10-1-2007

Two Vernacular Features in the English of Four American-born Chinese

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1 Introduction

Variationist sociolinguistics has largely overlooked the English of Chinese Americans, sometimes because many of them spoke English non-natively. However, the number of Chinese immigrants has grown over the last 40 years, in part as a consequence of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that repealed the severe immigration restrictions established by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (García 1997). The 1965 act led to an increase in the number of America Born Chinese (ABC) who, as a result of being immersed in the American educational system that "urges inevitable shift to English" (Wong 1988:109), have grown up speaking English natively. Tsang and Wing even assert that "the English verbal performance of native-born Chinese Americans is no different from that of whites" (1985:12, cited in Wong 1988:210), an assertion that requires closer examination. Chun (2001:53), for example, challenges the idea that Asian Americans are "honorary whites who desire to speak only Mainstream American English" (MAE), by examining a case of language-crossing by a Korean American male who appropriated lexical elements of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) into his English. Even for speakers who use some version of MAE, there are in fact "a range of varieties" (Chun 2001:53), varying from the more general "Network American English", to more local standards, and even to different local vernaculars.

This current study examines speaker variation among four ABCs in New York City (NYC) in their use of an array of MAE resources, and how such variation may be employed as linguistic practices for identity constructions. Growing up in NYC, ABCs are exposed to a socially stratified local vernacular—New York City English (NYCE)—best described in Labov (1966, to appear), alongside the local standard and the relatively non-local general Network English. This study seeks to 1) provide a quantitative pro-

file of two features of NYCE, [ɔ]-raising and [æ]-tensing, in the speech of four ABCs in NYC and 2) examine the extent to which the difference in frequency of these features correlates with speakers' social organization and identity in terms of their *social networks* and *lifestyles*.

2 The Linguistic Variables: [ɔ]-raising and [æ]-tensing

Vernacular features of NYCE have been well-documented by Labov (1966), and several follow-up studies 2007). Labov (1966) found the two vocalic variables examined in this study, [ɔ]-raising and [æ]-tensing, to be associated with Italians and Jews, two prominent white ethnic groups in New York. He examined the height of [ɔ] in words like *caught, lost,* and *bored¸* etc and the height of [æ] in words like *bad, bag,* and*, pass,* etc. He discovered that the height of these two vowels showed class and stylistic stratification. In addition, raised [ɔ] acted as a symbol of group identification for New Yorkers with Jewish backgrounds and raised [æ] for those with an Italian background (1966:317). He argued that "unconscious pressures for continued ethnic group identification" act as primary mechanisms in developing raised [ɔ] and raised [æ] (1966:308). These two variables' strong associations with Jewish and Italian New Yorkers may allow members of other ethnic groups in NYC to interpret them as markers of mainstream identification. They are therefore good candidates for studying whether ABCs in NYC vary in their frequencies of these features as linguistic practices of group affiliation and identity.

3 Informants

Data for this study were drawn from four female ABCs of Cantonese descent.[1] They spent almost their entire lives in the New York Metropolitan area, except for Beatrice T. and Doris W. who left NYC for a few years for college.[2] Table 1 summarizes the social characteristics of the informants.

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[1]Three of them were born in NYC. One informant, Beatrice T., was born in Hong Kong and arrived in NYC at the age of three. Since Beatrice T. started kindergarten in NYC and reported never to be enrolled in an ESL class, there is strong reason to consider her a native speaker of English.

Cantonese has eight pure vowels with a low back contrast between /ɔ/ and /ɑː/. Cantonese does not have a low front vowel, but it has a mid front vowel /e/.

[2]Beatrice T. went to Stony Brook on Long Island and Doris W. went to Binghamton in upstate New York.

	Age	Education level	Occupation	Borough
Alice M.	22	High school	Real estate agent	Brooklyn
Beatrice T.	23	Finishing college	Accountant	Queens
Candice L.	18	College	Student (Pre-law)	Brooklyn
Doris W.	29	Graduate school	Consultant	Manhattan

Table 1: Informants

The informants' lifestyle orientations and the ethnic compositions also vary (see Section 6 for more detailed discussion).

4 Data Collection

I conducted one-on-one sociolinguistic interviews with the informants.[3] Three styles were examined: conversation, reading passage, and wordlist.[4]

Self-reports and name-elicitation through a set of network questionnaires, adapted from Kirke (2004), served to identify informants' social networks. The questionnaires took into consideration the frequency of interaction between an informant and her ties, the presence of affective bonds, as well as the existence of rewarding exchange (Li 1994, Milardo 1988, Milroy 1987, Milroy 2001). Informants' social networks were analyzed in terms of their ethnic compositions to determine whether the differences in the ABC's network compositions correlate with different frequencies of the linguistic variables exhibit in their speech.

In addition to social networks, this study explores whether informants' ethnic and cultural orientations may impact on language. Having a specific "lifestyle", loosely defined to include patterns of social relations, group affiliations, cultural and religious practices, entertainment, and dress, implies a conscious or unconscious choice of one set of behaviors over another, linguistic practices included. A set of two self-report questionnaires were used to measure whether informants' favored a more Chinese or American oriented lifestyle. They were essentially two versions of the same questionnaire, differing only in their reference culture. The questionnaires were adapted from Tsai et al.'s (2000) General Ethnicity Questionnaire (American and Chinese abridged versions). Informants' scores on these two

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[3]Interviews were digitally recorded using a lavaliere microphone through a laptop audio interface (Edirol UA-25) with Adobe Audition 1.0.

[4]Each sociolinguistic interview started with a one-hour casual conversation centered around several fixed modules. After the conversation, informants were asked to read a passage and four wordlists.

questionnaires were examined with respect to features of their speech to determine whether different lifestyle orientations correlate with different rates of variable use.

5 Data Analysis and Results

All tokens containing the targeted vowels in the reading passage and word-lists were examined. For the conversation, I analyzed tokens containing the targeted vowels in stressed position from a thirty-minute section, starting at ten minutes into the interview. F1 and F2 at the midpoint of the vowels and vowel length were measured using Praat. Binomial analyses using GoldVarb 2001 were performed for [ɔ]-raising. Independent sample *t* tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted for [æ]-tensing, using SPSS 14.0.

5.1 [ɔ]-raising

For [ɔ]-raising, a total of 1104 tokens (574 tokens containing [ɔ] and 530 tokens containing [ɑ]), evenly distributed across four informants, were extracted, segmented, and measured.[5] Tokens were coded into two classes based on their expected pronunciation in NYCE. The *caught* class includes tokens expected to be produced with [ɔ] (e.g. *caught*, *dawn*, and *coffee*). The *cot* class includes tokens expected to be produced with [ɑ] (e.g. *cot, Don,* and *copy*). Tokens were also coded for their immediate phonetic environments, style, and speaker identity.

Since [ɔ]-raising is a highly salient sociolinguistic marker in NYCE, my analysis focused on the height (F1) of this vowel. I compared the frequency of those *caught* tokens that were distinctively higher than the *cot* tokens with the frequency of the other *caught* tokens that were less distinct in height from the *cot* class. The application value for the binomial step analysis was the frequency of those vowels within the *caught* class that were more than 1 standard deviation (*SD*) higher than the mean height of the *cot* vowels. Such comparison assumes that a speaker who distinguished *caught* from *cot* and raised her [ɔ] is more likely to have more *caught* tokens over 1 *SD* higher than the mean height of the [ɑ] vowels. Table 2 compares the distributions of the two classes with respect to the mean height of the [ɑ] tokens.

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[5]The breakdown of these 1104 [ɔ] tokens by speaker is as follows: Alice M. - 291 tokens; Beatrice T. - 249; Candice L. - 270; and Doris W. - 294.

	cot tokens		*caught* tokens	
	%	Ns	%	Ns
Over 1 *SD* **higher** than the mean height (F1) of [ɑ]	14%	77/530	60%	349/574
Over 1 *SD* **lower** than the mean height (F1) of [ɑ]	13%	73/530	3%	19/574

Table 2: Percents and numbers of *cot* and *caught* tokens falling above and below 1 *SD* from the mean height (F1) of the [ɑ] vowels

We can see that tokens within the *cot* class are normally distributed around the mean height of [ɑ], with only 13% and 14% in each tail of the distribution. The distribution of the *caught* tokens, on the other hand, falls on the higher tail: 60% of the *caught* tokens are more than 1 *SD* higher than the mean height of [ɑ], while only 3% of the [ɔ] tokens are in the opposite end. The distribution in Table 2 suggests that informants in this study showed the *cot/caught* distinction. Subsequent individual analyzes and individual vowel space representations also confirm this.

I performed binomial step analyses on the linguistic and social factors that condition higher [ɔ] forms. Corresponding to Labov, Yaeger, and Steiner's (1972) finding that [ɔ] preceding rhotics was consistently higher and further back, the first analysis found that following rhotics strongly favor the use of high [ɔ] with a factor weight of .96, almost reaching the categorical level. Since variation does not occur in the pre-rhotic environment, a second binomial step analysis excluding all the pre-rhotics tokens was carried out. Table 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3 shows that the use of high [ɔ] is conditioned by three linguistic factor groups: place and manner of following segment, and manner of preceding segment. The linguistic factors that favor and disfavor higher [ɔ] forms seem to correspond to acoustic and articulatory descriptions of the English vowel system. Style is not significant, a result that differs from previous findings based on European Americans that more formal styles inhibited [ɔ]-raising (Becker et al. 2005, Labov 1966).[6] Crucially, there is significant inter-speaker variation in the rate of [ɔ]-raising. Candice L. and Alice M. favor the use of high [ɔ]. Beatrice T. and Doris W. disfavor it.

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[6]The finding may also be related to the formality of the interviews, the relatively crude assignment of style to tokens, and the nature of the reading passage.

Factor Group	Factor	Weight	% of raised [ɔ]	N	% of total
Following Manner	Obstruents	.10	38	35/154	27
	Flaps	.42	66	16/24	4
	Laterals	.18	40	38/94	16
	Rhotics	.96	98	215/219	38
	Nasals	.06	31	24/76	13
Following Place	Labial	.42	22	6/27	4
	Coronal	.48	68	302/440	76
	Velar	.52	34	29/83	14
	Glottal	.81	50	12/24	4
Preceding Manner	Stops	.35	56	115/202	37
	Fricatives	.48	69	86/124	23
	Laterals	.60	47	38/80	14
	Nasals	.62	86	44/51	9
	Glides	.73	64	50/77	14
Speaker	Candice L.	.70	73	111/152	26
	Alice M.	.67	71	105/147	25
	Doris W.	.40	53	82/153	26
	Beatrice T.	.19	41	51/122	21
Input 0.788		Total	60	349/574	
Log likelihood = -214.785					

Table 3: Revised results from GoldVarb on the significant linguistic and social factors on high [ɔ], excluding tokens in the pre-rhotic environment

5.2 [æ]-tensing

While Labov (1966) focused primarily on the height of [æ], his later works examined both raising and fronting of [æ] (1994, 2007). In this study, I examined the height, frontness, and length of [æ] in words like *pat* and *sat* as well as *bag, can't, past* etc. A total of 718 tokens, evenly distributed across four speakers, were segmented and measured.[7] Tokens were coded into two separate sets: the ones expected to be tense (e.g. *bag, can't, past*) and those expected to be lax (e.g. *pat, sat*), based on Labov's description of this vowel

[7]The breakdown of these [æ] tokens by speaker is as follows: Alice M: 183 tokens, Beatrice T: 183 tokens, Candice L: 170 tokens, and Doris W: 182 tokens.

in NYCE (which he labeled the split short-**a** system (1994, 2007)). Phonologically, [æ] before voiced stops, voiceless fricatives, and front nasals in closed syllables are expected to be tensed. [æ] is expected to be lax in open syllables, except for a few lexical exceptions. There are a few other grammatical and lexical conditions on the split of [æ] (see Labov 1994, 2007). Tokens were also coded for following segment, style, and speaker identity.

Two-group *t* tests were conducted to determine whether informants maintain a tense/lax distinction of [æ]. Table 4 summarizes the results. All four informants show the tense/lax distinction in length, with tensed [æ] longer than lax [æ]. No informant shows a significant height (F1) distinction between the two sets. Subsequent statistical analyses did not consider length and F1, due to the absence of inter-speaker variation in these dimensions.

Speaker	Dependent Variable	Mean		*t*(df)	*p*
		Tense	Lax		
Alice M.		N=100	N=83	*t*(181)	
	Height (F1)	754	766	-0.94	.35
	Frontness (F2)	1639	1511	4.01	.001*
	Length (in ms)	105	89	2.09	.04*
Candice L.		N=83	N=87	*t*(168)	
	Height (F1)	938	963	-0.99	.32
	Frontness (F2)	2038	1945	2.16	.03*
	Length (in ms)	130	100	3.10	.001*
Beatrice T.		N=103	N=80	*t*(181)	
	Height (F1)	826	838	-0.89	.38
	Frontness (F2)	1876	1851	0.88	.38
	Length (in ms)	111	94	2.24	.03*
Doris W.		N=103	N=79	*t*(180)	
	Height (F1)	749	743	0.33	.74
	Frontness (F2)	2024	1948	1.48	.14
	Length (in ms)	111	80	3.77	.001*

Table 4: Two-group *t* tests on the tense/lax distinction by individual
indicates significant result at the .05 level

Turning to frontness (F2), Alice M. and Candice L. show significant F2 contrast in their tense and lax [æ], with about 100Hz difference. A univariate ANOVA on F2 as the dependent variable and following segment as the independent variable was conducted to determine if my informants observed

the complex phonological conditioning of NYCE's split short-**a** system. Al-though the ANOVA result indicates a significant main effect for following segment on the F2 of [æ] ($F(7, 710) = 44.97$, $p < .001$), the order of fronting environments shown in Table 5 (from the most fronted (highest F2) to the least fronted (lowest F2)) does not follow the NYCE system.

Table 5 shows that [æ] preceding the velar nasal [ŋ] is the most fronted in my data, although in NYCE, it is not a tensing (and also fronting) environment for [æ]. In addition, [æ] preceding voiceless fricatives—a tensing environment in NYCE—is the least fronted in my data.

Following Segment		Mean F2	SD	N
Most Fronted	Velar Nasals	2273	463	31
	Front Nasals	2054	314	207
⇕	Voiced Stops	1826	226	119
	Voiced Fricatives	1758	276	51
Least Fronted	Voiceless Stops	1704	201	164
	Voiceless Fricatives	1689	209	131

Table 5: Mean F2 and standard deviations (*SD*) of [æ] in different linguistic environments

The significant main effect for following segment on the F2 of [æ] therefore does not necessarily indicate that Alice M. and Candice L. have acquired NYCE's complex split short-**a** system. Rather, their significant contrast in frontness of this variable results from their more polarized F2 values between the longer, fronted [æ] and the shorter, retracted [æ]. This study's result that children of immigrants do not acquire the complex system is reminiscent of previous findings (Payne 1980, Friesner and Dinkin 2006).[8]

Turning to style, results from two-group *t* tests indicate that for the four ABCs, in both the conversation ($t(571) = 2.04$, $p < .05$) and the reading passage styles ($t(72) = 2.08$, $p < .05$), tensed [æ] are significantly more fronted ($M_{F2} = 1877$ for conversation; $M_{F2} = 1923$ for reading passage) than the lax [æ] ($M_{F2} = 1822$ for conversation; $M_{F2} = 1761$ for reading passage). In the more formal style, the wordlist, the tensed and lax [æ] show no significant frontness distinction ($t(69) = .73$, $p > .73$). This finding suggests that the

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[8]Closer examination of the order of following environments in Table 5 reveals a possible connection between the degree of fronting and length. The environments that favor fronting are pre-nasals and pre-voiced obstruents, which are also the same environments favoring vowel lengthening.

fronting of tensed [æ] shows stylistic variation: the most formal style in this study, the wordlist, inhibits fronting.

5.3 Interim Summary

So far, all informants in this study maintain the *cot/caught* distinction. None of them exhibited a height distinction between her tensed and lax [æ], nor have any of them acquired the complex phonological conditioning of NYCE's split short-**a** system. There are, however, interesting inter-speaker variations in the rates of the variable use. On one hand, Alice M. and Candice L. favored the use of high [ɔ] and also showed a fronting contrast between their tensed and lax [æ]. On the other hand, Beatrice T. and Doris W. disfavored the use of high [ɔ] and showed no fronting distinction in their [æ]. In the next section, I will examine how different rates of variable use correspond to differences in social networks and lifestyle orientations.

6   Social Networks, Lifestyle Orientation and Linguistic Practices

Examining informants' social profiles in Table 1, we see that predefined social categories like *age*, *occupation,* and *education* fail to separate Candice L. and Alice M. from Beatrice T. and Doris W. Alice M. and Beatrice T. are close in age but vary in their rates of vernacular features. Candice L. and Beatrice T., and possibly Doris W. are similar in education level but their rates of vernacular features vary. It is therefore essential to turn to social networks and lifestyle orientations.

Following Li (1994:117ff), informants' social networks were measured by using an ethnic index, which is essentially the ratio of the number of non-Chinese ties to the number of Chinese ties in their social network. An index above 1 indicates a non-Chinese dominant network and an index below 1 indicates a Chinese-dominant network. Table 6 shows the ethnic indices of each informant.[9]

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[9]Informants were free to name as many or as few ties as they wished and to list their ties more than once. No a priori restriction was placed on the number of ties. It is purely a coincidence that 9 ties were reported and analyzed for each informant.

	Numbers of Ethnic Ties		Ethnic Index
	Chinese	**Non-Chinese**	
Alice M.	2	7	3.5
Beatrice T.	5	4	0.8
Candice L.	2	7	3.5
Doris W.	6	3	0.5

Table 6: Ethnic indices of informants

We see that the ethnic indices of Alice M. and Candice L. are well above 1, indicating that they have non-Chinese dominant networks. Their non-Chinese ties are predominantly European Americans. Beatrice T. and Doris W., on the other hand, have ethnic indices below 1, indicating that they have Chinese dominant networks. For Beatrice T. and Doris W., their non-Chinese ties are primarily Asian Americans.

Social network is linked to lifestyle, as many individuals adopt a particular lifestyle as a result of, or to gain, an affiliation with a certain group. Lifestyle orientation is therefore indicative of how an individual organizes her social space (Bourdieu 1985:196, cited in Irvine 2001:23). Based on informants' responses to the lifestyle questionnaires, each informant received two separate lifestyle scores for her orientations towards a Chinese and an American lifestyle. An informant's score for a particular lifestyle was the sum of all her scores for each individual response in the relevant lifestyle questionnaire (containing 27 questions). The maximum score, 54, represents strong orientation towards a particular lifestyle (27 questions × max 2 points). The minimal score, 0, represents weak orientation towards that lifestyle. Tsai et al. (2000) argue that individuals may vary in terms of how they relate multiple lifestyles with one another. Some are oriented only towards one lifestyle, almost to the exclusion of the others. Others may be encultured into multiple lifestyles. A third score, a *score of difference*, therefore, was calculated to capture the variation between a unidimensional mode and a bidimensional mode of lifestyle orientation (Score of difference = American lifestyle score – Chinese lifestyle score). Positive scores indicate bias towards an American lifestyle and negative scores indicate bias towards a Chinese lifestyle. Moreover, a score that gravitates towards the two ends of ± 54 indicates a more unidimensional mode of lifestyle orientation. A score closer to 0, on the other hand, suggests a more balanced affiliation with both lifestyles. Table 7 summarizes the results of informants' lifestyle orientations.

	Lifestyle Orientation		
	Chinese	American	Difference
Alice M.	24	43	19
Beatrice T.	25	34	9
Candice L.	16	41	25
Doris W.	24	38	14
Average (*SD*)	22.5 (4.19)	39 (3.92)	16.75 (6.85)

Table 7: Lifestyle orientation scores

Informants as a whole express stronger orientation towards an American lifestyle than a Chinese lifestyle. Looking at the Chinese scores in the first column, we see that Alice M., Beatrice T., and Doris W. score very similarly. Candice L., on the other hand, has the lowest score. For the American scores in the second column, we see Alice M. and Candice L. scoring above average, while Beatrice T. scores the lowest. While Doris W. also scores lower than the group average, her score may not be significantly lower than Candice L.'s. More interesting is the *score of difference* in the third column. We see that Alice M. and Candice L. show the greatest difference between the two lifestyles, suggesting a more unidimensional orientation towards an American lifestyle than Beatrice T. and, to a lesser degree, Doris W.

We are now ready to evaluate the connection between informants' network score, lifestyle orientations, and their varying frequencies of variable use. Table 8 combines the linguistic results with the network and lifestyle data. Alice M. and Candice L., who have non-Chinese dominant networks and display a more unidimensional orientation towards an American lifestyle, tend to favor the use of high [ɔ]. Although they did not seem to use NYCE's split short-**a** system, they show a more polarized fronting distinction in their [æ]. Beatrice T. and Doris W., who have Chinese-dominant networks and display a relatively bidimensional lifestyle orientation, disfavor the use of high [ɔ] and show no fronting distinction in their low front vowels.

Informant	Social profile				Linguistic practices	
	Social network (ethnic index)		Lifestyle (difference score)		[ɔ]-raising (probability)	[æ]-fronting
Candice L.	Non-Chinese dominant	(3.5)	Unidimen-sional	(25)	Y (.71)	Y
Alice M.		(3.5)		(19)	Y (.70)	N
Doris W.	Chinese dominant	(0.5)	Bidimen-sional	(14)	N (.40)	Y
Beatrice T.		(0.8)		(9)	N (.20)	N

Table 8: Linguistic practices, social networks and lifestyle orientations

7 Discussion and Conclusion

The congruence displayed in Table 8 suggests that linguistic practices, social networks, and lifestyle orientations all belong to the same system of differentiation, through which individuals construct their identities and negotiate their social positions (Irvine 2001). [ɔ]-raising, and perhaps [æ]-fronting, seem to index contrasts in informants' social space. The local ideology of language that allows these two vernacular features to be interpreted as indices have already been documented by Labov 40 years ago: both features have salient ethnic associations with Jewish and Italian Americans. The features, therefore, join in the "work of representation" (Bourdieu 1985, cited in Irvine 2001:23), enabling informants to negotiate and index their positions within a complex system of distinctions and identity constructions.

Identities, of course, are not created in a social vacuum. *Burnouts* vs. *jocks* (Eckert 1989); *nobles* vs. *griots* (Irvine 1990), *nerd girls* vs. *cool kids* (Bucholtz 1999), identities are created in contrasts. Contrasts, however, are neither inherently binary nor are they predefined. Identities emerge through social practices, and individuals can contrast multiple identities simultaneously. The following piece of ethnographic data gathered from the sociolinguistic interview with Candice L. offers us a glimpse of the opposition in identities that seems to be salient to her, and how such opposition is manifested in her linguistic practices:

> (Talking about her next door neighbor). And what I've noticed is that even though I'm Chinese and she's Italian, [...] she sees me as more toward her culture than she would see a Jewish pers- Orthodox Jewish person or like a black person, like Hispanic person. I think it's more like the demeanor, like how I talk and the fact that I'm educated in like a well-known university, and, the way that I speak. People see- told me a lot of times that I don't sound Asian. […] But, like there is [sic] some people who were born here, still have like a Chinese lingo. [...] You could hear it. Like other people who are not Asian especially could hear it sometimes that the other person is not white. I've been accused of sounding white so often that you know [...] <*Interviewer: It's annoying right?*> I mean sometimes it's really annoying. Sometimes I'm flattered because I didn't speak the language and here I am being able to fool people into believing that I'm not even Asian you know itself [sic].

In this study, I provided a quantitative profile of the use of two NYCE vernacular features in the speech of four female ABCs from NYC. The distinctive linguistic behaviors found among the informants correspond with their distinctive patterns of social networks and lifestyle orientations. I pro-

pose that such parallels may be understood in terms of linguistic practices of identity, an approach that allows us to investigate individual behaviors by situating them within the larger communities. The findings from my study also show that examining the use of MAE features by ethnic minorities who do not react against mainstream expectations can contribute to our understanding of linguistic practices of identity.

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