

# LEARNING TO SPEAK ABOUT SPEAKING IN A PIDGIN LANGUAGE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the many English-based pidgins and creoles of the south-western Pacific Tok Pisin is both the linguistically most developed and the socially most firmly institutionalised variety. It is the major lingua franca of Papua New Guinea, being spoken by some 750,000 to 1,000,000 speakers as a second language and in about 20,000 households as a first language. The total population of Papua New Guinea amounts to slightly more than 2,000,000.

The language has been known by many names, among them New Guinea Pidgin, Neomelanesian and Tok Boi. Its present name Tok Pisin (literally: talk pidgin) reflects the linguistic independence of this language as well as the political independence of its speakers.

It was declared the official name by the Government of Papua New Guinea in July 1981.

Recent research<sup>1</sup> on pidgin and creole languages (e.g. the contributions in Valdman and Highfield 1980) has concentrated on the following aspects of these languages:

- i) their dynamic development and the resulting linguistic variation
- ii) questions of speech communities and status of pidgin and creole speakers
- iii) communicative competence and functional diversification of pidgins and creoles

I will make some brief remarks on each of these points:

i) The dynamic growth of pidgins is both structural and functional. Pidgins expand, i.e. get functionally more complex, as they are used in more and more social functions. It is still customary to isolate structural expansion as an independent variable, though, to my view, a better approach would be one which sees structural expansion as resulting from functional expansion: As speakers have to express more complex ideas they will use communicative strategies which lead to greater structural complexity.

It should be noted that the emergence of new linguistic functions in a pidgin differs dramatically from the functional expansion<sup>2</sup> accompanying first-language acquisition as described by Halliday (1979).

Most noticeable is that the endpoint of child language acquisition, the referential function, is the point of departure in the functional expansion of a pidgin. This difference in the sequence of emerging functions is probably the main reason for differences in the emergence of grammatical structures in first and second language acquisition.

A fuller treatment of this question is given by Mühlhäusler (1980:45-46).

ii) Most pidgins are spoken by two or more distinct groups of speakers. Typically, the language used in vertical communication (between expatriate 'master' and indigenous 'boy') differs considerably from that used in horizontal communication (among indigenes of equal social rank).

The grammar of a pidgin is shaped by two distinct groups of speakers:

- a) the socially dominant colonisers who speak a standard version of the pidgin's lexifier language.
- b) the subordinate indigenous population who speak many different vernaculars.

As the pidgin language develops, the importance of the former decreases whilst that of the latter increases.

The distinction between two groups of speakers, rather than the postulation of a unified speech community (as done for instance by Robert A. Hall 1943) is important for our purposes: How users of Tok Pisin speak the language, speak about the language and do things with the language depends very much on their group membership.

This is particularly important for the expatriate linguist and language planner. The view that one is dealing with a single grammar<sup>3</sup> has resulted in the failure to discover many aspects of grammar and is further responsible for the large number of unacceptable suggestions on language planning.

iii) To understand the nature of a language like Tok Pisin it is essential not only to know its grammatical structures but also its external use, i.e. the communicative functions in which it is employed by its speakers. Pidgin languages start off as functionally severely restricted languages (being used initially only in the referential and order-giving functions in a restricted domain) and are only gradually extended to serve as means of communications in other functions. In this paper I will restrict myself to an examination of the metalinguistic function of Tok Pisin, i.e. speakers' talk about talking. It is important in this connection, to keep in mind that pidgins are second languages. The metalinguistic capacity of pidgin speakers in their first language is not necessarily reflected directly in the pidgin and can be indeed quite different in the two languages. Sankoff (1976:289) remarks on attitudes towards correctness in indigenous vernaculars:

Speakers will insist that their own variety is the best, that it is easiest and clearest to understand, that it is in fact understood by people from miles around, that it is the easiest to learn, and so on. Other varieties are judged to be some kind of corruption or aberration from the speaker's own, and imitations occasion much mirth on the part of any local audiences.

The situation with regard to Tok Pisin is very different because it is not the possession of a small community but a nation-wide lingua franca. As such, it is commonly regarded as an asset, since it facilitates communication across

former tribal and linguistic barriers. There is considerable reluctance among second-language speakers of Tok Pisin to pass judgements on pronunciation. As long as a speaker is understood, his or her Tok Pisin is good. Similarly, a speaker's inability to talk about grammatical categories in Tok Pisin cannot be taken as an indication that such a speaker cannot talk about this topic in his or her first language.

In the remainder of this paper I will examine how second-language Tok Pisin speakers have acquired the capacity to talk about Tok Pisin in Tok Pisin.

## 2. THE ACQUISITION OF METALINGUISTIC CAPACITY BY SPEAKERS OF TOK PISIN

Judgements about the structure and use of Tok Pisin can be divided into two categories:

- i) Judgements made in a language other than Tok Pisin
- ii) Judgements made by means of Tok Pisin

A study of the first type of judgements should consist of an examination of both indigenous and European judgements. Unfortunately, there is still no comprehensive study of indigenous views (a brief sketch is given by Mühlhäusler 1979:118ff). Expatriate judgements on language use and language structure, on the other hand, have been extensively documented (for instance by Wurm and Mühlhäusler 1979). For the sake of brevity, I will restrict the discussion of point (i) to a brief summary of expatriate views. It should be noted that

- (a) virtually all expatriate judgements about Tok Pisin to date have been made in a language other than Tok Pisin
- (b) Expatriate opinions have remained pretty static over virtually the whole development of Tok Pisin. The most dominant views include:
  - i) Tok Pisin is a corrupted form of English
  - ii) Tok Pisin contains many rude expressions and therefore needs to be purified.
  - iii) Tok Pisin is referentially inadequate.

The following quotations must be regarded as representative of those views.

- i) Tok Pisin is a corrupted form of English (Daiber 1902:255):
 

Thus the white man attempted when he settled upon the palm-shaded islands of the South Seas, to bring English as a common language to the multilingual black natives, with which they could communicate with the whites as well as among one another. But the childish son of the wilderness was not yet ripe for abstract linguistic concepts. He transformed the language in his own ways, intermingled it with his own expressions and the quaint Pidgin English was created. [Author's translation]
- ii) Tok Pisin contains rude expressions: The *Rabaul Times* (24 May 1929) refers to Tok Pisin as a 'tenseless, declensionless, and often obscene jargon'.
- iii) Inadequate referential potential. Statements such as the one made in the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* (45, 1903:455) were repeated until the very recent past:

Pidgin English does not allow one to enter into general understanding with the native; in particular it is not possible to penetrate, by using this language, the outlook, customs and mentality of the native. In this language one cannot enter into negotiations nor explain rights nor enter into written communication with the native – it has thus no further use than the expression of short orders necessary in maritime or plantation service, orders which often are incompletely or wrongly executed due to the inadequacies of this language. [Author's translation]

The consequences of such opinions are discussed by a number of authors, for instance Hall (1955) and Wurm and Mühlhäusler (1979).

Judgements made about Tok Pisin through the medium of Tok Pisin, with a few exceptions, are found among the indigenous population of Papua New Guinea only. The emergence of such judgements is dependent on two factors:

- i) the realisation that Tok Pisin is a language different from English and hence from expatriate norms
- ii) the development of a metalinguistic vocabulary accompanying growing metalinguistic awareness of the users of the language.

In the first decades of Tok Pisin's development few indigenous speakers realised that their language differed from that spoken by the Europeans. In fact, for a long time Tok Pisin was called Tok Vaitiman by the Papua New Guineans. Judgements about correctness and good and bad varieties can only develop once the speakers of a pidgin see it as an independent language. Reinecke remarks (1937:100):

But when, owing to closer and more frequent contacts with the other party, a group that has been speaking a trade jargon comes to realise that it has been using a sub-standard dialect, it reacts in accordance with its attitudes regarding 'correct' speech, much as do the speakers of a creole dialect. In this case the change to a recognised language is quicker and easier, because they have no attachment to this supplementary tongue. This stage has been reached in the Chinese ports; it was being reached among the Russians who traded to northern Norway; it is beginning to be evident in parts of West Africa; but in Melanesia it is barely apparent among a very few natives of the thousands who speak Beach-la-mar.

Commenting on Reinecke's observations a few years later, Reed (1943:288) notes a significant change in the pattern of indigenous attitudes:

We now find, however, that the terms tok pijin and tok boi are part of the speech and stand in contrast to tok ples bilong waitman and tok ples bilong Sydney which designate true English. This distinction implies the general acceptance by natives of pidgin's subordinate position. More direct confirmation was given by a Kwoma informant who, laughing at his own naivety, told how he had believed pidgin to be the white man's speech 'true' before he had been recruited. But even before he had learned pidgin for himself, he had been disabused of the notion that the white masta had no other speech of their own.

At the same time, the way the expatriates spoke Tok Pisin was acknowledged as a norm for the further expansion of the language: Reports of Papua New Guineans making further distinctions between their own Tok Pisin and that of Europeans are found only after World War II. In 1956 (p.376) Mead refers to

... *men* who have been away at work for a long time and are able to make fine distinctions between Neomelanesian [= Tok Pisin] as the European speaks it and Neomelanesian as spoken among themselves.

The same author remarks about an interviewee (1956:225): "He could answer slowly, with experience of the ways in which Europeans spoke Pidgin English".

There is no indication at this point that Papua New Guineans objected to European pronunciations in any way. In fact, in an article by Hall (1955) it is noted that a number of Australian-English pronunciations were spreading widely among the local population. It appears that these favourable attitudes towards an expatriate pronunciation began to change as self-government and independence approached. Wurm (1969:37) remarks

Indigenes ..... are becoming increasingly critical of the mistakes made by Europeans speaking the language and of the incorrect Pidgin of many Europeans in general.

It was at about this time that the label Tok Masta 'expatriate talk' began to be attached to the European varieties of Tok Pisin. This reflects the growing self-awareness of the Papua New Guineans in the years preceding independence and a more critical attitude towards the ways of the expatriate population. The following statement by Piniau (1975:96) stands representative for the views of many educated Papua New Guineans:

Expatriates are mistaken if they think that Tok Pisin cannot be used to express everything well. If they find difficulty in expressing themselves, it is because they either do not know Tok Pisin well or they still think and formulate their ideas in their own native language.

Today Tok Pisin is seen not only as a language separate from English but subvarieties are distinguished within it. Next to Tok Masta one finds the names:

Tok Pisin belong Taun *Urban Pidgin*  
Tok Pisin bilong Asples *Rural Pidgin*  
Tok Pisin bilong Kanaka *Bush Pidgin*

as folk labels for different social varieties of the language.

For a small group of speakers the awareness that Tok Pisin is manifested in a number of varieties extends to the historical development of the language as well, and the distinction between

Nambawan Tok Pisin	Early Jargon and Stabilised Pidgin as spoken in German times
Nambatu Tok Pisin	Stabilised and Expanded traditional Tok Pisin
Nambatri Tok Pisin	Recent Anglicised Tok Pisin

made in the following account, given by Mr. Joseph K. from Lorengau, Manus Province, is used:

Mi laik toktok long pasin bilong Tok Pisin. Tok Pisin, em i luk olsem tete nau taim bilong ol nupela man nau, i luk olsem i tripela toktok nau. Nambawan toktok long taim Siaman i kam i bin yusim, ol i bin yusim long taim ples i bin tudak yet. I no gat man bilong mi ol i save pren gut long ol waitman. Orait, ol i bin lusim dispela toktok bilong bipo tasol, i no gutpela toktok tumas. Sampela ol i bin yusim, tasol mipela tete laik traaim lainim i hat tumas, i olsem planti i no kraik gut. Orait, i kam long mipela tete, mipela i kam bihain long ol, em i klia liklik tasol. Pisin i no olsem i no wanpela tok i tru. Olgeta hap toktok i kamaut insait long wanpela wanpela ples insait long ailan long Niugini .... Orait, nau inap long mipela ol dispela toktok i pinis, nau i gat tete em i narepela nupela toktok gen, nau ol i yusim tete, bikos planti manki ol i bin go long ol bikpela skul na ol i gat gutpela save nau, ol i ken toktok long Pisin na ol i ken putim liklik hap Inglis moa i go longen. Sampela hap hatpela toktok i no orait long Pisin. Orait ol i save bringim ol sampela hap long Inglis i go, ol i sotim i go nau, ol i bringim dispela toktok i kam longpela. Tasol long taim bilong ol bikman nogat, i narakain olgeta, mipela i no nap long harim.

*I want to talk about what Tok Pisin is like. As regards Tok Pisin, it looks as if, in our present day generation, one can distinguish three types of language. The first variety is that which was used when the Germans came; they used it when the place was still uncivilised. None of us would be a good friend to the white people. Well this language of the past has been abandoned; it was not a very good language. Some people used to speak it, but today we find it very hard to learn, many things don't sound correct. As regards my generation today, we came after them, our language is a bit clearer. Pidgin was not like a real language. All sorts of bits of language came from the various areas of New Guinea. Thus, a real language developed, the one we speak today. Now, the development of the language spoken by my generation has come to an end and now today there is a new language again. Now they speak it today because many boys have attended high school and they are well educated. They are used to Pidgin and they are used to putting quite a few little bits of English into it. Some bits of difficult language don't fit into Pidgin. Well, they bring some bits of language from English, they abbreviate it, they lengthen it. But, in the time of the ancestors this didn't happen, it was very different, we are not able to understand their language.*

The emergence of stylistic variants of Tok Pisin and ways of talking about them, also appears to have taken place in the late 1960s. The principal varieties and their Tok Pisin names are:

tok piksa	<i>metaphor</i>
tok pilai	<i>to talk in metaphors</i>
tok bokis	<i>secret word</i>
tok hait	<i>to use secret language</i>
tok baksait	<i>backslang</i>

We can postulate a tentative hierarchy of the development of the meta-linguistic capacity of Tok Pisin speakers as follows:

- i) awareness of Tok Pisin as a language separate from English
- ii) awareness of distinct varieties within Tok Pisin:
  - a) indigenous vs. non-indigenous varieties
  - b) socially determined varieties
  - c) diachronic varieties (developmental stages)
  - d) stylistic varieties

Whereas there is a considerable time gap between the emergence of (i) and (iia) categories, categories (iib-d) appear to have emerged almost simultaneously between 1960 and 1970. During the same period we also find the emergence of talking about language use, i.e. the emergence such as *tok brukbruk to stutter*, *tok gris to flatter*, *tok bilas to insult*, or *mauswara to waffle*, i.e. expressions referring either to the way in or the purpose to which Tok Pisin is used. None of these expressions were recorded before 1960 and most of them are restricted to young fluent speakers and first-language speakers. It is interesting that the emergence of such labels coincides with the appearance in print of letters by Papua New Guineans, criticising aspects of language use by other Papua New Guineans. Such criticism is directed, unlike earlier expatriate criticism against etymological impurities or referential inadequacies, against two types of *tok nogut bad language*:

- i) language which is unintelligible and hence useless for communication.
- ii) language which is socially damaging.

i) The main cause of unintelligibility is the incorporation of ad hoc loans from English into Tok Pisin, a device commonly used to enhance the speaker's prestige. Negative comments on this practice are commonly found in both printed and spoken language. Examples are:

- a) extracts from a reader's letter to *Wantok*, 10 July 1976:

Planti taim mi save lukim Wantok  
Niuspepa na sampela man na meri  
i save tok inglis, taim ol i  
raitim pas. I no min olsem ol  
i laik tru long raitim pas,  
tasol ol i laik soim ol i save  
inglis moa long tok pisin ...

*I often observe in Wantok  
Newspaper that some men and  
women use English expressions  
when they are writing letters.  
They don't really want to write  
a letter, they just want to  
show that they know English  
better than Pidgin.*

Sampela taim, as bilong tok i  
no kamap gut taim yu putim tok  
inglis insait ... You no ken  
putim hap inglis insait. Em  
i kranki. Orait. Tok Pisin  
em i pisin na tok Ingkis em i  
inglis. Tupela i no ken abusim  
wantaim. Tupela i mas wanwan  
stret. No ken paulim nabaut ol  
wantok.

*Sometimes, the meaning of an  
expression is not clear when  
you use English words in it ...  
You must not put in English  
words. It is stupid. Well,  
Tok Pisin is Tok Pisin and  
English is English. The two  
must not mix. Each must remain  
separate. You must not confuse  
your fellow speakers.*

- b) Unrestricted borrowing from English is also deplored in a letter to *Wantok* of 3 May 1972.

Sapos yumi mekim dispela pasin  
nogut, bai bihain tok pisin  
bilong bus na tok pisin bilong  
taun tupela i kamap narakain  
tru ... Nogut yumi hambak  
nabaut na bagarapim tok ples  
bilong yumi olosem.

*If we indulge in this bad habit  
then Rural Pidgin and Urban  
Pidgin will become quite different  
languages. Thus, Pidgin will  
really become fragmented. Let's  
not mess and thus ruin our  
common language.*

- c) The following comment on somebody's use of the loan *anaunsemen announcement* instead of *toksave* was recorded at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1976. It illustrates that the use of 'prestige' vocabulary can backfire:

Ya, man ya, i tok wanem?  
 Husat?  
 Nogat, em i tok anaunsemen  
 tasol, em i tok a-naun-se-men  
 Mi laik tokim liklik anaunsemen  
 - i no laik tok-save (general  
 laughter). Kain bilong ol  
 bikman ya dey been hearing it  
 from somewhere, na nau ol i  
 laik yusim it - a toksave, a!  
 Toksave is good, it explains  
 everything, toksave! Toksave,  
 he laik yusim hat wot ya,  
 anaunsemen, anaunsemen.  
 (Laughter) I tell you, he  
 doesn't know what it meant.

*And what did this man say?  
 Who?  
 You know who I mean, he said  
 'anaunsemen', he said 'a-naun-  
 se-men'. I want to make a  
 little 'anaunsemen', not a  
 toksave (general laughter).  
 It's typical of these prominent  
 villagers - they been hearing  
 it from somewhere, and now they  
 all want to use it - you know,  
 toksave! Toksave is good, it  
 explains everything, toksave;  
 he wanted to use a difficult  
 word, 'anaunsemen, anaunsemen'.  
 (Laughter) I tell you, he  
 doesn't know what it meant.*

- d) In a minority of cases unintelligibility is seen as the result of incorrect use of established words. An instance of this type of confusion are different names for motor vehicles.

A saloon car may be referred to as *kar*, *sip* (from 'Jeep'), or *taksi* in different parts of the country. Many speakers do not distinguish between *trak truck* and *trakta tractor*. The following unpublished letter to *Wantok*, written in 1971, deplores the use of *trakta tractor* instead of *taksi small car, taxi*:

Mi bin halim planti man na meri  
 ol i save kolim taksi long  
 trakta, tasol mi ting dispela  
 pasin i no stret long tingting  
 bilong mi. Taksi i no save  
 givim mani long yumi, yumi  
 save spenim mani long taksi ...  
 Na trakta i save givim mani  
 long yumi time em i bruikin  
 graun ...

*I hear many people call taxis  
 'tractors', but this is not  
 right to my way of thinking.  
 A taxi does not produce wealth  
 for us, we spend our money on  
 taxis ... but a tractor gives  
 us money when it is used for  
 ploughing.*

- ii) Remarks on socially damaging language are typically directed against lexical items which reinforce racial, social or educational inequalities. Again, the first examples of this kind were recorded in the late 1960s. Consider

- e) the use of *kuk cook* instead of *meri wife*, to signal the inferior status of women.

Sampela man em ol i save kolim  
 ol meri bilong ol olsem kuk  
 bilong ol. Ating planti long  
 yufela i save harim dispela  
 kain tok tu? Sori brata, yu  
 husat man yu save kolim meri  
 bilong yu olsem kuk bilong yu,  
 orait ating yu mas baiim em  
 long olgeta potnait long mani ...

*Some men call their wives  
 'cook'. A lot of you have  
 perhaps heard this expression.  
 My dear brother if you call  
 your wife your cook you better  
 pay her fortnightly wages.*

(unpublished letter to *Wantok* newspaper, 1974)

- f) the insults *graslain* *grasscutter*, *hillbilly* and *smelbek* *someone who fills copra in bags*, *a smelly person*, *hillbilly*.

Graslain, smelbek. Planti taim  
me save harim hap tok hia:  
Kolim ol man i no bin i gat  
gudpela edukesen o ol man i  
save wok long ol plantesen o  
ol man i save stap long ples  
(o) ol man i save sakim kopra  
long smel bek na gras lain ...  
Dispela kain tok olsem i no  
pasin bilong bung. Em inap  
kirapim trabel, laka.

*Grasscutter and smelly person.*  
*I have heard these expressions*  
*many times. This is how they*  
*call people with little education*  
*or the workers on a plantation*  
*or the villagers in their home*  
*villages or the people fill*  
*copra in bags, smelly people*  
*and grasscutters. These*  
*expressions do not promote*  
*unity, they mean trouble.*  
*You see.*

(Letter to *Wantok*, 15 November 1972).

The latest, and as yet not fully developed domain within Tok Pisin meta-linguistic language, are expressions referring to aspects of grammar. As can be expected with a language such as Tok Pisin, exchanging information about grammatical constructions does not rank very high on the list of priorities of its speakers. It should also be noted that devices for talking about grammar depend, to a significant extent, on the institutionalisation and socialisation of rules of speaking. This means that such devices cannot be expected in the early stages in the development of this language. Whilst I have not made a full analysis of this topic, it is interesting to observe that the solutions by indigenes and Europeans exhibit significant differences.

For instance, among the well-meant proposals suggested by European dictionary makers, we find proposals to translate the names of grammatical categories such as noun, adjective, verb etc. In Tok Pisin, such categories are notoriously non-discrete and the boundary between adjectives and intransitive verbs is hard to justify in terms of the grammar of this language. Ignorance of the true functioning of Tok Pisin grammar is also evident in proposals such as that by Balint (1973) to translate verbs as *taimwort* *time word* (probably calqued from German *Zeitwort*) notwithstanding the fact that Tok Pisin verbs have a complex aspect system but in many varieties do not express tense at all. Virtually all expatriate analyses of Tok Pisin are sentence-based and expatriate proposals for Tok Pisin grammatical terminology invariably include a term for 'sentence'. However, in a relatively ungrammaticalised language such as Tok Pisin the sentence is not a very good unit of analysis, not even for written language. The indigenous expression referring to a basic unit of speech is *hap tok* *a piece of talk* which can be translated loosely as a 'sensegroup' and which also tends to correspond to intonation group (in a pidgin language usually shorter than a grammatical sentence in the expatriate sense).

The spectacular development of derivational morphology in Tok Pisin (described by Mühlhäusler 1979) has not gone unnoticed by its speakers. When discussing these developments with young informants I was surprised to find a number of expressions relating to this area of grammar.

Unlike some expatriate linguists who still use static concepts such as the morpheme when talking about word formation, the Papua New Guineans appear to have realised that we are dealing with dynamic processes here and that verbal expressions are therefore more appropriate; Compounding is *bungim tok* *bring together talk* and reduplication is *skruim tok* or *tok skruskru* *to join talk*.

## 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to point out that this paper must be seen as an interim statement on an area of linguistic study of Tok Pisin which has been neglected for far too long. I hope to be able to fill in the skeleton information presented here and to relate it to the wider issues of the study of metalinguistic problems as discussed, for instance, by Lyons (1980). I feel that even a cursory information of Tok Pisin data warrants the following conclusions:

- i) What people do with their language and what they believe they are doing is of utmost relevance to language planners and the people who propose new uses for the language (e.g. in bilingual education).
- ii) Linguists are only too prepared to impose their metalinguistic system on languages they do not know sufficiently, thereby depriving themselves from finding out about some of the most intriguing aspects of human language.
- iii) The development of the metalinguistic capacity in a pidgin language is dependent on both extralinguistic and linguistic factors. The metalinguistic function emerges late in Pidgin development, implying that it is a nurtural rather than a natural function of language.

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank the Australian National University and the British Academy for help with my research stay in Canberra, during which this paper was written. This paper is a revised and expanded version of a talk at the meeting of the Australian Anthropological Society in Canberra, August 1981.
2. For the purposes of this paper a functional model similar to that developed by Jakobson (1960) is used. I am fully aware of the pretheoretical status of this model and the problems involved in setting up the metalinguistic function as a separate function.
3. An interesting example is the analysis of the sentence *ol i haisimap plak they hoisted the flag* which is analysed as Pronoun + predicate marker + Verb (consisting of verb stem and affix *ap*) + Object noun. However, for most Papua New Guineans *haisimap* would seem to function as two verbs in a verbal chain as can be seen from variants such as *haisim plak i ap*. This possibility is ignored in analyses such as that given by Hall (1943).

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