

Language Management Theory: A Device to Control Social Media effects on Language Usage- A South African Context

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Abstract: Language Management refers to any specific efforts made to modify or influence language practice (Nekvapil & Sherman, 2015). Language management takes place when a language deviation has been noted. The main purpose of language management is to enforce the correct and sound use of a language, according to the standards of a given context. Language could be managed by a Macro structure (government and private institutions) or Microstructure (individual activists or general citizenry). In the educational setting – a Microstructure, it is the responsibility of language teachers to influence good language practice, by ensuring that school learners use language correctly. Teachers are duty-bound to guard against any language deviations in accordance with the requirements of language subject curriculum. With the growing usage of social media and its widespread accessibility to school learners, teachers in South Africa constantly deal with language deviations caused by social media. This is in response to school learners' use of social media writing style in the classroom. Although, it is not wrong for learners to deviate from the norms when writing on social media, teachers bemoan school learners' tendency of transferring social media writing style to the classroom. The contamination of classroom language by social media language necessitates language management. This paper spotlights Nekvapil' Language Management Theory (LMT) as an effective tool to control language deviations influenced by social media. It bridges a gap between theory and practice by demonstrating how South African teachers manage language use in schools. This is qualitative research and uses interpretivism worldview to understand language management through educator's lenses. Open-ended interviews were done with 20 teachers from South Africa, Limpopo to get their experiences on how they ensure good language practice in the school. The collected data demonstrated that teachers have put various measures in place to management language.

Keywords: Language Management; social media; Social media influence; Macro language management; Micro language management

1. Introduction

The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of South Africa places language conventions at the heart of the language syllabus. It emphasises mastering essential language elements such as grammar rules and punctuation. Consequently, teachers prioritise sentence construction, punctuation, and spelling when assessing learners' language activities. This rigorous assessment framework is designed to ensure that learners adhere to standard language conventions.

However, numerous factors still contribute to learners' deviation from these norms, with social media emerging as a key influencer. Shaku (2024) describes social media as a significant distraction for school learners, profoundly impacting language dynamics in the classroom. Through engagement with South African secondary school learners, Shaku (2024:391) observes, "learners are affected by their imitation of social media language in the classroom. This imitation results from extensive use of textism (ungrammatical language on social media), which leads to the reproduction of similar language in the classroom." Similarly, studies by Odey, Essoh, and Endong (2014), as well as Shaku (2022), reveal trends of language deviation stemming from social media. These include abbreviations, acronyms, word contractions, vowel omissions, capitalisation inconsistencies, spelling, and punctuation errors.

In response, language teachers are compelled to function as stewards of language management, striving to mitigate the influence of external factors like social media and promote the correct use of language in the classroom. This paper examines Language Management Theory (LMT) as a framework for addressing and controlling linguistic deviations linked to social media.

Language Management Theory, first introduced by Neustupný and Jernudd (1987), offers a comprehensive model for understanding and addressing linguistic behaviour. Language management is defined as "any specific efforts to modify or influence language practice" (Nekvapil & Sherman, 2015). Mwaniki (2011:253) extends this definition, highlighting LMT as a synthesis of decision-making theory, sociolinguistic theory, modernisation theory, systems theory, and human development theory, aimed at explaining the dynamic interplay between language and society.

According to Neustupný and Jernudd (1987), LMT operates on both micro (individual) and macro (institutional) levels, addressing language as a system and as a mode of communication. This dual approach encompasses interventions ranging from individual actions to institutional policies. In the context of this paper, LMT would

provide a guiding framework for teachers to design strategies and interventions that help learners navigate and manage their language use within the classroom.

1.1 Language management procedure

According to Filozofická Fakulta (2013), Language Management Theory (LMT) provides a structured approach to understanding how speakers manage deviations from linguistic norms during communication. LMT assumes that when a communicative act occurs, the speaker identifies instances where the discourse deviates from expected norms. This process is guided by a systematic evaluation and adjustment cycle, as outlined in Figure 1.

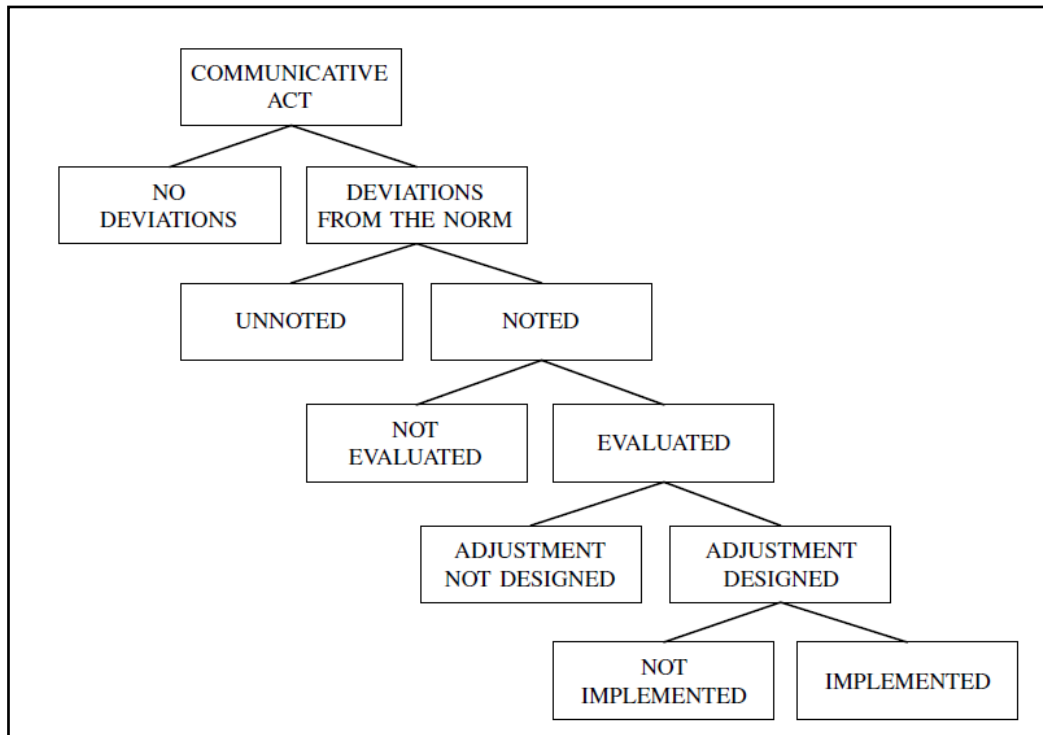


Figure 1: Language management procedure (Nekvapil, 2012)

The language management process begins with *noting*, where the speaker recognises a deviation from the norm. Once noted, the deviation is subject to *evaluation*, which can be positive, negative, or neutral depending on the context. Following this, the speaker may proceed to *adjustment planning*, where an intervention is designed to address the deviation. Finally, the adjustment proceeds to the *implementation* stage, ensuring corrective actions are applied to align with the desired linguistic norms.

The above figure illustrates two distinct paths in a communicative act: one where no deviations occur and another where deviations from the norm are identified. For deviations, the process may vary, as some deviations go unnoticed, while others are actively managed. Only through evaluation and deliberate planning can adjustments be designed and implemented effectively.

This structured approach highlights the dynamic nature of language management, emphasising that the way speakers handle deviations is not only reactive but also intentional and iterative. By mapping out these stages, LMT provides a clear framework for understanding how linguistic behaviours are influenced and controlled.

Kimura and Fairbrother (2020:1) highlight the importance of the language management procedure, emphasising that “in recent years there has been increased interest in examining the treatment of language problems at different levels of society, including, but not limited to, institutional language policy and how it actually plays out in individual interactions”. This perspective underscores the need for a collaborative approach to language management, involving all dimensions of society to ensure its effectiveness.

In the age of social media dominance, where language is constantly evolving, the role of language management has become even more critical. Maintaining respect for standard languages and their correct usage is essential, especially in formal contexts. In this paper, particular attention is given to secondary school learners, who form a sizeable portion of social media users while simultaneously being taught to master proper language use in academic and professional settings. This demographic is especially vulnerable to language deviations influenced

by their extensive engagement with social media. The next section explores specific examples of these deviations and their implications for language management.

2. An overview of language deviations

2.1 Language deviation in English Language

This section explores how language deviations manifest when social media users communicate in English, a language that holds global prominence as both a medium of communication and a dominant language in media across many countries.

Singh, Gupta, and Tuteja (2015) conducted research to investigate a link between social media and language deviations and its potential impact on teenagers' literacy development. The research focused on how text messaging influences writing skills and identified various challenges arising from its frequent use. Their findings revealed that while many teenagers were aware that excessive texting negatively affected their literacy, some disagreed, denying any harmful impact. The study noted that teenagers often committed language deviation by shortening words and spelling incorrectly in their messages. Most participants preferred abbreviations over complete words in their SMS texts, a habit that carried over into academic writing.

Singh et al. (2015:17) observed that "teenagers get lazy and use short words rather than complete words, which get stored in their brains and hence become a habit that later on affects them when writing examinations and in communication." Over time, teenagers became so accustomed to these shortcuts that they unconsciously incorporated them into formal writing, such as exams, demonstrating the pervasive influence of textism and its role in language deviations.

Similarly, Tayebinik and Puteh (2012) expanded on language deviations, arguing that students unconsciously use abbreviations and informal grammar in formal writing and exams. Although learners acknowledge that textism is unsuitable for formal contexts, the study revealed that frequent use of texting abbreviations results in the unintended transfer of these habits to academic writing. Many participants admitted that unconventional grammar, including misspellings and abbreviations, found its way into their formal writing, as their reliance on texting shortcuts had become ingrained.

These studies shed light on how the habitual use of textism shapes language behaviour, particularly among the youth, often blurring the lines between informal and formal language usage. The following example gives context:

2.1.1 Example 1:

1. a. **Speaker A:** Usually I use 'n' for 'and' or '2' for 'to' in my assignments or examination automatically.
2. b. **Speaker B:** Sometimes I use signs instead of words in my assignments without thinking (e.g @ for 'at').

Example 1 aligns with Tayebinik and Puteh's (2012) observations about the pervasive influence of textspeak on learners' informal and formal writing. However, De Jonge and Kemp (2015) challenge this perspective, arguing that while textspeak may intrude on learners' writing, there is no solid basis to measure writing competence solely on this phenomenon or the frequency of unconventional language usage. Instead, Grace, Kemp, Martin, and Parrila (2013) advocate for a more nuanced approach, suggesting that literacy development should be studied independently to establish whether textspeak truly reflects a decline in literacy skills, particularly in writing. Maryam and Marlia (2012) provide a structured analysis of textspeak's impact, categorising its effects into four fundamental areas:

- **Formal Writing:** Textspeak significantly influences how students write assignments, often resulting in a less formal style.
- **Speaking Skills:** The way students speak is increasingly shaped by their use of textspeak, introducing informal elements into everyday conversations.
- **Grammar:** Textspeak erodes grammatical skills, leading to omissions and incomplete sentence structures.
- **Spelling:** Overuse of abbreviations and short words negatively impacts spelling abilities and creates confusion in vocabulary usage.

Maryam and Marlia (2012:104) highlight these challenges, stating: "Textism has affected their formal writing, speaking, grammatical skills and spelling aptitudes. Moreover, overuse of short words has affected students' formal writing style. They also use abbreviations when engaging in normal conversation. Nevertheless, the

adoption of unstructured sentences in CMC has also shaped their grammatical skills in a negative manner and caused them confusion in their vocabulary.”

Further emphasising these language deviation concerns, Abbasova (2016) conducted a study on writing challenges and observed that CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) has a more pronounced negative influence on writing skills than on other literacy areas such as vocabulary, listening, and speaking. The study revealed that students often incorporate internet abbreviations into their schoolwork, opting for shorter, less structured sentences over longer, more formal constructions. Abbasova (2016:7) captures these effects in the following table, illustrating the impact of textspeak on reading and writing.

Table 1: The impact of textspeak on reading and writing

	Strongly		Slightly	Don't	
I tend to read and understand	17 (f)	48 (f) 46.15 %	33 (f) 31.73 %	6 (f) 5.57 %	-
I get used to going through the text quickly.	17 (f)	41 (f) 39.42%	35 (f) 33.65%	9 (f) 8.65%	2 (f)
I try to avoid long sentences, using shorter expressions instead.	21(f)	48 (f) 46.15%	24 (f) 23.08 %	10 (f) 9.62 %	-
Using internet abbreviations sometimes affects my academic writing in a negative way.	18 (f) 17.31 %	22 (f) 21.15%	33 (f) 31.73 %	29 (f) 27.88%	1 (f)
After using social network: I tend to make spelling mistakes	6 (f) 5.57%	38 (f) 36.54%	25 (f) 24.04%	34 (f) 32.9 %	-

Table 1 illustrates the pervasive influence of a deviated writing style that emerges when students engage on CMC platforms like social media. Many students admit to struggling with conventional writing due to their frequent use of social media language. This habitual use often leads to recurring writing mistakes, blurring the lines between informal and formal writing norms.

Marwa and Sabrina (2017) further support this notion, noting that despite debates among scholars about the negative impact of language deviations on students’ writing quality, students themselves acknowledge its harm. They admit that reliance on textspeak sometimes causes them to forget standard writing conventions, defaulting instead to social media-inspired styles.

Table 1 further highlights the way students transfer textspeak features, such as abbreviations, grammar errors, and spelling mistakes, into their examination papers. This highlights the deep integration of social media language in their writing.

Marwa and Sabrina (2017) highlight that grammar and spelling mistakes are the most prevalent language deviations dominating students’ writing. They elaborate that common grammatical errors include omitting the ‘s’ in third-person singular verbs, such as writing ‘change’ instead of ‘changes’, and neglecting plural forms, like saying ‘two person’ instead of ‘two persons’. Additionally, conjugation errors are widespread, with examples like ‘children is’ instead of ‘children are’ or ‘he have’ instead of ‘he has’. Spelling mistakes also abound, including instances of students substituting English words with similar-sounding French words, such as ‘probleme’ for ‘problem’, or writing phonetically, such as ‘board’ for ‘bored’ and ‘possibal’ for ‘possible’. This tendency even extends to unintentional errors such as ‘different’ instead of ‘different’ and ‘obset’ instead of ‘upset’.

Mittal (2015) underscores that texting harms literacy skills, emphasising the need to address this issue due to its negative impact on academic performance. According to Mittal, students frequently fail to differentiate between formal and informal writing styles, and texting habits seep into their academic work. Examples from Mittal’s study illustrate the pervasive use of textspeak, such as:

- *Thx 4 reading* (thanks for reading)
- *SWYP* (so what’s your problem)
- *TTYL* (talk to you later)

- *Diz iz ma lyf n I liv it by ma rulezz* (this is my life, and I live it by my rules).

This casual disregard for conventional grammar often infiltrates students' formal writing, sometimes unconsciously. Mittal suggests that teachers play a crucial role in mitigating the risks associated with texting language, advocating for the reinforcement of grammatical conventions in classroom instruction.

2.2 Language deviations within south African context

Teachers in South Africa also express concerns about the negative impact of textspeak on learners' written language. They recognise it as a pervasive phenomenon that diminishes learners' knowledge of correct Standard English. Teachers have observed notable shifts in the quality of learners' written work, attributing these changes to the influence of textspeak (Geertsema, Hyman & Deventer, 2011; Freudenberg, 2009).

Thubakgale and Chaka (2016:237) report that learners frequently incorporate text message features in their writing, struggle to differentiate between formal and informal styles, and often fail to construct complete sentences. These challenges inevitably hinder learners' language skills and spelling abilities. Moreover, after analysing learners' written work, Freudenberg identified recurring issues such as spelling errors, omission of punctuation, and excessive use of abbreviations. This pattern suggests that the unconventional language habits of high school learners, fuelled by their heavy reliance on textspeak, regularly manifest in their formal writing.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study adopts an interpretivist worldview to explore language management from the perspective of teachers. The data collected reveal that teachers have implemented various strategies to manage language effectively. According to Crossman (2020), qualitative research produces descriptive data, which researchers analyse through rigorous and systematic methods, including transcription, coding, and the identification of trends and themes. McCusker and Gunaydin (2015:1) further emphasise that "qualitative research is characterised by its aims, which relate to understanding some aspects of social life, and its methods, which (in general) generate words rather than numbers as data for analysis."

3.1 Research Setting

Data was collected from 20 teachers in Limpopo province, South Africa, to understand their experiences in managing language use in the classroom. These participants were Sepedi language teachers from Grades 10 and 11, all of whom confirmed using a marking rubric as one of the key tools to regulate language usage.

3.2 Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from the teachers. This interview method was chosen for its flexibility and natural flow. For convenience, telephonic interviews were used, as the teachers lived far apart, making in-person interviews challenging. Nonetheless, this approach benefited the participants by providing anonymity, allowing them to speak freely, openly, and honestly (Given, 2008).

3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews, aiding in the identification of themes and patterns (Ahmed & Du Plessis, 2020). To understand the impact of social media on Sepedi writing, the researcher unpacked and thoroughly analysed the data. Through this process, the data were grouped into main categories and subcategories. These themes were generated based on similarities in participants' responses, document analysis, and recurring linguistic elements observed in digital materials.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Language deviation diagnosis in South Africa

One of the key findings of this paper is that when teachers assess learners' Sepedi writing in the classroom, they focus on the correctness of syntax (sentence structure), spelling, and punctuation. Upon identifying errors in learners' written work, teachers employ various strategies to address ungrammatical language. These strategies include providing constructive comments, marking errors with short descriptive notes, engaging in one-on-one discussions with struggling learners, and using a marking rubric to clarify expectations. Therefore, learners' use of ungrammatical language cannot be attributed to a lack of knowledge or support. Instead, the findings highlight the proactive role of teachers in managing language use and the strategies thereof.

4.2 LMT Strategies applied in South African

Teachers in South Africa implement various language management strategies to promote quality writing in schools. These methods aim to help learners enhance their writing skills and maintain an acceptable standard of writing in the classroom. This section examines language management by exploring how South African

teachers support and assess learners’ written work. Shaku (2021) highlights that teachers utilise marking rubrics and feedback sessions as key strategies to reinforce correct language use in the classroom. This discussion further explores how marking rubric functions as a language management tool.

4.2.1 Marking rubric

Table 2: Language marking rubric

MARKING RUBRIC	
Criterion	Checklist
1. Essay Structure	Correct essay structure followed
2. Essay Content	Content links well with the topic
3. Grammar	All aspects of grammar are observed and applied rightfully
4. Spelling	Correct spelling used
5. Syntax	Correct construction of sentences observed
6. Orthography	Correct orthography used
7. The use of punctuations	The correct use of punctuation marks
8. Handwriting	Letters are written as expected
9. Vocabulary	Correct choice and use of words

In South Africa, a marking rubric is a tool prescribed by the Department of Basic Education (CAPS, 2011) for assessing essay-type questions in language subjects such as Sepedi language. It plays a crucial role in enabling teachers to conduct objective assessments by evaluating learners' language structures and conventions. According to CAPS (2011), Grade 10 and 11 learners should be familiar with the basics of grammar, including parts of speech (word classes), rules of concord, use of tense, auxiliaries and modals, and sentence structures.

The marking rubric aligns with Nekvapil and Sherman’s (2015) concept of ‘micro-level’ language management, which emphasises the role of institutions in shaping language practices through deliberate efforts to modify or influence usage. In the classroom, teachers use marking rubrics as a language management tool to identify writing deviations, evaluate them, and recommend necessary adjustments (Nekvapil, 2012). Additionally, the rubric provides learners with a clear understanding of their teachers’ expectations, guiding them toward improved writing performance.

On the exploration of how Sepedi language teachers use a marking rubric, Shaku (2021) argues that marking rubrics are effective in shaping learners' writing, guiding them to write appropriately. Moreover, a marking rubric is accompanied by comments, as teachers leave comments on learners’ written work. Furthermore, the rubric and comments are meant to guide learners about the dos and don’ts of formal writing.

4.3 The application of Language Management Theory

In the exploration of social media effects of the writing of Sepedi and how LMT is used as a framework to deal with language deviations, the following procedure apply:

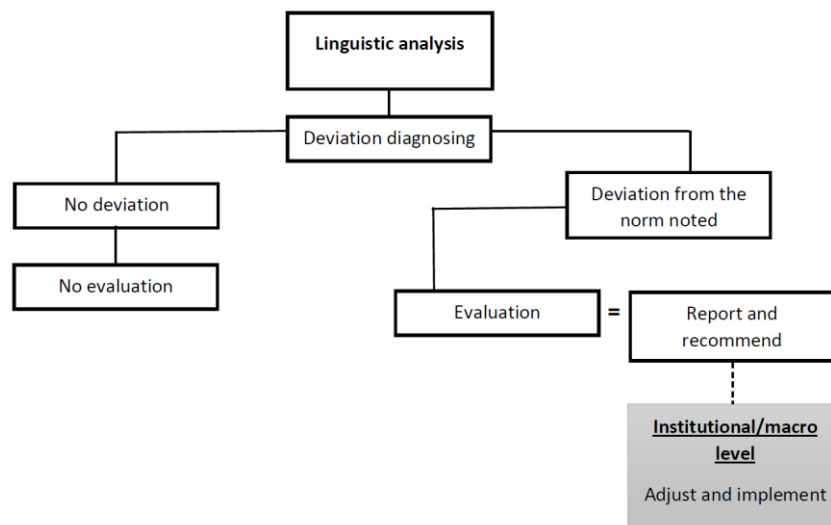


Figure 2: The application of LMT (Shaku, 2021)

Within the scope of this paper, the Language Management Theory (LMT) framework was used to determine whether language deviations occur in the formal writing of Sepedi learners. As illustrated in Figure 2, identifying language deviations is central to the language management process—if no deviation is detected, further evaluation is unnecessary. However, if a deviation is identified, an evaluation must follow to describe the nature of the problem. Following the evaluation stage, a report would be generated, and recommendations be provided to relevant government structures overseeing education, particularly those responsible for planning the language syllabus. The grey area in Figure 2 indicates that the processes of adjustment and implementation fall within the domain of institutional or organized management. The grey area is an optional phase; therefore, schoolteachers often assist learners to fix the identified language deviations at the school level or report it to the governing structures if the problem has a greater potential of language distraction.

The use of LMT can be instrumental in enhancing the understanding of language deviations in formal writing among Sepedi learners. As Shaku (2021) research highlights that the pervasive use of social media introduces informal linguistic features into students' academic writing, such as abbreviations, acronyms, and non-standard spelling. These elements contribute to language deviations that the Language Management Theory (LMT) process would make easy to identify and address. By applying the LMT framework, teachers can systematically diagnose these deviations, evaluate their impact, and implement strategies to mitigate the influence of social media on formal writing. This approach could ensure that recommendations are tailored to address the specific challenges posed by digital communication platforms, thereby maintaining the integrity of formal Sepedi writing in educational contexts. The outputs of LMT could also inform educational institutions on language syllabus structure.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

This study highlights the crucial role of teachers in language management within South African classrooms, particularly in response to the growing influence of social media on learners' writing. Language management, as defined by Nekvapil and Sherman (2015), involves intentional efforts to regulate language practices, ensuring adherence to linguistic standards. While social media provides an informal space for language evolution, its impact on classroom writing has raised concerns among teachers. The findings reveal that teachers actively implement various strategies to mitigate language deviations and uphold proper language use in alignment with curriculum requirements. Nekvapil's Language Management Theory (LMT) proves to be a valuable framework in addressing these challenges, bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. Through qualitative research and an interpretivist approach, this study provides insight into the experiences of 20 teachers from Limpopo province, South Africa, who navigate language management daily. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for continuous efforts in language regulation, particularly as digital communication evolves. Future studies could further explore the long-term effects of social media on academic writing and assess the effectiveness of various language management strategies in educational settings. This paper has methodological limitations: it presents data from a single country (South Africa), its small sample size (due to COVID-19) limits generalizability, and it focuses solely on Sepedi teachers in Grades 10 and 11.

Ethical declaration

In considering ethical issues, prior to the collection of data, the researcher obtained approval from relevant authorities in South Africa: (1) The University of South Africa (UNISA) and (2) The Limpopo Provincial Department of Education, which gave me access to teachers at Senior Schools in Capricorn and Sekhukhune Districts.

AI declaration

This paper is an output of my PhD research accessible at <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/29176>. Therefore, declare that the information contained in this paper was generated from the mentioned source by me as the author and not by AI.

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