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Revisiting the Concept of Communication in Business English. Some Implications on Teaching Communicative Skills

Abstract:

The major aim of the present paper is to discuss the skills relevant in the process of communication in Business English, which prove to differ enormously from those worked on in General English courses. It also becomes evident that the intercultural component is essential and learners should not only have a chance to become familiar with the cultural information related to the language they are studying, but also possess and develop a certain degree of intercultural awareness and sensitivity since they are demanded from any businessmen communicating at the criss-cross of cultures. Last but not least, teaching Business English communicative skills is seen as a process of working creatively with the business content supplied by the students that we as teachers of English then shape in terms of its language.

Introduction

In today's competitive business world, developing effective communication skills is more essential than ever before. It is the foundation on which companies and careers are built, and a crucial component of lasting success. Whether it is a face-to-face conversation or a more formal exchange during a business meeting, a meaningful message entails establishing a connection which leaves a powerful impression. It goes without saying that working on a truly engaging and responsive communication style, leading to positive results seems a must as business language skills are critical in this modern era of globalization. It is therefore imperative that anyone who wants to succeed in business should focus on strengthening business language skills, because an employee who has a competence in negotiation skills is more likely to be able to climb up the career ladder with ease.

1. What is Business English in the context of ESP?

It is very hard to define Business English and limit it in linguistic terms. D. Pickett (1986: 1) states that as business and commerce are by definition an interface between the general public and the specialist producer, it must be a lot nearer the everyday lan-

guage spoken by the general public than many other segments of ESP. His words imply that there are many dimensions in which one can look at English for Business Purposes. In his opinion, there are two particular aspects to business communication, these are: communication with the public and communication within a company or between companies. The distinction D. Pickett makes is useful, but probably not sufficient concerning today's wide-ranging business activities. Even within a particular business the language requirements in different departments or branches may vary accordingly. They are in many cases governed by the purpose of interaction, the topics covered and the professional relationships that to a high extent affect the choice of language.

Also, S. Donna (2000: 2) acknowledges the very fact that the aims of any Business English course will always reflect the students' professional careers. She continues by saying that in most of the cases course organizers will have requested such a training as they need something that relates to their occupational or professional language needs. Hence, most Business English courses are taught to adults working in businesses, or preparing to work in the field of business.

Ultimately, C. Chan and E. Frendo (2014: vii) provide the most up-to-date definition of Business English where they declare the existence of three different teaching and learning contexts to be considered. They analyze the needs of Business English classes from the point of view of stakeholders. The first is the tertiary education context where most learners are pre-experienced. The second is referred to as adult education. The primary difference between tertiary and adult education is that the Business English course in adult education is not part of an academic programme and such a course is offered in a language school. Learners in these situations may be pre-experienced or in-work and may be paying for the course themselves. The third context is corporate training, which focuses primarily on in-house needs and tends to deal with very specific contexts and topics. By definition, the learners in this context are in-work, although not necessarily job-experienced. In some corporate contexts such training may be informal and it is realized in the workplace rather than in a classroom.

2. The language features of Business English

M. Ellis and C. Johnson (1994: 3) posit that as it is the case with all the varieties of ESP, English for Business Purposes implies the definition of a specific language corpus and emphasis on particular kinds of communication in a specific context. However, Business English is different from other ESP varieties in the fact that it is most often a mixture of specific content, relating to a particular job area or industry, and general content, which refers to a general ability to communicate more effectively, i.e. in business situations. They distinguish three main features that characterize the language of business, and these are:

- a sense of purpose,
- social aspects,
- clear communication.

As has been mentioned, the sense of purpose is the most important characteristic feature of exchanges within the world of business meetings, telephone calls and discussions. Language is used in order to achieve a goal, and whether it has been used suc-

cessfully can be seen in terms of a fruitful outcome to the business transaction or event. Users of Business English need to speak English, first of all, so that they can achieve more in their professions. In general, business is very competitive, and competition exists not only between companies but also within companies, between employees striving to advance in their careers. What follows is that performance objectives take priority over educational objectives or language learning for its own sake. Moreover, the use of language in business context has an implied element of risk: mistakes and misunderstandings could cost the company dearly. Additionally, much of the language that is necessary for business people will be transactional, i.e. getting what you want and persuading others to agree with the course of action you propose. The language will often be objective rather than subjective and personal. In particular, in discussions and meetings, it will be more appropriate to evaluate facts from an objective standpoint, e.g. *This is a positive point...*, *On the other hand, the disadvantage is...*, rather than expressing personal feelings and opinions.

Furthermore, social aspects also seem crucial because of the fact that international people have a need to make contact with people whom they have never met before, or know only slightly. Meetings in which they participate are usually short because business people are always under time pressure. There is a need for an internationally accepted way of behaviour so that people from different countries, cultures and with different mother tongues can quickly feel more comfortable with one another. In consequence, social contacts are extensively ritualized. Formulaic language is used, e.g. in greetings and introductions, in the context of a routine pattern of exchanges. A certain style is generally adopted which is polite but also short and direct, taking into consideration the need to be economical with time. Although there are some situations that require more than this, e.g. in order to keep a conversation going over lunch, the style and content of social interactions is usually typified by a desire to build a good relationship while avoiding over-familiarity.

The last phenomenon that should be dwelled upon is clear communication. As stated by P. Sobkowiak (2008: 171), it is highly important because the information has to be conveyed with a minimum risk of misunderstanding, and the time for processing needs to be short. Therefore, there is a requirement for clear, logical thought emphasized by the kinds of words that indicate the logical process, for that reason phrases such as *as a result* or *in order to*, etc. are preferred. There is often a need to be concise, particularly when communicating by fax or telephone, and some concepts may be expressed in word clusters to avoid circumlocution, e.g. *cash with order, just in time delivery*. Certain terms have evolved in order to save time in referring to concepts familiar to people in business, e.g. 'parent company', 'primary industry' or acronyms such as CIF or FOB (M. Ellis/ C. Johnson 1994: 7–9).

3. Users of Business English

Generally, English has become the lingua franca of business environment. A Spaniard conducting business in China uses English, an Italian making transactions with the Dutch uses English and an Australian and a German probably also employ English. Thus, English-medium communications in business are non-native speaker to non-

native speaker, and the English they use is International English, not that of native speakers of English speaking countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia.

The role of English as a means of international business communication has many consequences. One of them is that “non-British managers may be able to understand each other more easily when speaking English together than they can understand a native speaker” (K. Barham/ D. Oates 1991), and it is easier for the non-native speakers to understand each other than for the native speaker to understand them. People who share their first language may also share the use of English which is not the native speaker’s use.

T. Dudley-Evans and M.J. St. John (1998: 54) assume that International English focuses on effective communication and non-native speakers of English want to communicate effectively but it is not so important to be highly correct or to speak as well as a native speaker. What may seem surprising, native speakers of standard English also need to learn in order to use International English properly.

Another consequence of the fact that English is the language of international business is that the role of intercultural competence is even more important in Business English training than in any other area of ESP. It is generally acknowledged that it is difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to do business successfully without a certain knowledge about a particular culture (P. Sobkowiak 2008: 24). A sensitivity to cultural issues and an understanding of students’ own and others’ values and behaviours is very important as noticed by T. Dudley-Evans and M.J. St. John claiming that “Language reflects culture and culture can shape language” (1998: 66).

The following line of argument compels us to think that successful users of Business English must be familiar with the relationship dimensions distinguished by Trompenaars (1993), i.e. neutral—emotional, individualism—collectivism, specific-diffuse and universalism—particularism, which are apparent in different cultures and may affect the business and its culture. The neutral—emotional dimension is related to the amount of eye contact perceived as appropriate, the size of private body space or transparency of feelings in tone or body. A preference for individual work, competing with others or collaborating depends on the individualistic—collective dimension of culture. In specific or segregating cultures, different aspects of life are kept separate, while in diffuse cultures they overlap. The universalist approach is based on the concept of one good way, the same rules and procedures are recommended across the board whereas particularism pays attention to the obligations of relationships and circumstances, i.e. flexibility is encouraged.

4. Linguistic competence, communicative competence and intercultural competence in Business English

As the purpose of the present paper is to revisit the concept of communication and consider specific skills demanded from competent Business English users, one must understand the term *communicative competence*. Hence, it seems natural to consider Chomsky’s distinction into competence and performance where the former was defined as the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences. Since this definition was

unsatisfactory, because in the opinion of prominent linguists it did not exhaust the topic and occurred somehow incomprehensive, Dell Hymes, a linguist and ethnographer, introduced a new notion of communicative competence. Communicative competence can be described as the learner's ability to understand and use language appropriately to communicate in authentic (rather than simulated) social and school environments (D.H. Hymes 1972: 277). Thus, the term comprises not only a good command of the language but also the knowledge of the language use. This pragmatic approach seems to reflect well the reality, for it assumes that the language is not only a set of strict grammar rules but also a tool to communicate and co-exist in a human society.

The notion of communicative competence was re-defined by M. Canale who proposed a much more extensive analysis assuming that the underlying systems of knowledge and skill are both required for efficient communication (M. Canale 1983: 5). In addition, M. Canale together with Swain, a specialist in the field of second language education, identified three basic components that form communicative competence (M. Canale/ M. Swain 1980):

- grammatical competence—the ability to use words and rules,
- sociolinguistic competence—the ability to be appropriate in a given context,
- strategic competence—the ability to use communication strategies.

In 1983, M. Canale added one more component, discourse competence, which signifies the ability to be coherent and cohesive. A detailed description of the above mentioned components goes beyond the scope of this paper. It must be noted, however, that the notion of communicative competence plays a major role in modern linguistics as well as language teaching. This applies especially to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a communication-oriented foreign language teaching. Perhaps, it is worth stressing that communicative competence is a central concept of the communicative approach to language teaching involving the development of language proficiency through interactions embedded in meaningful contexts. According to S.J. Savignon (2007: 207–208), this approach to teaching provides authentic opportunities for learning that go beyond repetition and memorization of grammatical patterns in isolation and hence remain the focus of the whole process of communication, including communication in Business English classes where most activities evolve around building negotiation skills.

The notion of communicative competence has been tackled by numerous linguists and scholars, including S.J. Savignon (1983), L. Bachman and A. Palmer (1996). In some cases, new components were identified while the previous ones were redefined but the general idea remained unaltered—communicative competence involves the knowledge of how to use the language and not only the very knowledge about the language. As communicative competence plays such a significant role in Business English, it seems obvious to highlight that E. Frenco (2005: 8–12) distinguishes three key components that are indispensable in Business English and that should be emphasized by a Business English teacher in the process of teaching:

- linguistic competence,
- discourse competence,
- intercultural competence.

The first notion of linguistic competence can be divided into the knowledge of lexis and the knowledge of grammar, together with the relationships between the two. Vocabulary involves not only 'regular' words and terms but also multi-word units (e.g. *How do you do?*), idioms (e.g. *We've missed the boat*), phrasal verbs (e.g. *carry out*) and collocation (e.g. *small print* rather than *little print*). Moreover, lexical units tend to occur in certain grammatical patterns (e.g. *letter of complaint* rather than *complaint letter*). Grammar, on the other hand, can be divided into written grammar and spoken grammar. Spoken grammar, as opposed to written grammar, can be characterized by the presence of contractions (e.g. *he won't, I can't*), hesitations (e.g. *ehm, uhm*), repetitions and ellipsis. Moreover, discourse markers (e.g. *OK, ehm, let's move to...*) and backchannels (signalling feedback) are also very common and form a natural part of any oral texts. All of the aforementioned elements form the linguistic competence which is related to the language at its most basic level and as such is context-independent.

The discourse competence, in turn, enables to interact in a given context. As stressed by M. Canale and M. Swain (1980), while linguistic competence deals with the formal approach to a language, discourse competence focuses on the use of language. Business discourse involves presentations, negotiations, business meetings, correspondence, etc. The importance of discourse competence is clear, since the appropriate use of language is essential, especially in business context where the wrong use of a given structure may offend the listener and result in failure in negotiations. One of the elements that plays a major role is register, which may be defined as a degree of formality. Business English involves colloquial speech (small talk) as well as very formal language (negotiations, contracts). Therefore, the proper use of register is central to any Business English communication exchanges. Moreover, any conversation has a certain structure, which is governed by specific rules. The turn-taking competence is another key element, which seems to be of high importance. The knowledge of opening and closing sentences as well as certain standard structures enables proper communication and gives the discourse its smoothness and natural tone.

Ultimately, P. Sobkowiak (2008: 132–133) points out that the intercultural competence remains the most general item related to Business English. Since the business environment is culturally diversified and numerous business meetings very often involve people from different countries, the intercultural competence is indispensable for proper communication. The lack of knowledge in this field may lead to misunderstandings and unpleasant situations. Therefore, a Business English course should develop the intercultural competence, so that students become sensitive to the differences that are an inseparable part of the business world. It should be noted that culture may refer not only to ethnicity or national culture but also corporate culture and culture of a given profession. The intercultural competence may help utilize these differences and distinct features to add a certain value to the business relations with customers or between employees.

5. Types of communication in Business English

Having laid the necessary foundations, it is now possible to address the core issue of this article. In order to better understand the concept of communication in Business English, we need to take account of the classification of communication types proposed by M.K. Sehgal (2008: 6) and conducted according to the number of receivers in the following manner:

- intrapersonal communication—within one's own mind,
- interpersonal communication—communication between two people (dialogue),
- group communication—an exchange of messages within a group such as a classroom or a team at work,
- mass communication—a message is received by large numbers of people and is sent by mass media such as newspapers or TV.

For the purpose of teaching, the most important type seems to be group communication and interpersonal communication depending obviously on the chosen activity. With regards to oral communication, it must be noted that it is an essential element of the command of Business English. Business meetings, negotiations, presentations and even a simple small-talk with business partners are an inseparable part of business activities. Therefore, M. Ellis and C. Johnson (1994: 35) emphasize the value of performance in teaching Business English and they deem the ability to speak fluently the most important skill developed by learners. Business people need to convey the message which should be properly understood by receivers. The nuances of correct grammar and sophisticated vocabulary are welcome but less essential. Hence, S. Panja (2011: 14–15) sees oral communication as often preferred to written communication for a number of reasons. First of all, it is spontaneous and instantaneous and takes place at a relatively high speed. Moreover, if the message is not clear, a receiver may ask for immediate clarification, which certainly facilitates mutual understanding of interlocutors. Furthermore, the non-verbal aspect of oral communication (body language, proximity, etc.) renders an effective tool of persuasion. Last but not least, oral communication has a social function and as such helps strengthen the bonds between employees and business partners.

On the other hand, oral communication is characterized by certain drawbacks, which may constitute a difficulty for learners. First of all, any oral utterance is constrained by time and requires hurried planning. Moreover, receivers must be attentive and focused, since the oral message is usually not recorded. Another drawback is the lack of legal validity of oral messages and a high likelihood of such a message being distorted—a listener may not remember all the details or a speaker may express ideas in an inappropriate manner.

Oral communication is beneficial in the business world since it is fast, persuasive and serves as a tool of social bonding. The nature of oral communication and the difficulties that learners may encounter require a good preparation and development of certain skills. M. Ellis and C. Johnson (1994: 35) enumerate some skills and abilities that are essential for oral communication in Business English:

- confidence and fluency,
- skills for organizing and structuring information,
- ability to communicate ideas without ambiguity,

- strategies for following the main points of fast, imperfect and complex speech,
- ability to ask for clarification,
- speed of reaction to utterances,
- clear pronunciation and delivery,
- awareness of appropriate behaviour and language specific to different cultures.

There is one important conclusion to be drawn from the aforementioned considerations. The above skills are central for Business English in general, thus maintaining that oral communication plays a key role in business relations. Reading and writing skills are additional assets, but it is the ability to communicate without difficulties that constitutes the main focus of teaching Business English.

6. Types of interaction in Business English

Oral communication in Business English encompasses a wide array of techniques and communication types. M. Ellis and C. Johnson (1994: 36) enlist two crucial subtypes, namely speaking and interaction. Speaking includes monologue-type communication, while interaction consists in conducting a dialogue with another person. Among the most popular types of Business English skills are the following:

- speaking
 - a) formal presentation
 - b) informal presentation
 - c) instructing
 - d) description and explanation
- interaction
 - a) visiting or receiving visitors
 - b) showing visitors around
 - c) entertaining
 - d) discussions and informal meetings
 - e) formal meetings
 - f) chairing meetings
 - g) interviewing
 - h) negotiating
 - i) telephoning

It seems interesting to notice that listening is enumerated as an additional skill with the ability to follow instructions, talks, presentations, etc., which remain central. The above list encompasses skills that are typical for General English such as entertaining, telephoning or showing visitors around.

For the purpose of the present article, it is also imperative to consider another distinction of communication types that constitute a mainstay of Business English, namely negotiations and presentations. Hence, they should be discussed in a more detailed way, for they form a basic part of any Business English class.

E. Frendo (2005: 75–76) rightly emphasizes that presentations are particularly interesting from the standpoint of teaching because they require a number of skills that are both linguistic and non-linguistic. A presentation needs to draw attention of audience and serves as a source of information. Therefore, it is the content that is of high

importance and the way it is presented, whereas the linguistic quality takes a secondary place. Thus, teachers should pay attention to the overall impression made by a student during a presentation rather than errors and mistakes, unless they impede communication. Such elements as body language, visual aids and intonation facilitate the reception of the message and play an essential role in the overall outcome. Although the main purpose of any presentation is to deliver a message and persuade something to the audience interested in the topic, which lends less importance to the correct use of language, some issues regarding the very linguistic competence are of high importance. The most crucial components are the following:

- signposting—the use of expressions typical for presentations such as *let's start* or *to conclude*,
- rhetorical language—the use of metaphors, triplets, rhetorical questions and emphasis renders the text more persuasive and more attractive to the audience,
- intonation—one of the key aspects of any presentation; good intonation is necessary for keeping audience interested and concentrated,
- stress—some words need to be stressed by the speaker so that the audience pays special attention to a given idea,
- chunking—it is the general ability to group words of a given utterance and pause in specific places so that the whole text is coherent and pleasant to listen to.

Teachers should therefore put emphasis on these elements. The main point of interest is the ability to deliver a text which is interesting and compelling. Such skills can be acquired by listening to speeches performed by professionals, e.g. politicians or lecturers.

The second variant of business communication that deserves careful attention is the discourse of negotiations. This is a complex process that seems to be quite intricate to define. E. Frenco (2005: 76) enlists two negotiation styles:

- competitive negotiations, which include a conflict between the two parties' goals and usually price bargaining or sharing limited resources are involved,
- integrative negotiations, which involve mutual or partially mutual goals and as such are not competitive although the aim is not to achieve a win-win situation.

Another crucial aspect of negotiations is a set of strategies that can be followed by either of the parties. R.J. Lewicki and A. Hiam (2006: 31–33) distinguish five categories:

- avoiding—it consists in withdrawing from active negotiations, neither the goal nor the long-term relationship are important for the parties,
- accommodating—in this case one party deems a long-term relationship more crucial than the outcome and adapts to the conditions set by another party,
- competing—it should be implemented if a party wants to win at all costs, i.e. the long-term relationship with another party is of low importance,
- collaborating—here both parties try to find a solution that would be satisfying for both of them and the outcome as well as the relationship are equally important, hence collaborating usually results in a win-win situation,
- compromising—it may be defined as a substitute for collaborating and occurs when full collaboration is not possible or when there is a time pressure.

As noted earlier, there are different types of negotiations and various stages they go through. It may be hard to identify the key language to teach, but the functions to be considered are: clarifying, summarizing, asking questions, proposing, agreeing and disagreeing together with the relation-building skills. Probably, the most effective way to practise negotiating will be adopting a task-based approach where role-plays and simulations are extensively utilized. Following E. Frenco (2005: 77–79), they allow for the improvement of non-linguistic negotiating skills as well as give a chance to practise the adequate language. It seems obvious that negotiations involve strategies and relationship-building skills that are of high importance for the outcome of any meeting. Our students should be aware of them if they want their negotiations to be successful. Moreover, they should master body language and the ability to present and express their ideas. Therefore, a teacher should pay attention to the general outcome of activity and should encourage students to work more on non-linguistic skills. The art of negotiating is a complex ability that should be practiced throughout the whole course of Business English.

Last but not least, it should be affirmed after T. Dudley-Evans and M.J. St. John (1998: 109) that there are many spoken interactions in Business English that involve just two people. These are telephone conversations and other social situations, which, even if there are more people, revolve around dialogues. In this case, what matters mostly is ‘socializing’, which is of particular importance, especially when interlocutors have met for the first time. Briefly speaking, it encompasses those spoken interactions that introduce somehow the actual discussion about business matters. Socializing may be crucial in establishing good relationships with business partners, that is why it is important to cover them in any Business English classroom. The language connected with socializing may include meeting and greeting people, conventional phrases, dining out, visiting other people’s homes as well as those language items that may be useful for maintaining the conversation, encouraging the participant to talk, asking polite and unobtrusive questions or telling anecdotes.

Because it is natural for business people to attend meetings on daily basis, learners need to be trained for them. Business meetings range from most formal ones, where there is a chairperson and a clerk responsible for taking the minutes to those informal ones over a cup of tea or coffee. The language of such meetings is also varied and thus it has to be brought to the attention of learners. As such it is hard to be taught thoroughly without first obtaining some information from the learners who are job-experienced. Normally, people in meetings enter discussions, pass on information, persuade, justify, defend one’s position, argue, clarify and summarize, thus, these functions should comprise the focus of a Business English teacher. Role-plays and simulations which resemble the meetings that the learners usually participate in will probably be the most useful. S. Donna (2000: 126) suggests considering the following points when designing the meeting simulations:

- 1) Who is to chair the meeting, if anybody?
- 2) What is the chair’s role?
- 3) What contributions are to be made by participants?
- 4) What is the function of the meeting?
- 5) How formal will it be?

6) Will there be a tight structure?

7) Will the minutes be produced?

Learners can also be asked to take minutes of meetings held in their Business English classes or bring authentic minutes into the class and use them to explain what happened in the meeting to the other learners. It may also be a way to review the language and start a discussion.

It is also worth analyzing the issue of socializing from the point of view of the so-called 'small talk', however, one must remember that it requires the learner to engage in a polite conversation without warning and involves talking about things having little to do with business. T. Hutchinson and A. Waters (1987: 140) imply that it has different functions such as time-filling, easing the transition from one business topic to another or easing the tension. It may be simply practised during a lesson as an interaction between the learner and the teacher, or two learners talking about their weekend, the film they have watched recently, a football match or the weather. A lot of small talk takes place over the telephone, however this type of communication can cause a lot of stress and may be difficult to handle mainly because of the fact that there is no time to prepare and no body language, which usually facilitates conversations and enables better understanding. The training of talking on the telephone during a business class focuses on two basic points: teaching standard lexical phrases used in such situations which will not be met elsewhere, e.g. *X speaking, Who's calling, I'll just put you through, Hold on, please*, etc., and some so-called 'survival strategies' which allow the learner to control conversations and deal with numerous situations, e.g. *I didn't catch that, could you repeat?, Could you spell that?, Could you confirm that in writing?* Following T. Dudley-Evans and M.J. St. John (1998: 109), one might notice that teaching how to make telephone calls involves a lot of role-play activities and listening, which if carried out successfully, may result in learners' being more confident, which is crucial in managing telephone conversations.

The last phenomenon that should concern us and has already been commented upon in the present paper, corresponds with the awareness of cultural factors, which as N. Brieger (1997: 83), T. Dudley-Evans and M.J. St. John (1998: 66) notice, seems vital in any business interaction. Both teachers and students need to be sensitive to cultural issues as well as it is mandatory for them to try to understand their interlocutor's values and behaviours. The awareness of cultural issues may help the learners avoid misunderstandings and conflicts that may arise from an unintentional but inappropriate use of linguistic or even non-verbal communication. As a result interlocutors will function more successfully in a foreign environment or with partners from different cultures.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a few salient points that emerge from the above discussion. Firstly, teaching Business English skills differs from teaching the communicative skills in General English courses enormously. There is a clear distinction observed due to the fact that the stakeholders are always taken into account and their needs require proper assessment prior to the start of any Business English course.

Secondly, teaching negotiations in a foreign language, which remain the most vital ability of any business person, has to be done thoroughly and real conditions must be preserved.

Thirdly, the intercultural component is essential and our students should not only have a chance to become familiar with cultural beliefs and practices related to the language they are studying and its cultural context, but also possess and develop a certain degree of awareness regarding their own beliefs and values.

Lastly, we should see the teaching of Business English as a process of working creatively with the business content supplied by the students that we as teachers of English then shape in terms of its language.

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