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The Language Shift Origins of Judeo-Spanish

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes that the Judeo-Spanish language of the Sephardic Jews of the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean involved at its origin a *language shift* that occurred after emigration from the Iberian Peninsula, in non-Hispanic environment; that a form of Castilian was adopted as a deliberate act and quickly in the early period of exile, in order to alter a previous situation of Romance language pluralism within and among the transplanted Jewish communities.[1]

KEYWORDS: Romance multilingualism; sacred language (hierogloss); vernacular as foreign; Balkan; Eastern Mediterranean; Turkey.

The Judeo-Spanish language was born in the sixteenth century, among the exiled Jews who had lived in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries, but were forced to leave the united kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and later the kingdoms of Portugal and Navarre. From the last decade of the fifteenth century on, many of them settled in the eastern Adriatic, the Balkan interior, Macedonia and northern Greece, the cities and islands of the Aegean, Constantinople, and the Levant coast. These lands were then mostly under Ottoman rule, or came under it shortly thereafter. Throughout the sixteenth century, the number of Iberian transplants in the eastern Mediterranean increased by the influx of migrants from subsequent generations of exiles from

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northern Italian cities, Portugal, northern Africa, and the Netherlands, refuge areas where they had settled, sometimes after conversion to Christianity, before return to Judaism. From the mid-nineteenth century until the end of the twentieth, the Judeo-Spanish language had a significant print life, in periodicals, religious and homiletic books, and novel and story books or pamphlets. At present, it is a language in serious danger of extinction, since it is no longer being transmitted to the new generations. Nevertheless, it has found a new vibrant life on the Internet, in the hands of enthusiastic devotees—mostly second language learners, and in flourishing academic programs in the USA and Israel, and in some lexicographic and historical work performed in Turkey and the Balkans (Şaul & Hualde 2017).

Historical linguistics has recently been impacted by sociolinguistics, which transformed how we understand the development of Romance languages in Iberia and the evolution of Castilian Spanish. Likewise, a new light on the origins of Balkan and Levantine Jewish Spanish is thrown by greater awareness of the historical presence of well-defined Romance varieties at the dawn of modern times in Iberia and contact between their speakers under circumstances of long-distance mobility, and prestige and power differences between different registers and local dialects.

The linguistic situation in the Iberian Peninsula at the time when the Jewish exiles left, is now understood to be more complicated than the linear progression models of earlier times. Till the end of the fifteenth century, in Castile and Aragon different Romance languages were spoken side by side, although knowledge of the Castilian variety of Romance was also spreading as a second language and becoming standard for communication between members of different Romance speech communities. A phase of Romance bilingualism or multilingualism preceded language shift to Castilian (Minervini 2006: 19; Quintana 2010). At the same time, within the Castilian variety wide dialectal differences existed between different groups of speakers (Penny 1992: 127). The Jews of Iberia shared with non-Jewish neighbors and countrymen the Romance language variety of their locality (Minervini 2006: 18). However, they also participated in the surge of varieties of Castilian as translocal super language. It follows from this observation that the Jewish transplants of late fifteenth century spoke different Romance languages, and those who spoke Castilian spoke different dialects of it. There was also widespread Romance multilingualism among them, but most to the point, also the ability to understand and with various degrees of competence to speak or write Castilian. When their post-expulsion place of settlement had a dominant variety of Romance that was new to them, as in Portugal, Italy or Romania (Wallachia and Moldavia) that new language was added to the transplanted community's linguistic repertoire of Romances.

No reason exists to assume that the majority of the Iberian Jewish exiles in the Levant were originally native speakers of the Castilian-Spanish variety of Romance. This supposition has been taken for granted in much earlier literature, but is unwarranted. The actual data that exists suggests the opposite. In a now famous chronicle of the united kingdoms of Ferdinand and Isabella, Andrés Bernáldez recorded contemporary descriptive notes on the late fifteenth century Jewish communities of Iberia and the places where they settled after their forced migration, including "la tierra

del Turco," turn of the sixteenth century Ottoman empire.[2] Consolidating the information conveyed by Bernáldez with other historical information, Révah summarized the places in Iberia where the Jewish exiles who arrived in the Balkans mostly originated: Catalonia, Aragon, Valencia, New Castille ("the Kingdom of Toledo" and the Mancha of Aragon), and the southern parts of Andalusia which communicated with the port of Cartagena. This is the eastern half of Spanish Iberia, where multiple Romance languages were still alive at the end of the fifteenth century (Révah 1965: 1353-54). Half a century later, new Jewish refugees were added to the exiles in the Ottoman lands and the Balkans. They arrived from the Kingdom of Portugal, where they had been forcibly converted to Catholicism. But most of them originated elsewhere, in the western and northern parts of the Spanish kingdom: Old Castile and Leon. By the time of their travel east, they had adopted Portuguese, to which the earlier language of the refugees from Leon was probably already close. There were also families who came in two steps, passing through the Netherlands before settling in the Balkans. That was the case of the famous Nasi-Mendez banking house of Antwerp, who after various peregrinations transferred to Constantinople (Istanbul) in the middle of the sixteenth century, under the reign of Soliman the Magnificent (the Nasi family will be mentioned below once again as benefactors and sponsors of Judeo-Spanish publications; they, too, adopted Castilian Spanish at some point in their exile, Joseph Nasi's cousin and wife assuming the name Reyna).

Elsewhere Révah reported from records at the other end of the exilic ambit, where the Iberian Jews had settled. According to an Ottoman census of mid-sixteenth century Salonika, the *Lisbon* synagogue consisted of 200 households, *Kal de Evora* of 96, *Kal de los Katalanes* of 218, *Kal de Aragon* of 315, *Kal Zaragoza* of 42, and in addition there were synagogues with names of Italian cities (quoted in Quintana 2014: 68, n. 4). It can be conjectured that Castilian-speaking Jews were present in all these synagogues, because among the Iberian exiles in the Balkans in the second and third generation congregation boundaries had started to blur. The configuration of the synagogues still suggests strongly, however, that native speakers of Castilian were a minority among the Iberian exiles (Révah 1965: 1355).[3]

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[2] Andrés Bernáldez (c. 1450-1513) was a priest of Los Palacios, a town near Sevilla, and chaplain of an influential archbishop. His chronicle *Historia de los Reyes Católicos Don Fernando y Doña Isabel*, first known historical work of that period, was published for the first time only in 1856, but has had multiple editions since then and is frequently quoted for its sections on the conquest of Granada and the discovery of the New World, as the information derives from the author's privileged relationships with key historical actors. The five chapters on the Jews and their forced migration (vol. 1, CX-CXIV: pp. 332-350 in the 1869 edition) includes equally unique first-hand information, although the author reveals little mercy for the banished population and their subsequent fate.

[3] This seems to clash with the finding that at the end of the fifteenth century the "Crown of Aragon" in Iberia had only 10,000 to 12,000 Jews (7000 to 9000 were Aragonese and about 3000 Catalan). Whereas the "Crown of Castile" had eight to nine times more—between 75,000 and 90,000 Jews (Minervini 2011: 125-126). Maybe the explanation is that after the destruction of the important Jewish communities of Zaragoza and Calatayud in Aragon, the Jews who escaped to other Iberian cities continued to maintain strong Aragonese or Catalan identity, preserving also corresponding features of dialect. In any case, the Ottoman tax records quoted by Révah leave no doubt that nose count-based suppositions are not always accurate. When groups speaking related languages or dialects commingle, the speech form that wins out is not necessarily the one of the most numerous. Deliberate action by the actors and considerations of a non-linguistic order intervene.

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The mobility of Iberian Jewish exiles throughout the sixteenth century involved mixing of speakers of different Iberian Romances as well as encounter with new Romance languages, creating a greater degree of Romance bilingualism. This linguistic multiplicity led first to a developing use of Castilian Spanish for communication between communities that had otherwise limited mutual understanding; eventually, for intracommunity communication as well, the other Romance languages were replaced by Castilian. Castilian also became the language of written composition. A form of Castilian took hold among Sephardic communities to become general, a *koine*, later to be dubbed Judeo-Spanish. This historical development is generally conceived as slow and gradual, a pattern like epidemiological diffusion by competition between rival dialects or languages, that is not as the result of purposeful acts or thought-out decisions.

I want to suggest that, on the contrary, the Iberian Jewish exiles' linguistic progression toward Castilian after they left the Iberian Peninsula was less drawn out and more deliberate. For the majority of the Sephardic exiles, Castilian was not a heritage that they brought from preexilic Iberian times and passively passed on, but a language they actively shifted to after being transplanted to other places in the Mediterranean, as part of their adjustment to resettlement in new lands. The children of the Iberian Jewish exiles were intentionally trained to speak, not the parental generation's Romance variety, but a Castilian dialect. This new Castilian also became the choice for use in writing and community affairs. What happened was not only levelling, but *language shift*. What made this shift difficult to conceptualize and detect is that it occurred in a situation that was different from the circumstances this term typically suggests today: that is, speakers of a minority language abandoning it, to adopt the official language of the state or the language of the politically dominant majority that surrounds them (Ostler 2011). We will return to this issue.

That the shift to Castilian within a Romance multiplicity involved deliberation and preference, or that it occurred at all, was also obscured because of conceptual matters internal to the Jewish world: a premodern attitude toward language and language boundaries. In the learned Jewish understanding, all Romance languages were lumped together with no distinction under the Hebrew term *la'az*. According to Aslanov, this word set Romance languages in opposition to Germanic and Slavic languages (2002: 12-13). For Iberian Jews, as for the Jews of Provence and of Italy, *la'az* was Latin and the Romance languages into which it evolved. In time, however, in the Balkans *la'az* came to mean the vernaculars spoken by the Jews versus the Sacred Language, *lashon ha-kodesh.* Eventually the meaning of *la'az* was redirected to liturgical translations into *any* Romance vernacular. In medieval Jewish vernacular texts, the Biblical verb *lo'ez* (Ps. 114:1), designating 'translate', was rendered with cognates derived from the words *Latin* or *Roman*: *latinar* in Italy; *ladinar* in Provence, *ladinar* or *aromançar* in Iberia, *aromancer* in northern France (Banitt 1972).

The concept of *hieroglossia* helps understand this lack of interest in registering differences between the varieties of vernacular. This term was proposed by the French specialist of Buddhism, Jean-Noël Robert (2006). A language that vehicles religious learning and faith instruments, perceived to be a central and founding element by the followers of the faith. This is often a "dead language," learned after arduous apprenticeship only by a minority of religious specialists and literati. In com-

parison to it, the population considers the spontaneous and live tongues that they speak (*laoglosses*) as derivative, secondary, and dependent on the *hierogloss*. This feeling is not justified historically or linguistically, as scholars reconstruct it, but it is experienced powerfully as an ontological and theological reality. Naturally the hierogloss for Iberian Jews, before and after the expulsion, was the language of the sacred books, *lashon ha-kodesh*, the sacred tongue, biblical Hebrew —and also Aramaic, the language of later sacred texts and some liturgy, which for that reason was merged with Biblical Hebrew. Hebrew, and its alphabet, became "a symbolic fortress of identity" against vernacular languages, even when the latter also were used to create written works.

It is worth noting that a parallel exists in that other non-Christian faith community of Iberia, Islam. Its hierogloss was classical Arabic. The Muslims (*Mudejar*s —who were forced to convert to Catholicism in 1502 in Castile and in 1526 in Aragon, henceforth known as *Moriscos*) created written works in Romance, written generally in Arabic script (until their final expulsion in 1609). These texts are known as *aljamía*, from Ar. *al 'ajamiyya* 'foreign/non-Arabic language'. The Romance was generally Castilian. The development of *aljamía* is part of a wider phenomenon in a vast expanse of land stretching from Persia to the shores of the Atlantic, commitment to using the Arabic script for writing local vernaculars, from the eighth to the twentieth centuries. The word *'ajamiyya* is the Arabic equivalent of *la'az* in Hebrew and of *ladino* in Romance. A testament to the powers for phantasmagoria of the human imagination, in contrast to the hierogloss the vernacular speech that was used daily for communication was conceived as "foreign." Like *la'az* and *ladino*, *ajamiyya* underwent semantic narrowing, to 'writing' and 'written text'.

Despite the obscuring effect of sharp contrast between sacred language and vernacular, sixteenth century practices recorded in the widely dispersed area of the Iberian Jewish diaspora adumbrate language shift as the beginnings of Judeo-Spanish. Inquisition records indicate that in Pisa it was common practice for Jews of Iberian origin to hire tutors to teach their children to read and write Castilian in Hebrew characters (Ray 2013: 138). The Portuguese Jewish community of Ancona spoke Castilian, and in Bucharest, too, Portuguese and Catalan Jews abandoned their language and adopted Castilian (further sources in Şaul and Hualde 2017: 14). Quintana (2002) posits that Castilian first imposed itself in the Mediterranean diaspora as the language for communication between communities originating in different Iberian localities, while internally the communities continued to use their particular non-Castilian language or dialect. Deliberate educational strategies suggest that the competition between Romance varieties did not last long, and among the exiled communities as in the Iberian Peninsula, it was tilted toward Castilian Spanish, which was also the rising language in the international political realm.

The process of language shift is documented most clearly in the case of literary production. According to Révah, during the sixteenth century the Sephardic authors of the resettlement in the Balkans wrote the works that they composed in the vernacular in the Toledo variety of Castilian, even though they were often rabbis originating in non-Castilian speaking Iberian regions (Quintana 2002: 132). This situation was different from the one prevailing in the preceding two centuries. Among pre-expulsion Jewish communities of Iberia, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,

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texts in Aragonese and Navarran varieties of Romance, as well as in Castilian, had proliferated—all lettered in Hebrew characters, as was the case also for the other vernaculars that the Jews wrote, until the advent of modernity and with it the government policies of mass schooling. These texts were on juridical, administrative, poetic or religious matters (Minervini 2006: 15).

The glowing illustration to the shift to Castilian is provided by Moshe Almosnino, sixteenth century rabbi born in Salonica (1515-1580). His father Baruch belonged to an Aragonese family from Huesca and his mother was of Catalan origin. In 1551 Almosnino became the rabbi of the Catalan congregation in the city, to which his family belonged, but in 1560 he assumed the same function in the congregation of former Portuguese marranos in Salonika, under the patronage of the Mendes/Nasi family of Constantinople. Yet, despite this complicated Romance language heritage that he carried, when he composed works in the vernacular, he chose to write in Castilian. Almosnino wrote two treatises in clear and eloquent Castilian (penned and printed in Hebrew characters) which now receive much scholarly attention.[4] Almosnino's language choice has parallels in Iberia. In the sixteenth century the famous author Boscán wrote in Castilian and was regarded as a model in prose. He was, however, a Catalan by birth (Pountain 2001: 142). The adoption of Castilian among the sixteenth century Jewish exiles of the eastern Mediterranean the mirrored the linguistic development in Iberia.

Another example might be David Attias' *La güerta de oro* published in Livorno in 1778. By that time, in major Ottoman cities with substantial Iberian Jewish population the printing of Judeo-Spanish vernacular works had already taken off, but this book remains relevant because it emerged in a community of well-attested non-Castilian origin. Attias was a merchant born in Sarajevo but spent most of his life in the Tuscan port city of Livorno, which had attracted a large Jewish community from among Portuguese former converts, after the 1593 proclamation of the Grand Duke Ferdinand promising commercial privileges and freedom from religious persecution (Lehmann 2005: 53-54). Nonetheless, the official language of the Livorno Jewish community was Castilian Spanish and Portuguese (not Italian) and at the end of the eighteenth century a foreign observer wrote "they speak the vernacular tongue as lucidly and elegantly as their rhetoricians". Livorno became a center for Hebrew publi-

[4] *Regimiento de la Vida*, printed in Salonica in 1564 treats among other things of the origin of good and evil, the influence of the stars, providence, the moral life, education of children, and freedom of the will. A chapter on "Dreams, Their Origin and True Nature," written at the request of Don Joseph Nasi was appended. The book was republished in Venice in 1604, in Salonica in 1729, and transliterated in Latin characters in Amsterdam in 1729. (Quintana 2002 referencing I. Révah's 1954 Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes Section V dissertation; Borovaia 2017; Zemke 2004) Almosnino's second book in Castilian, *Kronika de los reyes otomanos*, consists of four parts (the death of Soliman the Magnificent and enthronization of his son Selim II; a chronicle of events of Soliman's reign; description of life in Constantinople; negotiations in Sultan Selim's court of a Jewish delegation from Salonica including the author). Written between 1566 and 1567 it remained in manuscript form until the twentieth century (*Crónica de los reyes otomanos* / Moisés Almosnino critical edition by Pilar Romeu Ferré. Barcelona: Tirocinio, 1998), but in 1638 a partial adaptation of it was published in Latin characters by Jacob Cansino in Madrid under the title *Extremos y Grandezas de Constantinopla* and was well known in Hispanist circles. Moshe Almosnino wrote many religious books in Hebrew.

cation (prayer books and homiletic works) and also, as Attias' book indicates, books in Spanish printed in Hebrew characters.

The language shift from different varieties of Romance to Castilian as a basis for the vernacular left traces in Judeo-Spanish. For example, even when we know where a significant majority of some Balkan Sephardic communities originated in Iberia, a genealogical relation between their Judeo-Spanish varieties and specific dialects or languages of Iberia cannot be established. Non-Castilian speech features are present, but they are randomly distributed in the vast Judeo-Spanish domain and do not indicated continuity of local Judeo-Spanish varieties with specific Iberian regional varieties. This observation was made in Révah's pioneering study (1965: 1355) on the basis of interviews conducted with a large sample of Judeo-Spanish speakers from multiple communities. It corrected a widespread earlier view that went in the opposite direction, as the first serious scholarly studies of the Judeo-Spanish language were conducted in specific local communities in the Balkans and advanced speculative views without knowledge of the distribution of linguistic features in the wider area. Révah's observation was not fully digested and its import remained unrecognized, until a new generation of researchers confirmed it in the 1990s. The lack of continuity between Judeo-Spanish dialects and regional Iberian Romance languages suggests a linguistic break after resettlement in the Balkans and the Middle East, rather than gradual evolution following contact by mutual adjustment between separate speech forms.

Another characteristic pointing in the same direction is that Judeo-Spanish seems to possess features that are more recent than late fifteenth century Castilian, or traits that at the end of the fifteenth century were not yet dominant in it. One of them is the word-initial aspirated /h/. In late medieval Castilian this phoneme replaced the word initial /f/ in Latin words, but eventually it disappeared to produce the modern Castilian forms that start with a vowel (*h* now preserved in orthography). Judeo-Spanish has no trace of this aspirated /h/. It has some words that preserved the initial /f/ of Latin, and these must be intrusions from Portuguese or other Romance varieties, but the as yet unsettled situation of aspirated /h/ versus zero at the time of exile (as I understand it), finds no reflection whatsoever in Judeo-Spanish (for the fricatives and affricates in Judeo-Spanish, see Hualde and Şaul 2011: 97-100). This would be hard to account for without considering that the basis of Judeo-Spanish was provided by the a late-sixteenth century variety of Castilian, rather than a fifteenth century one.

Now we return to the historical circumstances of and motivations for the language shift. Modern situations of language shift generally involve a linguistic community that forms a minority subjected to the political and cultural pressure of an engulfing majority, which also controls the state or is favored by its elites. To ease the tension, the minority adopts the language of the majority. This was not the situation with respect to Castilian for Iberian exiles in the Ottoman lands or elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. Yet a parallel to language shift —to a language that is not that of the controlling state— exists in more recent Sephardic history, undertaken, not under compulsion by the commingling majority or from the state, but because of the promise of incorporation into a wider world. This is what happened when the Ottoman Sephardic communities turned to French in the early decades of the twen-

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tieth century. The catalyzer in that situation was the creation of dozens of elementary schools by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* society, which dispensed a shallow but massive education to boys and also a large number of girls, a total novelty, and made them capable of speaking and reading French. Naturally, French also presents a parallel to sixteenth century Castilian, in being a variety of Romance confronting another variety of Romance that was Judeo-Spanish. The attraction for the Ottoman Sephardim was the perception of greater employment opportunities in changing economic circumstances and the prestige value of a West European tongue (Şaul 2001; for a general description, Benbassa and Rodrigue 1995). Many families adopted French for daily use, with the outcome that the generations of parents and children did not share a "mother tongue" and grandparents and grandchildren had difficulties communicating. This linguistic development was cut short before it was completed, because of strong opposition inspired by linguistic nationalism in the Turkish republic, and also a new set of educational and economic institutions that necessitated competency in Turkish. Such constraints and alternative opportunities did not exist in the sixteenth century. Similarly, we can point out briefly other language shift situations in our day as outcome of international migration. Filipinos or African migration communities quickly become English-speaking in exile, because migrant parents choose to not transmit their native tongue to the new generation but raise them speaking an internationally useful language, after prolonged residence in host societies that are not necessarily English speaking.

The experience of language shift in the origins of Judeo-Spanish may account for some enduring features of Sephardic linguistic culture. For example, the propensity of this vernacular to adopt new forms, the disposition that contemporary historical linguists consider the "innovativeness" of Judeo-Spanish, in vocabulary and syntactic forms, but also in phonetic development, can be due to the sense of constructedness and arbitrary resulting from having adopted for daily usage a medium learned as a foreign language. Concomitantly, native speakers in Turkey were susceptible to thinking that Judeo-Spanish is "mixed", impure, that somewhere else better standards and proper norms for this language exist. A popular feeling considered that Iberian varieties were *el espanyol halis* ('unadulterated Spanish') (Varol Bornes 2008: 88, 351). For its native speakers, the changes, borrowings or innovations in the daily use of the language constituted creolization or bastardization. This entire complex, which surfaced time and again in multiple strata of Judeo-Spanish speaking Sephardim, may have its roots in the residual feelings of inadequacy or ressentiment due to the subliminal memory of the foundational language shift of the sixteenth century.

This attitude to the vernacular is often attributed to the nature of schooling that the Jewish communities encountered after late nineteenth century, when French-trained teachers instilled in children a sense of language insecurity and inferiority. But the native idea of mixing in the vernacular was already expressed before this schooling had an impact. Rafael Uziel, editor of the first ever Judeo-Spanish newspaper published in Izmir in 1845, *Sha'are Mizrah, o Puertas del Oriente*, wrote in his editorial for the initial issue (29 December) that this *lingua espanyola ke nozotros praktikamos en Turkia* ('Spanish language that we use in Turkey'—terms almost identical to the ones written by Attias 75 years earlier in Livorno) was blemished

with *la erida de la mestura* ('the wound of mixing').[5] The statement simultaneously provided the sense of "Spain" as geographic and historical origin. This mythical realm constituted a basic element of identity, fixing the boundaries against the Jewish communities of other speeches and geographic origins: *Lehlis* (Ashkenazic Jews of Germanic speech), *Romanos* (Byzantine Jews of Greek speech), and eventully *Arabos* and *Gurdjis* (mustarab Jews of Iraq or the Aramean speakers of the eastern provinces and the Georgian Jews who became part of the Istanbul community in the twentieth century), but was little more than a construction projecting the reality of Judeo-Spanish language.

This was the case with Balkan, Ottoman, and Levantine Jews, who did not have direct contact with Spain, Portugal, or Latin America for the last few centuries, as opposed to North African Sephardim who experienced Spain as a real kingdom with an imperial and colonial agenda. In the eastern Mediterranean, Spain was a neverland that vaguely maintained its medieval contours of Iberia, the vernacular counterpart of Sepharad, as spoken Judeo-Spanish was the specification of Ladino, the *la'az* of the hierogloss 'Hebrew' (*ebreo*).

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[5] Uziel's editorial is reproduced in Bunis's pioneering article on *Sha'are Mizrah* (2016, after an earlier version in 1993), the passage quoted on p. 202. Dov Cohen (2013) published a precious biographic article, written *por demás* in Judeo-Spanish, on what he discovered about Rafael Uziel.

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