student might give a reaction. Such an example

could represent cross-cultural pragmatic failure

But again in the chalk example, the teacher individually might be someone who was particular about having a clean classroom, which the students were not aware of because it was one of the first classes with the teacher. So again, a mixture of cultural and individual dynamics could be interplaying to create pragmatic failure. Or was the teacher a Canadian, well known for their concerns for a clean environment? Or are descriptions of this classroom relevant to certain Asian ones where initiative is seen as potentially in this instance as being impolite. Such remarks might be seen as inconsistent to the respective Asian and Canadian cultural models and as stereotyping. Was the underlying pragmatic meaning consistent to the Canadian cultural model and what might that model be especially considering the multicultural composition of some Canadian classrooms? As Thomas (1983 p.110) eloquently writes, "...speaking good English does not necessarily mean conforming to the norms of the culturally hegemonic strata." As well, should the teacher in the chalk example and teachers in general, better understand the way in which pragmatic meaning might be understood among groups to which they have some degree of different beliefs and not always construe pragmatic misunderstanding as being ethno-culturally derived? Surely the answer is in the affirmative.

However, as Mangubhai (1997,p. 24) states, "Nonetheless, it is possible to discern certain patterns of behavior, or primary tendencies within a cultural or sub-cultural group that permit one to address learners as a *group*." He evidently draws attention to variation within culture. Stern and others (1996) refers to culture as "way of life" or "life style of a community" (p.207). They add that culture includes value systems and relationships of personal and family nature. So again culture does not have to refer to ethnicity or race. For instance, if the woman was a feminist in the above older non-western male example of telling a western lady she was an "old maid" because she was over thirty and unmarried, then the cross-cultural pragmatic failure in this instance could be inclusive of *both* ethnicity and gender- all consistent to the definition by Stern (1996). With this kind of pragmatic knowledge, hopefully teachers will be better able to impart ways linguistically speaking in making their students more successfully bridge the cultural pragmatics divide between the

L1 and L2.

4.0 Classroom Implications

One needs to take the issue of cross-cultural pragmatics into the classroom if as Jung (2001, p.6) indicates, pragmatics is a subject that is an indispensable part of language learning and which has received insufficient attention in acquisition. But the question is how to go from recognizing the importance of the issue to moving into classroom language learning and mitigating cross-cultural communication failure. There may be no easy solutions it would appear. Thomas (1993, p.109) may be alluding to such difficulties when she refers to the "potentially explosive area" of making judgments on what is pragmatically acceptable to the foreign learner. Openness to different pragmatic interpretations consistent to sensitivities of various cultures and social groups would be something to keep in mind as well as an approach free of stereotypical judgments.

Based on Jung's seminal work at Columbia University (2001), there are also a number of insightful ideas on how acquisitorial pragmatics can be approached. One important area of focus relates to ensuring L2 learners gain an acceptable appreciation of pragmatic strategies of relevance. Again understanding the pragmatics of politeness and face saving is an important area to return to for L2 students to get right in their language learning strategies. For consistent to Hanza (in Sheffield Hallam Working Papers, n.d., p 1.) getting a grasp on what constitutes cross-culture *failure* through losing face due to low pragmatic competence would seem to be especially worthy of classroom attention.

For example, though a milder example of impoliteness, for some, certain L2 speakers may not understand the differences of how and when to use such modals as "can" and "could" versus the conditional "would"; the latter of which carries a more imperative meaning than the two modals in respect to making requests -at least among middle class Americans. (Jung, 2001).

Here one as an instructor could use forms of role-play and drama in the class with proper

description of the different contexts. It is again context which Hatch (1992) and Mangubhai and Son (2003) refer to as key to defining pragmatic meaning or shaping it. (Though this example of "would" versus "could" may indicate that grammaticality and pragmatics may be inseparable or at least interconnected at times as "would" is the signal grammar in a speech act of request to designate more of an imperative force).

I will also add that in teaching even the L1 in a native context of say teaching English in Australia or Canada within the regular school system -or even in other courses such as geography acquiring intercultural knowledge can help make the L1 learner better able to understand how individuals of varying cultural backgrounds might infer certain meanings that would particularly lead to cross-cultural pragmatic breakdown. This has important ramifications for the multicultural classroom with large number of immigrants for example. As well, a consequence of focusing on the way different types of receivers infer pragmatic meaning is that such an approach could encourage teachers to be more sensitive to learners' heritage culture. As Brislin (1997, p.94) states,

"... many students have not had significant intercultural experiences in their lives so have had a difficult time conceptualizing the fact that many people have been socialized into a different culture."

Additionally, a clear but not overly complex demonstration of the difficulties of separating culturally related failure to non-culturally related ones (e.g. pragmalinguistics versus sociolinguistics failure) can be helpful in getting students to really understand pragmatics and the need for tolerance. This all presupposes that the cognitive level and learning levels of students are such that they are ready and receptive to such teaching and that the teaching materials and methods avoid pitfalls that some teachers might experience as pointed out by Brislin (1987) and Thomas (1983).

5.0 Conclusion

As supported by the definitions by Mangubhai and Son (2003) and Hatch (1989) in respect

to an utterance, its underlying meaning and intention derived from specific context represents pragmatics. While this represents a useful definition it seems additional clarification and elaboration is required to make pragmatics not redundant or confused with semantics. Semantics according to Green (1996) is additionally compositional and truth conditional where it would seem that pragmatics is largely not. Both Morris (in Thomason, 1973) and Green (1989) separate out pragmatics to semantics and it is this separation, which needs to be imparted in defining to teachers and students how to generate a real improvement in pragmatic competence. Further, the goal of developing overall communicative competence is well served when culture and its impact on pragmatic competence is not left out of the curriculum, but is dealt with in a sensitive and open-minded way.

Well orchestrated role play and videos representing authentic successful pragmatics across different cultural lines as well as examples of more frequent cross-cultural pragmatic failure may be a place to start as well as more specifically introducing students to successful pragmatic strategies (Jung, 2001). How much should be included and when to draw learners serious attention to pragmatics may be dependent upon a host of factors that would seem to benefit from further research as well as the individual decisions and overall pragmatic competence of the instructor.

So as to not to get lost at times in defining cultural pragmatic failure, Mangubhai (1997) reminds one that cultures do have a framework of commonality. But defining a particular cultural model (Gee, 1999) of relevance to the teaching of pragmatics can represent a pedagogical quagmire with explosive potentiality (Thomas, 1983). Therefore the teaching of cultural pragmatics would seem to require that instructors be careful and knowledgeable and as objective as possible. Otherwise personal judgments that may not be well grounded, hearsay or plain prejudice and stereotyping could find their way in the student's understanding of pragmatics. Or due to the cultural sensitivities of a student(s), while the teacher may provide objective insights, it could result nevertheless in a student losing face. Maintaining a positive classroom dynamic for all students needs to be considered.

As a final note, the importance of the subject at hand is re-enforced by Boz (in Sheffield Hallam Working Papers, n.d., p.3) that "our shrinking world" may compel more and more people to find ways to avoid intercultural communication breakdown. Hence, with possibly an increasing awareness of the need for cross-cultural sensitivity in communication, language educators at large and researchers in linguistics may be more willing to support a more thorough understanding of pragmatics. This should include understanding and defining better for students in the foreign language classroom, as to what is cross-cultural pragmatic failure and its relevance to their L2 learning.

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