

# Linguistic Theory: The Essence of Critical Pedagogy

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**Abstract:** In Spolsky's educational linguistics model, basic reference to general linguistics has been supported by theories of language and language descriptions to introduce second language pedagogy. Respectively, the present work aims at visualizing the contribution of linguistic theory to critical pedagogy triggered by the nature of theory and the way it interacts with the sub-skills of critical thinking. For this purpose, the study adopted as samples the set of linguistic theories and descriptions offered by teachers of linguistics at university level, more particularly in Algeria.

**Keywords:** Foreign language pedagogy, Critical pedagogy, Critical thinking, Applied linguistics, Linguistic theories

## Introduction

Along the process of language learning, linguistics, as a science interested in the study of language as a system, is fundamentally included in the university curriculum. It is almost approached as an independent module whose contents are built upon a set of theories and concepts, and its subdisciplines constitute whole modules among which phonetics, grammar, and phonology undertake descriptive functions regarding the language taught. In the aim of rethinking the role of linguistics in pedagogy, more precisely, in critical pedagogy, the present paper introduces general linguistics as the theoretical foundation of second language teaching/learning. This interaction between linguistic theory / language description with language pedagogy has been basically adopted from Spolsky's Educational Linguistics Model (1980) in Stern (1983:37). Critical pedagogy embraces in the present work the development of mental activities that vehicle critical thinking, typically attentive thinking, in the learning process of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Algerian universities. However, the present paper is a more oriented investigation towards the set of linguistic knowledge university students receive via the module of linguistics and others, and the impact it should have on their learning of EFL.

## I. Literature Review

The number of research studies on the relationship between linguistic theory and language pedagogy have very commonly been the concern of applied linguistics. This science has been introduced as a mediating discipline whose major function applies on the teaching/learning ground of second/foreign languages to treat problems encountered at one of the two levels, if not both. The introduction of the appellation 'applied linguistics' has witnessed a

series of subsequent definitions among which Corder's stated as follows: "Applied linguistics is the utilisation of the knowledge about the nature of language achieved by linguistic research for the improvement of the efficiency of some practical task in which language is a central component"(Corder,1974,p.24). Knowledge about language (KAL) constitutes a leading step of linguistic research throughout which the learner shapes particularities of the language, and formulates inherent characteristics of the syntax, the grammar, the morphology, the phonetics and the phonology, and the semantics of the targeted language. This knowledge is transported from linguistic research to language learning by way of applied linguistics, or 'educational linguistics' in Spolsky's narrower representation. Spolsky's delimitation of the broader applied linguistics intends to submit language-related issues in the pedagogical sphere to educational linguistics, while all language problems in different areas of use are to be adopted by applied linguistics. This distinction will serve as a conceptual introduction to the relationship between linguistics and pedagogy undertaken by the present work.

In the educational linguistics model, Spolsky's up-down description is initiated by general linguistics with a two-fold categorization: theory of language and language description. For educational purposes, the theory of language needs to be supported by the introduction of a theory of learning (psychology), a theory of language learning (psycholinguistics), and a theory of language use (sociolinguistics), while educational linguistics is interested in all subjects related to second/foreign language pedagogy. The present paper cultivates a critical approach to pedagogy and examines the way language theory and description intervene at this level.

One of the definitions of applied linguistics during the 1960's/70's provided by Widdowson (1979) details the function of Spolsky's educational linguistics as follows: "applied linguistics at that time intended to treat pedagogical language issues by applying theoretical knowledge about language to classroom practices" (Widdowson,1979). Widdowson's view about the role of applied linguistics during the 60's/70's applies appropriately to the descriptive itinerary that connects theory to practice in the present study.

#### **A. Linguistic Theory/ Language Description and Language Pedagogy**

The infrastructure of any language theory reflects the practical platform wherein the set of linguistic, cognitive, and mental mechanisms interact. Langendoen (1998) states that the role of linguistic theory is "to answer such questions as 'what is language' and 'what properties must something (an organism or a machine) have in order for it to learn and use language'".(Langendoen ,1998, p.1). In respect to the theoretical attempts to generalize concepts and descriptions about the human language, the history of linguistics has exposed a bulk of movements whose assumptions towards language and language use at times vary, and at other times complete one another. The most common linguistic theories that are introduced to foreign language graduation learners aim at discerning the structuralists', the functionalists', and the mentalists' approaches to language. Obviously, the learner would develop a more philosophical conception of this communicative system especially throughout de Saussure dichotomies, Chomsky and Hymes' communicative competence, Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar, MAK Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, and other theories that have been proposed as parts of linguistic branches, namely: sociolinguistics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, etc. Beside these

theoretical orientations, language descriptions constitute a large part of the discipline of linguistics and its sub-variants mentioned before.

The implication of linguistic theory and language description for pedagogical purposes is not only limited to making known the different concepts that characterize linguistic research and investigations in and about the human language; they are hypothesized in the present study to act as tools for the enhancement of critical minds in the learning process of EFL. The idea emerged from the nature of the relationship between language structure and mental adaptations based on logic.

## **B. Critical Pedagogy and General Linguistics**

### ***1. Introducing Critical Pedagogy***

The nature of the teaching/learning environment is predefined by the set of ecological features that shape and reshape the components of pedagogy and their interrelatedness. Therefore, the birth of 'critical pedagogy' has been inclined towards a more cooperative way of approaching teaching and learning practices to replace the 'oppressive' (Freire(1972)) nature of this environment being characterized by kind of selfishness, subjectivity, routine, and restraint. The idea as defined by the leading pioneer in this area of study Freire (1998) accounts for the importance of a relationship between teachers and students which should be "just, serious, humble, and generous..." Another description of this kind of relationship is provided by critical pedagogists like Darder(2003) and Zembylas(2013) who base it on "compassion, mutual understanding, and common goals"(in Getahun (2014.p.6)). Respectively, the major constituents of critical pedagogy have been represented in McKernan's (2013) definition:

Critical pedagogy is a movement involving relationships of teaching and learning so that students gain critical self-consciousness and social awareness and take appropriate action against oppressive forces. The idea is central to Freire's notion of "conscientization" or the coming to personal critical consciousness. (MacKernan(2013.p.425))

In MacKernan's description, critical pedagogy represents kind of social revolution which is embodied in education as a social institution. Its actors, being fundamentally teachers and students, are asked to elevate their critical consciousness scale to confront all aspects of intellectual oppression, either originated in or destinate to society. Based on McIntyre approach to social practice, Zeichner(1988) refers to education as a 'virtue-loaden social practice' as it is "construed as a social practice, one which depends on the honest, just and courageous actions of teachers and is focused on developing intellectually and morally autonomous, compassionate, and caring students" Zeichner(1988.p.119).

Other approaches to critical pedagogy reside on 'power' as a key concept which is dually defined by Bizzell(1991). He points out that the sort of power in which A imposes on B some teaching instructions, 'regardless of B's consent or best interests', is named 'coercion'; this kind of power is the one rejected by critical pedagogists who opposingly advocate another sort of power where A adopts teaching instructions only with B's consent as A's approach meets B's best interests; Bizzell names it 'persuasion'.

In Bizzell's distinction, coercive power applies to 'banking education' in Freire's (2009) words in which "education becomes an act of depositing instead of communicating, students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor...students patiently receive, memorize and

repeat”, while persuasive power is one of the vehicles of new pedagogical paradigms covered by critical pedagogy.

In their attempt to defining critical pedagogy, Freebody and Luke (1990) introduce four basics for critical pedagogy: ‘code breakers’, ‘meaning-makers’, text users’ and ‘text critics’.

1. **Code Breakers** implies personal endeavor to decompose a structure and understand it in terms of a set of combinations of sounds/letters, morphemes, words, sentence/utterance, and message.
2. **Meaning-makers** evoke background knowledge and other strategies in order to decipher meanings in texts.
3. **Text users** produce and deal with texts on the basis of ‘textual genres and structures’ in context-based social acts.
4. **Text critics** have got the ability to be analytical and critic vis-à-vis texts, taking basic account of ‘power’, ‘social justice’, and ‘perspective’.

## ***2. On the Relationship between General Linguistics and Critical Pedagogy***

On the ground of foreign language critical pedagogy, is meant a connection between the linguistic material and the way teaching and learning practices critically behave towards it. This situation has already been reported in Miguel’s (2005) *Critical Language Awareness and Foreign Language Learning* when he points out: “...What critical language awareness adds to the approaches propounded by its predecessors is its alliance or coalition with advocates of critical pedagogy” (p.5).

### **a. Critical Language Awareness**

In an attempt of defining critical language awareness Taylor, Despagne, and Faez (2017) introduce a prototype of learners who accumulate aptitude to adopt critical language awareness in the learning process of a foreign language. They assume that:

Students able to discern persuasive (not neutral) manifestations of worldviews expressed through vocabulary choices, as well as syntactic and other constructions are deemed to have ‘critical language awareness’ (CLA).

Critical language awareness is more than a simple linguistic ability; it is a cognitive competence which introduces the learner to a larger horizon of teaching and learning. It is a strategy that develops in the individual along becoming more and more aware about the non-neutral (Taylor et al. 2017.p.8) users’ attitude behind social and linguistic patterns.

The previous approach to critical language awareness does not only focalize the necessity of questioning every single alliance of a given discourse to the possibly referential ecology, but more than this, it aims at contemplating linguistic construction or any language-related subject for

a more objective, reasonable, and, to the extent of righteousness, a daring reaction to the subjective, ideological, and oriented attitudes.

### **b. Critical Thinking**

To the limits of the present paper, Fairclough (1992) definition of critical language awareness seems to adapt more to the idea of the study when he refers to 'conscious attention to properties of language and language use as an element of language education'. The concept of consciousness repeatedly appears in critical approaches to language and critical thinking is no exception. Among the set of definitions of critical thinking as 'cross-disciplinary' (Sanders (2011), Bloom (1956) refers to this practice as "involving analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (in Sanders (2011,p45). While the definitions of the concept are different to a certain extent, they share common attributes about critical thinking summarized from Hitchcock as follows:

Critical thinking is a way of thinking, which can apply to any subject; it is based on reason, revision and evidence using reflection to shape a definite judgment. Further, the set of characteristics that are typical to a critical thinker "involves knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions" (Hitchcock (2011)). However, and in an attempt of visualizing critical thinking in terms of the aspects of cognitive mechanisms that participate in its processing, the ACER (The Australian Council for Educational Research) represented by Heard et al. (2020) characterizes critical thinking as not only reflective but also applied and generative:

cognitive processes that are ultimately goal directed and purpose driven. Whether that purpose is to solve a problem, support a theory or statement, conduct an experiment, formulate an argument, present an interpretation, undertake a critique, better understand a topic or decide on a course of action , the skills here presented assume that critical thinking is not simply reflective thought, it is also applied and generative. (Heard et al. 2020:1)

The conception of critical thinking in the ACER's view implicates all the foreign language learners/teachers aspirations for understanding and using this language in the way it ought to be. All the purposes prescribed as possible items for the enhancement of a critical thinking process come to terms with classroom language situations which are ambiguous, more theoretical than practical, not planned for a practical purpose, based on memorization, and driven from assumptions.

## **II. Conception of the study**

In the present work, linguistic theory is represented by the set of English language descriptions and language theories formulated to understand the aspectual characteristics of languages. This theory is, however, limited to the most frequently exposed in university courses of linguistics and sociolinguistics, and which remain , by all means, elementary for language learning beside all the set of language theories which might not figure in the literature part but which are, nonetheless, meant to apply to the conceptualization and the objective of the present study.

Attempts to draw an up-down process of critical thinking which is stimulated by linguistic theory is sustained by the nature of this theory which according to Magnusson (2013) is made up of basic elements :

1/Philosophy: each theory has an undisputable character which is frequently based on intuition and general logic perceived similarly by human agents as they intuitively evaluate behaviours, acts, and relationships that compose the context of this theory.

2/description: A theory tends to describe results and products and explain the way they support the set of facts and experiences processed or witnessed by the theoretician. Magnusson adds:” we need to ask the question “how well does this explanation account for the experiences it is trying to describe and change?” It is therefore for the theory user to develop deep understanding of the descriptions.

3/Prescription: theory should have a leading objective towards change. What is held within a theoretical plan is to develop changing attitudes and roles in the user’s mental and behavioural acts, with attempts to find resolutions to problematic situations.

4/Evaluation: the theoretical ‘constructs’ need then to be applied for evaluation and measurement of practicability and generalizations. Some dimensions of evaluation are themselves theoretical elements as explanation and comprehension; however, Magnusson (2013) adds to this scale: parsimony, operationalization, verifiability, heuristic value, and applied value.

By parsimony is meant the ability to use the least number of explanation modes in the description of an experience. In other words, with parsimony, a theory can be made clear through a summarized number of dimensions, parameters, characteristics, habits, attitudes, etc. On operationalization, Magnusson points out:” to operationalize a concept, means to find a way to put the concept into action. Usually, it refers to a process of making an abstract idea more concrete and often measurable” (Magnusson, 2013). By verifiability is meant the extent to which the theories apply to practical situations. It is therefore evidence that confirms the validity of a theoretical construct. According to Magnusson, this dimension calls for a critical analysis of the data. In the context of the present study, EFL learners can experience the language theoretical models in their daily practices of the language. By heuristic value in the context of EFL, the author refers to the ability characterizing theory in solving learners’ problems with language and language use. Learners may ask themselves: Is this theory useful for the kind of errors I frequently make? Is this theory a representation of the way I still perceive the structure of the English language? Is this theory helpful for understanding the impact of context on language/language use and vice versa?

At the end, the direction of any theory is practical, and the user of a theory would wish to succeed in the application of theoretical constructs in the real world. However, with the tendency to scrutinize the extent of applicability, critical questions may evolve and contribute either to the nurture or the decline of a theory; this is the content of the last evaluation scale

referred to as applied value.

As part of applied psychology, the previous knowledge about the nature of theory brings to sight almost the same properties of critical thinking. In Hughes' collection, the latter are based on asking questions, evaluating information, questioning ideas, analyzing material and providing personal opinions supported by reason, seeking learners' autonomy, defining the nature of problems and planning for resolution, and accounting for a variety of opinions to answer questions.

Based on Blooms' Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956) planned for adoption by language teachers in their classrooms, Hughes (2014) summarized the components of critical thinking in a set of "sub-skills" whose function is "to take the learner from lower level thinking to a higher level thinking", these are: understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Therefore, based on the common properties shared by theory and critical thinking, the following part exposes the extent to which this similarity advocates a linear connection triggered by linguistic theory to support critical pedagogy through language awareness, knowledge about language, critical thinking, and attentive thinking as a new concept boosted in this study.

### III. Results and Discussion

The interaction between linguistic theory and the learning process will therefore be based on the behaviour of the learner towards theoretical guidelines; this behaviour is shaped /changed by pedagogical orientations provided by the teacher. The latter is not necessarily a specialist in linguistic studies, yet they are language teachers and should act as linguists to a certain extent. The following directions have been suggested to understand this interaction inside EFL classrooms of Algerian university.

#### A. Teaching Linguistics as a Discipline

To understand linguistic theories and language descriptions, teachers raise their learners' attention about reading, processing and organizing theoretical knowledge. Then, under the process of application, the knowledge acquired would need to be referred to in real situations throughout examples. The learner will then be reoriented towards theory and asked to grasp the way information and ideas are shaped and constructed throughout arguments; at this level, it is possible for the learner to classify ideas by nature and content. Under the evaluation skill, learners are invited to a rather disciplined understanding of the validity of arguments by participating in the promotion of the set of situations accounted by theoretical descriptions. Under this skill, learners develop a critical way to testing the extent to which the language theory in question can be objective, reasonable, and generalized. As for the last skill, learners are then expected to create language /linguistic situations that respond to the content of the theory or the language description they have treated in the classroom.

#### *1. Linguistic knowledge: The Concern of Content disciplines*

The range of knowledge reported by the module of linguistics shapes an introduction to the set of units/symbols constituting the English language, and a representation of the way this

language functions within context and situation. The whole displays an undetachable part of knowledge that co-operate with the one reported in other modules with a content-oriented order. However, knowledge about language and its mechanistic function constitute a considerable part of all language modules and curricula. Thus, among the major goals of the present study is to refer to linguistic theory and language description very frequently; the latter practice involves the learner in a critical approach to understanding every single linguistic structure, language property and language use.

### **B. Knowledge about Language and Critical Pedagogy**

The critical behaviour developed by learners in dealing with language theories and descriptions applies to all learning tasks and processes among which the ones determined by the teaching programmes. Being aware of the way language theories have been elaborated and the way they justify daily language practices, the learner raises more awareness about their interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) and the natives' ways of using and perceiving linguistic forms. Hence, Palmers' (1922 in Stern, 1983)) 'studial capacities' composed by co-operative, cognitive and deliberate learning interconnect with the critical approach to language structure and use predefined by language theory. The learning practice is thus enhanced by its fundamentals among which Sweet's associationism (1926 in Stern (1983)) which is based on a set of distinctions namely concerning words/sentences and their relationship with texts and context, and other structures which are by nature meaningful as they are contextual. The main objective that Sweet tries to discern is the grammatical analysis of linguistic combinations especially syntactic. Sweet's psychological skill of association is a process through which the learner analyses and uses language by synchronizing mental representations and images; the latter ability is an absolute product developed along the treatment of linguistic theory.

Being enhanced by linguistic/language theory, critical approach to language/language use is also based on reason, logic, and intelligence; hence, English language learners will arrive either at possible acceptance of structures, hesitation, or at definite refusals. Pedagogical practices that are context-bare and others that are contextual can strongly support the idea. Consider: we wish to see you in Anna's wedding. Under mechanical thinking, the learner might imagine the context of the. However, referring to the way context controls discourse in MAK Halliday's *Systemic Functional Linguistics*, and which exposes three different kinds of meaning intended by the human language: "Experiential meaning" (clause as representation); Interpersonal meanings (clause as exchange); and Textual meanings (clause as message) (Egins (2004) in Almurashi (2016)), beside van Dijk's *Context Models* (2016) which "provide an explicit theory of relevance and the situational appropriateness of discourse, and hence also a basis of theories of style" van Dijk (2016), the intention of the speaker would then need more clarifications for the learner. Unless the larger context is provided, the structure still needs to be analyzed and evaluated in terms of word choice, tense, and form to crystallize its function, especially if it carries a certain meaning of mockery, impoliteness, reaction to past actions, or it evidently carries all the meanings of positiveness and appreciation (see Freebody and Luke (1990) *Four Basics of Critical Pedagogy*). Besides, critical thinking in this example may not only be developed to better understand the message, but because it is an absolute product *per se*. The difference between the learner's cultural



context and the one within which the expression originally appears impacts the way expressions of this kind should be perceived. In the Algerian case, wedding invitations are themselves cultural and vary from one area to another; hence, in the region of Tlemcen<sup>1</sup> expressions of wedding invitations are: /*mselmin 3likoum dar flen wa flen bech td3iw lel3ors te3 flen/flena ...*/. (The members of family (x) greet you and ask you to take part of their son's/daughter's(y) wedding...).

Another critical/ attentive approach to dealing with English structures is to process kind of 'contrastive analysis' Lado (1957). This kind of analysis that is pedagogically supported enables the learner develop awareness about the set of similarities and differences characterizing the mother tongue and the foreign language(s) they learn. The distinction first lies at symbolization, to mean the letters/sounds specific to the two codes beside the phonetic, phonological, semantic and lexical characterizations. This kind of knowledge about language constitutes a necessary part of Chomsky's 'linguistic competence' (Tienson, 1983) which idealizes the native language speaker/listener who masters the language spoken in their community. In Chomsky's view, mastery of language is an internalized ability of generating grammatical structures; in other words the ability of producing a large set of correct syntactic structures. It is therefore evident that contrastive analysis participate in the formation of this kind of ability in the foreign language learner by preventing 'interlingual identifications' (Weinreich, 1953:7) which is a mixed-ruled linguistic practice where aspects of the mother tongue interfere with the ones of the foreign language; these are the main features of 'compound bilinguals' (Weinreich, 1953) . Hence, with the mental formation of two separate systems, the foreign language learner would have acquired the properties of 'co-ordinate bilinguals' (Findlay, 1932) in Stern (1983) and would have developed critical thinking to control their bilinguality.

Further, the concept of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) has been developed as a complementary parallel to Chomsky's linguistic competence to account for the socio-cultural knowledge to shape linguistic competence along the message to be conveyed, the addressee, the localization, etc. In some English language learning situations in the Algerian context, the learner may grasp well perfectly the grammatical forms related to direct and reported speeches; however, sometimes no mere attentive thinking is processed to recycle the rule during oral communication, the reason for which grammatical errors continue to considerably constitute the learner's interlanguage. Therefore, communicative competence as a linguistic theory is more complex in nature than linguistic competence; beyond correct structure, the combination and the use of linguistic units importantly reflect the components of the setting along with the previously developed discourse. Pedagogically, communicative competence can be enhanced by exposing students to conversations between/ among native speakers in a socio-culturally/politically defined context to understand the way linguistic and contextual combinations participate in the development of nonmechanical discourse.

Among the set of critical skills that are initially acquired when dealing with linguistic theories and developed throughout learning practices, English language learners are also importantly extending far downward the understanding of the theory of language change which according

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<sup>1</sup> A region in the north-west of Algeria.

to de Saussure(1959) and Milroy (1992) considers language as a dynamic system exposed to change along its circuit of existence. This kind of language knowledge achieves a set of learning reflections which critically enhances the attention of EFL learners to investigating the current changes at different societal, socio-economic, technological, and educational levels and help them discern the linguistic units that are more likely to undergo changes, especially words, grammatical rules, pronunciation, inflexions, and structures. Respectively, students become more and more aware about the role of research and KAL adjustments to the contemporary time besides a rather controlled feeling of satisfaction in language learning.

A final account of linguistic theories refers to understanding, analyzing, and evaluating the role of the properties of the human language introduced by Hockett (1958/1960/1966) which are: duality, productivity, arbitrariness, interchangeability, displacement, specialization, and cultural transmission, vocal-auditory channel, broadcast transmission and directional reception, rapid fading, total feedback, semanticity, discreteness, prevarication, reflexiveness and learnability (in Wacewicz and Żywicznyński (2014)) . Each of the properties above involves deep analysis, understanding, and evaluation beside application and creation by the learning agents. By arbitrariness, Hockett describes the kind of relationship between the combination of phonemes and the meaning of the idea they represent as arbitrary. This relationship applies similarly to de Saussure signifier/signified where the signifier is the linguistic presentation and the signified is the idea shaped by this phonemic composition. Hockett's arbitrariness will develop another theory, the one of language dynamic thanks to the variational set of linguistic constructs that are able to represent an extended number of ideas.

In other properties introduced by Hockett, discreteness should raise in the learner a critical perception towards the pronunciation of the smallest units (sounds) in an oral communication. Each sound is attributed a distinct property in nature and function; hence, /i/ in slip is not the /i:/ in sleep, /t /is not /t•/ in teeth and tall.

#### **IV. Implications**

The implications of the present study are purely educational in the sense they contribute to the participation of students in the understanding of their learning processes. Learners are undoubtedly supported by pedagogical orientations and practices that help them acquire a sense of criticality in dealing with ambiguity, subjectivity, pedagogical material and deficiencies that may appear across the teaching activity. Linguistics is then the basic component of this individual involvement previously determined by its nature which is a combination of depicting elements which dually apply to theoretical and practical considerations. It is, however, worthy to think linguistically when learning a foreign language.

#### **Conclusion**

Critical pedagogy is a discipline with a complex nature; its attempt to achieve a set of objectives that are structurally educational and substantially humanistic, political, social and intellectual is not limited to the learning of foreign languages, but it extends its concerns to the

learning practices of all the disciplines being scientific, literary, philosophical, political, or economic. Nonetheless, the learning of a foreign language is an investigation of the human agent, to mean practices, biology, mental processing, abilities, actions and reactions, linguistic and semantic manifestations, and learning styles and practices. A sequence of characteristics that have controlled the nature of theories elaborated to understand the human character and which could only and necessarily be philosophical. Thus, linguistic theory has summarized the components of this philosophy when being affiliated to comprehension, analysis, evaluation, and creativity that are themselves the sub-skills of critical thinking. Respectively, represented by critical thinking, critical pedagogy takes its essence from the codes of linguistic theory.

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