Antagonistic Contact and Inverse Affiliation: Appropriation of /TH/-fronting by White Speakers in South Philadelphia

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Abstract

This paper examines a group of white speakers in South Philadelphia who exhibit appropriation of African American Vernacular English /TH/-fronting. Speakers with the most antagonistic contact and most aggressive attitudes toward their African American neighbors show the highest rates of /TH/-fronting. This paper argues that appropriation of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) ethnolect feature of /TH/-fronting has been reanalyzed as a marker of street smarts rather than as a marker of speakers' affiliations with AAVE speakers.

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Betsy Sneller*

1 Introduction

This paper examines a group of white speakers in South Philadelphia who exhibit appropriation of African American Vernacular English /TH/-fronting. There's a rich background of sociolinguistic work that shows speakers' linguistic behavior shifting to match groups that they feel positively affiliated with (e.g., Eckert 2000, Moore 2003). This study provides a surprising example of linguistic appropriation that occurs in inverse affiliation with speakers' attitudes toward the origin dialect speakers. The speakers in this study appropriate a feature of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), while simultaneously espousing negative opinions about the speakers of AAVE.

In appropriating features from other dialects, Fix (2010) and Sweetland (2002) have shown that regular personal interaction with speakers from the borrowed dialect is also a requirement for feature borrowing. In this study, there is a high degree of dialect contact between the white speakers and their AAVE-speaking neighbors via regular and antagonistic contact. I suggest that the appropriation of the AAVE ethnolect feature of /TH/-fronting follows from this antagonistic contact: that the white speakers have reanalyzed /TH/-fronting as a marker of street identity rather than AAVE identity, and are using this feature as a marker of street smarts rather than as a marker of their affiliation with AAVE speakers.

2 Linguistic Background

/TH/-fronting is the substitution of the labiodental fricative /f/ for the interdental fricative /θ/. In dialects which also exhibit /ð/ → /v/ substitution, the term /TH/-fronting also may refer to the substitution of the voiced segments. Since it is only the voiceless segments that are the focus of this paper, I will use the term /TH/-fronting to refer only to the substitution of the voiceless segments.

In AAVE, /TH/-fronting has been described as occurring only word-medially or word-finally (Green 2002, Labov et al. 1968). These word position constraints are shown with examples in Table 1 below.

Word Position	/TH/-fronting	Example
Word Initial	Not possible	THANKS
Word Medial	Possible	ATHLETE → AFLETE
Word Final	Possible	TRUTH → TRUF

Table 1: Word position constraints on /TH/-fronting in AAVE.

/TH/-fronting is a well-known feature of AAVE, as well as of many dialects of English worldwide, but it has not been described as a feature of non-AAVE dialects of American English. Crucially, it has not been reported to be a feature of Philadelphian English, which is the dialect spoken by the participants in this study. All of the speakers in this study exhibit the salient features of Philadelphian English: the complex Philadelphian split short-a pattern, the raising of the back vowels before /r/, the allophonic split of /ay/ before voiceless codas, and the allophonic split of /ey/ before open syllables. These speakers represent prototypical Philadelphian English, with the addition of /TH/-fronting.

3 Neighborhood Background

3.1 Demographics

Since the linguistic feature under consideration is a feature of AAVE which is appropriated by white speakers, it is important to lay out the demographic details of the neighborhood.

The data in this study consist of sociolinguistic interviews conducted in an area of South Philadelphia called Grays Ferry. Grays Ferry is a blue-collar area of Philadelphia, comprised of 56% black residents, 39% white residents, and 5% other (Bureau 2013). Despite the nearly equal racial proportions of the area, there is a high degree of racial segregation between racial groups. Many of the blocks in this neighborhood are either predominately white or predominately black. On a single street, one block may be comprised of almost entirely black residents while the subsequent block is comprised of almost entirely white residents. The neighborhood has a history of racial tension between the black residents and the white residents, which is discussed in more detail in Section 3.3 below.

The particular block on Grays Ferry on which interviews were conducted, named here Donegal Street, has a median income of $12,790 per year (Bureau 2013), which is well below the middle-class income range of $44,750–54,425 for Pennsylvania. Many of the residents on this block are union workers or are living on disability, and there is a high rate of drug addiction in the neighborhood.

3.2 Participants

Participants were recruited over the course of a year of fieldwork done on Donegal Street, as part of the LING-560 project at Penn and the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus (1972–2013)[1]. The interviews made use of the sociolinguistic interview modules developed by Labov (1984), which covered a range of conversational-style topics about the lives of participants. Some participants (Jerry, Kevin, Flip, Molly, Sonny) were recruited by members of the research team making initial contact on Donegal Street. All others (Larry, Barbara, Renee, Jennifer, Patrick, Tiny, Sally, Edith) were recruited as friends of these initial contacts. The speakers and their ages are listed below in Table 2.

Males	Age	Females	Age
Kevin Murphy	13	Molly Murphy	26
Flip Abruzzo	20	Jennifer Till	29
Patrick Murphy	37	Renee Till	24
Jerry O'Neil	45	Barbara Till	51
Tiny Delaney	48	Edith Till	62
Larry Till	65	Sally Till	53
Sonny Brody	70		

Table 2: List of participants, grouped by gender and age.

These participants all lived within a three-block stretch of Donegal Street. This stretch of Donegal Street is almost entirely comprised of Irish-American, Italian-American, and Polish-American residents. All of the participants in this study identify as white, except Renee, who identifies as half white and half black.

Family trees for the Murphy family and Till family are shown below in Figure 1:

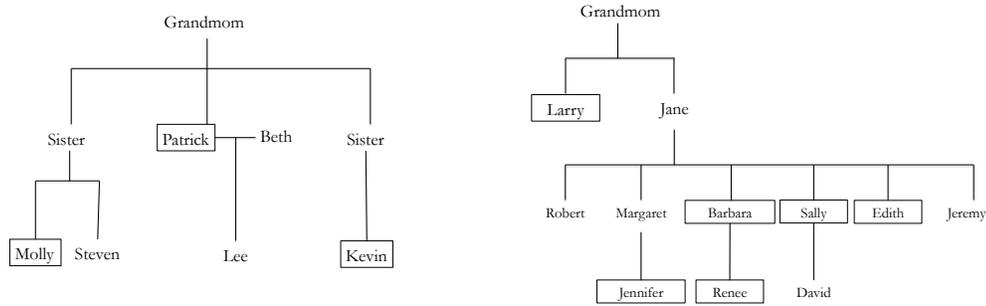[1] Thanks especially to David W., who introduced the research group to the "Till" family

Figure 1: Murphy family tree (left) and Till family tree (right), recorded individuals outlined.

3.3 Racial Tensions

Grays Ferry is an area of Philadelphia that is well known for racial tensions between black residents and white residents. This section discusses some of the context behind these racial tensions.

3.3.1 Section 8 Housing

The Section 8 Housing Voucher program is a national assistance program which provides rental assistance to low-income families. Since the program was implemented in Grays Ferry in the 1970's, the neighborhood has grown to include 10% of the city's Section 8 residents, despite containing less than 1% of the city's population (Newall 2005).

The disproportionate influx of low-income Section 8 recipients caused property values to decrease and resulted in an increase in drugs and violence, which in turn resulted in the flight of many financially able residents out of Grays Ferry and into more expensive neighborhoods.

Because many of Section 8 recipients were also black, many of the current white residents of Grays Ferry perceive the history of Section 8 housing as a racial problem: that "You can't not think badly of that – of the race because. When they jump your little brothers, jump you, **ruin the neighborhood**, it's like. What are you gonna do?" (Kevin, 13, emphasis mine). This narrative of black residents ruining the neighborhood is one regularly recounted by participants in this study.

3.3.2 Racial Tensions in 1997

Racial tensions in Grays Ferry peaked in 1997, through a few successive events.

The first of these was an event that occurred at a local fundraising event for the neighborhood Catholic parish. At a point during the night, one of the white patrons of the fundraiser got in an altercation with two black teens outside of the bar. When he returned to the bar and reported being jumped by two black teens, a group of white men left the bar to retaliate. The men followed the teens to their home and kicked down the door. This resulted in a high-profile legal case between the mother of one of the teens and the men who kicked down the door.

A few months later, a white teen was shot and killed by a black man during a drug-store robbery. When the white community reacted to this, the Nation of Islam reacted back, organizing a thousand-person march through the streets of Grays Ferry. This series of events remains a salient topic for residents of the neighborhood. This salience is exemplified in Kevin, who although born two years after these events, was able to describe them in detail when he was asked about racial tensions in the neighborhood.

In the following section, I turn to /TH/-fronting among these thirteen white, non-AAVE speaking participants.
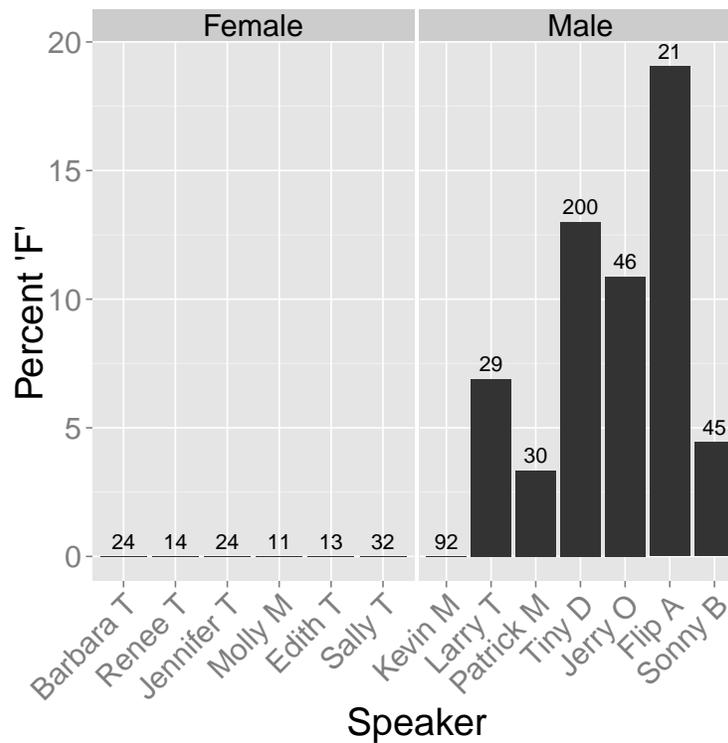
4 Methodology and Results

4.1 Gender

Figure 2: Percent /f/ by gender, total n's reported in each column.

As shown in Figure 2 above, not one of the six women in this sample exhibited variability in /TH/-fronting, using the standard variant [θ] categorically. Because none of the women exhibited variability, gender was taken out as a predictor and only the men were included in the model.

4.2 Racial Attitude Scores

Because speakers' attitudes have been shown to be an important aspect of linguistic appropriation (Sweetland 2002, Fix 2010), and because race relations are such a salient part of life in Donegal Street, a racial attitude metric was constructed. Speakers' attitudes were measured through comments made during the interview. Although sociolinguistic interviews afford a high degree of variability of questions asked, each speaker was asked how the neighborhood has changed since they've lived there. From speakers' responses to this question and their comments throughout the interview, the racial attitude metric in Table 3, below, was used. When grouped by this racial attitude metric, the male speakers fall only within the last two racial attitude categories.

| Racial attitude score	Diagnostic	Example
1	overtly opposed racism	"My daughter brought that [picture] home for me. It says 'The shame of American democracy', and it has the police lynching a black guy." - Barbara, 51
2	no mention of race	——-
3	non-aggressive racism	"When they jump your little brothers, jump you, ruin the neighborhood [...] what are you gonna do?" - Kevin, 13
4	aggressive racism	"Back in the day, a n- couldn't walk down Donegal Street without getting smacked in the face with a glass bottle" - Flip, 20

Table 3: Racial attitude metric.
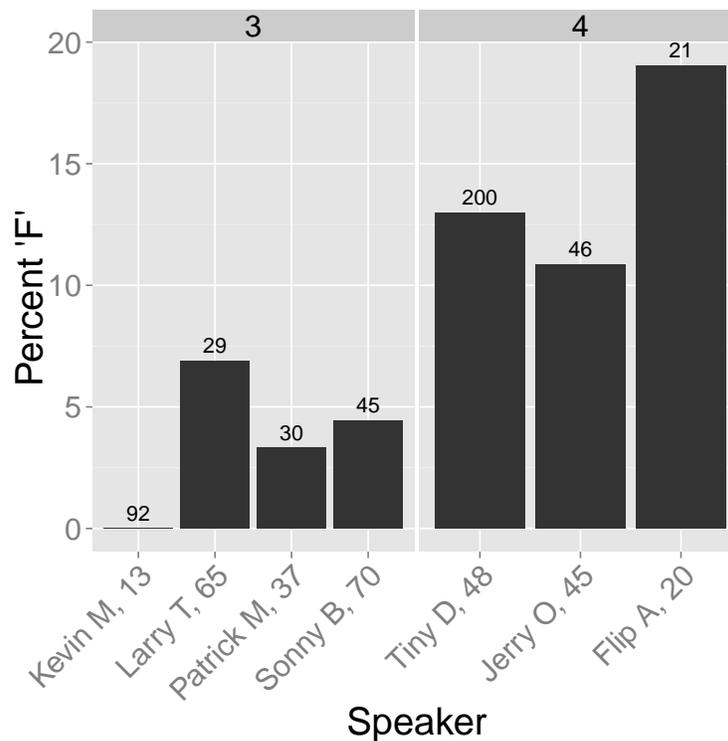
Figure 3: Percent /f/ by racial attitude score. Total Ns reported in each column, ages listed after speakers' names.

Kevin, the only male who does not exhibit /TH/-fronting at all, is exceptional in the neighborhood. He attends a prestigious high school nearby, in contrast to his peers, who attend the neighborhood parochial school if they have not dropped out of school. Kevin has aspirations to

attend the University of Pennsylvania to become a nurse, and very much wants to move out of the neighborhood. He views himself as quite different from his peers in the neighborhood, including his own cousins. This is exemplified in the following passage, in which he discusses why he doesn't get along with his cousins:

> They're all like little nothings that come from nothing. Like they're just gonna turn – they're not getting outta here. They're gonna –. I don't know. I'm happy, I'm smart. I'm getting outta here.
>
> Kevin, 13

Kevin's exceptional behavior in /TH/-fronting is informative, and shows him to be hyper-standard in comparison to his peers. Though /TH/-fronting is the only linguistic feature under consideration in this paper, it should be noted that he also is an outlier in /ing/-/in/ variation and get-be passive variation, in which he uses the standard forms almost categorically. His exceptional linguistic behavior is very much in line with is attitudes toward the neighborhood; he dislikes the neighborhood and has upwardly mobile aspirations, and his linguistic behavior belies these aspirations. Although Kevin's /TH/-fronting production is interesting, he will be excluded from analysis since he does not show variation in this feature.

4.3 Word Position

Considering only the six speakers who show variability in /TH/-fronting, I now turn to the effect of word position on fronting.
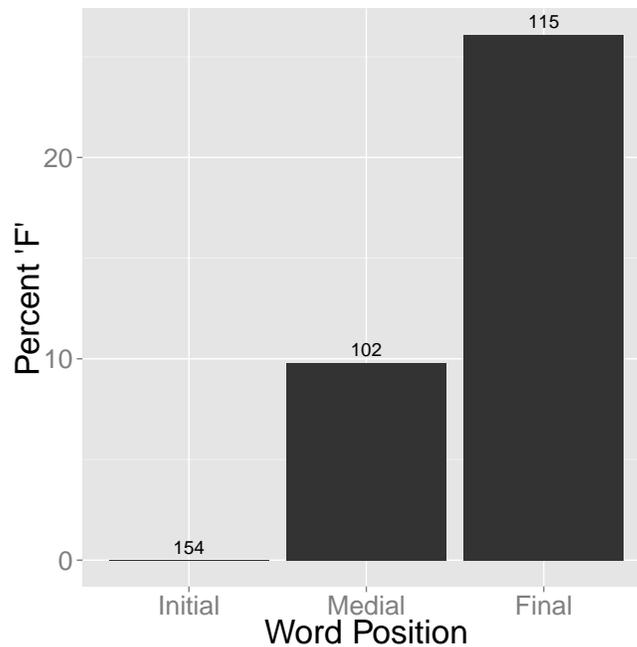

Figure 4: Percent /f/ by word position, total n's reported in each column.

As shown in Figure 4 above, these six speakers exhibit /TH/-fronting in word-final and word-medial position, but not in word-initial position. This can be schematized in Table 4:

Word Position	/TH/-fronting	Attested example
Word Initial	Not possible	–
Word Medial	Possible	ETHNIC → EFNIC
Word Final	Possible	BOTH → BOF

Table 4: Word position contraints in the speakers from Grays Ferry.

Notably, these speakers exhibit /TH/-fronting in the same word positions that have been described for AAVE /TH/-fronting, as shown in §4.3 above. Because the phonotactic constraints of word-position on /TH/-fronting for these white Philadelphians matches the AAVE constraints of word-position, this suggests that these white speakers are picking up the feature of /TH/-fronting from AAVE-speaking contacts. Further discussion on the level and type of contact that these speakers have with their AAVE-speaking neighbors is provided in Section 6.2 below.

4.4 Syllable Position

In this section, I tease apart the effects of syllable position on /TH/-fronting, to see whether the effects of word position are just a consequence of syllable position. Since word-initial tokens are necessarily syllable-onset and word-final tokens necessarily syllable-coda, it is the word-medial tokens that are of interest. Figure 5 below shows the word-medial tokens separated into syllable onset and syllable coda position.
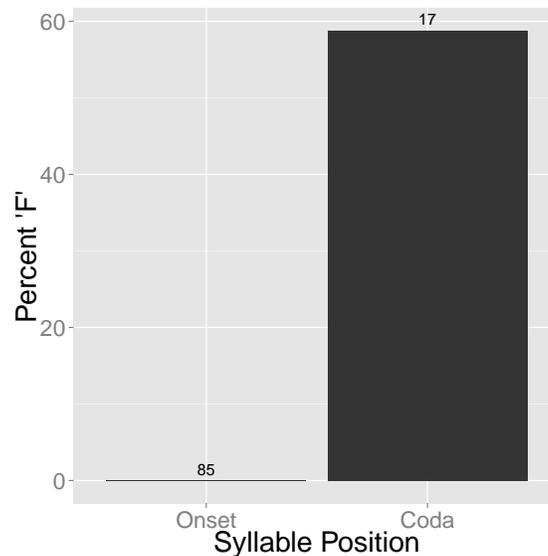

Figure 5: Percent /f/ by syllable position, total n's reported in each column.

When word-medial tokens are investigated by syllable position, it becomes clear that for these speakers, /TH/-fronting only occurs in syllable coda position, from which the above word-position results are derived.

5 Mixed Effects Model

For modeling the effects of social and linguistic factors on /TH/-fronting, I include only the variable speakers (Patrick, Larry, Flip, Jerry, Tiny, and Sonny), as well as only coda-position tokens. Using the lme4 package in R, a logistic mixed-effects model was run. The model with the best fit gives us the following results:

Predictor	Coefficient	P-value
Racial Attitude (aggressive)	2.35	< .001***
Word Position (internal)	1.59	.016*
Age	.03	.07

Table 5: Results of the best-fit model.

As shown in Table 5, the best predictor of /TH/-fronting is speakers' attitudes toward race. Speakers with the more aggressive racial attitudes are also the most likely to exhibit /TH/-fronting. This is a surprising result, given that linguistic appropriation typically is the result of positive affiliation (Labov 1972, Eckert 2000, Moore 2003). The data from Grays Ferry speakers provides an example of inverse affiliation: speakers' linguistic behavior is in inverse correlation to their attitudes toward the group whose feature is being appropriated. It is proposed here that racial attitudes are epiphenomenal to /TH/-fronting: that aggressive racial attitudes is caused by regular conflict with black neighbors, and that /TH/-fronting is appropriated via regular contact with AAVE-speakers. This is discussed in further detail in Section 6.2 below.

The second significant factor on /TH/-fronting is word position. For the syllable-coda tokens, word-internal position is more likely to show fronting than word-final position.

Age is not shown to be a significant predictor of /TH/-fronting.

6 Discussion

6.1 Appropriation

These results suggest that /TH/-fronting in the white population of Grays Ferry is the result of appropriation from AAVE, rather than an endogamous change from within the white community, for three main reasons.

Firstly, all speakers who exhibit /TH/-fronting follow the AAVE-pattern word position constraints, which suggests that this feature was borrowed from AAVE speakers. Secondly, /TH/-fronting is not a feature of Philadelphian English, which is the dialect that all thirteen participants speak. Finally, the speakers who show the highest levels of /TH/-fronting are also the speakers with the most regular contact with their AAVE-speaking black neighbors. This regular contact provides a feasible route of appropriation.

6.2 Street Culture Contact

As mentioned in Section 4.3 above, it is suggested here that the racial attitude effect is epiphenomenal to a more basic effect of antagonistic contact. All six speakers who exhibit /TH/-fronting are also the speakers who are the most involved in 'street' culture: buying and selling drugs, participating in the local stolen bike trade, and participating in turf-related conflicts with other neighborhood gangs. Crucially, these activities cross racial boundaries: drugs are sold by white dealers to black buyers and vice versa. Disputes over control of the neighborhood basketball court occur between groups of white kids and groups of black kids.

Aside from the contact that occurs during these activities, contact between black neighbors and white neighbors is limited. The neighborhood is characterized by a checkerboard pattern of settlement, with one block of a street comprised almost entirely of white residents with the following block comprised of almost entirely black residents. Over the course of a year of observational fieldwork, the only black neighbors that were seen on Donegal street were the two that lived on that block. On more than one occasion, I was told to avoid "N***** Donegal" (the predominately black blocks of Donegal Street) on my walk home. In addition to the limited contact between blacks and whites in outdoor spaces, black children and white children typically attend different schools: white children attend the neighborhood Catholic school while black children attend the neighborhood

public school. The high level of racial segregation within Grays Ferry means that white speakers do not have much opportunity for contact with their black neighbors.

For the six speakers in this study who exhibit /TH/-fronting, street culture provides an avenue of contact between these white speakers and their AAVE-speaking neighbors. I suggest that it is the regular and antagonistic contact which results in the violently racist attitudes outlined in Section 4.2 above, as well as in an appropriation of the /TH/-fronting feature.

This analysis of /TH/-fronting as a feature of contact through participation in street culture is bolstered by a comment from Tiny. During a perception experiment where participants were asked to report whether a recording said [f] or [θ], Tiny paused after hearing the stimulus [bof], and said, "I know you said [bof] but I clicked [boθ] instead, because I'm not just street." Tiny's analysis of the fronted token as a marker of 'street' identity supports the claim that /TH/-fronting has been appropriated through street culture contact with AAVE-speakers.

7 Conclusion and Future Directions

While linguistic appropriation typically is the result of a positive affiliation with a given group, these results provide an example of linguistic appropriation resulting from conflict between two groups. This is in line with Giles (1973), which claims that speakers converge in speech style to become more like those with whom they interact. Furthermore, Giles et al. (1991) communication accommodation theory suggests that social integration also drives accommodation.

Giles et al. (1991) points out that social integration is not necessarily coterminous with approval. For the white speakers in Grays Ferry who exhibit /TH/-fronting, approval from their AAVE speaking neighbors is clearly not a priority. However, for these speakers, there is very likely to be a need for street culture social integration. Speakers who deal drugs need to be able to signal that they understand the Code of the Street (Anderson 1999), and that they are not easy targets of violence or theft. Given Tiny's evaluation of [bof] as a marker of 'street' identity rather than AAVE identity, it seems likely that the feature /TH/-fronting has been reanalyzed as a marker of street smarts. I suggest that it is through the regular and antagonistic contact with AAVE speakers during street activities that these white speakers have appropriated /TH/-fronting and which also drives its status as a marker of street identity.

This work also raises further questions that would be worthwhile examining in future research. While the word-position constraints clearly fall out from the syllable-position constraints for the Philadelphian English speakers examined in this study, syllable-position still has not been examined for AAVE. It is necessary, therefore, to also examine a more fine-grained analysis of the syllable constraint phonotactics governing AAVE pattern /TH/-fronting. Additionally, the sociolinguistic status of /TH/-fronting amongst these white speakers still remains a fruitful topic of inquiry. Tiny overtly associated the form [bof] with 'street', but it is unclear whether he was reacting to /TH/-fronting as a feature or to the form [bof] as a stereotype of street-culture speech. Finally, this work would benefit from a larger sample size of variable non-AAVE speaking /TH/-fronters as well as AAVE-speaking /TH/-fronters to serve as a comparison.

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