

Some Theoretical Considerations for Studying Linguistic Politeness in Japanese

Koichiro KITAMURA

The present paper deals with linguistic politeness in Japanese. While giving an overview of the subject matter, this paper aims to raise attention to some theoretical issues necessary to be considered for pursuing the meaning of individual linguistic manipulation in discourse, particularly the style shift between formal and plain forms, in relation to culturally constructed norms in the society. The discussion is based on the assumption that the choice of a certain style among other alternatives manifests the speaker's recognition of his/her social position in relation to the other speech participants. It is suggested that style-shifting practiced in both written and spoken discourse can be studied as a key for the understanding of linguistic politeness in Japanese. Prior to the investigation of strategic use of Japanese polite forms surfaced in ongoing social interactions, the notion of various linguistic signs is discussed in this paper in terms of the two concepts being operative in discourse: "power and solidarity" (Brown and Gilman, 1972). Taking the dichotomy of in-group and out-group into consideration, style-shifting from one form to the other is characterized as an index to define and redefine social relationships in a given speech context.

Key words: Linguistic politeness, style-shifting, power, solidarity, Japanese culture

1. Introduction

The relationship between language and culture is complicated and controversial. However, as indicated by Foley, human may be defined as "social beings encultured through language" (Foley, 1997:24); therefore, linguistic practices can be placed as a part of cultural practices. It is recognized that linguistic practices are determined by cultural practices in which they are used, and in turn, linguistic

practices determine the ongoing cultural practices diagnostic of the society. In every society, the use of linguistic forms seems to operate in relation to its cultural contexts. The characterization of communication in one language therefore requires critical analysis of culturally particular practices that are correlated with the language.

In the first part of this paper, I will first give a brief review of some important literature related to the treatment of culture and the local construction of personhood in the society. As a development of the argument, the issue of linguistic politeness in the Japanese context will be discussed by characterizing social and psychological sources behind the linguistic manipulation. Finally, based on the viewpoint of language and culture, I will raise some possible research questions for further study.

2. The Treatment of Culture

Culture is the domain of cultural practices through which humans sustain viable social interactions or “structural couplings” (Maturana and Varela, 1987) with each other. There have been two anthropological approaches to the concept of culture. Firstly, according to the school of symbolic anthropology, culture can be viewed as a system of symbols by which humans enact their embodied understandings. Secondly, according to the school of cognitive anthropology, culture can be viewed as “a mental phenomenon lying behind actual social behavior, and as such, quite private and individual” (Foley, 1997:19). However, in order for such mental phenomena to be operative, culture must be characterized in relation to social contexts. Culture is a context where “the sedimentation of meanings” (Schutz, 1962) takes place in the process of human coordination of action.

The way meanings are signified in language appears to be universally constrained to some degree due to the sensorimotor capabilities that human bodies present. However, it is at least partially

recognized that the way meanings are created through language is relativistically variable. Gergen, for example, maintains that meanings are subject to “continuous reconstitution via the expanding domain of supplementation” (Gergen, 1994:267). Meanings are what language expresses, not only about the world we live in but also about the world we imagine. In this sense, meanings can be interpreted as something one creates with others in the history of structural couplings. Therefore, the creation of meaning is believed to be highly conventionalized in linguistic or cultural practices. If the constitution and reconstitution of meanings are largely realized through linguistic practices humans engage in, different conventions for linguistic practices across cultures would characterize one domain distinctively from the others.

Since dispositions or “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1991) are inculcated in social interaction, one’s linguistic practice is often emblematic of the social group he/she belongs to. Appropriate linguistic practices according to certain conventionalized codes are likely to be the means of becoming a person of a culturally constructed world. Of course there are variables in the way each individual coordinates his/her action in ongoing social interactions, as is clear from the fact that no social group can be completely homogeneous. However, as the definition of the proper use of languages varies from culture to culture, the acquisition of normative linguistic practices is essential to be a competent member of society. In fact, linguistic socialization of children demonstrates diverse varieties depending on cultural domains. For example, in her investigation of child-rearing patterns in Japan, Rosenberger (1992) illustrates a clear contrast to that in the Western European counterparts. Linguistic socialization is the process of coordination in ongoing social interactions in which people continuously monitor their actions by adjusting and readjusting along with the local ideology.

3. The View of Self

There are divergent forms of selfhood created by different cultural patterns through linguistic practices (Hsu, 1985). Regardless of cross cultural differences, each form appears to be the result of coordination carried out by an individual member of the culture to maintain a dynamic balance, what Hsu calls “psychosocial homeostasis” (Hsu, 1985:27), between psychic demands and sociocultural requirements. The view of self as the manifestation of a socially and culturally constructed being will provide a practical means to analyze cultural practices in habitus, or a correlation between linguistic knowledge and cultural norms.

Self is a controversial concept, and indeed its interpretation or conception varies from culture to culture (Carrithers and Lukes, 1985). However, the diversity of local conceptions of selfhood is likely to be elaborated by analyzing local linguistic socialization through which people become social agents who create and recreate their culturally constructed ideology in the community. If the way the self is crafted in a culture is manifested and thus observable through communication, the characterization of linguistic socialization would be a useful means to understanding the meaning of linguistic practices emblematic of the culture. The appropriation of a local ideology of selfhood through linguistic socialization will in turn contribute to the reproduction of the practice according to the local ideology.

Important to note as to the cognitive cycle of appropriation, however, is the fluid nature of the selfhood that people create and recreate in social relationships. A sense of self that people experience in ongoing social interactions is not a static and coherent, but variable and interactive being. Meanings are exchanged differently depending on a local cultural domain in which people as social agents create and recreate the sense of self according to the local ideology.

The analysis of the Japanese perspective towards self made by Devos (1985) demonstrates significant influences of the local ideology

on their community activity which are maintained through their linguistic practices. However, it is important to be aware, as reported in the study of Holland and Skinner (1998), that the way people create the selfhood cannot completely be homogeneous even under the same cultural context characterized by race or ethnicity. In the case of women in Nepal, for example, the creation of the selfhood is facilitated based not only on “figurative identity” (Holland and Skinner, 1998:121) which leads them to place themselves in terms of their castes in the figured world or domain of culture, but also on “positional identity” (ibid. 269) which brings about the consciousness of a position as women across or beyond the castes.

The variability of meanings being exchanged in one culture is further recognized in the practice of language itself because of its indexical functions to constitute contexts in discourse (Sliverstein, 1976, 1979). In fact, due to the different systems of indexing meanings, grammatical categories in one language may guide particular patterns of cognitive appropriation distinctive from the others. This indicates that some distinctive features of a language may lead to relativity in the way meanings are exchanged. In short, the appropriation of language in a culture is both the cause and the result of the action of the cultural patterns. The linguistic practice or style-shifting in this study is therefore to be treated as a part of wide ranging cultural activities.

4. Social Categories

Every society has its own way of categorizing interpersonal relationships. Sets of individuals who occupy similar interests, beliefs and dispositions or cultural practices can be regarded as a distinctive group in society. According to Bourdieu, such categorization is “a purely theoretical existence” (Bourdieu, 1991:231) constructed based on subjective judgments in the social world. Indeed, belonging to a particular group attributes an individual to sets of culturally

constructed norms of behavior or social roles. The socially collective viewpoints imposed on the individual's roles are largely dependent on such an awareness of his/her positions in society.

4. 1. The Management of Interpersonal Relationships

Beyond the fundamental attributes such as age and gender, there are a great number of categories extensively institutionalized in society: not only kinship, but also groups with particular dispositions. For example, political parties, business corporations, religious affiliations and educational associations are all socially and culturally elaborated categories in society. In the case of Western societies, the criteria for social stratification depend largely on one's occupation, educational background and economic base. In order for one's position in such socially and culturally defined categories to be acknowledged, there needs to be a system in society.

Languages are obviously one of the primary means of indexing such socially loaded human relationships. In fact, the appropriate use of languages cannot be realized without the relativization of self in relation to the other participants in a given context. For example, to be linguistically polite in English would require knowledge of relative ranking and the use of address terms (e.g. Dr. /Mr./Ms.) in order to index social distance between speech participants. The notion of "face-work" (i.e. the positive image of oneself that one intends to show to the other participants) advocated by Goffman (1967) and its associated "positive/negative politeness strategies" (i.e. the patterns of enacting a sense of the solidarity or the social distance between the interactants) elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1987) are further examples of how the western society is structured through linguistic practices according to its cultural norms.

Social relationships are enacted and maintained through linguistic practices in society. However, the way an individual relativizes the self in relation to the others in the social space may vary significantly from

culture to culture. In fact, in studying diverse linguistic practices in cross-cultural contexts, the approach to linguistic politeness in terms of the dual aspects (i.e. positive and negative) turns out to be a social theory inculcated in the western ideology which stresses individual autonomous rights rather than absolute universal constraints. Problems arise when the analysis of linguistic categorizations is made without taking local concepts of personhood into consideration. The different expectations and values on the social distance between Western and Japanese societies are the case at issue.

There has been a dispute over the universal constraints on human interactions to be characterized in terms of the two contrasting parameters of positive/negative politeness. Matsumoto (1988) for example claims that the western notion of social distance and their structures is not always tenable in analyzing categories of interpersonal relationships in Japanese culture. In fact, in Japanese society, to be depended on by someone is often taken not as an intrusion of autonomous rights, but as an enactment of interdependent relationships in which the one gains a honor with deference to his/her assigned social roles. Such cultural differences seem to be rooted in how the self is posited or inscribed in social relationships. The cross-cultural variability in the notions of interdependent relationships suggests that the investigation of social categories negotiated through linguistic practices in Japanese culture must involve an inquiry of social and cognitive forces operative in its local ideology of personhood.

4. 2. Social and Psychological Basis of Group Consciousness

The sociocentric dispositions inscribed in the Japanese sense of self are most notably realized in how one understands a relation between self and society. In contrast with the Western sense of self, a large number of studies have characterized the Japanese sense of self as sociocentric orientations: for example, to be “in social network” (Watsuji, 1979), “sensitive to other people” (Benedict, 1946), “in

binary rapport” (Mori, 1979), “aware of acknowledgement of his or dependence on others” (Matsumoto, 1988), and “interfactual” (Kuwayama, 1992). Moreover, Tobin (1992) demonstrates in his research on the pedagogy of selfhood in a Japanese preschool that social accommodation, responsiveness and cooperation are given high importance for a child in constructing a group-oriented sense of self in Japan.

What is inferred from these studies is that to be a full-fledged member in society may often involve an appropriation of self-positioning in accordance with its socially and culturally conventionalized manners. Obviously, there is little doubt that Japanese is not the only society where each individual locates him/herself in the relational context, and acts according to assigned rights and duties. However, it is worthwhile pointing out that the place of self in relation to social relationships defined by Japanese society is manifested not only in terms of self-society axis, but also of its range of cultural values. The concept of “*uchi*”-“*soto*” (‘inside’-‘outside’) axis is a case in point.

The knowledge and skills to make distinctions between *uchi* and *soto* dimensions in interpersonal relationships are termed as “*kejime*” in Bachnik (1992). According to Bachnik, *kejime* determines *uchi* and *soto* or an axis for indexing social contexts by the shifting of group boundaries which constantly occurs because everyone in a scene must be defined as either ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ relative to all the other participants (Bachnik, 1992:167). Bachnik’s view of a group boundary as permeable may very well indicate the fluid nature of *uchi* - *soto* based interpersonal relationships.

In order for a group to be established, there needs to be an element which is remarkable enough for each individual member to give rise to a feeling of unity. The theory of group consciousness presented by Nakane (1984) exemplifies the process of stressing the group consciousness of ‘us.’ Along with the theory of group, the concept of

“*amae*” (‘dependence’) advocated by Doi (1973) contributes to providing the structure of *uchi* / *soto* relationships with its psychological basis. Social categories in Japanese culture concern the relativization of self in relation to group or society defined in terms of constantly shifting *uchi* - *soto* axis and varying degree of *amae* mentality in social relationships. In this regard, *uchi* - *soto* dichotomy and *amae* mentality can be regarded as social markers to indexing interpersonal relationships.

The greatest significance of such Japanese social categories lies in an interrelation with its language. It is widely recognized that Japanese speakers drastically change their ways of communication depending on the *uchi* and *soto* dichotomy to correspond with the degree of *amae* being conceived in the speech context. In fact, a certain style among other alternatives is selected depending on how social relationships are defined by the social and psychological indexes. Moreover, it should be noted that the two social dimensions of *uchi* and *soto* are contrasting but still variably shifting depending on how social relationships between speech participants are defined. The understanding and practice of such culturally elaborated social categories are not instantly acquired but consciously learned in social interactions.

5. Linguistic Politeness in Japanese

Every language functions in relation to its socio-cultural contexts. However, languages differ in their approaches to indexing interpersonal relationships. Some languages are equipped with linguistically explicit forms to indexing self in relation to social space. The Japanese language is a common illustrator of an indexical correlation between the use of linguistic forms and the social context. The Japanese language presents a complex system of social deixis, and its honorific system is exemplified as an explicit linguistic device to expressing respect, deference, and politeness in social relationships and

contexts. The choice of one style over the others in Japanese honorific system reflects the speaker's view of self in relation to the other participants in a given context.

5.1. *Mas*-form and \emptyset -form¹⁾

The Japanese honorific system is extensively classified into three categories: 'honorific,' 'humble,' and 'polite' forms (i.e. *mas*-form) which interrelatedly signify social relationships between participants: the speaker, referent and addressee in a given context. The process of honorification is basically explained in terms of the two functions: to signal "the relative higher status of a participant in the speaker's utterances *vis-à-vis* the speaker himself" and to register "the relative status entitlements of addressee against speaker" (Foley, 1997:319).

Honorific and humble forms function with regard to the referent. Honorific forms are used when the speaker expresses respect to a person or the person's activities. They locate the referent in higher status than the speaker or the member of the speaker's in-group. Humble forms are also used when the speaker shows deference to a person or the person's activities. They place the speaker or the member of the speaker's in-group in lower status than the addressee, which in turn gives respect to the addressee.

Mas-form operates in relation to the addressee. It is thus used when the speaker expresses deference towards the addressee of higher social status. However, regardless of the deference, it is often characterized as a feature of formal speech. For example, Tsujimura (1996) describes *mas*-form to be "neutral with regard to the target of respect" and thus "used when a conversational situation is formal" (ibid. 363).

The use of *mas*-form is one of the most common ways of expressing politeness in Japanese speech acts. The four categories of verbals, consist of 'verb,' 'adjectives,' 'nominal adjective,' and 'noun + copula' are marked by "*mas*-" and "des-" endings. The morphological

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manipulations are summarized in a simplified chart by Hinds (1984) below:

Table 1 Morphological Manipulation

	POLITE	NON POLITE	LITERARY
Verb			
<i>iku</i> 'go'	<i>ikimasu</i>	<i>iku</i>	<i>iku</i>
Adjective			
<i>aoi</i> 'blue'	<i>aoi desu</i>	<i>aoi</i>	<i>aoi</i>
Nominal Adjective			
<i>hen da</i> 'strange'	<i>hen desu</i>	<i>hen da</i>	<i>hen de aru</i>
Noun + Copula			
<i>hon da</i> 'it's a book'	<i>hon desu</i>	<i>hon da</i>	<i>hon de aru</i>

(Hinds, 1984:154–5)

The use of *mas*-form is related to an aspect of formality defined by Irvine: “invoking positional identities” which concern “the social identities of participants in social gatherings” (Irvine, 1979:778). *Mas*-form is therefore viewed as a formality marker that invokes positional and public identities as a person in social context.

Mas-form can thus be characterized as a linguistic sign reflective of formal speech. Regardless of the social status of the addressee, *mas*-form is to be selected when a conversational situation is formal. In fact, it is widely recognized that the use of *mas*-form is highly conventionalized in various fields of Japanese speech events. For example, one is supposed to use *mas*-form in such formal contexts as law courts, rituals and business deals. As well as a rule of relativizing the distance of the referent in the use of honorific and humble forms, a rule of appropriating formality of conversational contexts in the use of *mas*-form is often learned consciously through the linguistic socialization at home, school and wider social groups in Japanese society.

It is important to note, however, that the use of *mas*-form is not always determined in everyday conversations. In fact, it is rather obligatory for young people to employ *mas*-form in conversation with an elder, but not vice versa. The use of *mas*-form in this sense plays such a deictic role as to mark a parameter of the relative social positions in informal settings.

While age in this case is an obvious factor that conditions the use of *mas*-form, the parameter of the relative social positions must be understood further in particularly Japanese terms. Suzuki (1978) points out that crucial to Japanese society is a contrast between “*senpai*” versus “*koochai*” (‘senior’ versus ‘junior’). According to Suzuki, the former refers to “an earlier graduate” and the later “a late graduate” of the same school (Suzuki, 1978:132). However, the two contrasting terms are applied to seniority not only in school, but also in any kinds of social groups in Japanese society. The notion of seniority, especially in the latter, must be understood here in particularly social sense rather than biological one. In fact, it is widely recognized that a new member of social groups would speak to his/her senior members in *mas*-form, regardless of their biological age.

The non-reciprocal exchange of *mas*-form between the pair of opposites, *senpai* and *koochai* demonstrates that the linguistic sign contributes to the enactment of culturally figured social relationships in Japanese society. It is clear that *mas*-form functions as a social deixis to the addressee in addition to a feature of formal speech: it is used when the speaker expresses deference towards the addressee as well as admits formality in conversational situations.

5.2. The Mixture of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form

Historically, Japanese language is largely divided into the two: “*bun-go*” (‘literary language’) and “*koo-go*” (‘colloquial language’) or ‘Classical Japanese’ and ‘Modern Japanese.’ Shibatani (1990) posits that division would be made in between the twelfth and sixteenth

centuries. Corresponding to the history of Japanese civilization as in *Nara* /*Heian* periods (710–1185), *Kamakura* and *Muromachi* /*Edo* periods (1192–1868), and the *Meiji*, *Taisho*, *Showa* and *Heisei* periods (1868–), the name given to the language of each period is often referred to as ‘Old/Late Old Japanese,’ ‘Middle/Early Modern Japanese,’ and ‘Modern Japanese’ respectively. According to Shibatani, Modern Japanese is often contrasted with Late Old Japanese and Middle Japanese in terms of *koo-go* and *bun-go* (Shibatani, 1990:120). It is in the *Meiji* period when the issue of the choice of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form in Modern Japanese was authorized by an official regulation called “*gen-bun-itchi no undo*” (‘the movement for consistency between written language and spoken language’).

The movement for consistency between promotes the separate use of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form as distinctive forms that represent the written/spoken language in discourse. The distinction of styles in terms of the use of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form is still maintained in the Japanese language today. However, it should be noted that there are three styles which are relevant to the choice of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form in contemporary Japanese writing: “*bun-go-choo*” (‘written style’), “*koo-go-choo*” (‘spoken style’), and “*kaiwa-choo*” (‘conversational style’). A Japanese language dictionary for example describes the former as traditional styles that are adopted in formal speech, and the latter as the most common style that is normally used in casual speech among friends (Kabashima, 1989:1400).

Conventions prescribe that the mixture of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form without any specific reasons should be avoided. However, regardless of their different representations, it is widely recognized that the two forms are used simultaneously in discourse. The high degree of co-occurrence suggests that the inquiry of such reason which licenses the mixture of the two styles, and moreover the meaning behind the linguistic manipulations would require a further investigation beyond the typology of styles in a Japanese dictionary.

5.3. Style-Shifting between *mas*-form and \emptyset -form

It has been known that a number of linguists have attempted to characterize the use of *mas*-form in pragmatically cohesive rules. Among them, a prescriptive rule presented by Haga seems to be the fundamental work that contributes to characterizing the conditions on the use of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form which he calls “*bunmatsu-ikkan no gensoku*” or ‘the principle of consistency in sentence-ending forms’ (Haga, 1962:62). As Maynard put it, paraphrasing Haga, a sporadic use of *mas*-form appearing in \emptyset -form dominant discourse may index the ‘formality,’ while a sporadic use of \emptyset -form appearing in *mas*-form dominant discourse may indicate “an interpersonal familiarity” and “closeness to the listener” (Maynard, 1991:554).

Furthermore, Hori characterizes the style choice between *mas*-form and \emptyset -form is characterized as an accommodating or distancing speech acts to maintain “personal space” (Hori, 1985:196, Trans. Maynard, 1991:555) between individuals. Those descriptions of *mas*-form suggested that the manipulation of the two linguistic forms function as to controlling the access to solidarity. The avoidance of using *mas*-form in casual conversations between friends is thus characterized as a sign of being in *uchi* relationships where psychological territories are open to each other.

Giving allowance to the implicature in the style shift, the view of Haga and Hori is successful in pointing out that the linguistic manipulation is treated no longer as a violation of consistency prescribed in conventions but as an implication of social distance relativized by the participants in the discourse. However, it is not likely that their work would fully provide the pragmatics of *mas*-form with the social and cognitive process in which the speech participants work out with the implicature. In fact, it is not clear how the sporadic use of *mas*-form in \emptyset -form-dominant discourse may be interpreted as a sign of expressing a sense of distance, not of lacking the ability to maintain the consistency in styles. Nor is it clear in what situation the

sporadic use of \emptyset -form in *mas*-form-dominant discourse may be interpreted as a sign of expressing a sense of solidarity, not of neglecting sets of linguistic etiquette.

Recent works on style-shifting or more commonly referred to as “speech-level shift” (Mimaki, 2013:85) in Japanese have provided more comprehensive views of the linguistic manipulation by categorizing the occurrence condition for *mas*-form marking and its functions in detail. Maynard also defines style-shifting as “a manipulative device to express some aspects of discourse modality (Maynard, 1991:580). The condition for \emptyset -form marking is summarized as follows:

The *da* style is selected (1) when the speaker takes a perspective internal to the narrative setting and immediately responds within that framework, (2) when the speaker presents backgrounded information semantically subordinate within the discourse structure and (3) when the speaker finds the addressee close enough and the speaker uses a style similar to the style in which he or she self-addresses. (Maynard, 1991:551)

Usami points out the possibility of *mas*-form and \emptyset -form functioning as indicators of “the social and psychological relationships between the speaker and hearer” (Usami, 2002: 138) by demonstrating the correlation between the frequency of occurrence of style-shifting and “the power (age, social status) and/or gender of the interlocutor” (ibid. 3) in discourse level.

6. Concluding Remarks

As explained in the above sections, previous studies suggest that a dimension of solidarity as well as formality is operative in the style choice between *mas*-form and \emptyset -form. However, in order to seek a correlation of the social and psychological forces with the linguistic

manipulation, the notion of solidarity needs to be elaborated on particularly in Japanese terms. Crucial to Japanese linguistic politeness is that style-shifting is codetermined by a range of cultural values, or the two contrasting but shifting parameters of *uchi* and *soto*. And equally important is the fact that, due to its fluid nature of the parameters, the frame of social relationships and contexts is not fixed but consistently negotiated in ongoing social interactions. The motivation for style-shifting from one form to the other is therefore to be discussed further by examining how people extensively relativize a boundary of in-group and out-group relationships with each other in their social encounters.

While linguistic politeness in Japanese is a wide area for further study, I believe that the following issues should be taken into consideration.

- (1) what brings about a sense of *uchi* or *soto* among a group of people in their social encounters;
- (2) how it is realized in their style choice;
- (3) how the meaning of the linguistic manipulation is exchanged among the members, and;
- (4) what effects linguistic practices may be imposed on the group.

In order to find out possible answer for these questions, I suggest that it is important to investigate into style-shifting by characterizing social and psychological sources behind linguistic choice through systematic surveys and by analyzing *mas*-form and *o*-form in naturally occurring conversations where negotiation of its meaning is taking place. The motivations for the linguistic manipulation are to be analyzed in ongoing social interactions among Japanese speakers including members of Japanese speech communities abroad. The investigation is to shed light on the interactions between people and structures by demonstrating how extensively the *uchi* and *soto* dichotomy is interrelated with the linguistic signs as social deixis in Japanese speech acts.

Notes

- 1) As to the treatment of polite and plain forms, this article describes the forms in verb morphology *masu* /*desu* endings as *mas*-form and *da* endings as \emptyset -form. The rationale for the description is that both *masu* /*desu*-ending and *da*-ending forms or styles do not necessarily determine the level of politeness in the same ways as honorific and humble forms do. Style-shifting between the two forms is therefore not interpreted as an indication of being 'more polite' or 'less polite'. In terms of the neutrality, the absence of *mas*-form is described as \emptyset -form.

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