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Language Teacher Identity: Historical Perspectives, Philosophical Frameworks, and Research Directions for Japan

Matthew Nall
Assistant Professor
Faculty of Foundational Academics
Miyagi University

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【Correspondence】
Matthew Nall
宮城大学基盤教育群
nall@myu.ac.jp

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, language teacher identity (LTI) has become an influential area of academic study within fields related to foreign language teaching and learning. While there are many well-written reviews of literature on LTI currently available, this article seeks to complement the ongoing academic conversation about LTI by placing contemporary understandings of identity and selfhood in a historical context, and within a broader philosophical framework. This paper explores the *traditional, modern, and postmodern* understandings of selfhood and identity. This work contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of LTI and the current trends in empirical research, where dialogical self-theory, ecological approaches, and positioning theory are employed as tools for researching, theorizing, and conceptualizing LTI. It has been established that research on LTI can be beneficial for teachers, students, institutions, and for the broader communities in many ways. This article ends by identifying several important areas concerning LTI in Japanese sociocultural contexts where more research is warranted.

Introduction

Philosophers have debated the nature of the self and identity for centuries. This growing and evolving body of knowledge has been controversial to say the least, and theorizing, conceptualizing, and analyzing identity has proven to be an intriguing yet illusive venture for thinkers in contemporary and historical time frames, and across the various academic disciplines. Recently, the concept of language teacher identity (LTI) has received ample attention in empirical research in domains related to teaching and learning foreign languages (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Yazan, 2018; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Today, at academic conferences related to second language teaching and learning or in applied linguistics, one is likely to find symposia and presentations on new and interesting aspects of LTI research. There is a wealth of volumes dedicated to LTI available to the researcher and teacher, and several top-tier academic journals have recently dedicated special issues to uncovering the intricacies of various aspects of LTI.

Focusing research on LTI may on the surface seem trivial, but with deeper consideration, and being informed by an intuitive view of the complex nature of learning environments in specific sociocultural contexts, there are important implications which are to be discerned concerning LTI. By conducting research on LTI, researchers can gain a better understanding about how teachers think and act. As a result, this knowledge "will help create democratic learning and teaching spaces where language teachers can develop empowered identities through agentic actions in order to not only author their teaching practices but also become advocates for social justice, challenge social oppression and advance equity within minoritized language learning and teaching communities" (Kayi-Aydar et. al, 2019, 3). By focusing research on LTI, researchers can inform the educational field at the macro and micro-levels. This work contributes to the creation and maintenance of supportive teaching environments and to a reduction in attrition rates. It can support teacher empowerment by promoting identity negotiation and development, and by encouraging teacher agency emergence (Beauchamp, 2019). It opens doors for teachers to become the owners of their own pedagogy and practice. In short, focusing research efforts on understanding LTI development allows for the improvement of both the professional working environment as well as the educational outcomes for students, institutions, and for their broader communities.

Teachers often consider their identities. However, this is done in a peripheral manner through discourse with colleagues, students, and other stakeholders about teaching and learning. Making LTI the focus of empirical research allows teachers and researchers to systematically examine who they are. It allows teachers to bring their ideas about their identities to a level of awareness (Barkhuizen, 2020). Over the past several decades there has been a social paradigm shift in applied linguistics (Block, 2003), accompanied by a move in research and practice in foreign language education away from teacher-centered learning models (e.g., grammar-translation method; audio-lingual method) toward student-centered and active-learning approaches (e.g., communicative language teaching; task-based learning). These trends have served as catalysts for important evolutions and innovations concerning the roles of teachers and LTI development. Before the sociocultural perspective gained influence in the fields of second language acquisition and teaching, there was little attention paid to teachers and their identities (Johnson, 2009). Teachers, once thought to be merely technicians and the purveyors of information, have now come to be viewed as active agents of change (Varghese et al., 2005).

In recent years, an abundance of research has been conducted concerning LTI, and there are many well-written literature reviews and collections of empirical studies on the subject of LTI available to the reader (e.g., De Costa & Norton, 2017; Varghese, et al., 2016; Yazan, 2018; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). Several top-tier academic journals have dedicated special issues on LTI. These are highly recommended if a well-informed review of literature on LTI or a broad overview of research on LTI is of interest (See De Costa et al., 2017; Varghese et al., 2016). However, research areas in LTI are not exhausted, and there remains a need for further exploration in empirical and theoretical studies in specific sociocultural contexts.

In the following pages, this manuscript will do what is not done often enough in reviews of LTI research. It will place the discussion about LTI within broader historical and philosophical contexts and theoretical frameworks. Prevalent conceptualizations of self and identity throughout human history will be discussed in order to bring the reader to better understand present-day conceptualizations of identity and the contemporary research methods for identifying and analyzing LTI. Finally the author will place the discussion of LTI within an academic field of study, and discuss areas ripe for further exploration of LTI by making some recommendations for further research, with a focus specifically within the sociocultural contexts of Japan.

Theories of Self: Historical Perspectives and Philosophical Frameworks

Throughout human history conceptualizations of selfhood and identity have taken on different forms (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). In academic discussions about identity, it is important to first view and understand these different conceptualizations and their relationships to one another. These conceptualizations are organic, and changes occur in accordance with a kind of Hegelian dialectic (Hegel, 1812). One thesis gives birth to an opposing view of reality, an antithesis. This creates a tension that is eventually resolved through a synthesis, which then gives rise to a new set of opposing forces, and so on.

The longest-lived conceptualization of identity is the traditional model of selfhood. In this model, humanity has been placed at an intersection between the dichotomous scheme of the other-worldly (spiritual) realm and the temporal (physical) world. Here, individual identity is subject to the spiritual (perfect) world while existing in the temporal (imperfect) world. In this reality, the human condition is bifurcated between the bodily and spiritual worlds, with priority of the two given to the spiritual. This framework has been manifested in cultural rituals and myths, and notable life-events such as birth and death have carried important significance for the individual and the respective cultures.

The *modern* model of selfhood was strongly influenced by the Enlightenment period within the western liberal thought tradition. During this period the spiritual became marginalized to an extent, as societies and cultures experienced a re-awakenment of logic and rationality, once again following suit with the Classical Greek tradition. In this worldview, value was placed on universal truths, the perfectibility of human nature, and human progress was seen to be achieved by the application of reason and science. As a consequence, in a modernist worldview there was a strong division between the internal self and the outwardly other; between the spiritual and the physical, the religious and the political. No single thinker can be credited with founding the modernist movement. However, René Descartes (1637) and his philosophical ideas can be seen as one cornerstone of the early Enlightenment period, and therefore a precursor to the modernist metaphysical conception of identity. In pre-modern terms, the self was considered to be a subject to the broader spiritual narrative. Humanity lived in a world where the individual, and therefore identity, was subject to cultural (religious) norms. Descartes, with his *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and his *cogito ergo sum*, argues for the metaphysical existence of individual identity to be placed entirely within the self. Consequently, this move forces the realm of absolute truth from being subject to the outwardly and spiritual, to the inward, emphasizing the value of individualistic truths as they are discovered within the self. This was a major step in western philosophy, helping to pave the way for the modernist movement, and subsequent conceptualizations of identity.

The *postmodern* or the *poststructuralist* conceptualization of selfhood and identity came into existence as a reaction to the modernist movement. In this tradition, philosophical thought moves away from universal truths towards skepticism. In stark contrast to modernism, postmodernist thought values "the importance of difference, otherness, local knowledge, and fragmentation" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 4). The conceptualization of self and identity comes to be seen as an entity that is decentralized, fluid, and inextricably connected to social context and to discourse. One of the early contributors to this way of thinking about identity was Friedrich Nietzsche. Identity forms the core of Nietzsche's arguments found in *The Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche, 2014) and the *Will to Power* (Nietzsche, 1968). In a rejection of Aristotelian logic and metaphysics, Nietzsche championed the idea of perspectivism, claiming that we are all prisoners of our perspectives. Truth, therefore, does not exist in a universal or objective sense, but rather only on a subjective individual level. One's reason, experience, and perception of truth in the world are highly dependent on, and filtered by, one's perspective. For Nietzsche, there is no absolute or objective truth outside of one's perspective. Nietzsche thusly issues a challenge to the logical supremacy of identity when he argues against enduring substances and universal truths (Nietzsche, 1974; Nietzsche, 1968). For Nietzsche, individual identity becomes a site of constant struggle between the Apollonian and Dionysian drives. Life, and therefore individual identity, is viewed as a process of constant internal struggle and becoming. In this way, contemporary postmodern and poststructuralist conceptualizations of identity are aligned with Nietzsche's ontology of identity as being composed of tropes rather than universals. For Nietzsche, identity is not unitary, grounded in Aristotelian logic and metaphysics, but rather it emerges out of difference (Steinhard, 2005). That is to say that identity is no longer considered a singular attribute of the individual. It is negotiated within the individual, and throughout various sociocultural contexts. It is dynamic and changes over time and in space. Influential poststructuralist thinkers from the French fashion, such as Foucault and Derrida, echoed this view seeing individual identity no longer as a unified subject, but rather as something that is inextricably tied to and intertwined with the social environment and language (Richardson et al., 1998). They rejected universality, objectivity, and rationality in favor of relativistic concepts of truth and identity.

This brings us to the contemporary evolution in philosophical thought concerning identity—dialogical self-theory (DST). Technically speaking, DST is the latest in post-structuralist approaches to identity, and has been gaining intellectual clout in academia since the early 2000's (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). DST is grounded in the individuality of American Pragmatism (James, 1890; Mead, 1934), and in Russian Dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Bakhtin, 1986), which emphasized the value of dialogue within the self between various I-positions. Bakhtin recognized that individuals speak with multiple voices and regularly assume multiple I-positions. DST is an "understanding of the self as composed of multiple I-positions in the landscape of the human mind" (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 310). It combines the modern and postmodern conceptualizations of identity in order to more appropriately capture individual identity from a perspective that provides "a theoretical viewpoint that assumes a multiple, discontinuous and social nature of identity, while simultaneously explaining identity as being unitary, continuous and individual" (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 310). DST assumes from the start that the *traditional, modern*, and *postmodern* models of selfhood do not exist in historical succession, but rather they are simultaneously claimed by the individual as they manifest themselves in the various I-positions that are assumed in an ongoing internal dialogue (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 5).

Positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), a poststructural approach to understanding identity negotiation, takes on an important role in much of contemporary research in LTI. DST is concerned with examining individuals within society and the ways and methods that they position and reposition themselves both temporally and spatially. That is to say that individual identity is closely tied to the various positions that that they take in a given time, social environment, and culture (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). From this perspective, identity is seen not as a static entity or attribute of the individual, but rather it is socially constructed. It is fluid and negotiated depending on specific timeframes and contexts (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Hermans and Hermans- Konopka (2010) emphasize that "one of the basic tenets of DST is that people are continuously involved in a process of positioning and repositioning, not only in relation to other people, but also in relation to themselves" (p. 7). Positioning theory is concerned with speech and actions that are "unstable, contestable, and ephemeral" (Harré, 2004; Harré & van Langenhove, 1991). Teacher identity is "an ongoing process of negotiating and interrelating multiple I-positions [e.g. teacher, facilitator, role-model, mentor, life-coach, materials preparer, curriculum designer, administrator, researcher] in such a way that a more or less coherent and consistent sense of self is maintained throughout various participations and self-investments in one's (working) life" (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 315).

Globalization is also an important element found within contemporary identity research. It is one of the major defining characteristics of society today, and it plays an important role in the identity development of both individuals and communities. Robertson (1995) argued for the adoption of the hybrid term *glocalization* in order to discuss and examine ways that global issues manifest themselves in local forms. Today, *glocalization* is viewed as having an important influence on identity (both individual and collective), and DST, ecological approaches, and positioning theory are research tools that can be used to discover important insights into identity development of individuals and communities in the world of today.

Defining Language Teacher Identity

In any discussion concerning LTI, researchers consistently encounter a problem of semantics. Definitions of identity in literature are at best numerous, vague, and ambiguous. A paradox emanates from the fact that identity as a concept does not have a widely agreed upon definition, and any attempt to define the term will inevitably lead to objections from the various disciplines. Researchers, for example in fields such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, or applied linguistics, have specialized ideologies, epistemologies, ontologies, and metaphysical beliefs about identity. Therefore, each discipline will inevitably argue for the subtle differences in their conceptualizations of identity. The semantic problem is compounded when researchers within their fields have to make a choice of theoretical perspectives when conducting research. They have to make certain choices about their understanding of identity, whether it be poststructuralist, sociocultural, dialogic, based on communities of practice, or social identity theory, for example. Even within a single academic field there can be much debate about the concept of identity.

Defining identity in fields related to second language teaching and learning has likewise been problematic. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) describe LTI as being multiple and dynamic. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) described LTI as “an organizing element in teachers' professional lives” (p. 175). Others claimed that LTI emanates from the way that teachers answer the questions “Who am I at this moment?” and “Who do I want to become?” (Beijaar et al., 2004). In an attempt to answer the semantic challenge, Dr. Gary Barkhuizen (2017) surveyed over 40 prominent researchers in the field concerning their conceptualizations of LTI. He then systematically conducted a meta-analysis of these conceptualizations in order to produce a synthesized definition of LTI. The author hoped that this definition would “be interpreted variously from different theoretical perspectives as well as from different contextual realities . . . and possibly prompt alternative ways of thinking about LTI” (p. 3).

> Language teacher identities (LTIs) are cognitive, social, emotional, ideological, and historical—they are both inside the teacher and outside in the social, material and technological world. LTIs are being and doing, feeling and imagining, and storying. They are struggle and harmony: they are contested and resisted, by self and others, and they are also accepted, acknowledged and valued, by self and others. They are core and peripheral, personal and professional, they are dynamic, multiple, and hybrid, and they are foregrounded and backgrounded. And LTIs change, short-term and over time—discursively in social interaction with teacher educators, learners, teachers, administrators, and the wider community, and in material interaction with spaces, places and objects in classrooms, institutions, and online. (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4)

This understanding of identity is far from simple. Barkhuizen's (2017) conceptualization of LTI is at its heart a poststructuralist and postmodern conceptualization of identity as an entity that is not attributed to the individual, but rather is multiple and changing, and inextricably tied to the sociocultural context. Fairbanks and Hinman (2018) add that:

> The concept of identities encompasses the ways in which experiences, practices, and contexts shape how people respond to their circumstances. In current conceptions, identity is understood as multiple, shifting, learned, and improvisational. Individuals enact identities as good teachers, strict teachers, supportive teachers, confidant, or uncertain teachers. Their identities are always in flux and enacted in specific historical and cultural spaces. (Fairbanks & Hinman, 2018, p. 4371)

In an attempt to make LTI more approachable as a research subject, Barkhuizen (2020) also breaks LTI down into seven component parts that can be addressed and conceptualized individually in research. (1) *Embodied identity* is the identity that is located within our own bodies. It is mobile and contextualized and related to our physical presence in space. (2) *Reflexive identity* relates to how we view ourselves and who we think that we are. This is usually represented by a complex mesh of personal attributes. (3) *Projected identity* refers to how we want others to view us. This is does not only include our physical or semiotic attributes like appearance and gestures, but it also includes sociolinguistic manifestations and the pragmatic use of language. (4) *Recognized identity* deals with the manner that individuals project their identities and how those projections are understood, interpreted, and acted upon by others. (5) In professional working environments, identities are sometimes ascribed to individuals. This facet is known as *imposed identity*. (6) We all have ideas about our hoped-for, or possible selves. *Imagined identity* is how we imagine ourselves, or our ideal selves. It is contextualized through participation in imagined communities in other times and other places. (7) The final facet deals with *identity categories and resources*. These are generally grounded in the culturally embedded terms that we use to categorize people and talk about identity such as race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, class, and religion, for example.

Directions for LTI Research in Japan

Research studies within the fields of second language teaching and learning generally can be categorized in two groups—the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp, and the sociocultural camp (Fazel, 2014). These camps have their own epistemologies, ideologies, and methods. While research studies of the former camp tend to be primarily quantitative analyses, studies in the latter are generally qualitative or mixed-method research designs. If one examines the contents of the most prestigious peer-reviewed journals in Japan that are related to second language teaching and learning, (e.g., *The Annual Review of English Language Education in Japan; JACET Journal*; JALT Journal), one can see that there is an obvious bias toward quantitative research studies in Japan, and a bias toward research studies in the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp. LTI research plays an important role in educational research globally, and Japan remains a region where this area of study is relatively unexplored, posing ample opportunities for future research.

As much of recent research in Japan has been focused on producing high-quality quantitative research studies in the cognitive/psycholinguistic camp, there is general a need for more qualitative research studies related to LTI, especially from sociocultural perspectives. Such studies could potentially be grounded in sociocultural theory, ecological approaches (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), or dialogical self-theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). It would be useful for studies in this area to draw upon accepted post-structuralist conceptualizations of identity (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Fairbanks & Hinman, 2018), or focus on specific elements of identity found with Barkhuizen's (2017) unified definition of LTI. Additionally, language teacher agency is closely related to LTI (Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019), and future studies on teacher agency and identity development in Japan would be of merit.

In recent years many studies on second language learning and teaching have adopted anthropological research methods, such as the ethnography (Creswell, 2008, p. 473-510). This genre also employs autoethnography (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012) and collective ethnography as methods of exploring LTI development. While there are some objections to autoethnography as a method of scientific inquiry due to the subjective nature, autoethnography is gaining ground in academic circles as some argue that it has an important place in pre-service teacher training programs as well as in professional development programs (Yazan, 2018). Likewise, there are several volumes dedicated to guiding the researcher in educational ethnographic studies such as autoethnography (Chang, 2008) and collaborative ethnographies (Chang et al., 2013; Norris et al., 2012). Engagement in the practice of auto and collective ethnographies can support teacher empowerment through identity and identity negotiation (Kanno & Stuart, 2011) which is related to, and manifested in teachers' agentic actions (Beauchamp, 2019; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020).

As LTI studies tend to be qualitative in nature, they rely heavily on the data collection methods of interviews, focus groups, observations, narrative inquiry, critical incidents reflection, and written reflective data. Utilizing these methods, there are several areas of research in Japan that are ripe for exploration in empirical qualitative research study. Many of these studies lie in examining the relationship between policy and LTI, as policy changes can have an important influence on LTI (e.g., Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019; Ng & Boucher-Yip, 2017), while others are grounded in sociocultural issues in the classroom (e.g., Ng, 2017).

LTI Research in Primary School Contexts

One of the avenues in LTI research in Japan that has opened up to inquiry recently has to do with policy changes and issues of *imposed* versus *imagined* identity. Recently, there have been significant changes to English educational policy at the elementary level in Japan, with English now being taught as a subject for upper-elementary school children, and English activities have been included in the curricula for 3rd and 4th year elementary students. This poses many professional challenges for elementary school teachers (Nemoto, 2018), as many of them have no background in teaching English, and their new imposed identity as English teachers may be in conflict with their *imagined identity*. This is an area of LTI that should be addressed in research. Special regard should be given to examining LTI development of mid to late-career teachers at the time of policy change implementations. Such studies would serve to inform pre-service teacher training programs, as well as current and future professional development programs.

LTI Research in Junior and Senior High School Contexts

Japan has also experienced a recent push in policy demanding the adoption of communicatively based teaching methods (e.g., MEXT, 2014), such as communicative language teaching (Brandl, 2008) and task-based learning (Moore, 2018). This effort has been muddled with problems as policy changes require English Medium Instruction and communicatively based teaching methods, while influential standardized tests have had a powerful washback effect on classroom practice (Schissel, 2018). In many scenarios, teachers feel compelled to focus on *juken eigo* (English for tests) in class (Ushioda, 2013), and courses that are described as communication courses or 4-skills development courses (reading, writing, listening, speaking), in practice become reading, translation, and grammar-focused classes (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). This scenario does very little to help students acquire communicative skills (Berwick & Ross, 1989). Currently there is a need for research to focus on LTI as teachers struggle to meet both the demands of current policy as well as address the needs of students.

LTI Research in Tertiary Education

Sociocultural factors that negatively affect classroom activity are known to be detrimental to language teacher agency and LTI (e.g., Ng, 2017). Student attitudes and motivation have been another site of significant research in recent years (e.g., Apple et al., 2013). Student attitudes and motivation have a significant impact on classroom practice, and as a result directly affect LTI development and teacher agency emergence. Several authors have offered challenges and accusations concerning student motivation in higher education contexts in Japan. The extent to which these challenges are valid is debatable, but nonetheless they offer some insight to the sociocultural context of higher education in Japan. Consideration of LTI in these areas will offer opportunities for teachers to systematically consider and re-evaluate their identities and their positions in the university context. Ryan (2009) describes the "permanent sense of crisis" (p. 407) that characterizes English educational policy throughout Japan. To contribute to this discussion Clark (2010) rebukes the university system in general, calling the four years of higher education a "leisure-land" where "teachers pretend to teach, and students pretend to learn" (p. 2). The author ridicules policy and practice, as well as student motivation because there exists a culture where in the post-graduation job market, university prestige carries more weight than individual achievement. The author claims that this system offers students little incentive to really try hard to learn something in their university years. The author goes on to assail Japan's groupism and writes that "failing weak or lazy students and having them expelled from the allegedly warm and cozy bosom of the university group is almost impossible, both practically and psychologically" (para. 4). Given these contextual clues, it would be of value to address the relationship between student motivation and LTI development and teacher agency in further research. Implications of such studies would inform policy and practice in scenarios where teachers are confronted with student motivational problems that negatively affect classroom practice, and as a result impact LTI.

In addition, student *demotivation* is one emerging trend in contemporary research. Concerning student demotivation, Ushioda (2013), an outstanding scholar in the area of language learner motivation research in Japan, claims that "Japan leads the field in this area of inquiry" (p. 6). Dörnyei (2001) notes that student demotivation is common in second language classrooms, and argues that teachers have a responsibility and a moral obligation in this sense (p. 155). That is to say that student demotivation is partially a 'teacher-owned' issue, and can have significant implications for teacher identity and its development. Other studies have provided evidence to support the claim that teacher behavior, ranging from tardiness on one extreme to sexual harassment on the other, can contribute to student demotivation (Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Kikuchi, 2009; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009). In this sense, university teachers have an important responsibility to consider their *projected* and *perceived identities* and to evaluate how those play into classroom activity. Empirical research studies on LTI in the university context will help shed light on this area of concern.

Conclusion

Research on LTI has become a fundamental aspect in academic research throughout the world. Current trends in empirical research on LTI tend to rely on the tools and methods of dialogical self-theory, ecological approaches, and positioning theory. These postmodern conceptualizations of identity are grounded in and complemented by a historical discussion about the evolution of theory of self (*traditional, modern*, and *postmodern* conceptualizations) outlined in this paper. While defining identity remains problematic in the various disciplines, LTI carries an ever-more important role in academic research in the fields of second language acquisition and teaching, as these fields have experienced the sociocultural and poststructualist turn in recent decades. LTI research can be an empowering force, and it serves an important role in both pre-service teacher training programs as well as professional development programs. Many geographical areas around the globe are making important contributions to LTI research. However LTI research in the various sociocultural contexts within Japan remains scarce. This article has suggested important areas of potential research at the elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels in Japan. It is hoped that research in these areas will inform language teaching policy and practice, as well as place Japan on the global stage as an important geographical area where intuitive insights in the area of LTI development can be gained.

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