

Market Pitching and The Ethnography of Speaking

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Abstract

The direct sales encounter has rarely been described in anything resembling its full contextual richness. Further, attention to this encounter has been largely confined to the primary retail sector of the economy. In this paper, a perspective drawn from linguistic anthropology is used to examine the persuasive rhetoric of market pitchers as it unfolds in a culturally significant setting. The secondary or informal economic sector is used as the field site.

Performance and the Sales Encounter

While a full-blown sociolinguistic tradition of research into consumer behavior has not yet emerged, increasing attention has been paid to the role of language in consumption. Persuasive rhetoric has been the focus of much traditional consumer research, but the bulk of this interest has been in messages conveyed through mass media or through material culture (e.g., labels). Recently, however, the kind of research into symbolic communication long espoused by Levy (1978, 1981) has accelerated. Semiotic analyses of consumer behavior (Holbrook and Grayson 1986, Mick 1986, Sherry and Camargo 1987, Umiker-Sebeok and Levy 1987) building upon the discontinuous antecedents in the discipline have used language as a tool to unlock the meaning encoded in consumption, and have used consumption itself as a vehicle for interpreting the rich significance of language.

Although such work has explored linguistic dynamics, it has continued to dwell on such "finished" products as advertising (Beeman 1986), rumor (Sherry 1984), or movies (Hirschman 1987). In this article, such products constitute just one component of a larger communicative frame. Elsewhere (Sherry 1980) I have noted a shift from text-orientation to action-, event- and communication-orientation, on the part of theorists concerned with verbal art. Bauman (1975) has identified a cross-disciplinary integrative tradition focused on "performance," which treats the emergent and patterned dimensions of speech. Text, event, and social structure are manipulated through performance. The sales encounter is at once strategic social interaction and verbal art. Thus, construing the market pitch as a performance permits the analyst to gain a deeper understanding of the sales encounter. While a dramaturgical perspective of consumer behavior has occasionally been advocated (Dichter 1975, Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986, Sherry 1987b), the rich significance of persuasive performance, especially in direct sales encounters, has seldom been plumbed.

Performance in the context of market society is more often experienced than consciously evaluated. Performance has been called the structuring of structure (Kapferer 1986). The performances with which this article is concerned -market pitching- are examples of what Fernandez (1986) has called "revelatory incidents"; that is, tropes are played and images argued by consumers in especially charged moments in human relationships which are pregnant with meaning. Fernandez regards revelatory incidents as primary sources of insight in ethnographic fieldwork. These incidents involve dialogue and colloquialism, and are directly

experienced by the researchers. Through these incidents, we can learn more about the personal, social and cultural significance of phenomena than would otherwise be possible.

Market Pitching As Discourse

Market pitching is a variant of personal selling in which the sales encounter is governed by a *spiel* or a script designed to recruit and enrapture an audience to such a degree that its members are moved to purchase the trader's products. Etymologically, "*spiel*" is related to "spell," and it functions as an incantation that induces collaborative expectancy and a willing suspension of disbelief. The conversion from spectator to participant to consumer is accomplished through the pitch.

The pitch is an ancient vehicle of information and impression management, combining didacticism and delight into a powerful rhetorical strategy. Braudel's (1979) description of the Parisienne Halles of the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries is replete with market cries ranging from simple declaration to invective. Such cultural survivals or anachronisms remain entrenched in vehicles like nursery rhymes (e.g., "Hot cross buns"). The patter of contemporary traders such as car salesmen is so familiar (one is tempted to say archetypal) to consumers that advertisers are able to incorporate it in a highly self-conscious, burlesque fashion into mass media messages. "Joe Isuzu" is so credible as the incredible salesman that his pitch reinforces the contradictory print message of the commercial; further, his tag line ("You have my word on it") has been adopted by other commercial reference figures unrelated to the original product. If the market pitch is a hard sell, it is often enough tempered with tropes that both absorb the impact and deflect it to a more congenial realm of the consumer's experience.

In their insightful ethnomethodological analysis of "patter merchanting," Pinch and Clark (1986) investigated several rhetorical formats and selling techniques in the routines of market pitchers in the U.K. and the Netherlands. By exploring the "informal economic reasoning" by which such traders manage consumer preference, these authors show the ways in which "worth" versus "selling price" are contrasted in the constituting of "bargains." A companion piece (Clark and Pinch 1987) that explores compliance techniques and audience response in microsociological perspective demonstrates further the merit of a close reading of discourse recorded *in situ*. The same can be said of Prus' (1985) field study of price-setting activity.

The emergence of discourse analysis (Van Dijk 1985a) as a viable subdiscipline or cross-discipline is a timely one for consumer researchers. In examining language "in use," discourse analysis reveals the multiple links language has with the context of communication and interaction; cognitive and social processes and strategies, and the "contextualization" of discourse itself, become focal concerns (Van Dijk 1985b,1). Existing as it does in the interstices of sociology, sociolinguistics and ethnography (Van Dijk 1985c) these foci of discourse analysis will shift in emphasis depending upon the researcher's orientation. Thus, the one dimension, one method approach of the linguist or

ethnomethodologist (e.g., Corsaro 1985) will differ from the broader, interdisciplinary concerns of the anthropologist (e.g., Hymes 1962). The former approach yields reliable, generalizable results, the latter conceptual richness and theoretical complexity (Van Dijk 1985c). Either approach is useful in consumer research, since language and consumption use-systems are mutually constituting.

In his discussion of language as social practice, Fowler (1985) describes vocabulary as a "lexical map" of the preoccupations of a culture. Consumption, and by extension marketing, is one of our cultural preoccupations (or cultural focus, in Hall's (1959) terms). While our everyday speech is shot full of consumptionese, this article is concerned most specifically with a "speech event" (Duranti 1985), that is, an interaction defined by speech: market pitching. This event, embedded as it is in the polylogue of the marketplace (Sherry 1987c), is still marked as a distinct register, or as a ceremonial use of language. Argumentation (Kopperschmidt 1985), narrative analysis and conversational storytelling (Gulick and Quasthoff 1985, Polanyi 1985), and rumors and gossip (Fine 1985), are just a few common marketplace speech genres - each of which, in addition to others, can be detected in pitches - that have been explored from a discourse analytic perspective. Predictably, none has used consumption or marketing as a precipitating speech environment. Aside from Woodside's (1984) application of discourse analysis to insurance sales encounters, this approach has not filtered into consumer research.

Ethnography of Speaking

Of the variety of ways of interpreting discourse, the ethnography of speaking is especially useful in probing the significance of market pitching. It is employed in this study in a particular form that is compatible with the researcher's interests. The approach is accorded no interpretive primacy. Rather, it is introduced into the consumer research literature as another item to be added to the methodological toolkit. Its comprehensive scope should prove especially useful in assisting researchers to grasp the complexity of consumption phenomena, and in providing enthusiasts with a framework for inserting parallel approaches on issues from expansion (Labov and Fanshel 1977) to paralinguistics (Birdwhistell 1970, Hall 1959).

The basic tenets of the ethnography of speaking - also called the ethnography of communication - have been elaborated in a number of articles and books. Principal among these is work by Hymes (1962, 1964, 1974), Hymes and Gumperz (1972), and Bauman and Sherzer (1974, 1975). Subsequent work by Duranti (1985) has further enriched the approach. In the interest of enforced concision, the components and processes of this approach detailed below are paraphrased from these sources. Ethnographers of speaking seek to determine the speech codes and repertoires of members of a speech community, including the values, strategies and norms which govern speech production and interpretation (Bauman and Sherzer 1974). These ethnographers focus on a number of basic sociolinguistic concepts: speech communities and events, elements of linguistic structure, repertoires, and codes. Ethnography is the preferred methodological vehicle for such study. Because much language choice is subconscious, and because context critically determines the signalling of social information, fieldwork techniques that elicit and

challenge the verbal skills of speakers are essential (Gumperz 1974). Field immersion and data collection *in situ*, rather than artificial laboratory manipulations, are thus required.

In the development of his descriptive theory of speech behavior, Hymes (1962, 1972, 1974) has proposed the acronym "SPEAKING" as a mnemonic to organize the components that contribute to the complexity of verbal interaction. The eight foci of Hymes' analysis can be briefly reviewed. The *situation* is composed of a setting and a scene. *Participants* may include a speaker/sender, an addressor, a hearer/audience, and an addressee. The *ends* toward which a speech event unfolds are described in terms of purposes: outcomes and goals. The *act* sequence of a performance includes both message form and message content. *Instrumentalities* involved in communication include channels and forms of speech. *Norms* governing communication cover interaction as well as interpretation. Finally, genres of event are the categories to which particular performances can be assigned.

As stated earlier, Hymes' framework can be used for ever greater elaboration of performance; its principal value resides in its comprehensiveness. In the balance of this article, I will employ the framework to interpret two speech events embedded in a local system of consumption. Space limitations preclude an exhaustive treatment of these events, but the analysis serves the programmatic ends of this article.

Methodology

The data employed in this study derive from a larger corpus compiled by the Consumer Behavior Odyssey, an interdisciplinary transcontinental team research project, during the summer of 1986. Both the history and scope of the Odyssey have been detailed elsewhere (Belk 1987, Holbrook 1987, Kassarian 1987, Sherry 1987, Wallendorf 1987). So also have the naturalistic paradigm and attendant data collection techniques that guided the project been meticulously described (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1987). The entire data set is deposited in an archive at the Marketing Science Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is available for inspection by consumer researchers.

The data involving market pitching were collected in a number of sites across the country: swap meets, boardwalks, retail outlets, auctions, fairs, revival meetings and assorted tourist attractions. For simplicity's sake, I have elected to focus on a single venue to develop this article. The analysis centers on material gathered at the Rotundan Swap Meet in a suburb of LaBrea, California. Data were collected through participant observation and interview. Embedded collection and induced natural context approaches (Sherry 1984) were employed. Data were recorded in field notes and journals by several researchers, as well as by audio- and videotape and photograph. Since both swap meet venue and naturalistic inquiry methods have been considered at length elsewhere (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988), no further elaboration of these issues is provided.

The Rotundan Swap Meet itself is an ethnically diverse open air market that is held in a defunct drive-in theatre. It is one of two such markets owned and managed by a local family. Rotundan managers conduct extensive civic positioning in terms of public relations and peace-keeping within the community. Rotundan boasts a 465

vendor capacity, and exhibits a distinctive daily rotation cycle in its product assortment and rental schedule, such that available merchandise and type of consumer varies widely throughout the week. Thousands of consumers may be present on a given day. Musicians, jugglers and other entertainers create a festive atmosphere and help to build traffic. Vendors sell a variety of used and new goods. Traditional retailers also rent booth space at the meet. Thus, a consumer is as likely to encounter a lyrical script and an offer of a "free gift" from a pitchman at a Sears credit application booth as he or she is the harangue of a "bull shit artist" (an emic term for barker or salesperson) moving items from chamois to glassware from Occupied Japan. So also is a range of social classes intermingled, from the upscale bargain hunters of Rosemary Hills to the destitute "scroungers" who scavenge the merchandise jetisonned by vendors at day's end. Rotundan is a fascinating microcosm of the social universe in which it is embedded.

From among the diverse assortment of market pitches occurring at Rotundan, I have chosen two performances for extended consideration. The products in question are functional equivalents: a small, manual vegetable chopping appliance on the order of a Veg-o-matic. The consumer audiences to which the appeals are directed are also comparable, insofar as they are composed of shoppers strolling the same midway. The vendors, however, differ significantly in terms of ethnicity and residence. One of the vendors ("The Miracle Worker") is a middle-aged midwestern white American male who travels market circuits across the United States. The other vendor ("Chop Chop Chop"), a middle-aged Korean male who is a local resident, travels a much more restricted market circuit.

For purposes of discrete, linear exposition, the following sections of this article examine speech events in the sequence proposed in Hymes' model. Because this article was originally presented as a multimedia performance, much of the richness of each speech event is compromised in the reduction, especially as constrained by present page limitations. What follows is an ethnographic overview of materials available to researchers through the Odyssey Archive at MSI.

Speech Event I: The Miracle Worker

The vendor's booth is sandwiched between stalls containing a variety of new and used goods, on a crowded midway of the swap meet. It is a bright summer afternoon, and consumers stroll unhurriedly down the many aisles of the open air market. The vendor's platform is elevated several feet off the ground, permitting him to speak down (literally as well as figuratively) to his audience. His table is filled with vegetables and props. The psychosocial occasion of this performance — its cultural definition — is the "demo." The demonstration is also likened to a "show." If the patter is alleged to be a hard sell, it is tempered at least by strains of amusement and diversion. This exists as one of hundreds of scenes through which consumers move during their site visit.

The vendor himself is a middle-aged Anglo sporting sunglasses and a cowboy hat, in affectation of perceived local canons of dress. The consumer cluster toward which he directs his pitch is composed of Whites, Asians, Hispanics and Blacks. While his principal objective is to sell a \$10.00 vegetable cutter to prospective customers, a number of ancillary objectives are apparent. He uses his pitch to recruit an audience,

literally distracting consumers from the cacophony of the midway, enticing them to focus upon his message. The information and entertainment he provides to his client base are significant components of his ends.

The act sequence of the vendor is arresting. In terms of form, he relies on a rising-then-falling intonation pattern. Among the rhetorical tropes employed most extensively are hyperbole and apostrophe. The content of the message is focussed principally on product attributes, convenience, and economy. The speech modalities invoked impart a special distinction to the message. The pitch is humorous, and the humor is largely of a disparaging or deprecating nature. Consumers are frequently the butt of his humor. The vendor adopts a conspiratorial tone, implicitly and explicitly promising to assist consumers in impression management; in fact, successful deception of significant others is one of the benefit bundles consistently touted. Finally, the vendor delivers his pitch in a perfunctory, detached, methodical manner. The precision and ease promised by the product are echoed in the vendor's pitch, where the cadences are often clinically delivered.

The instrumentalities in evidence are varied. Multiple channels are employed. The pitch itself is delivered on an oral/aural level. The demonstration occurs in a visual channel: vegetables, tools, rinse bowls and assorted props are manipulated to communicative ends. A signboard behind the vendor's table serves to display his product's name, and functions as a dart board of sorts that permits the vendor to toss vegetables sliced "as thin as poker chips" up on permanent display. The pitch is delivered in standard midwestern American English, with no code- or register-switching during the performance.

The behaviors and proprieties attached to speaking, and issues surrounding decoding are fairly transparent in the vendor's pitch. Although following a practiced script, sufficient allowance is made for extemporizing. For example, the vendor engages consumers (individually, or as a rhetorical collective) in banter and in ridicule throughout his pitch. He also commits several intentional "mistakes" in his presentation, using self-effacing remarks to bond his prospects more tightly to him. While implicit expectations of all actors call for an uninterrupted performance, punctuated interruption is in fact the norm. Some heckling and cross-talk emerges from the audience, with *sotto voce* argumentation and post-hoc criticism being common occurrences. Notions of turn-taking in conversational interaction prevail overall. Because the vendor is not a regional native, and because he travels a transcontinental market circuit, he employs a generic or functional language devoid of local resonance. Popular cultural references (for example, to soap operas) are as specialized a use of language as the vendor permits himself.

Of the speech genres employed by the vendor, the pitch is the predominant or overarching category. However a number of other subgenres combine to give his pitch its distinguishing characteristics. Principal among these subgenres is the joke, and principal among joke themes is the disparaging of the consumer as buyer. If joking is construed as ritual behavior (Sherry 1980), then the topics of the vendor's jokes can be used as indices of social stress upon which his product is positioned to have primary impact. Role expectations, time pressures, kith and kin relations and consumption skill are a few of the topics of his joking interactions.

Extensive reliance upon comparative advertising makes it clear that formal comparison is an important subgenre of pitch composition. Finally, proverbs and proverbial expressions are important units of pitch composition. Comparison and admonition modulated through humor is a fair characterization of the vendor's genre development.

Speech Event II: Chop Chop Chop

While this vendor's booth is also sandwiched between the stalls of other vendors on a similarly crowded midway, it differs in several respects from the one previously described. This booth is set up entirely at ground level, with the vendor's table being the only barrier between him and his prospective customers. In this sense, he is on equal footing with his prospects. The vendor has erected an awning over his table. This canopy provides shade for him and a number of consumers who have surrounded his stall. His performance unfolds literally in the round, unlike the proscenium based performance of his competitor. The cultural definition of the speech event is identical to the one just described: "demo" couched as "show."

The vendor in the present event is a middle-aged Korean male. He is dressed in a casual westcoast style, but as will become clear, his apparel is more semiotically significant than that of his competitor. The consumer cluster he has recruited is quite similar to that of his competitor, with the exception of a greater proportion of blacks. In terms of ends, the goals and outcomes of the Korean vendor are similar to his Anglo counterpart, with one significant exception: the Korean vendor closes more sales. Whether this is attributable to price, performance or some permutation remains to be considered.

The act sequence of the Korean vendor is every bit as arresting as that of his Anglo counterpart. The form of speech preferred by this vendor is a staccato shout, modulated intermittently by a chant. The pitch is a hybrid of soliloquy and stichomythia, with the rhetorical question forming the basis of what is essentially a lecture. Message content centers on product attributes, but in contrast to the competition, focuses as well on issues of health and utility. These are important positioning differences that arise from the vendor's cultural values system and his reading of American lifeways, as much as from business strategy.

The "key" component of this speech event differs markedly from the first. The Korean vendor is very serious in demeanor, and his performance is quite painstaking. He has a vigorous, animated style, conducting his demo with a flourish. His language becomes part of the slicing, dicing, cutting procedure he demonstrates, the words and cadences of his patter as much a cutting instrument as the implement itself. His style is quite personalized, despite the fixity of the script. Perhaps the best way to characterize the modality of his pitch is to call it ingratiating. The vendor bonds his audience with the gift of his performance. He is as eager to perform well as he is to close the sale.

Instrumentalities evident in the second pitch are quite distinct as well. Again, the pitch itself is delivered on oral and aural levels. Visually, however, this speech event is far more evocative than its counterpart. While the same demonstration props are evident (albeit manipulated more dexterously), additional props are employed to create a hotter semiotic environment. The vendor wears a roll-up cap to which is attached a button which proclaims "I love Chop Chop Chop." This same

logo is emblazoned in larger letters across his T-shirt. Framed newspaper clippings attesting to the vendor's local celebrity are attached to the awning struts of his stall. Consumers familiar with his performance through local mass media or from having seen it in other open air markets refer to the vendor himself as "Chop Chop." Speech forms themselves are also distinct from those present in the pitch described earlier. The Korean vendor's heavily accented American English is both a tactical and unintentional source of much of the humor of the pitch. The incongruity (some of it staged, as befits proper showmanship) of the persona and the accent gives the performance much of its power. The colloquial use of American English (the pitch is replete with idiomatic expressions such as "looking good!" and "I gotta go") contributes to this effect. Furthermore, the Korean vendor is adept at code switching, delivering parts of his pitch in English, Spanish and Chinese; relevant targets are acknowledged and complimented, while the audience as a whole is delighted.

Interaction and interpretation norms are also sufficiently different from the first pitch as to warrant comment. The Korean vendor's script is rigid and permits no extemporizing or adhoc interplay with the audience. An uninterrupted performance is expected and delivered. No heckling occurs during the pitch, and the cross-talk among the audience is entirely supportive. Calls of "Yeah Chop Chop!" or "Go Chop Chop!" are common. In fact, the presence of a larger coterie of black consumers produces an interesting synergy with the vendor's presentation style. One black consumer begins an antiphonal, overlapping call and response-type commentary in support of the pitch, much like the speech form that would be expected during a liturgical service. Because the vendor is a "local" (despite or because of his ethnicity) he is able to use language strategically to target his prospective customers in a way that the non-native vendor does not. Such effective linguistic targeting may contribute to the vendor's successful closing rate.

Finally, the genre of this second speech event is still the pitch, but the subgenres undergirding it differ noticeably from the first. The Korean vendor's pitch is primarily a lecture, peppered with colloquial expressions. While joking occurs, it is less formal than that of the counterpart pitch, and consumers, when criticized, are disparaged for their dietary patterns rather than their shopping acumen. The length of the pitch is half that of Anglo vendor's; the Korean vendor's performance is more stylized and yet less rhetorically elaborate than that of his competitor.

A Note on Dramatic Shape

Space limitations prompt a reductionist interpretive summary at this juncture. In one speech event, a non-native (i.e., non-local) vendor delivers a lengthy, rhetorically elaborate, precise but interactive, humorous pitch for an implement positioned as an economical and convenient labor saving tool. In a second speech event, a native (i.e., local) vendor delivers a shorter, tightly scripted, paralinguistically elaborate, impassioned and strategically incongruous pitch for a product positioned as a quasi-medical instrument. The former is a distanced exhortation to buy; the latter is an animated lecture encouraging purchase. The Anglo vendor makes relatively few sales of his (relatively expensive) product compared to those of his competitor. In each

Table 1
Dramatic Structure of Speech Events

Element	Vendor	
	The Miracle Worker	Chop Chop Chop
Initiation	Recruit audience	Recruit audience
Rising Action	5 (Demo joke comp)	3 (Am deficit remedial lect) 3 (Serial demo prod benefits) (Am deficit)
Climax	2 (Price gift joke focus)	(Price gift price)
Denouement	(Gift price reduc exhort)	
Close	(Gift joke)	(Price increase)
Conclusion	Disperse audience	Release audience
Result	Single Purchase	Multiple purchase

case, the audience has received an intangible gift which will ostensibly pay dividends for the vendor-performer.

The dramatic shape of these speech events remains to be considered. This dramatic shape I take to be the ritual substratum of the pitch. Based upon an analysis of transcripts (verbatim are not provided due to space limitation), the structures indicated in Table 1 emerge. Clearly, ritual beginnings and endings, formulaic repetition, and progressive movement are apparent at the fundamental level of the market pitch.

The Anglo vendor relies heavily on repetitive jokes and comparisons to other products, services and companies to build audience involvement. The Korean vendor prefers to reveal American problems, offer solutions, and repeatedly extol product benefits while conducting his demonstration to engage his prospects. In each case, the pitch climaxes with the announcement of price and the offer of an incentive gift. The Anglo vendor uses the gift as a stimulus to additional pitchwork, while the Korean vendor simply rests his case. The pricing strategy employed by each dealer is instructive. Whereas the Anglo dealer announces a price reduction and a doubling of his incentive, the Korean vendor actually raises his price marginally to compensate himself for the show. The former vendor literally disperses his audience, actually antagonizing some of the mere "lookers." The latter vendor releases his audience, which presumably has become enthralled, and thanks consumers for "watching" his "show." Note the lack of a falling action in the Korean vendor's pitch. His close comes abruptly after the climax, while his competitor returns consumers more gradually to the other delights and temptations of the midway.

As a primarily descriptive exercise, this article makes no attempt to frame generalizable propositions about market pitching efficacy. Rather, the data contained in this article are presented as baseline ethnography against which future studies of pitching may be positioned. Within space limitations imposed by proceedings, I have tried to illustrate the utility of a thick description of consumption phenomena. Clearly, much additional detailed work is required before our understanding of market pitching can become comprehensive.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to accomplish two objectives. First of all, I have drawn attention to a curiously neglected commercial art form every bit as fascinating as its mass media analogs: the market pitch. Secondly, I have used patter merchanting as a vehicle for introducing into the consumer research literature a

comprehensive framework for the interpretation of buyer and seller communication: the ethnography of speaking. The use of naturalistic inquiry methodology and the choice of a venue with significant ethnic diversity contributed further to the programmatic goals of this article. The rise of informal retailing, the increasing significance of direct marketing, the accelerating fragmentation of the domestic mass market and a number of other consumption trends make it clear that researchers must return their attention to fundamental market mechanisms if our understanding of consumer behavior is to deepen appreciably. The pitch and the open-air market are two such fundamental mechanisms.

The long term prospects of an ethnographic approach to commercial speech events are theoretically and practically significant. Comparative analysis of thickly described sales encounters — captured in multiple media that preserve contextual and paralinguistic features of performance — will permit more comprehensive modelling of the sales encounter. The effectiveness of the pitch can be evaluated by factors other than mere price manipulation, such as rhetorical virtuosity, information disclosure, or even social class. Conceivably, even more effective promotional patois might be generated through such analysis. Perhaps the most significant contribution of a detailed investigation of patter merchanting would be the impact outside the discipline of consumer research itself. The study of a consumption phenomenon as an extraeconomic event — an art form, a performance, etc. — would be of value to scholars in folklore, anthropology, sociology, communication, and marketing.

[References available from author]

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