

An interview on linguistic variation with ...

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Isogloss: From your perspective, what are the relevant levels of abstractness to approach the faculty of language? The standard ones (namely "language," "dialect," and "idiolect")? Others?

PB: The faculty of language can be approached, when observing and seeking to describe a grammar, as a set of rules and representations in the mind of a native speaker. With the help of a theory, we can observe and describe phenomena at various levels of abstractness. In a very simple theoretical framework, the grammatical subject can be defined as "the nominal element that governs the verbal agreement"; its properties can be described at this level and resumed later at more abstract levels, where ever more refined explanations can be formulated and tested.

For example, a simple, traditional, notion of 'grammatical subject' is sufficient to describe the properties of subject pronouns in English, French, French dialects and Northern Italian dialects, as opposed to Italian, Spanish, etc. The description becomes the empirical basis for a development of a more abstract theory, which aims to make generalisations, observing the characteristics that go together in a certain grammar. It is vital that the description be accurate, and the apparent variation be accurately tested. Continuing with the example, some northern Italian dialects and varieties of French (as well as varieties of English) seem to allow a lexical subject to be doubled by a subject pronoun, without any apparent difference in meaning. A first hypothesis is that if the subject is doubled by a pronoun, it is in fact left-dislocated, and presented explicitly as the topic of the sentence. As the subject is the natural candidate for the function of Topic of a sentence, it is not easy

to find a context in which this particular function is perceptible, or produces ungrammaticality. There are, however, elements that can be subjects (or objects) but cannot be topics, namely Quantifiers and Operators such as “nobody, somebody, etc.”; we can prove our hypothesis (a doubled subject is a left-dislocated topic) by showing that Quantifiers and Operators cannot be copied by a subject (or by an object) pronoun. On the one hand, we reach a more abstract level, on the other we eliminate a possible example of free variation. In some varieties, though, this conclusion is not supported, since an operator can, in fact must, be doubled by a subject pronoun; this is therefore a new phenomenon, which needs to be accounted for by more abstract hypotheses.

The standard labels “language, dialect, idiolect” correspond to objects dealt with primarily in sociolinguistics, even though they can have indirect relevance for some aspects of grammatical description, for example to account for the intrinsic variability inside one language, i.e. one grammar. Some phenomena appear to vary in a language without any semantic or stylistic effect. If the language considered is a dialect in a situation of micro-diglossia – i.e. if it is in contact with different varieties with the same degree of prestige (Trumper 1977) – speakers can be under the influence of two leading dialects and present, for example, two kinds of negation, or two forms for the past participle of irregular verbs, which show free variation without any apparent correlation with grammatical features. These are cases of forms in competition due to the influence of sociolinguistic factors. In cases like these the categories “dialect, idiolect” have a clear meaning and play a role that permits us to maintain that a grammar is not expected to have variable rules.

Isogloss: What are the main advantages / reasons to study linguistic variation?

PB: Linguistic variation can be studied with different degrees of detail and from various points of view, but, given that any scientific research has to compare the different forms that an object assumes in the real world, it is my opinion that linguistics must deal with variation. Even reflection on a single language, as was the case in the initial stages of the development of syntactic theory, is guided by an implicit kind of variation: the difference between what is expected and what a language actually shows or else does not show. If we reflect on the history of syntactic theory, it appears evident that it came to a significant and very productive turning point when Kayne (1979) explicitly compared English with French, two languages that are not too distant from one another and are sufficiently similar to each other to permit us to discover subtle differences (for example, clitic vs non-clitic pronouns, verb movement, properties of prepositions). Subsequent research included other varieties in the comparison, which became increasingly fine-grained, offering the possibility to test ever more detailed hypotheses. For me, the most powerful theory, from the empirical point of view, has been Chomsky’s *On wh-movement*. It provided the theoretical hypothesis and also the means to test it in various languages and dialects, in a clear and straightforward way. That was the exciting period that led to the ‘Principles and Parameters’ Theory.

If you had to reconstruct the form of an object by joining up a set of points in space, the more points you had, the more accurate the figure would be. The finer the

variation at one's disposal, the more reliable the image of the language and grammar one is seeking to reconstruct. This is precisely what has been happening in dialectology, in particular with Romance dialects and languages, which have proved an inexhaustible experimental field for testing and refining syntactic theories.

It can be interesting to reflect on what happened in the 19th century with respect to phonology in the framework of Comparative-Historical grammar. It began by comparing classical, dead languages (Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Persian, Gothic): the first clear results in this sense appeared when it became possible to explain most of the apparent exceptions to the diachronic phonological rules, in particular through the analysis of morpho-phonological alternations. The model was then tested on a larger scale, using dialectal data. Romance, or Neo-Latin languages and dialects in particular offered very detailed data involving micro-variation relating to phonological reflexes of forms that had a well-documented common ancestor, namely Latin. Scholars soon realised that synchronic variation represents, in a spatial dimension, the various historical steps of diachronic evolution. Thus confirmed and strengthened, the theory of regular phonological change provided a robust and reliable tool for associating synchronic and diachronic forms within a richer, multi-dimensional framework of variation.

The most solid achievements of historical linguistics are also very useful for the study of syntax, in particular with respect to functional elements resulting from grammaticalisation processes: these can be identified as such, while their original function can still provide suggestions for syntactic analyses (see Munaro and Poletto 2013 for an interesting recent attempt to use etymology to analyse forms that express the interrogative locative “where” in Italian dialects). One must be particularly careful when dealing with grammaticalisation processes, because they do not have the same characteristics as regular diachronic change; they are more radical and often involve the loss of part of the word. For example, most complementisers derive from pronouns, from relative pronouns to be precise, and there is no doubt about this, but it is impossible to deduce which precise features of the various pronominal forms passed into the complementiser, since only the word-root remained after grammaticalisation. In this sort of situation, it is up to the theoretical analysis to suggest one solution rather than another.

Isogloss: How do you conceive the relation / tension between linguistic variation and linguistic uniformity throughout the years?

PB: The uniformity of languages at an abstract level is consistent with the hypothesis that the human linguistic faculty, which can generate an indefinite number of variants, is the product of the cognitive endowment shared by all human beings (until proved otherwise), with a unitary generative mechanism.

A very interesting and clear article by Wendy Sandler (2010) points out that, contrary to what is expected by at least part of the interested community of researchers, there are discrepancies between oral languages and sign languages. This suggests that the characteristics of the medium also play a crucial role, not just the cognitive system that encodes and decodes the grammar, but also the parts of the body that receive the input and produce the forms. This possibly also suggests the relevance of phonology in the construction of a grammar, which is not strange, since phonology is the first component that is acquired by a child in

its process of activation of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), and sounds are the first units of linguistic representation that are acquired.

Diversity, on the other hand, is a necessary correlate of the flexibility of the system, as can be clearly seen in organic living beings. The more flexible an organism, the easier its adaptation to modified situations.

There is also a kind of uniformity, albeit partial and unstable, which derives from contact and sociolinguistic factors that give a language prestige, or mark a language as “inferior”, favouring the adoption of a limited number of grammatical, morphological, phonological elements taken from other languages or dialects. This is easily observable in the study of dialects. A very simple example: at the boundary between Friulian and Venetan, Friulian dialects survive very well, but in some of them the phoneme /c/ characterising Friulian is systematically realised as /tʃ/: for example, Venetan (and Italian) /'kaza/ “house, home” is /caza/ in Friulian and /tʃaza/ in the Friulian varieties on the Venetan borders (not /kaza/, like in Venetan, or in Italian, as expected if the assimilation involved a lexical borrowing). This means that the rules that produce the segment /c/ in Friulian are maintained, but the output is repaired in order to produce a segment that belongs to the Venetan phonological inventory.

The observation of closely related dialects leads us to tentatively conclude that only certain superficial elements (lexical items, phonetic realisation of phonological elements, etc.) can be borrowed. On the other hand, systematic micro-variation cannot affect macro-parameters such as constituent order, or inflectional versus agglutinative systems. This is due, I think, to the fact that macro-parameters do not exist as such, not in the same sense as micro-parameters. I think of macro-parameters as conglomerates of features—or of micro-parameters, proper sets of features—that for some good reason often go together, but are not necessarily linked to each other in any structured way.

Uniformity can also derive from convergent linguistic evolutions, which possibly tends to avoid costly constructions: all northern Italian dialects, like French dialects, used to produce interrogative main sentences with Verb movement to the left periphery and subject inversion. Some varieties (like Piedmontese) lost inversion in the 17th century (see various works by M. Parry, in particular Parry 2003); others, like spoken French or Venetian, lost it only recently; a few still preserve it, but will perhaps lose it in the near future, arriving at a uniformity caused by endogenous processes (the areal and temporal distribution of the phenomenon excludes that the change had been induced by the influence of one system on the other).

Research in sociolinguistics has shown that speakers of languages in a multilingual context tend to imitate some aspects of the languages with which they are in contact, in order to be better understood, or rather not to be recognised as foreigners. But there is also an opposite tendency, namely that of being faithful to their mother tongue. I have found traces of this in small areas of Veneto, north-east of Padua, thanks to the research of two students of mine for their final dissertations, Gianluca Anòè and Matteo Cacco. In this area of Veneto, innovating morphemes have been introduced in the past as to form past participles of strong or irregular verbs; these morphemes appear now to co-exist in some varieties, giving rise to doublets or triplets (*piazùo*, *piazesto*, *piasso* ‘liked’). This state of

affairs is not expected in morphology (Thornton 2011). In a sub-part of this area (province of Treviso) the choice of one or the other morphological form is connected to a [+/- real] value of the verb (if-clauses, yes/no interrogatives, as is the case in varieties of English with double past participles: *he has come / had he went...*). In another small sub-area, between Padua and Venice, yet another situation emerged with speakers consciously choosing one or the other form for the purpose of supporting either the Venetian or the Paduan variety (they used precisely the concept of “loyalty” to express the motivation for adopting one form or the other). Both solutions seem to be strategies that the speakers use to deal with an accidental variety of forms: they try to motivate them by connecting each of them to a semantic or a sociolinguistic feature.

To conclude this series of examples, I wish to stress that, in order to identify the relevance of the elements playing a role in the tension between variation and uniformity, it is necessary to deal with them in the light of strong predictive grammatical theories.

Isogloss: In your opinion, what are the contributions of dialectology (both traditional and present-day studies) to the study of language?

PB: In general, I see dialectology as a particular form of comparative grammar that concentrates on minimally different languages, which are often but not necessarily genetically related, and are well developed and independent of each other. In this framework, a significant amount of research is devoted to describing languages (dialects) that belong to an interesting dialectal area. As a rule, dialectological descriptions are based on a grammatical – more or less formal – theory, which inspires and directs them. In one sense, then, the dialectological method is part of normal linguistic research. Mainstream theories are based on languages shared by a large number of people, who can constantly control the correctness of the data; dialectology deals with languages that are spoken by small communities, and need to be accurately described in order to be interpreted without misunderstandings. This sort of languages, developed for centuries with relative autonomy and in general little influenced by other languages, has often developed idiosyncratic characteristics and rare phenomena, which can be crucial for testing a given theoretical hypothesis.

Dialectology in connection with grammatical theory can have the function of an experiment. As noted by the biologist George Cuvier (1769-1832), whom I quote every time I have the opportunity, the observation and description of the various kinds of natural organisms is a kind of experiment. Experiments with living beings cannot be run as in the so-called ‘hard sciences’; we cannot modify organisms to see the function of one or the other of their parts. In the same way, we cannot implant, for example, clitic pronouns in a grammar to see the consequence of their presence or absence in a language. Fortunately – says Cuvier – it is nature itself that performs the experiments, producing organisms (or languages) differing by just minimal characteristics, thus showing us how various aspects of an organism are connected to each other and to specific functions. From this perspective the fundamental function of observation and description of phenomena – guided by increasingly sophisticated theoretical hypotheses – are enhanced, in linguistics as in biology.

The affinity of linguistics and biology was explicitly pointed out by linguists of the second half of the 19th century, in regard to the conceptual analogy between the diachronic classification of languages and Darwin's theory of the evolution of species. The comparison with biology appeared an attempt to give linguistics the status of science. In fact, it was Darwin himself who proposed Comparative-Historical grammar as a particularly clear example of a theory of evolution in a natural system, which could support and clarify his theory ("It may be worth while to illustrate this view of classification, by taking the case of languages." Darwin [1859] 1996, p. 311). The first important works in linguistics conducted with an empirical and falsifiable methodology appeared in the early decades of 19th century, well before the *Origin of Species*.

Isogloss: What are the relevant sources to obtain evidence to study language and its variation (speakers' own competence, corpora, experiments, non-linguistic disciplines, etc.)? Is any of them potentially more relevant than the others?

PB: I will answer this question together with the following one.

Isogloss: Much current theoretical research is complemented with corpora and statistical / experimental analyses. In fact, dialectology also resorts to experimental and field work methods, traditionally. What do you think is the position of theoretical approaches to language in such scenario?

PB: As said above, the fundamental source is the competence of the native speaker (sentences, grammatical judgements), gathered directly or indirectly from a speaker (or a writer, dead or alive). Different methods of collecting data have their pros and their cons, and often it is convenient to combine more than one strategy. The choice depends very much on the phenomena one happens to be interested in. To study old varieties (Old Italian, Old English, etc.) it is necessary to begin by reading texts and get a certain acquaintance with the language under study, in order to discover phenomena or deepen the analysis of phenomena already described. Afterwards, corpora can help a lot, because they can be searched and permit one to check the behaviour of elements involved in the phenomenon under study in different contexts. Less important, for this kind of study, is the contribution of statistics, which is sometimes considered a substitute for the possibility of getting grammatical judgments from dead languages. Regarding word order, the fact that Subj-Verb-Obj is the statistically more numerous structure in old Romance, for example, does not tell us anything significant with respect to the V2 hypothesis, namely that the verb has to be moved to the left of the subject position in main clauses; the subject is a very natural topic and so a frequent occupier of the preverbal topic position in a V2 language. To cite another example, the fact that enclisis of clitics in main clauses is more frequent in a given language than in another does not mean anything particularly interesting if the few examples conform to the theoretical hypothesis, namely that the focus / operator position has to be empty to have enclisis, which is obligatory in the relevant context. Even if the cases are scarce, the rule is still active if no counterexamples are found, and that is true also in a language where the structure that provokes the enclisis of pronominal clitics seems to be even avoided.

For data from modern varieties, we still have a great source in the linguistic Atlases, in particular the classic AIS for Italy and southern Switzerland (easily

searchable online at <http://www3.pd.istc.cnr.it/navigais-web/>), the ALF for France, and others which followed. Even if the syntactic structures that are documented in these works are not inspired by any explicit theory, it is surprising how they can still be useful sources of documentation. Also inspired by these works, in the seventies and later, a specifically syntactic Atlas was initiated and is still developing, based on written questionnaires sent to the informants, who fill them and send them back by mail. It was preceded by a more limited but very successful inquiry devised by Renzi & Vanelli (1983), who aimed at providing a more detailed picture of the syntactic behaviour of subject clitics in northern Italian dialects. Richie Kayne, Laura Vanelli, Cecilia Poletto, and myself decided that it was worth expanding this kind of data collection, and planned a digital Atlas to compare new syntactic data and test the best described and most promising analyses of various phenomena. We have used, and still use, a mixed method: first, the written questionnaires, which are often sufficient to get a more precise description of a construction; then, where new phenomena emerge, direct investigations are carried out, with new, more detailed questionnaires, which include new constructions to test further forms that could emerge during the inquiry. The data are searchable at asit.maldura.unipd.it.

Written questionnaires in general are not considered a reliable method of collecting data, but our results are evidence of the contrary. If the written questionnaire is based on previous knowledge of the basic characteristics of the dialect, they are a first step in getting an idea of the existing phenomena, which must subsequently be investigated directly with informants. On the other hand, the answers written by the informants provide specifically important information about the intuition of native speakers, in particular about functional elements and in general the units of morpho-syntactic representation.

Just a sample of the results we got: the apparently chaotic behaviour of subject clitics has been precisely connected with specific syntactic structures and other functional properties of verbs, etc., by Poletto (2000). New phenomena have been discovered and analysed, such as the existence of Romance varieties displaying verb movement and *do*-support exactly parallel to English (Benincà and Poletto 2004). The syntax of complement clitics in an area of Eastern Piedmont (Borgomanero) has been the object of an impressive monograph (Tortora 2015), based first on written questionnaires and afterwards on several years of fieldwork. Tortora's monograph shows how a remote dialect can lead one to reconsider large parts of the properties of syntactic structure and functional elements. Tortora is now working with other colleagues on a dialectological project dedicated to non-standard varieties of English, in particular Appalachian English.

These and other important results all stem from the data collected first via mail, which have inspired direct inquiries in order to define the details of the phenomena that had attracted our attention, and also to improve the method of research.

Isogloss: Why do you think dialectal studies have typically focused on the lexicon, phonetics, and morphology? Are we in a better position now (than decades ago) to carry out studies on syntactic variation? If so, why?

PB: Dialectology was founded as a scientific linguistic discipline (based on falsifiable empirical hypotheses) in the second half of the 19th century by Indo-

Europeanists, chiefly G.I. Ascoli and G. Flechia. They created an experiment using Italian and Romance dialects (in particular northern Italian dialects) as a case study for the theory of regular evolution of the phonological component of languages. Romance varieties represent an ideal experiment because, whereas Indo-European languages were very distant in time and their genetic affinity was part of the theory (the mother tongue is not known), Romance languages have a common ancestor, Latin, which is a good basis for reconstruction. The results of this gigantic experiment are lexical and morphological forms whose internal structure (word formation) can be easily reconstructed. For ex., the Latin future tense has no continuation in the Romance languages, which innovated with analytical formations, like *cantare habeo*, *cantare volo*. And this is certain, as it is certain that the fruit named ‘apple’ comes from the enlarged receptacle of the flower (as Francesco D’Ovidio commented, while translating W.D. Whitney 1876: 372-3, who asserted that diachronic grammar is only probabilistic, as other historical disciplines).

Syntactic variation of dialects has been described and analysed, and has been the input for developments in syntactic theory (see works by Kayne, Tortora, Cinque, Belletti, Manzini & Savoia, Poletto, to name just a few). Also proper diachronic syntax has produced interesting analyses. I do not mean just the description of an old stage of a given language, but the comparison of diachronic varieties and the attempt to account for the grammatical change that produced the new grammar.

The detailed study of variation in Romance and in northern Italy has identified a historical shift from V2 syntax, which was shared by all Romance dialects and has been generally lost (apart from some interesting residues in various areas); interrogative syntax, with verb movement and subject inversion, was shared by the dialects of the sub-area named ‘Romania continua’ (France and Northern Italy). The development of subject clitics in the Romania continua permits us to see that in this construction also the movement of the verb is being lost over the whole area. *Wh*-clitic pronouns and negative particles show a parallel shift away from a high position of these elements in the structure, substituted by the movement of clitic forms doubled by a heavier element in the source position; later on, the loss of the clitic elements left *wh-in situ*, and post-verbal negation (see Benincà & Poletto 2005). Regarding phenomena like these, the study of both diachronic and synchronic data permits a very sound and detailed reconstruction of the diachronic processes, which in some respects explains the synchronic variation.

Isogloss: Some recent studies argue that it is diversity what truly characterizes human language, often implying that the universal nature of language is wrong (or that some allegedly specific traits, such as recursion, are not present in all languages). Is this scenario a residue of the fact that the I-language / E-language distinction has not been understood? Is it something else?

PB: I think that the anti-universalistic position - as the universalistic one - depends first of all on the personal attitude of the researcher towards the phenomena of the world.

Macro-variation and typology are the other side of micro-variation and dialectology; both perspectives, with their respective kind of evidence, show that not every conceivable function or combination of phenomena is found in real languages of the world. This was the theoretical and empirical design of

Greenberg's research in the 60s: he recorded the macro-phenomena of word and morpheme order and showed that not all conceivable orders are attested: some very important implicative generalizations discovered by Greenberg and the research that followed are evidence in favour of the existence of universal properties in grammar.

The original universal scheme outlined by Joseph Greenberg on the basis of a limited sample of 30 languages of different linguistic 'families' has been enormously increased, and a certain number of counter-examples have been found and pointed out (the *WALS Online*, *World Atlas of Language Structures*, edited by Dryer and Haspelmath, can give an idea of the impressive development that this method has had in the last decades). The figures of many counter-examples are statistically low, but, in a universalistic framework, they must be accounted for.

Typologists are investigating the implicative generalisations of very subtle aspects of grammar; on the other hand, their results are the object of theoretical reflexions that inspire new directions of research. But we must admit that, in the face of more and more discrepancies between what is expected on the basis of theories and generalisations and what is actually found in the languages of the world, one can be tempted to conclude that there is no universal grammar, that all the phenomena are accidental events, and the apparent regularities are illusions, perhaps involving non-grammatical factors of some sort. This would mean, in fact, giving up our research, because it is not possible to demonstrate that universal principles *do not* exist. You go on with further observations and hypotheses if you believe that universal principles exist. Choosing one or the other move depends on personal attitudes.

Isogloss: Within the Generative Enterprise, the research stemming from the Principles and Parameters framework has proven very fruitful to study both variation and uniformity. However, this trend has been subject to much criticism, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. In your opinion, what is the status of "Parameter Theory" nowadays?

PB: In the 70s, after having cultivated diachronic and synchronic morphology and phonology, I met syntax, framed in the Principles and Parameters theory, which seemed to me designed to reconcile different perspectives which could shed light on each other. Its natural continuation is represented by Cartography and Nanosyntax: they both recognise that 'every little counts': even a single vowel, or consonant, can have a function and enter a representation in the syntactic structure. When the possible theoretical explanations are not convincing or appear to lead to a dead end, we can still do something useful: individuate phenomena and describe them as accurately as possible, as dialectologists did in the past. Possibly in the future new theories will be able to deal with them profitably.

The Comparative-Historical method, whose object was diachronic phonology and morphology, had in a sense concluded its job within a century; research in historical linguistics went on discovering fascinating etymologies of single words and morphemes and refining the method, but the substance of the theory was sufficiently clear and defined: phonological changes are subject to rules that *per se* are without exceptions. Apparent exceptions are caused by independent factors. Part of the linguistic community concentrated on developing alternative

frameworks and theories; others, including most dialectologists, concentrated on description: descriptive grammars, dictionaries, and linguistic atlases, where linguistic variation is visible in geographic maps. Fortunately, they documented not just single forms (lexemes and morphemes), which were the primary object of their theory, but also sentences and syntactic structures, about which they did not have anything special to say as linguists. These data, though, are there, very accurately collected and therefore perfectly reliable. During a piece of research on Occitan dialects of Piedmont, I had the opportunity to compare the syntactic properties of their subject pronouns with those of Occitan varieties of Southern France and I obtained from the *Atlas Linguistique de la France* (ALF) extremely interesting and useful data on the pro-drop or non-pro-drop nature of these dialects. These data had been collected more than one century ago without any other aim than that of documenting potentially interesting phenomena for the scholars of the future.

Apart from the theoretical results of the P&P theory, its most relevant aspect seems to me its strong empirical side, differently from other alternative theoretical models. P&P theory, in some more recent versions such as Cartography or Nanosyntax, is for me still indispensable if we wish to provide firm support for theoretical constructs. I find the possibility of making and test generalisations the most useful – and exciting – part of research, in linguistics as in other science.

Isogloss: What are the challenges that we will have to address in the following decades when it comes to study language and its variation?

PB: I will briefly resume points already underlined above. As I think appears clearly from what I have been saying up to now, it is worth underlining the importance of maintaining a firm relationship and an optimal tension between observation, description and the formulation of theories. Christina Tortora and Richie Kayne are examples of two directions of dialectological descriptions: Kayne has exploited the morpho-syntactic micro-variation of Italian dialects, Tortora analysed every single detail of one dialect, characterised by particular grammatical features. Both research methods are based on the use of both modern and traditional grammatical descriptions, and provide new theoretical insights.

Theories have to be empirically based and falsifiable in order to make it possible to build upon the research of others. We need to stand on the shoulders of other researchers, not necessarily giants but even other strong and solid dwarves. *Les biologistes, les théories passent, la grenouille reste* (Jean Rostand, quoted by Jacob 1981:15). Interesting aspects presently emerging from the evolution of grammatical theory is that macro and micro perspectives are converging in many respects: first of all, both frameworks provide evidence that grammatical descriptions – detailed and accurate – appear increasingly important. Moreover, the subtle hypotheses of grammatical theory can provide clues to help us correctly sub-classify and interpret complex phenomena outlined by typological research, and conversely, typology is ever more ready to take into consideration the macro-variation of micro-parameters, and thus indirectly test theoretical hypotheses.

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