Review

Sociolinguistic challenges of the post-1991 Ethiopian Language Policy

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Ethiopia has witnessed a history of language policies ranging from pre-1991 linguistic assimilation to the post-1991 official multilingualism. Though many articles have been written on Ethiopia's current language policy, little attention has been given to the current policy's challenges and future consequences. Hence, the intention of this article is to reflect upon challenges and future consequences of the current Ethiopian language policy. Since the concern of language policy in linguistically diverse countries like Ethiopia is fairly complex, this article focuses only on four major issues: bilingualism, rural-urban migration, language policy models and linguistic human rights. These points are first explored on the basis of the existing language policy-related sociolinguistic conceptual frameworks; thereafter the current challenges and a forecast on the potential future consequences of the current Ethiopian language policy are discussed. Taking the three-language model into account, Ethiopia currently lacks a de jury language of interethnic/intergroup communication. The ongoing urbanization, due to a high degree rural-urban migration and the horizontal expansion of metropolitan areas are creating a complex sociolinguistic profile in urban areas, putting citizens' linguistic human rights at risk. The pre-1991 most prevalent bilingual nature of the society is swiftly shifting and regional monolingualism is on the rise. This trend will predictably turn some regions into linguistic islands and put communication at cross regional and national level at risk. The unfolding sociolinguistic dynamics calls for urgent language policy rethinking in Ethiopia.

Key words: National language, symmetric multilingualism, exoglossic language policy.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in Africa. It harbors more than seventy languages within its geopolitical boundary (Meyer, 2006). This linguistically diverse nature of Ethiopia is part of the reason why the issue of language policy (henceforth LP) has been so contentious in the recent history of Ethiopia. Languages are strongly linked to politics in Ethiopia. The process of nation-building and identity construction are inextricably connected to languages in Ethiopia (Simth, 2008). The sentimental roles of languages are at the hub of the

current state-building project of ethnic federalism. The overall historical language policy[1] picture of Ethiopia shows that there was only a minor LP ideology change during the period from Tewodros II (1855 to 1868), this time being most noted as the beginning of Amharic–favoring de facto LP, to the fall of the Derg regime in 1991 (Getachew and Derib, 2006). This period's Ethiopian LP was predominantly characterized by the sole use of Amharic in diverse key domains of Ethiopia. Getachew and Derib (2006) have also stated that the post-1991 multilingual LP of Ethiopia has both positive and negative outcomes. We Ethiopians are, of course, thankful for the positive aspects, yet we must not overlook the negative outcomes. To date, no attention has been given to the present challenges and the possible future consequences of the post-1991 Ethiopian LP.

Although the post-1991 Ethiopian language policy appears to be pluralistic in model, it is not genuinely based on the three-language structure policy. This is so because the policy does not guarantee additive bilin-gualism, nor does it entertain the communicative needs of internal migrants or address minority linguistic right issues. Therefore, the intention of this article is to discuss sociolinguistic challenges of the post-1991 Ethiopian LP and to forecast its possible future consequences. Four issues: bilingualism, rural-urban migration (urbanization), LP models and linguistic human rights (LHRs) are the primary focus. Hence, in light of these points, the researcher reveals some of the sociolinguistic challenges of the current language policy in order to forecast its possible future consequences.

Background

The history of Ethiopian LP has two stages: de facto and de jury1[2]. The pre-1955 LP is entirely a de facto LP where Amharic, by common law, was the most crucial national language[3]. This implicit national status of the language was explicitly declared for the first time in the constitution of 1955, during the regime of H/Sellassie I (Meyer, 2006). From then, until 1991, Amharic enjoyed the constitutionally enshrined status of being the national language of Ethiopia. However, none of those years of the great zenith of the language was without linguistic, political, economic and social sacrifice of non-Amharic speakers.

Following the coming to power of the military junta in

1974, the National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia (NDRE) Constitution promised the right to provincial self-government together with the right to the use of one's language. In the early days of the socialist regime, it appeared that there was a promise for non-Amharic speaking ethno-linguistic groups that they could use and preserve their own languages. However, the socialist regime's constitutional promise of granting both minorities and powerless majorities to exercise their linguistic rights has been transformed to the drama of red terror. Citizens who demanded their human and democratic rights including LHRs were persecuted and murdered. In fact, there are some linguists who praise the socialist regime for the fifteen different languages used during the literacy campaign (Getachew and Derib, 2006). These languages were reduced into writing system using Ge'ez script. However, I would argue that the literacy campaign was more of a good politics for the regime than a good LP for Ethiopia. The campaign was not a genuine attempt of formulating a LP that entertains linguistic diversity.

The 1991 sociopolitical change in Ethiopia brought an unprecedented sociolinguistic change all across the nation. All languages of Ethiopia were given equal constitutional recognition. Following this, Amharic which was the most prestigious and principal national language has been officially reduced to the status of the federal working language. Multilingualism has become the major LP direction of Ethiopia.

This language policy change, though well praised among the members of the previously marginalized ethno-linguistic groups, is not free of weaknesses. According to Appleyard and Orwin (2008), the policy still fails to provide equal chance to the younger generation of non-Amharic speakers. This is true in federal admini-strative areas and major towns where there is a massive concentration of different linguistic groups due to large scale rural-urban migration and horizontal metropolitan expansion. It is true that no LP could suffice the needs of every linguistic/ethnic group in a country as diversified as Ethiopia, for symmetric multilingualism[4] is very difficult to realize. However, LP designers must consider collective identity, national cohesion, efficient governance, econo-mic participation and LHRs in LP formulation (Kembo-Sure, 2003). If citizens are not educated, trained, governed and given the opportunity to participate in the economic, political and social businesses of their country using the language they best understand, growth and development would remain a dream.

On the basis of the idea of Kembo-Sure (2003) above, Ethiopian LP shows a gap in terms of national cohesion. Young children from the regions where Amharic is not the working language could hardly communicate with their fellow citizens that do not speak Amharic. Higher

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[1] Language policy is a statement of both the status and corpus of (a) language
(s) on official policy documents in a given society (Shohamy, 2006)
[2] The term de facto is used to refer to facts on the ground while de jury is used to refer to language ideology statements on a constitution or any legal document of a nation.
[3] The term national language is a vaguely defined concept in the literature of sociolinguistics. In this article, it is used in a sense that it refers to an indigenous language used in several identified spheres in a nation. I am well aware that the term national language has a complex connection with national sentiment.

[4] The term symmetric multilingualism is used in a sense that it refers to a sociolinguistic context where all languages are "equally" used, all linguistic identities are "equally" respected and all LHRs are "equally" entertained.

institutions are among the domains where the challenge of inter-ethnic communications is very common. It is easy to recognize how much students coming from regions like Oromia, Tigray, and Somali to Bahir Dar University, in Amhara region, suffer to communicate in Amharic with their instructors and supportive staffs.

A colleague in an Ethiopian higher institution in Amhara region shared a story with me in which he encountered a student in a class he was assigned to offer an English language course. The student was from Tigray region, North Ethiopia. She had a problem to share with the instructor, but she could hardly communicate with him since she could not speak Amharic. The instructor did not speak Tigrinya, the student's first language. The instructor, therefore, could not communicate to her in English, for she could barely understand English. This is typical evidence that Ethiopia's LP is producing a young generation of regional monolinguals.

Furthermore, since the existing linguistic diversity has not been well taken care of in terms of LP formulation and implementation, well-organized governance all across the nation is inevitably challenging. Ethiopia's linguistic pluralism is ignorant of the linguistic human rights of a significant number of citizens who aspire to get job opportunities and need to communicate at cross regional level. Urban residents who have migrated from non-Amharic speaking rural areas are also facing challenges of communication. The horizontal expansion of federal administrative towns, including Addis Ababa, is incredibly enriching the towns' linguistic diversity putting a large number of citizens at disadvantage of communication. In this respect, some researchers also state that socio-linguistic complexity of Addis Ababa city state is pretty much observable (Getachew and Derib, 2006). Ethiopia has the most unpromising LP which may even lead to further complication in the future if urgent and thoughtful measure is not taken. In the following section the current nature of bilingualism, rural-urban migration, LP model and linguistic human rights in a more general sense are explored and light is shed on how unpromising the policy is in relation to these important points.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism is differently defined by different socio-linguists. It is the use of two or more languages at individual or societal level (Spolsky, 1998a). Bilingualism can be stable where languages are relatively and constantly used in an alternative way. Speakers who are bilinguals in their first language (L1) and language of wider communication (LWC[5]) might gradually shift to L1[6]

monolingualism as they recognize that the LWC is no more important in their lives. The moment the importance of the LWC starts dwindling, the existing bilingualism becomes unstable and the LWC starts to shrink and eventually the bilingual communities begin transforming to mother tongue monolingualism.

Since the change of Ethiopian language policy in 1991, the nature of bilingualism in Ethiopia is becoming more unstable. The current generation of the new sociolinguistic environment is becoming a semi-speaker of the LWC, Amharic. This unstable bilingualism may gradually be transformed to monolingualism in which only remem-berers of Amharic are left. This sociolinguistic pheno-menon of drifting to L1 monolingualism is less arguably happening swiftly in regions where Amharic is not used as an official language.

According to Brenzinger (1998), in a time of three generations, gradual language shift[7] can be realized. Over the same period, Ethiopia may lose its second language speakers of Amharic in Oromia, Tigray and Somali regions where the language does not have an official status. Then, it is convincing to predict that members of different non-Amharic speaking ethno-linguistic groups in these regions will become pure monolinguals in their L1. Some foreign researchers believe that Amharic is relatively the most dominantly used language among non-Amhara students living in urban areas (Meyer, 2006). Sociolinguists like Cohen (2006) also argue that "Amharic continues to spread both as a mother tongue and as a second language. The development of the use of local languages and the continued extension of the use of Amharic are happening simultaneously and do not necessarily hinder one another." (p.171) I strongly contend that these socio-linguists might be deceived by the past sociolinguistic history of Amharic language. This historical status of Amharic is in a period of swift transition in post-1991 sociolinguistic matrix.

The difference I observe between my own generation and the generation of my brother's children who live in Oromia region is evidence. I am a bilingual both in Afan Oromo, my first language and Amharic which is my second and primary language[8]. I bilingual due to the fact that I was among the generation born, raised and educated up to grade four during the era of assimilation policy, the entire pre-1991 Ethiopia's sociolinguistic reality. Those little kids, however, are pure monolinguals in their L1. It seems that they have no reason to learn Amharic as long as they are in their own region. Even their parents want them to study English Language next to Afan Oromo. Being mindful of this, let us think of two or three generations ahead; there may come a time when a

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great majority of people in this region of Ethiopia couldn't speak Amharic as a second language.

There are also other foreign sociolinguists who believe the pre-1991 sociolinguistic status-quos have been maintained in the post-1991 Ethiopia. Appleyard and Orwin (2008) for example have indicated that "…because of its history, Amharic remains to date the most effective and the most widely used medium of interethnic communication in Ethiopia." (p.280). My argument however, is that this historical status quo of Amharic is being transformed and the role of Amharic as a lingua franca keeps dwindling. What these sociolinguists ignore is the post 1991 sociolinguistic dynamics in regions of Ethiopia where Amharic is not currently used as an official language.

In Oromia, Tigray and Somalia regions, non-Amharic speakers are significantly drifting away from Amharic region and ethnic languages are getting strong hold. This means that the national role of Amharic is shrinking and the previously stated Amharic-based sociolinguistic status-quos is being lost and that perhaps means Ethiopia will have no language of intergroup communication in the future. Here, it does not literally mean that Amharic is becoming a minority language, but I do mean that the language is losing its prestigious status of serving as a national lingua franca.

Rural-Urban Migration

The more ethno-linguistic groups move to urban areas, the more multilingual communities are created (Spolsky, 1998). Multilingualism in this context does not refer to individuals speaking two or more languages. It is about a society that holds different languages within itself. In such a society, especially if there is one officially recognized dominant language, "minority"[9] language speakers remain disadvantaged.

No matter what pull factor or push factor might be the case, Ethiopian towns, these days, are becoming a critical destination of internal migrants (Appleyard and Orwin, 2008). In Ethiopia, rural-urban migration outweighs international migration. Rural-urban migration results in high level urbanization and affects language use behavior in urban areas. Young people, for example, migrate for education and job opportunities to Addis Ababa. These young migrants come from different linguistic

backgrounds and could hardly communicate in an Amharic dominated sociolinguistic environment. Even those who manage to go to schools face the hardship of non- mother tongue education. The tragedy is that Ethiopia does not have a comprehensive education-language-policy that entertains the migrant children's needs of mother-tongue education policy.

Since ethno-linguistic self-perception is at climax than ever before in the history of Ethiopia, members of the migrant speech communities demand to preserve and transmit their ethnic languages to their respective generations. Then, the existing linguistic self-consciousness and the demand of mother-tongue retention stop the engulfing power of Amharic, the dominant language and sustain the migrants' languages. Consequently, the towns end up being a place of sociolinguistic complexity where communication becomes an impossible necessity. Therefore, LP reforms need to be made in migrants' destination towns like Addis Ababa by putting existing linguistic diversity and potential LWCs into consideration.

Language policy models

As in many other African nations, language policy decisions in Ethiopia were not research-based. Sociolinguistic facts on the ground as well as consequences of LP determinations were not enquired. Decisions have been made on the bases of mere political aspirations during the pre-1991 period and hasty need for linguistic egalitarianism during 1991. The WOGAGODA[10] harmonization incident in the SNNPRS[11], which lead to a bloody conflict, is a practical instance of the unsympathetic LP decision in Ethiopia. This WOGAGODA failure according to Appleyard and Orwin (2008) is referred to as "…ill-conceived creation…" (p.278) LP formulation, discussions must be made at grassroots level and sociolinguistic, demographic, historical, political, economic realities must be well understood before making any LP decision. Above all, LP formulation demands the planners to feel what a decision means if they were in the place of the speakers. And ignorance in LP formulation will only fuel language-based conflicts.

The proclamation and celebration of linguistic pluralism could never be just an end by itself. LP decision goes beyond the matter of politically motivated language selection. LP decisions should involve citizens' belief in language status, preferences and commitments to accept and practice decisions (Spolsky, 1998a). It demands a

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[9] "Minority" is not used in this article in a sense that it denigrates either a language or speakers of a language. It simply refers to a context-based power relationship between languages. A power of a language, I think, originates from the status of its speakers in the socioeconomic and political realm of a country. In Ethiopia, for example, Amharic was (and is to a degree) the most powerful language since its speakers had a chance to shape the political and economic history of the nation. And of course, a vibrant and powerful language in one area might be a powerless and dominated one in other area. Sociolinguistic contexts determine the power of languages.

[10] WOGAGODA is a term made up of the first two letters of four different languages: Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro. It is a brilliant example of Ethiopian government's failed attempt in the SNNPRS to harmonize the languages/varieties to form one language. Some linguists believe that these four varieties are dialects of the same language on the basis of mutual intelligibility.

[11] SNNPRS- Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State

comprehensive understanding of the sociolinguistic matrix of the whole range geopolitics and linguistic ecology of the nation. Ethiopian LP is considerably different from LPs of many African nations. Several African countries have a colonial linguistic legacy which they have been wrestling with since independence. These countries even have to struggle with countless language-related problems for years and decades to come if they do not make tough decision. True, Ethiopia is one of the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa that is praised for having an endoglossic LP[12]. This may sound good, but a good LP is not only about endoglossic or exoglossic[13] model, but also about whether it could help citizens effectively participate in socioeconomic and political development issues of their country. In connection to this, Okombo (2001) makes the following point:

Citizens can take control of their destiny in matters of development and governance only when they are able to participate effectively in the discourse pertaining to their private and public interests and enterprise. (Okombo, 2001: 8)

Based on this sociolinguistic view, Ethiopian language policy does not create a suitable sociolinguistic matrix where citizens, regardless of their linguistic background, could participate and effectively contribute their best in the betterment of Ethiopia. Citizens who do not understand each other's language cannot communicate and work together toward a collective destiny. Though the post-1991 Ethiopian LP can be appreciated for being radically different in approach to the LP of the pre-1991, the policy still has a deficiency of mediating the existing linguistic diversity in a reasonable manner.

There are many LP models ranging from one language assimilationist model to the three-tier pluralistic one. In the following section, three different LP models: one language model, two language model and three language model will be discussed in line with Ethiopia's reality of linguistic ecology. One language model is the use of one language across the board in a nation (Okombo, 2001). This model finds it origin at the heart of western philosophy of monolithic perception of a nation. Many European philosophers think that a strong and viable nation is only built using one language. Many western philosophers believe that linguistic diversity poses ethno-linguistic conflicts. Ethiopia, during the pre-1991 period strongly followed the one-language-one-nation philosophical paradigm of state-building. The result, however,

was that this LP model posed grievances among ethno-linguistic groups within the boundary of the state. Given the linguistically diverse reality, one language model is very impractical in Ethiopia. The model does not work for linguistically diverse countries like Ethiopia. In fact, it is a policy that failed Ethiopia's project of nation-building during pre-1991 period. In terms of ideology, the model is predominantly of Eurocentric[14]. Hence, it could not be a good LP model in the Ethiopian sociolinguistic context.

In two language model, two languages or groups of languages are required (Okombo, 2001). The first language (group of languages) is used for an in-group communication. This can help citizens achieve communication at intra-ethnic level. The second language or group of languages is used for both inter-group/ inter-ethnic communication and international or specialized communication. This type of LP model is most frequently called the bilingual model. In Ethiopia, there is no language that could play a role of both interethnic and international communication. English is a foreign language to Ethiopia. Even though there are some scholars who believe that English is a second language in Ethiopia, the truth is that the language is not even a good foreign language. This LP model could perhaps be applicable in some African countries where colonial languages have a strong hold of serving both as first/ second and international languages. This model could hardly work for Ethiopia either.

Three-language model comprises three languages or three groups of languages (Okombo, 2001). The first language or group of languages is used for an intra-group or in-group communication. This can help citizens achieve communication at intra-ethnic level. The second language or group of languages is used for inter-group/ inter-ethnic communication. This group is the one this researcher is interested in this article. The third language or group of languages is used for national/international communication. Yes, Ethiopia has a well understood language of international communication which is English. There are myriads of languages used for intra-group/ intra-ethnic communication. Even there are some languages being used as zonal official languages (Cohen, 2006). However, it is quite difficult to claim any language in Ethiopia as an officially stated means of interethnic/inter-group communication at national scale.

As stated elsewhere, many Ethiopian linguists consider Amharic as a national language of inter-ethnic or inter-group communication. Even though this was true in the pre-1991 Ethiopia, Amahric does not have such a status in the post-1991 Ethiopia. This can be justified by two main reasons. First, the current constitution of Ethiopia recognizes Amharic as a federal working language, not

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[12] Endoglossic LP is a type of language policy in which an indigenous language/s is/are used for various media, education, judiciary and administrative purpose a country.
[13] Exoglossic LP is a type of language policy in which (a) foreign/ external language/s is/are used for various media, education, judiciary and administrative purpose a country.

[14]"Eurocentric" is a term used to refer to a western ideological framework of LP in which linguistic diversity and
linguistic pluralism do not seem to be happily welcomed

as a national working language[15]. This means the language's linguistic geography is limited. Second, in Oromia, Somalia and Tigray regions, Amharic is losing its historical strong hold and the young generation in those regions is swiftly shifting to regional monolingualism. Hence, the absence of interregional/ interethnic communication could gradually push regions away from one another and end up in turning regions to linguistic islands. This situation, therefore, will gradually create citizens that will only be L1 speakers of their respective regional languages, block citizens' movements and employment opportunities across regional boundaries. This consequence will even create further situation where speakers of several regional languages could face difficulties of communication in federal administrative areas. In a broader sense, these would be regional linguistic islands obstacles to cross regional communication and hence may hamper development.

Linguistic Human Right

Linguistic human right (LHR) is an important yet an ignored concept in developing countries' LP design. The term is synonymously used with language right or linguistic right. LHR is a legislative statement about the freedom and dispensation of linguistic group and the language they speak (Paulson, 2011). Immediately after the end colonization in Africa, the LP ideology that was at the forefront of the mind of first generation African leaders was predominantly Eurocentric (Simpson, 2008), the view that contradicts with linguistic pluralism and hence linguistic human rights. This ideology helped ex-colonial languages sustain their most powerful domains in the life of many Africans. Well, Ethiopia's colonial experience might be different from other African nations, but Ethiopia's condition of linguistic human rights could be no exception.

In Ethiopia, Amharic is a language of upward socio-economic and political mobility and it is a language of political leadership in the federal domain. Politicians who could participate in shaping the destiny of Ethiopia need to be Amharic speakers since Amharic is the sole federal working language of Ethiopia. It is quite easy to predict that the future generation of leaders will have to come from regions where Amharic is spoken. These perhaps means the young generation from Oromia, Somali, Tigray and other sub regions where Amharic is not spoken will

have no political space in federal domains. There is a linguistic human rights violation in federal administrative areas. Take the capital, Addis Ababa, for example, a great number of rural-urban internal migrants, more importantly young people, who enrich the city, find it difficult to cope with the pace of life. Even those children who work harder, in an unfair sociolinguistic environment and aspire to get a primary education cannot get a school where education is offered in their first languages. Here, it is worth considering that a right to one's mother-tongue which is an important aspect of linguistic human rights is at stake. The horizontal expansion of urban areas, for example Addis Ababa city, which is encircled by the Oromo linguistic group, the more the city expands the more it adds different language speakers, most significantly Afan Oromo speakers. This horizontal metropolitan expansion creates a complex sociolinguistic situation. In such a sociolinguistic context, the linguist rights of citizens, especially the young generation, who do not speak Amharic, is inevitably violated. None-Amharic speakers will engage in unfair competition.

In Ethiopia's higher institutions, minority language speakers are facing the hardship of communication. Ethiopia's constitution offers a right to develop one's own language and maintain one's linguistic identity at regional domain, yet the rule of the existing sociolinguistic game contradicts this at the federal domain. How are students brought up and taught in homogeneous sociolinguistic contexts, where only one language is predominantly spoken, expected to interact effectively in universities where the working language is completely different?

Interethnic/intergroup/national communication seems to be in danger. Amharic L1 speakers are predominantly monolinguals for politico-historical reasons and employment opportunities for Amharic monolinguals seem to be limited to only regions where Amharic functions as an official language. In regions where Amharic is not officially spoken, except in federal offices, employment is a serious challenge. In the post-1991 Ethiopian LP, cross regional mobility will be an impossible necessity in the future. This is primarily due to the decline in the number of bilinguals in Amharic. All these facts suggest that Ethiopia has an incomplete LP assignment that, if it continues to be given a deaf ear, it could hamper the ongoing process of pluralist state building project.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this article was to discuss the present challenges as well as the future consequences of the post-1991 Ethiopian LP. The current nature of bilingualism in Ethiopia is very unstable- declining and hence intergroup communication is on the way out. Even though Ethiopia's LP appears to be plurilingual, it does not clearly follow the three languages model which is the most commonly recommended model for multilingual

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[15] There is a difference between "national working language" and "federal working language". Geographically, the former operates at national level while the later is only limited to the federal domain. In addition, the term "national working language" bears a sense of national sentiment, at least in the Ethiopian context, while the term "federal working language" focuses on only the instrumental aspects of a language in a multilingual setting. In countries like Ethiopia, where language and identity have a strong bond, it is difficult to find a national working language.

countries like Ethiopia. There is no officially recognized language of intergroup communication in Ethiopia. The policy does not have a room to entertain the socio-linguistic demand of ever-increasing number of rural-urban internal migrants. There is a linguistic human right violation especially in federal administrative areas. Since language and development are intertwined, Ethiopia does not afford to ignore LP. A good LP creates a good socio-linguistic environment for citizens of all linguistic back-grounds so that they could contribute their best to their country's development. A sociolinguistic survey needs to be conducted at national level paying a particular attention to federal administrative and metropolitan areas, with potential LP problems and then LP ideological reforms should be made. Yes, best politics also mean best language policy.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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