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## **11 Extratextual Elements in Subtitling – The Battle of Linguistic and Cultural Codes**

### **11.1 Introduction**

The translation of the audiovisual text has been dealt with extensively within the discipline of Translation Studies in the past decades, to the point where it would not be an overstatement to say that audiovisual translation has become a branch in its own right of the discipline of Translation Studies, having its own specific terminology, concepts, approaches and gaining ever increasing academic representation. However, in spite of the huge amount of literature in the field and the increasing number of scholars and academics interested in audiovisual translation, few issues regarding audiovisual translation have been exhaustively discussed. This is partly because of the interdisciplinarity of the field, the multimodal nature of the text, the diversity of audiovisual translation modes, and also due to the fast technological changes that constantly open new possibilities in the field of audiovisual translation.

In order to understand the importance of extratextual markers in the translation of audiovisual texts, it is useful to revisit this particular type of text in terms of structure and diversity.

### **11.2 Structure of the Audiovisual Text**

The source language text subject to translation in the audiovisual text (AVT) has a complex structure, being made up of several codes that function simultaneously to produce a single desired effect. Delia Chiaro (2009, 142) speaks about the translation of screen products (SP) intended primarily for being seen and made up of a complex visual code and an acoustic code. The visual code contains elements such as: the actor's movements, gestures and facial expressions, the scenery, the costumes, lightning and colour and written verbal information rendered through signposts, street signs, banners, newspapers, letters, notes, etc. The acoustic code has, in turn, a verbal dimension, that is the words in the dialogue/monologue, and a non-verbal dimension, consisting of background noises, sound effects, and recorded music or soundtrack. Delabastita (1989, 101) has best emphasized the four basic elements that inter-relate in order to form the inter-semiotic texture of the audiovisual text: the acoustic-verbal elements, the acoustic-non-verbal elements, the visual non-verbal elements and the visual-verbal elements.

### 11.3 Types of Audiovisual Translation

The journey of the audiovisual text from the source language to the target language is possible in many ways, resulting in different translation modes or types of audiovisual translation. The transfer of the spoken dialogue of an original audiovisual programme into another language can be dealt with through two basic approaches, resulting in three main translation modes. The oral input can be either transformed into written output, the process being known as subtitling, or it can remain oral, like in the original production, a case in which, the original source language soundtrack is replaced by a target language soundtrack, the process being known as revoicing. When the replacement is total, the target viewer no longer has access to the original soundtrack, and the resulting translation mode is known as dubbing or lip-sync. When the replacement is only partial, the original dialogue remains faintly audible in the background, and the resulting translation mode is known as voiceover. Yves Gambier (2003, 172) divides the types of AVT in *dominant types* (interlingual subtitling or open caption, dubbing, consecutive interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, voice-over, free commentary, simultaneous or sight translation, multilingual production, such as double versions or remakes) and *challenging types* (scenario/script translation, intralingual subtitling or closed caption, with variations of subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, live or real-time subtitling, audio description for the blind and visually impaired).

Regardless of the type of AVT s/he works with, the translator deals with the whole triadic structure of the AVT (image/words/sounds). This is to say that even if s/he does not actually translate or incorporate the extratextual elements in the translation, his/her choices are influenced by these elements.

### 11.4 Extratextual Elements in Subtitling

Subtitles are governed by a series of technical, time and space constraints ‘to the point of making language hostage to parameters’. (Neeves, 2009, 150). According to Karamitroglou (1998), the standard parameters that dictate the subtitler’s options are related to: space (position on the screen, number of lines, text positioning, number of characters per line, typeface and distribution, font colour and background), time (duration of a full two-line subtitle, duration of a full single-line subtitle, duration of a single word subtitle), punctuation and letter case and target text editing.

Despite being an addition to the original audiovisual product, subtitles are most often analyzed in terms of loss. The quantitative loss is an acceptable logical consequence of the constraints enumerated earlier. The transition from the spoken code to the written one can only be done by reducing the dialogue to the minimal function of conveying the plot. In order to obtain effective subtitles, the translator has to eliminate and simplify all ‘disposable’ elements that would not alter the meaning

of the original dialogue. It is estimated that the original dialogue tends to be reduced by between 40% and 75% (Chiaro, 2009, 148) in order to give the audience a chance of watching the programme effortlessly, that is of reading the subtitles without losing track of what actually happens on the screen and without realizing that they make a conscious effort to follow the captions.

The three aspects considered earlier, namely the time and space constraints governing the subtitling process, the fact that these constraints lead to condensation and the necessity of taking into account extratextual markers face the translator with a challenging paradox: s/he has to obtain a written target text that is a shorter version of a longer spoken text by actually incorporating extratextual markers in the translation, while rendering the same message and creating a similar effect upon the target audience.

Extratextual elements actually represent all the elements of the audiovisual text, except for the spoken dialogue/monologue: visual non-verbal, acoustic non-verbal and visual verbal elements. There are two main issues to be addressed in this respect: which of these elements are prone to translation and to what extent do extratextual markers both influence translation and determine the translator's choices?

Different answers are valid for different types of extratextual markers.

Non-verbal elements belonging to the visual code (namely actor's movements, gestures, and facial expressions, scenery, costumes, lightning, and the like) obviously need no translation. They might nevertheless carry a heavy load of culture-bound references, yet they remain self-explanatory. The way they are processed by the target audience depends mainly on the very profile and cultural background of the audience itself.

Non-verbal elements belonging to the acoustic code (namely background noise, sound effects and recorded music) do not necessarily need to be rendered through translation. In contrast to speech and paralinguistic features, sound and music usually need no translation. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1985, 37) offer a broader perspective on the concept of 'non-verbal', explaining that language ultimately pervades both the music and the noise-tracks, which can embrace, at least by association, linguistic elements. Recorded music is either accompanied by lyrics or evokes lyrics in the target viewer's mind, being 'deeply embedded in social discourses, including verbal discourses'. Recorded noises are not 'necessarily "innocent" of language' themselves, and 'the image track itself is infiltrated by the ubiquitous agency of language'. The same authors point out the fact that 'camera angles can literalise specific locutions such as "look up to" or "oversee" or "look down on"'. Joselia Neeves (2009, 153) asserts that 'viewers have grown to understand filmic conventions and have come to associate musical types with certain genres and with particular filmic effects'.

This kind of association is so strong sometimes, that certain music tracks or famous songs acquire intratextual dimensions. There is a famous scene in *Forrest Gump*, where Forrest is interviewed about his experience in China and John Lennon asks him questions that are actual lyrics from one of his most famous songs, *Imagine*:

Dick Cavett: *You had quite a trip. Can you, uh, tell us, uh, what was China like?*  
 Forrest: *Well, in the land of China, people have got nothing at all.*  
 John Lennon: **No possessions?**  
 Forrest: *And in China, they never go to church.*  
 John Lennon: **No religion, too?**  
 Dick Cavett: *Oh, hard to imagine.*  
 John Lennon: *Well, **it's easy if you try**, Dick.*

*Example 1. Dialogue excerpt from Forrest Gump*

Unless the lyrics are rendered in English in subtitles, the humorous effect along with the intercultural reference effect are completely lost. When choosing a domesticating approach, the subtitler has to be careful not to go too far as there is a risk of contradicting the general intention and nature of the film itself. *Forrest Gump* is a film about the American Society, with its 20<sup>th</sup> century history and symbols. Domestication of such symbols through translation does not really make much sense, as besides technical and spatial constraints imposed by the subtitling process, the linguistic and cultural transfer is subject to demands of relevance and adequacy.

Recorded music can be dealt with in various ways in subtitles, depending on the programme genre, the profile of the audience and so on. For instance, in subtitled animation movies, the lyrics of the songs are nearly always translated in subtitles. This is firstly because kids are less likely to grasp the meaning of the song from the soundtrack or because the lyrics are connected to the ‘action’ of the movie. In animation movies songs are not interrupted; it is usually one of the main characters who performs the singing. There is no additional ‘action’ taking place on the screen and no dialogue is superimposed on the lyrics. In other types of movies, even if the song is meant to reinforce the action or to transpose the audience into a certain kind of mood, or even to produce, through contrast, a comic effect, song lyrics cannot usually be incorporated in the captions because the song is heard in the background of the dialogue.

Another element of acoustic non-verbal nature, which can pose numerous challenges to the translator is canned laughter. It is mainly specific to sitcoms and stand-up comedy and represents the feedback of the studio or live audience for the comic effect produced by the original dialogue. It obviously does not make the subject of translation, yet it greatly influences the translator’s decisions. Because normally the sound of laughter triggers more laughter, canned laughter might be a helpful tool for the subtitler since it signals the audience the presence of a funny element. At the same time, it adds extra pressure for the subtitler, who has to make sure that the perlocutionary effect was transferred in the target text with surgical precision so that the canned laughter instance follows immediately after the respective caption; otherwise the whole comic effect would be compromised and the final audience would feel frustrated when they hear the studio audience laugh at a joke they did not have a chance to get. The text is literally dynamic and the target viewer has no

second chance to re-evaluate a joke. In addition, canned laughter sequences might also vary in length, signalling, thus, the degree of ‘funniness’ of a particular joke or a humorous instance. Regardless of the fact that some words or phrases may be more jocular in one language than in the other, the subtitler has to make sure that the effect his/her translation of the joke has on the target audience is of the same intensity the original joke had on the studio audience. Whenever the subtitler fails to render the humorous effect in the target language, the target viewer who has no or poor command of the source language feels frustrated, perceiving the situation as a case of mistranslation. Moreover, the translator cannot remain ‘invisible’, mainly due to the fact that the target audience has permanent access to the original dialogue, and the subtitles are under the permanent scrutiny of those members of the target audience who have a certain command of the source language.

Verbal elements belonging to the visual code (signposts, street signs, banners, newspapers, letters, notes, etc.) need either be translated as individual items or incorporated in the translation of the original dialogue proper. A part of these elements may complement the dialogue with valuable information. The subtitler can insert them in separate captions using appropriate editing techniques (brackets, italics, different font size or colour). Other visual verbal elements may need no translation at all (banners, street signs) as they are part of the scenery and the viewer can instinctively decode/process the information they contain. However, there are instances when ignoring visual nonverbal elements faces the subtitler with the risk of being discredited in front of the target audience. Visual non-verbal elements are usually subtitled in cartoons and animation movies, where their omission could prevent the target audience from following the action.

*Fawlty Towers* provide such an example of a recurrent extratextual element which is supposed to enhance the humorous effect. The opening shot of each episode shows a sign, which initially reads ‘Fawlty Towers’. Throughout the first series, letters go missing or are pulled askew. Variations of these anagrams include: ‘Farty Tower’, ‘Warty Towels’, ‘Watery Fowls’, ‘Flay Otters’, ‘Fatty Owls’, ‘Flowery Twats’, and ‘Farty Towels’. Left untranslated or not even hinted at in subtitles, these elements might bring a feeling of frustration upon the viewer who lacks a good command of English.

Unfortunately, either because of habit or because of the restrictive rules governing the process of subtitling ‘film translators tend to be vococentric, concentrating on spoken dialogue’ (Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, 1985, 47) and leaving certain ironies and nuances to be perceived only by the viewers who are familiar enough with the source language.

### 11.4.1 The Target audience – extratextual parameter influencing translation strategies

There are elements outside the text, which greatly influence the subtitler's choice in terms of translation strategies. The profile of the target audience is one of the parameters dictating how interventional a strategy should be in rendering a culture-bound reference, for instance, so that the target viewer does neither feel patronised or overburdened by the target text. In the particular case of audiovisual translation, the translator's choices are conditioned, motivated, encouraged, or restricted by the target audience from a double perspective: first of all, the profile of the target audience is one of the most important parameters a subtitler has to consider when making an active translation choice, and secondly, the target audience is constantly exposed to the original source text, which makes the translation 'vulnerable'. In Diaz Cintas' terms (2010, 344) subtitling is 'a supplement to the original programme, which (...) remains intact in the target culture for all to watch and to hear'.

The audiovisual text is, paradoxically, more than a text (as it incorporates several codes and extratextual elements) and less than a text at the same time (as it is constrained and restricted by its technicality and the policies of the broadcaster, while being shaped and adapted to the profile of the audience). While a whole range of elements and factors add to the meaning of the AVT (reinforcing and contradicting the message of the spoken dialogue), another series of factors, some depending on the translator and some way beyond his/her reach cut out from the body of the text, fragment and even distort it. This is precisely why any taxonomy of translation strategies that apply to the AVT (as deduced by researchers comparing the source language text with its final subtitled target text) needs to be validated by a secondary process, in which all the co-textual, para-textual, contextual and pragmatic parameters influencing the translation process should be carefully weighted.

Some of these parameters are related to the specific nature of the text, some others are connected to the technical nature of subtitling, some are skopos-related, while some are simply pragmatic matters.

In order for the target viewer to effortlessly watch and enjoy a subtitled product, the subtitler (and team of technicians backing up/supporting/amending the target text produced through translation) must have a deep knowledge of the target audience's profile. Elements as diverse as the age range, educational and cultural background, previous exposure to the same type of programme, social status, and so forth should be carefully considered. As well as this, pragmatic matters related to deadlines and financial remuneration of subtitlers are responsible for the quality of their translations and their ability to make full use of the time consuming interventional strategies.

The profile of the target viewer is of great importance whenever culture-bound references are at stake. According to Pedersen (2005, 2), an Extralinguistic Culture-bound Reference (ECR) is a 'reference that is attempted by means of any culture-bound linguistic expression, which refers to an extralinguistic entity or process, and which is

assumed to have a discourse referent that is identifiable to a relevant audience as this referent is within the encyclopedic knowledge of this audience'. The list of strategies proposed by Pedersen apply to what he calls 'translation crisis points' (puns, poetry, quotations, allusions), which correspond to Leppihalme's 'culture bumps' (Pedersen, 2005, 2). On a Venutian scale, the strategies range from the most foreignizing to the most domesticating ones, although Pedersen prefers using the more neutral terms *source-language oriented and target-language oriented*.

Although retention is by far the most common solution for a translation crisis point, its success depends on which level of transculturality it is placed. Pedersen (2005:10) makes a very useful distinction between three methodological relevant levels of transculturality, explaining that 'the degree of transculturality of an ECR deals with how familiar it is to the ST and TT audiences'. According to these distinctions, an ECR can be transcultural (i.e., not bound to the source culture, but retrievable from the encyclopaedic knowledge of both ST and TT audiences), monocultural (bound to the source culture and less identifiable to the majority of the TT audience; these ECRs represent translation crisis points) and microcultural (bound to the source culture, but too specialized or local to be within the encyclopaedic knowledge or both the ST and TT audiences).

The profile of the target audience is equally important in the subtitler's decision regarding the best strategies to be used when dealing with taboo language. Comparative studies in translation have constantly asserted that taboo language is undertranslated. However, some of these prerogatives should be revisited and brought closer to one of the questions initially raised by this research: What do subtitlers actually translate? Labelling a translation solution for a term or phrase as undertranslation immediately places it on a scale where a direct translation procedure or perfect linguistic equivalent would be the best (more or less feasible) option. Why would source taboo language be undertranslated in subtitling? Could it be because Romanian language, for instance, is less creative or productive in this field? Alas, no, on the contrary, it is quite rich, both vocabulary and grammar-wise, and it has been so for centuries. A more down-to-earth and widely accepted explanation is that the written word is more powerful than the uttered one. The target viewer might feel offended or burdened by captions containing perfect dictionary equivalents of swearwords. Moreover, specific policies of the broadcasting companies might, for obvious reasons, exclude such techniques.

Undertranslation of taboo language and swearwords often results in omitting the problematic element altogether. There are cases in which the swearword is initially undertranslated, rendered by a 'softer' equivalent, then omitted in the captions, although it is repeated in the spoken dialogue. Numerous examples are provided by stand-up comedy routines that are extremely rich in taboo language and where the rhythm of speech is extremely high. Omission is consequently requested by the need for textual economy as well as by the fact that the viewer can actually hear the monologue and the swearwords are easily detectable, so there is actually no need to render them in the captions. They are more of a brand, a part of the comedian's

persona, a verbal habit. For instance, Billy Connolly, in a 3:31 minute fragment of a routine on the Solar System uses the f-word with a frequency that could match his heart rate (which is probably quite high, considering the amount of body language involved), while Craig Ferguson utters it 52 times in a 2:14 minute fragment of his *Does This Need to Be Said?* routine, where he admits being a very ‘cursy’ person. The humour here is actually triggered by the fact that as the host of a TV show, he must comply with the restrictions of the TV company and refrain from using taboo language. The subtitler should actually rely on the fact that the target viewer who is likely to watch a stand-up comedy routine performed by Craig Ferguson has a specific profile and specific knowledge about the comedian and his career, as well as a fairly good command over English, and consequently uses the subtitles only for guidance, to get the more intricate jokes. Taboo language is, otherwise, easily detectable and comprehensible and does not need to be rendered in the captions.

Swearwords seem to be more problematic and resistant to translation when they appear in isolation, rather than when they are used extensively. This is mainly because the overuse of profane language diminishes the impact it has both on the SL viewer and the TL viewer, who has a certain command of the SL. When used in isolation, swearwords are meant to express a certain state of mind of the speaker, an attitude or a strong emotion. Even in this case, their rendering in the TT seems to be regarded with conspicuous caution. However, this tendency is not to be defined necessarily as undertranslation, but rather as a sort of register calibration.

Nord (2010, 123) speaks about intertextual and intratextual coherence, stressing out the fact that ‘in order to make the target text work for a specific target audience, the translator should produce a text that conforms to the standard of what Vermeer terms *intratextual coherence*, which means that the addressed audience should be able to make sense of it and that the text should be acceptable for them’.

The use of taboo language is so frequent, so ‘normal’ in American movies, for instance, that it produces no surprise to the source viewer. On the contrary, the Romanian cinema and movie industry has rather stayed away from profane language. This is why translating it bluntly, by means of perfect equivalents, would rather sound like over-translation. When calibrating the register, the subtitler should be careful in choosing a vocabulary range that would make the character sound credible to the Romanian viewer and in placing that character on the social scale originally intended for him/her by the creators of the movie.

Analysing and comparing a whole list of taxonomies of translation strategies could, at some point, seem dull if these classifications were considered outside a range of parameters motivating (or de-motivating) the translator’s and more particularly, the subtitler’s choices. Lists of do’s and don’ts can, of course, be drawn; errors can be identified and more felicitous solutions can always be prescribed. Yet, at least as far as ECRs are concerned, each translator’s choice and active decision apply to a unique context. Although audiovisual translation has become a highly distinct branch of Translation Studies, there is a huge gap between theorists and practitioners. On one

hand, globalization and intercultural communication via audiovisual products has proliferated so rapidly that the assumption that the subtitlers have the time to read the literature in the field and apply models offered by translation scholars would be naïve. Practitioners deal with some very down-to-earth issues, such as tight deadlines, constraints, policies and censorship imposed by the broadcasters and producers, rapid changes in technology, remuneration, contracts and (repetition intended) tight deadlines. On the other hand, globalization comes in handy when ECRs are at stake. An ECR that was monocultural a few years ago, might easily have become transcultural in the meantime (thus requesting a ‘less’ interventional strategy). The type of audiovisual text being translated matters equally. A sitcom, for instance, addresses a specific-profile audience. A pact is concluded from the very beginning: the target viewer watches the series in order to be entertained, s/he is expecting the punch-line, which triggers laughter being backed up by verbal and non-verbal extra-textual elements, such as character’s gestures, facial expressions, canned laughter and the like. The target viewer is also ‘trained’ by his/her previous experience (previous episodes of the series, other encounters with sitcoms or comedy movies). This is to say that s/he might have come across the same ECR, or that in decoding an ECR, s/he does not only rely on his/her encyclopaedic knowledge.

In the particular case of subtitling humour, taxonomies cannot be applied prescriptively, as subtitling deals with an extremely complex type of text and each ‘translation crisis point’ challenges the subtitler in a unique way. Although restrictive by nature, the process of subtitling can incorporate the whole range of translation strategies described by scholars, from the most domesticating to the most foreignizing ones.

#### **11.4.2 Extratextual elements in other forms of audiovisual translation: SDH and AD**

Whether or not to incorporate extratextual elements in audiovisual translation is ultimately the translator’s choice, and the average viewer might judge this choice in terms of how successful the translation is. For some categories of target viewers, though, the signalling of extratextual elements in translation is actually a necessity. Accessibility is a key concept in AVT and is globally encouraged for more or less commercial purposes by producers of audiovisual programmes. It is expected that the needs of groups, such as the deaf, the hard-of-hearing, the blind and the visually impaired should be catered for with more consideration. Fortunately, this is actually the case in Western Europe and most English-speaking countries. Consequently, accessibility to the media for people with sensory impairments has strengthened relatively new fields of expertise within audiovisual translation, namely subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH) and audio description for the blind and the partially sighted (AD).

Statistically, between 1% and 5% of the population of any country are deaf or hearing-impaired. In subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH), also known as (closed) captioning in American English, the actors' dialogue is converted into written speech, which is presented in subtitles of up to three, or occasionally four, lines. Subtitles generally change colour on the screen indicating, thus, the person who is talking or the emphasis given to certain words within the same subtitle. Besides the dialogue, they also incorporate all paralinguistic information that contributes to the development of the plot or to the creation of atmosphere, which a deaf person cannot access from the soundtrack, e.g., a telephone ringing, laughter, applause, a knock on the door, and the like.

In order to tackle down the typology of this particular AVT mode, Joselia Neeves (2009, 150) draws attention upon the importance of being aware, as a translator, of the specific needs of the audience: 'subtitles are all about reading (...) to the Deaf and HoH subtitles are essential, rather than redundant. They are the visual face of sound. For the HoH they are a stimulus and a memory exercise; for the Deaf, they are the only means to gain access to aural information. However redundant, sound and image tell different stories'.

On the Romanian audiovisual scene, this type of translation is poorly represented, although the deaf community is quite large. However, a Law Project regarding Technical and Social Assistance for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing issued by the Romanian Parliament in October 2013 states that 'The Romanian Public Television shall provide subtitles for 80% of all cultural, political and general interest programmes broadcast every year'.

Visual impairment is one of the most age-related disabilities and the vast majority of blind and partially sighted people are elderly. As demographic trends show that the number of elderly people is on the increase, one can only expect that the percentage of people with visual impairment will also increase in the near future.

Cintas (2008, 2) describes AD as 'an additional narration that fits in the silences between dialogue and describes action, body language, facial expressions and anything that will help people with visual impairment follow what is happening on screen or on stage'. The procedure is again poorly represented in Romania, one of the reasons being that we are one of the countries where subtitling is favoured and the audio description of a foreign audiovisual product would only make sense if that product were dubbed. This apparent impossibility could be overcome by means of audio subtitling in order to make subtitled programmes accessible to the blind in countries where a large percentage of the programmes are commercialized in a foreign language with subtitles. The website of the Romanian Association for the Blind (ANR) indicates that the association has about 80,000 members. Yet, apart from information regarding a recording studio for audio books, that was founded in 1966 and has produced over 5,000 book recordings, there is no mention about any sort of audiovisual programme. On the other hand, a few hundred kilometres away, EBU organizes this year the 5<sup>th</sup> Advanced Seminar on Audio Description (ARSAD),

demonstrating the increasing concern for the development of AD in Europe. This is, however, a social matter and we can only hope that in the nearest future, Romanian researchers in the field of AVT will be able to come up with their own examples and data about AD in Romania.

## 11.5 Conclusions

The extratextual elements give the source language text its full meaning, which can be completely altered if they are neglected in translation. Subtitling is seen as a vulnerable form of translation. What is said and implicitly translated is only a part of the message. The way it is said (sound, intonation) together with visual and auditory markers (visual signs, gestures, postures, editing techniques, soundtrack) is another part. Thus the reader is also the ‘viewer’ and ‘hearer’ of a polysemiotic entity that somehow imposes itself on its receptor with a certain speed, range of images and sounds. Since what we call non-verbal or extratextual markers are still marked by the presence of language, one might legitimately wonder if the subtitler, already challenged by the economy of space and time characteristic to subtitling, could find any resources and/or strategies to incorporate the meaning of these language-associated nonverbal elements into his/her translation. Due to the complex nature of the audiovisual texts, no ‘rules’ can be established regarding the signalling, description, translation or adaptation of extratextual elements in the captions. Nevertheless, the subtitler should be fully aware of the profile of the target audience in terms of age, cultural background, sensory impairments, etc. in order to make sure that the perlocutionary effect of the original text is achieved without the risk of either over- or under-stressing the target viewers.

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