THE JAPANESE INDIRECTNESS PHENOMENON

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This article focuses on the phenomenon of Japanese indirectness with the aim to summarize reasons for its existence and share several ways of its presence in the communication process.

1. INTRODUCTION

When saying that Japanese communication is indirect, ambiguous or vague, first we have to be aware, that our observation comes from the Western point of view. The Western information type of communication stands in opposition to the Japanese social type (Aoki and Okamoto, 1988: 3-12). A typical example of the difference between the two is an answer to the question "Where are you going?" when two acquaintances meet in the street. While a Westerner would mostly react with a concrete answer such as: "to the cinema", many Japanese would choose a vaguer expression: "*chotto soko made*" ("just over there"). While in the first case the answer stands for a concrete reply to the question, in the latter one it functions more like a social answer to the greeting.

What stands behind the two types of answer, or two types of communication? No doubt, it is a long historical development determining the structure of the society and set of values commonly shared by people of one culture. Therefore, to understand the roots of the indirectness and vagueness of Japanese communication, first we have to be aware of the structure and value system of Japanese society.

2. FRAME OF INDIRECTNESS:
SOCIAL STRUCTURE, VALUES AND NEEDS

2.1 Group-Orientation

In her American Slovak Japanese and Chinese Picture Dictionary of Gestures Ružičková points out two anthropological ways of dividing cultures (Ružičková, 2001: 37). Taking into account any of these classifications, we characterize the Japanese culture as collectivist, or in other words, group-oriented.

This classification corresponds to the Japanese cultural concept of *uchi* and *soto* (in-group and out-group). The need of the Japanese to divide people according to whether they belong to the same group is a proof of their inner identification with the group they are a part of and share common values with (*uchi*). Those who are not a part of the same community are considered out-group (*soto*).

In Japan groups are social units (like families in tribal cultures). Their role stems from the past agricultural society in which the village was the important social unit producing rice and paying taxes. "The individual within the family in this context survived as a member of the village group, not as an individual, as tax was demanded from the village group" (Taplin, 1995: 18). This role of the village community strengthened by the immobility in Japanese society caused the village inhabitants developed mutually interdependent relationships, high sense of reciprocity, support and solidarity. As a reward for obeying common rules and working for the benefit of all, the community protected the individual and provided him with a secure and safe environment.

Of course, in such a social structure individualistic ambitions and efforts have to be suppressed. It functions in both ways – the group does not allow the individual to behave independently regarding such behaviour as selfish, and the individual adapts his behaviour to the group, since he does not want to lose the benefits it guarantees him. In other words, he is scared of being excluded.

To have the picture of the Japanese group-oriented society whole, we cannot avoid mentioning *amae* – the need to be loved, accepted and allowed to ask for indulgence. Doi (1981) introduces *amae* as the main emotional force in the Japanese psyche, and in his later work he admits it to be "the psychology underlying Japanese groupism" (Doi, 1988: 56). But this need is not exceptionally Japanese. It is shared by human kind as a whole. The difference between the cultures lies in its position in the hierarchy of human needs.

While in Japan we observe *amae* to be the driving psychic force in peoples' behaviour, searching for a comparable psychological view in the West, we find reflection of *amae* somewhere in the middle of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (Satō, 1998: 32). He calls them safety needs and the needs to belong and to be loved. Above these he states the esteem needs and the self-actualization needs are placed on the top. Maslow and Doi provide us with a proof of the different psychic priorities of Japanese and Westerners. While the need of *amae* stands for the evidence of the Japanese group-orientation, the self-actualization need supports the idea of the individualistic approach to the life in the West.

2.2 Vertical Structure

Vertical orientation is the second characteristic attribute of the Japanese society. It is difficult to find two individuals equal to the criteria of differentiation: one's social status, age and gender. Not only the relation between two people is vertical. Every single group has its internal hierarchy and the same principle concerns the order among groups.

According to Nakane (1997), this social feature comes from traditional *oyabun – kobun* (parent – child) relationship, which used to take "the form of patron and client, landowner and tenant, or master and disciple". Contemporary society reflects it in the form of the relation between *senpai* and *kōhai* (senior and junior). The quality of such vertical relationship is reciprocal: "…the *kobun* receives benefits or help from his/her *oyabun*, such as assistance in securing employment or promotion, and advice on the occasion of important decision-making. The *kobun*, in turn, is ready to offer his services whenever the *oyabun* requires them" (1997: 44).

Adapting one's behaviour to the given hierarchy and obeying its rules is also reflected in the way the Japanese communicate. While the superior is allowed to speak in a friendly informal manner, the inferior is expected to express his respectful attitude through polite and honorific forms of the language. Consequently, indirect and roundabout expressions are observable on the side of the inferior.

2.4 Value of Harmony
Japanese social structure described above gave birth to the highest cultural value – harmony (*wa*). Group harmony has to be saved at all costs. Everybody is obliged to fulfil his role in the group for the common benefit with regard to his or her status in the vertical structure. What is more, in the name of harmony one is supposed to conceal negative emotions, suppress individualistic ambitions and display only the appropriate behaviour. Thus, on the surface, group cohesion is never threatened. Consequently, communication in such a society is required to be indirect. It is a must demanded by the commonly shared value of harmony.

3. CONCEPTS SUPPORTING INDIRECTNESS

3.1 Honne and Tatemae
Although they belong to groups, people are first of all individuals with their own likes and dislikes, emotions, thoughts and views. Even displaying the proper conduct not to threaten the group cohesion but to maintain the surface harmony, Japanese cannot avoid their feelings. Consequently, it often happens, that to preserve harmonious relationships they say one thing but think something different. Being aware of the way the society functions, they call this double-faced phenomenon *ura* and *omote* (back and front) considering both to be inevitable parts of human life. For a particular explanation of the concept see Doi (1988).

Ura represents everything concealed behind the front shown to the outside world (*omote*). Even if tension is felt in *ura*, it is not appropriate to display it in *omote*. This phenomenon gave birth to another Japanese communication concept known as *honne* and *tatemae* which directly reflects the concept of *ura* and *omote* in the communication process. *Honne* is expression of *ura* and *tatemae* is expression of *omote*.

Honne represents one's true feelings and thoughts. However, to avoid destroying the harmony in relationships, it is often not appropriate to reveal them and, instead, *tatemae* has to be displayed. Therefore, we call *tatemae* a socially required and consequently acceptable white lie, used not to hurt peoples' feelings, to avoid causing losing of face by anybody and to avoid revealing the thoughts and emotions of the speaker (cf. Sokolová, 1999).

3.1.1 Distinguishing the Settings
Nevertheless, the way of self-expression depends on concrete situations. During the daytime, at formal occasions and when talking to people from out-group, *tatemae* is often required to maintain the harmony. On the other hand, *honne* has its place in the inner circle of close family members or intimate friends. Therefore the usage and switching between the two resembles the principle of *soto* and *uchi*. Woronoff argues that "among insiders, the *honne* is discussed frankly and openly and only a fool would believe anything else" (1997: 12).

However, it does not mean, that surrounded by one's in-group members one can reveal one's *honne* on any occasion. Vertical hierarchy has to be taken into account as well. Not concealing *honne* before superiors is accepted only in informal situations such as after hours socializing during nights, and mostly under the influence of alcohol in the relaxed environment of bars and pubs. It is the time one can speak frankly because openness is accepted. De Mente also observes that there is a strong feeling in Japan that one cannot truly get to know another person until they have drunk enough to forget etiquette, because it is assumed that people never reveal their true character while sober (1994: 114).

This could also possibly explain the reason Japanese people socialize so often. Apart from strengthening their group ties, after a long day of work, when they had to obey all possible social rules, finally there is a chance to relax without necessity to be afraid of making a slip of the tongue. It is time when people are allowed to behave not how the society wants, but how they want to. This fact has a definite influence on the peoples' psyche, prompting them to search for an environment that enables them to be themselves.

Needless to say, Japanese, being aware of this mechanism, make conscious use of the after hours socializing. Knowing that night is "the *honne* time", they invite each other for a drink when they want to discuss delicate issues they do not feel like speaking about during the day.

3.2 The Form and The Content
In a broader sense, we view the *honne* and *tatemae* concept to be a reflection of another pair-phenomenon: content and form. Whatever one thinks or feels, and whatever one wants to communicate, the content has to be given an appropriate shape to be acceptable for the environment (the form). In the situation, where one does not want or cannot reveal one's true feelings one prefers a *tatemae* expression to react in a polite and socially acceptable way. Therefore, the *honne* is the content of one's utterance, while the *tatemae* represents the shape it is "dressed in".

"Dressing up" the content is reflected in the **indirectness** phenomenon. Things are said, but not in a straight way. They are rather implied than expressed. Therefore, if one does not want to misunderstand, one cannot always take the words at their face value but has to discern their true meaning – to search for the content under the shelter of its form.

It is often said of Japan that it is not so important what you do (the content), but how you do it (the form). The same applies to the language; it is not so important what is said, but how it is said. The form (*tatemae*) is highly valued and many times it prevails over the content. It is being ritualized.

This can be proved by predictability of the Japanese behaviour. The easiest way to prevent some misconduct is to follow the way the others behave. This phenomenon makes the Japanese people communicate and behave in very similar ways that serve to be safe. This explains why the Japanese daily conversation as well as written communication is rich in sets of prescribed phrases (*kimarimonku*) one can always rely on. Therefore, an experienced listener can expect what answer may be given to any phrase.

3.3 Giving and Receiving
In the group-oriented society people develop interdependent relationships. They are aware that their existence depends on each other and this fact is reflected in the way they use the language. This is observable in the system of the auxiliary verbs expressing the idea of giving and receiving (*ageru/yaru, morau, kureru*) or in the honorific language *keigo* with its levels of self-depreciation on one hand and respectful forms for the partner on the other. These forms of the language underline the interdependence and imply awareness of mutual obligations. If one is served, he is supposed to serve back.

4. THE CONCRETE SHAPE OF INDIRECTNESS

We have described reasons and cultural concepts supporting the existence of indirectness in the Japanese language. Now, let us have a look at its concrete examples.

4.1 Giving a Command through Asking for a Favour
Analysing the correct usage of the honorific language *keigo*, Kabaya (2000) points out three important principles to think of: **who** out of the two, the speaker and the addressee, **acts**, **who gives the consent** to the action, and **who profits** from it. Simultaneously, he directs our attention to *atakamo hyōgen* – such types of utterance, which help in solving the situations where a straightforward expression sounds rude. Kabaya states an example of a command expressed through the structure of asking for a favour (2000: 124-131).

Imagine a situation when explaining to somebody the way to fill in a certain document. Besides, you want the listener to fill in black. You may express it in different ways; observe the structures below.

Kuroi inku de kakinasai. ⇔ *Kuroi inku de kaite moraeru?*
Kuroi inku de kaite kudasai. *Kuroi inku de kaite moraeru to arigatai.*
Kuroi inku de kaite itadakemasen ka?
Kuroi inku de kaite itadakeru to
arigatai desu.
Kuroi inku de kaite itadakereba to
omoimasu ga . . .

Structures on both sides are arranged from informal to formal. Of course, all of them are correct and usable. The content of all ("fill in black") is the same. But the speaker has a choice of the form. And that is chosen according to the actual situation, considering the concrete relation between him and the listener with regard to the familiarity, status, age, gender etc.

The fact the act will be done by the addressee is the same for both sides. But while structures on the left side are straightforward commands, those on the right are put into the form of asking for a favour. "The different dress" causes a shift in an important point: who has the right to decide the action? While on the left, the action is decided by the speaker giving a command, on the right side, the structures are put in a way suggesting that the decision is up to the listener.

And still, there is a question of the profit. Of course, the real profit depends again on the concrete situation. If the document is important, and if it has not been filled in black it will not be accepted by some authority, it is indisputable that being advised to do it in the right way is good for the listener. But the constructions containing the idea of receiving a favour on the right side imply, that the profit is on the side of the speaker, and thus, sound more polite.

Though the content of structures on both sides is the same, those on the right do not express it in "a naked way", but are "dressed" to the socially acceptable form.

4.2 Refusal
Another example of indirect communication is the way the Japanese refuse. A direct refusal is generally considered impolite since it offends mutual relationships. Therefore, a roundabout way is demanded.

4.2.1 Refusing through Apologizing
One way of polite refusal is the apology. It is usually applied when one is asked for something one cannot or does not want to provide. When refusing, it is recommended to state some reason. The more objective it sounds the better. Further, in conversation it is not always necessary to add the refusing phrase itself, since the meaning is understood from the whole context and nonverbal expressions.

Observe the full structure of refusal in conversation:

Objective Reason – (Refusal) – Apology

Examples*:
None of the examples contains apparent words of refusal.

1. The office lady is about to leave the office for home, when addressed by her boss:

Section chief: *Tanaka kun, minna de yūhan tabe ni iku kedo, dō ka ne.*
(Miss Tanaka, we are going to take supper together.
Would you join us?)

Office lady: *Kore kara desu ka? Kyoo wa eikaiwa no kurasu ga aru mono desu kara... Sekkaku desu ga... Sumimasen.*
(From now on? In fact, I have my English lesson today... It is a pity. I am very sorry.)

2. The office lady addresses her colleague (man) who is imitating training golf during his break:

Woman: *Kobayashi san, gorufu yaru n desu ka? Watashi mo hajimeyō to omou n desu kedo, kondo no shūmatsu ni de mo, oshiete moraemasen?*
(Mr. Kobayashi, do you play golf? I would like to start as well. Would not you teach me this weekend?)

Man: *Iya, shūmatsu wa tomodachi to gorufu ni iku koto ni natte ru n da yo. Mata kondo ne. Gomen, gomen.*
(In fact, I go to play with my friends this weekend... Some other time, O.K.? I am sorry.)

Tachibana (1998: 126-127) states that if the principle of soft refusal wrapped up by the phrases of apology is valid in conversation, the same rule has to be followed in writing a letter serving as a negative reply to some request. It has to be even more polite, since the written communication has a flavour of one-sidedness as the partners do not see each other at the moment. "Even if we finally convey the message of rejection, it often takes the form of a 'letter of apology'" (1998: 127). In other words, although the content of the letter is refusal, since it has to have an acceptable sound, it takes the form of an apology.

4.2.2 Positive Sounding Refusal

Another possibility to refuse is expressing things in a way providing some hope for the future. These expressions sound like a promise to do something though the speaker does not have to mean it seriously at all.

Observe several examples introduced by Miyamoto (1995: 39-41) and De Mente (1994: 175):

Kentō shimasu.	I will examine it.
(Maemuki ni) kangaete okimasu.	I will think about it.
Hairyo shimasu..	I will give it a careful consideration.
Mimamorimasu.	I will follow it closely.

The above and other similar phrases are often used by businessmen, politicians, or bureaucrats to turn down some proposal they do not want to consider.

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* Exampes marked with an asterisk are adapted from Ujie and Tatematsu, 1990.

| *Mata kondo.* | Later./On the next occasion. |

A typical conversational reply, used even among friends, to a suggestion one is not interested in. However, explicitly he does not say so but gives it a chance to be realized in the future, instead.

4.2.3 "Direct" refusal

| *Muzukashii desu.* | It is difficult. |

Though Japanese consider the phrase to be a clear refusal, many Westerners tend to ask where is the concrete problem in their effort to solve it and make the situation easier for getting a positive reply.

| *Muri desu.* | It is unreasonable/impossible. |

This is a most direct refusal.

4.3 Expressing opinion
There are several ways of expressing opinions in Japanese. When choosing the appropriate one, apart from the mutual relationship between the speaker and the hearer, one has to consider also the fact whether he is going to express an agreeable or disagreeable opinion with his partner.

Observe the following constructions:
• *to omou*   I think that . . .

This construction is considered to be quite straightforward, and therefore, if used in a debate, it is suitable for expressing agreement with the opinion of somebody else (Ex.1). It is also preferred when expressing a **positive** opinion about something.

Examples:
1. *Ossharu tōri da to omoimasu.*
   (I agree with you/I think it is the way you say.)
2.*A: *Nihon no gakusei ni taishite donna inshō o motte imasu ka?*
   (What do you think about Japanese students?)
   B: *Akarukute, shakōteki na hito ga ōi to omoimasu.*
   (I think many of them are bright and sociable.)

• *yō na ki/kanji ga suru*   I have a feeling that . . .
Basically, this construction expresses uncertainty. However, it is also used, when one wants to express one's opinion or feeling about something in a soft way. Especially, it is preferred when the opinion sounds **negative**.

Example*:
A: *Nihonjin no daigakusei to tsukiatte, nani ka kanjita koto wa arimasu ka?*
   (Have you felt something when associating with Japanese students?)

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B: *Sō desu ne. Nihonjin no daigakusei wa jibun no kangae o amari hakkiri iwanai yō na ki ga shimasu.*
(Well, I have a feeling they do not express their opinions clearly.)

• *ka mo shirenai*	It is possible that . . .

This construction basically expresses possibility or potentiality (Ex.1). However, it is often used to admit the partner's opinion (Ex.2), and it often precedes one's opposite opinion to that of his partner in order not to sound offensive (Ex.3).

Examples:
1. *Ashita wa ame ga furu ka mo shiremasen.*
   (It is possible that it will rain tomorrow.)
2.*A: *Nihonjin wa ichinichi no hontondo o kaisha de sugoshite iru yō na ki ga shimasu.*
   (I have a feeling that Japanese spend most of the day in their company.)
   B: *Tashika ni nihonjin no sararîman wa hatararakisugi ka mo shiremasen ne.*
   (Yes, it may be true, that the Japanese businessmen work much.)
3.*A: *Gaikokugo o benkyō suru tame ni wa, sono kotoba ga hanasarete iru kuni e iku no ga ichiban ii hōhō desu ne.*
   (The best way to learn a foreign language is to go to the country where it is spoken, is it not?)
   B: *Sō iu kangaekata mo aru ka mo shiremasen ga, watashi wa sō to mo ienai yō na ki ga suru n desu.*
   (Some people may think so, but I have a feeling that it is not the only way...)

• *no de wa nai deshō ka*	Is it not so, that...?
no de wa nai ka to omoimasu	I think it could be that...

These constructions are used to express one's opinion in a soft way. They are suitable when expressing an agreeable (Ex.1) as well as a disagreeable opinion to the others (Ex.2).

Examples:
1. A: *Kekkonshiki wa kono doresu ni shiyō to omou n desu kedo, dō deshō ka?*
   (I think, I will take this dress for the wedding ceremony. What do you say?)
   B: *Īn ja nai deshō ka.*
   (Fine, is it not?)
2.*A: *Nihon no daigakusei wa zeitaku da to omoimasu ka?*
   (Do you think Japanese students have a luxurious life?)
   B: *Watashi wa, zeitaku na hito wa ichibu nan ja nai ka to omoimasu ga...*
   (Well, I think it is only a part of them...)

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* Exampes marked with an asterisk are adapted from the textbook of the Japanese language *Bunka Chuukyuu Nihongo I* (Bunka Institute of Language, 1994).

Further, opinions are usually introduced in a self-depreciating way starting with terms making one's view sound more humble:

Examples:
1. *Watashi no kojinteki na kangae desu ga...*
   (It is only my private opinion, but...)
2. *Watashi no soboku na iken dake desu ga...*
   (It is only my humble opinion, but...)
3. *Shiken o iwasete itadakimasu to...*
   (If I may express my opinion, ...)

4.4 Correspondence

Japanese written communication has an elaborated system of rules one has to follow to write an acceptable piece of correspondence. It is so ritualized that it is more correct to call the writer of a letter *a composer*. The following examples illustrate the way the *honne* and *tatemae* phenomenon appears in Japanese correspondence.

4.4.1 Greetings

Japanese correspondence contains many types of "obligatory" greetings the role of which is more to fulfil the rules of social communication than to communicate some concrete content. They always consist of prescribed phrases, so one does not even have to read them to know what is written inside. But as we have mentioned before, socially it is not so important what is written in the greeting (the content), but the fact that the greeting was exchanged (the form). Therefore, they are being exchanged by most of the people every year to strengthen their ties in the group-oriented society.

A representative example of the socially obligatory correspondence is a New Year's card (*nengajō*). Even if one does not write during the year, one is supposed to send at least this greeting to his family, friends, acquaintances, bosses and colleagues. Every *nengajō* has the same structure: greeting on the occasion of the New Year, expressing gratitude for everything one was provided during the last year, and asking for continued kindness in the New Year. This structure is represented by three following phrases:

Akemashite omedetō gozaimasu.
Sakunen wa taihen osewa ni nari arigatō gozaimashita.
Kotoshi mo dōzo yoroshiku onegai shimasu.

Whatever the modification in the first greeting (e.g.: *kinga shinnen, shinnen omedetō gozaimasu*, etc.), whatever the wish the author adds (e.g.: *minasama no gokenkō o oinori mōshiagemasu*), the structure is always the same.

However, it is not the words, that are important, but the act itself. *Nengajō* is the expression of mutual interdependence, obligatory *tatemae* indirectly replacing people's *honne*: "I am aware that I may need you in the future."

Contents	Letter addressed to those outside the company	Letter exchanged inside the company
Document number	+	+
Date	+	+
Recipient	+	+
Sender and the impress of his seal	+	+
Kenmei (similar to Re:)	+	+
Salutations	+	−
Opening greeting	+	−
Phrase indicating a change of topic	+	+
Main text	+	+
Closing greeting	+	−
Complimentary close	+	−
Writing specifics	+	+
Listing enclosed items	+	+
Postscript	+	+
Conclusion: the term *ijō*	−	+

4.4.2 Business Letters

The double-faced way of Japanese communication is clearly observable in Japanese business correspondence. Handbooks of Japanese business letter writing (cf. Hiraoka, 1992 and Maruyama, 1999) differentiate between two categories: *shanai bunsho* – correspondence exchanged inside the company, and *shagai bunsho* – correspondence addressed to those outside of the company. We consider this phenomenon a reflection of the cultural concept *uchi* and *soto* (ingroup and out-group) in the concrete process of communication.

The main difference between the two types of letter lies in the organization of their contents. Let us observe the items obligatory for the letter addressed to the outside world, and then, let us see which out of them are not appropriate to use in the letter exchanged inside the company. The mark "+" means presence, the mark "−" means absence of the item in the letter.

The main flow of both types of letters is basically the same. However, letters addressed to the outside recipient have to contain a formal salutation and a complimentary close (e.g.: *haikei* – *keigu*), together with opening and closing greetings. In the opening greeting the composer refers to the actual season of the year, expresses his hope for the recipient's prosperity and gratitude for help and consideration in their mutual relationship; in the closing greeting, he/she underlines the main content, expresses hopes for health and active participation in the future, and possibly apologizes for writing in a haste or not communicating serious points in person.

What is important, none of the phrases written in these passages is directly related to the actual content of the letter. However, one cannot omit them because they fulfil the important role of "wrapping up the content" in the socially required and acceptable form (*tatemae*) necessary when communicating with

soto. Therefore, when reading the Japanese business letter, one has to search for the main point somewhere in the middle of the letter body, after the phrase indicating getting to the core of the subject (e.g.: *sate, tokoro de,* etc.)

On the other hand, since it is the *honne* what is required in the in-group, it is not appropriate to write all the greetings and salutations to the letters exchanged inside the company. They are supposed to be simple, concise and straightforward. More, it is not necessary to write the name and the position of the addressee in full like in the letters addressed to *soto*, but writing one's position is sufficient. In-house letters are usually finished with the term *ijō*, which simply signs "the end" not having any connotation of salutation.

Maruyama (1999: 39) also points out the difference in the style between the letters to someone outside the company and the in-house documents. While the former are supposed to be put into very polite terms of *keigo* and are written in more formal *de gozaimasu* or *te orimasu* style, the latter are sometimes written in the *de aru* style. Speaking in the terms of direct and indirect communication, while softness and indirectness is demanded in the communication with the outside world, directness and openness is appropriate inside.

5. CONCLUSION

We consider the Japanese indirectness phenomenon to be a reflection of the social structure, and cultural values and needs. The way it appears on the verbal level and the way it reflects several cultural concepts mentioned above supports our view. However, Japan, as well as the rest of the world, is in a flux of change. It is a question for future research, whether the intensive contacts between Japan and other cultures (especially those of the West) are influencing the value system of young people, and, if yes, whether this influence appears in the way young people communicate in society. Are young Japanese more straightforward than the older generations? Do they use *honne* in situations the older people would not do? The generation gap in the hierarchy of the values and thus in the way people communicate appears to be a relevant topic for our next observations.

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