

On the Role of Gender on the Oral Production of the Native Language of Iranian Kids

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Abstract

Some studies have been done to investigate the role of the gender on the acquisition of the first and second or foreign language. Actually it is assumed that the way through which girls acquire the native and the second language is somehow different from the way boys do it. It is worth mentioning that first language acquisition is different from second language acquisition in different ways (Hagen, 2008). However, the focus of this study is the acquisition of L1. The researchers have tried to show if girls' and boys' use of the first language is different in this study. To achieve this goal they selected four participants, two girls and two boys. One of the girls and one of the boys were less than three years old and the other two were more than three but less than four. The researchers made efforts to consider various social and personal factors while choosing the participants. They prepared twelve questions to ask of the participants and they also showed six short episodes of a silent film and asked them to tell something about each episode. Each participant was interviewed separately and whatever they said was recorded. The researchers transcribed the recordings for the later analysis. At the end of the project and after exact analysis of the recordings through categorization and providing schemes, they found that girls' speech was significantly different from the boys' in terms of choice of vocabulary, structure, interruptions, redundancy, hesitations, repetitions, understandability, relevance, and quality. Actually girls' speech was of a higher quality both in terms of structure and vocabulary. Therefore, it can be claimed that there is a difference between the rate and the way of the first language acquisition of the girls and boys due to different factors such as biological, personal, social and some others.

Keywords: first language acquisition, language development, native language

Introduction

Learning to communicate is a natural, predictable developmental progression. All children around the world learn the immediate language they hear in their environment. In fast rate children learn the basic components of their native language. They learn the phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax of their native language. The style and rate at which children acquire and grasp their native language have universal characteristics although there are individual variations in the process of language development. It seems that the differences in first language development of girls and boys can be seen during the first years of life.

Some studies have proved that the way and rate of girls' first language acquisition is more advanced than that of boys. These studies have shown that girls' use of the first language is more fluent and more proficient compared to the boys of the same age. On the other hand, some other studies have revealed that boys' use of the first language is dominant over the girls' at the school age. The close observation of children shows that girls somehow speak differently from boys of the same age. It seems that the rate of the first language acquisition of girls differs from that of boys. Based on the close observation of the ways that girls and boys talk, the researchers of the study have proposed that girls may develop language fluency and proficiency in a more facilitated manner than boys. The findings of some related studies have also proved that girls start talking their first language earlier and even they talk more than boys in their first language. Some studies have also proved that the majority of late talkers of the native language are boys. On the other hand, there are also opposite views on the issue. Studies of the first language classroom interaction have revealed that boys interact more in classes (Gascoingne, 2002,p. 83).

These differences may refer to different factors. Part of the difference may refer to biological differences between girls and boys. Other parts of the difference may refer to sociocultural, socioeconomic and affective factors. In case of biological differences, it must be mentioned that researches that have been done on the area of neurobiology have revealed that males' and females' brains process language not exactly in the same way.

One of the factors that may lead girls to talk sooner and better than boys may refer to their behaviors. Infant girls may show more empathy toward their parents and this may encourage their parents to talk more to them and this may stimulate their language. From the birth, children are interpreted and treated differently with regard to their gender. Parents dress girls differently from boys and they give them the names from different categories. Thus, they may treat girls and boys differently considering the linguistic events. Therefore, parents may use more words while talking to their girls than their boys. This can be a cause to claim that girls are more advanced in their first language acquisition than boys.

Theoretical basis of research:

Verbal ability studies have also proved that girls surpass boys in verbal fluency, correct language usage, sentence complexity, grammatical structure, spelling, and articulation (Karmiloff, Karmiloff-Smith 2002). Based on what has been stated, one may conclude that it is more difficult for boys to gain their mother tongue than girls. Some researches that have been done in the field allow us to state; however, that even

though in some aspects of language acquisition boys might be considered to lag behind or experience more difficulties than girls, they, as a rule, reach the same level of linguistic competence as girls already during the preschool years (Karmiloff, Karmiloff-Smith 2002).

Research Background

Before the 1950's studies on child acquisition were mostly diaries by linguist studying their own childs. Since then research on child acquisition has rapidly changed, mostly after Chomsky introduced his hypothesis concerning the existence of an innate system in every child. Linguists started seeing children as "creators of interesting and systematic language, rather than as imperfect imitators of adult speech" (Gleason, Berko and Ratner, 1993). "At one time, it was believed that children learned language by simply imitating the speech of those around them" (O'Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff, 2011). Due to technological improvements in the last fifty years, linguists gained the ability to both tape-record and/or video-record the sounds that children produced.

Today, video-recording is more general because although linguists are interested in hearing what the child is saying, they are also interested in what the child is doing at the same time. The study of first language acquisition is very difficult because the linguists cannot simply go up to young children and ask them questions on what they know and how or why they know it, especially when the children are younger than two. For linguists to test their hypotheses they would either conduct an experiment or make an observational study. "Good experiments are often ingeniously simple, and you don't have to be a specialist to understand them" (O'Grady, 2005). In his *Journal of Child Language*, Ingram (1989) divided the studies of development of language acquisition into three periods. They are diary period (1876-1926), big sampling period (1926-1957) and longitudinal studies period (started when Chomsky's 'Syntactic Structures' appeared). In this first period, he said, some researchers noted whatever the children say in the diary. These notes are analyzed and finally he gets the summary result.

The second period related with the behaviorists' orientation said that the environment has a big role in children's language acquisition. The main evidence is showed by Templin (1957). He tested 480 children, 3-8 years of age, of representative socio-economic background. The last period, longitudinal period, was started by Chomsky's 'Syntactic Structure or nativism orientation that said children are born with a set of rules. The main characteristic of this period is that the studies needed a very long time because they examined the development of something that is being studied from one period to another. Four months or more is not enough giving out an idea of how things were developing in languages. Besides that, the number of the participants of the studies is usually much less and even one person. It is quite like the studies done by the Weir (1962), Dromi (1987), Tomasello (1992). Their participants are their own family members, their own kids and Dardjowidjojo (2000) researched his own granddaughter.

There are three main approaches towards the first language acquisition of children, behaviorism, nativism and cognitivism. According to behaviorists, language acquisition is a process of imitation and reinforcement. Children learn how to speak by copying the utterance which is heard around them and having their responses strengthened by repetition. Nativism argued that during the process of first language acquisition, children gradually acquire the language ability because they are genetically

programmed to do that. So the environment has no influence in the process of acquisition at all. The last approach argued that language is one of several capabilities derived from cognitive maturity, so the development of language is determined by sequences of cognitive development.

On the other hand, some researchers focused on the role of gender in acquiring the first language. Among researchers who comprehensively brought a historical-typological account of feminist linguistic approaches is Cameron (1995) who made a distinction between three models of language and gender: the deficit model, the dominance model, and the cultural difference model. Deficit model states that females are disadvantaged speakers and communicators. Accordingly, the speech of men is considered as the accepted norm, while the women's speech is to be perceived as deficient (Aslan, 2009, p. 9). Holmes (1995) also states that men use interaction as a means of gaining and exchanging information but women use it as a way to connect to others (cited in Gascoigne, 2002, p. 83). According to Holmes (1995, cited in Gascoigne, 2002), it is "females who lost out, their politeness makes them disadvantaged in mixed-sex classrooms" (p. 203). The dominance model, which traditionally existed in feminist linguistics, is, as Aslan (2009) asserts, rather radical in comparison with the deficit model which is more conservative. Along the same line, Block (2002) argues, "In this model women are perceived to perform their 'woman-ness' in an ethno-methodological frame as they continually negotiate their position of relative powerlessness vis a vis men" (p. 53).

Cultural difference model, as an alternative to the dominance model, perceives men and women as belonging to separate but equal cultures which predate the development of individuals who are socialized into them (Block, 2002). In fact, unlike deficit model, it does not take the differences negatively (Aslan, 2009). As Block (2002) reports, cultural difference model adopts a socially liberal position that men and women are different but equal: women's speech and communication styles are not inferior to men's; rather the relationship between the two are problematic at least in part because of culture clash (Block, 2002). Overall, if communication breaks down between men and women, it's caused by misinterpreting the other party's form of interaction (Tannen, 1993, cited in Aslan, 2009, p. 12).

What these three models share is a modernist and a structural approach to social phenomena where concepts of clear boundaries, social stability and determinism are manifest (Block, 2002). The shift from structuralism toward post structuralism advocates the belief that "gender is a social phenomenon" (Block, 2002, p. 54) and there is a shift in view from perceiving gender as an individual concept to perceiving it as a social construction (Aslan, 2009). To Ellis (1994), there was nothing conclusive in studies of gender differences in SLA in achievement, attitudes and strategy use at that time.

Research methodology

The population, sample and sampling

Participants of this study were four kids, two girls and two boys, ranging in age from 2.5 to 4. Ava is 2.8 and Parsa 2.6, Mani and rose are both near 4. The researchers of this study were faced with various

limitations in choosing their agents. They considered many factors while selecting the participants. They considered the child's family sociocultural, socioeconomic, and social level. They also made sure that none of the agents had suffered from a disorder such as ear infection in infancy. They were aware of the disadvantages of choosing the participants from the available population but they had no other choices. They were also aware that the small sample size may restrict the scope of the study but this study changed into a case study due to this matter and has its own benefits.

However, this is a qualitative study which justifies using small samples and it must be mentioned that the most important characteristic of a sample is its representativeness, not its size (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that, the researchers used purposive sampling because they thought that it was sufficient to provide maximum insights and understanding of what they were studying according to Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson (2010). This way they could make sure that the participants were typical and representative although it is a type of non-probability sampling. It must be mentioned that none of the participants had any other brothers and sisters. They were the only child of their families. It must also be stated that the researches did not have any control over the probable use of any educational supplementary materials by the participants' families to help them talk better at this age.

Research tools

The primary method of data collection of this study was interview, actually a type of semi-structured interview. To reveal the impact of gender on the oral production of the kid, they were asked some questions and their answers were recorded for later use. As it was mentioned earlier, the interviews were of semi-structured type and somehow informal. It means that there was not a specified time restriction for each question to be answered by the kids and the interview was conducted in a very easy manner which kids could tolerate. The researchers prepared some questions that were usually asked of kids by their parents, siblings or relatives. They also used a silent film consisting of some short episodes and asked the kids to tell something about each part separately. The film was used to encourage the kids to talk about a specific subject, the plot of the scenes. Each episode was repeated several times until the kids said something about it. The kids' speeches were recorded for later analysis.

Design

This is a qualitative study and it can be claimed that it is, in fact, ethnography, because it traces the naturally occurring behaviors of the agents in a natural setting. In ethnography the researcher traces the learners' naturally accruing behavior in a natural setting and tries to record all those behaviors for the final analysis. That is what actually happened in the present study. The researchers asked the kids some questions in a childish language, they also showed them some short episodes and asked them to tell what they saw in a very simple way and they both recorded their answers and took some notes. The researchers' notes and documents were kept to be coded and categorized to be used for the final descriptive analysis although they made some analysis on the spot. This way they could claim that the study had a stronger design and the claims would be more logical and reasonable. Thus, the generalizability which is a limitation of the qualitative research can be overcome.

This study was also done in an emergent way. It means that both researchers were present in the field. In fact not only did they record, kids' speech for the final analysis but also they took some notes and did

on the spot analysis to compare their notes with their final judgments. Finally the speeches of the participants were coded, categorized, and analyzed and they were compared and contrasted together.

Procedure

To do this research the researchers chose four participants, two girls and two boys ages from 2.5 to 4. Then they started to write a proposal for their research to gain a clearer insight of what they intended to do. They also started to study some literature on the area and prepared a questionnaire containing twelve questions to ask of the participants. They already had a film consisting of some silent episodes which they decided to show to their participants and to ask them to talk about the film. It must be mentioned that the researchers had the biggest problem with selecting the participants because they needed both girls and boys at the same age and they had to know the kids because they needed the parents' permissions and because the kids are not usually comfortable with the strangers. They talked to the parents of the kids about the study and its aims to ascertain them that this study won't harm their child and let them set the time of the day of doing the project.

Although the researchers only prepared twelve questions and six short episodes of a film but it lasted at about half a day to get the answers from each of the kids. The researchers recorded the speech of the participants and they also took some notes of their speech and also analyzed their speech simultaneously. It means that data collection and data analysis happened at the same time during the process. However, the notes were kept until the end of the study to be analyzed in more details and with more accuracy. The recordings were transcribed later at the data analysis stage and they were analyzed more carefully.

It must be mentioned that the researchers firstly conducted a semi-structured interview, although the kids could not recognize that it was an interview for a specific purpose. They also provided a friendly atmosphere under which the kids felt comfortable in order to talk and answer the questions. Actually the interview was structured since the questions were ready-made and it was unstructured since the researchers asked the questions informally and in a childish language and the participants answered the questions at their own pace. Each participant of this study was interviewed separately. The researchers recorded the interviews and they also took some notes of the answers on the spot. The interviews were transcribed later by the researchers for better analysis and to secure credibility (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010).

The time of the day for the interview was recommended by their parents and they were also present with the researchers to give the necessary help if needed. This way the kids also felt more secure although they knew at least one of the researchers (the one who asked the questions). The researchers asked all the kids the same questions which were written before but they had memorized the questions and asked them. The questions were simple ones but the researchers tried not to ask the routine questions that parents ask their kids every day because they might have been familiar with the questions and there was the possibility that they answer them automatically. There was also the risk that parents might have provided the answers to their kids in advance. The researchers also showed the participants some short episodes of a silent film and then asked them to say something about what they had just seen. This way they could make sure that they had not talked about that subject before although the plots of the film were familiar to them. For example in one of the scenes two kids were playing with a ball.

To analyze the data qualitatively the researchers listened to the kids' interviews and their speeches about the film several times, coded them, and then categorized the data and tried to describe them. They

also read the notes that they had taken on the spot about the kids answers' to get a better understanding of what they had done and to be more careful in their analysis of the collected data.

Data collection and analysis

The most challenging part of the study was data analysis since the researchers had to read and reread the data several times to be able to compare and contrast girls' and boys' speeches together to be able to categorize the data. It was a delicate task which needed great patience and concentration.

As it was mentioned, at the beginning of the analysis the researchers started to carefully coding the data and an evaluation was done to determine the differences that were noticed between girls' and boys' native language. The way of the data analysis and interpretation was complex and intricate. The researchers listened to the recorded speeches several times and then read the transcripts and they also read their notes and discussed the matters together for a long time. As it was mentioned before, since it was also an emergent study, the researchers had taken some notes and had done some analyses during the process of data collection.

After coding the data that helped the researchers to develop a "big picture" out of them, they started categorization. It means that based on their concept and scheme that they had developed before they labeled the data that seemed important to them and provided some tables. Then the stage of developing themes started which involved making comparisons and contrasts. This step was a challenging step because the researchers had to decide cautiously in which patterns the speeches were different or similar. However, at the end of the analysis they could summarize the outcomes of the study.

Research Findings

This study was done to examine the supposed differences between girls and boys first language acquisition. Actually the researchers aimed at discovering if girls and boys of the same age have gained the same amount of knowledge of first language. The researchers somehow thought that girls may be better speakers of the first language than boys of the same age. It seemed to them that girls express their thoughts more conveniently than boys and what they say are more understandable. They also contended that girls' speech seemed to be richer than that of boys in terms of grammar and vocabulary in the first years of life.

Girls' language was obviously different from boys' language according to the findings of this study in terms of choice of vocabulary, structure, interruptions, redundancy, hesitations, repetitions, understandability, relevance, and quality. There were also many differences between girls' use of gestures and boys' but it was not the focus of this study and the researchers ignored to approach gesture differences. The researchers noticed that boys' words' combinations were merely in the form of a sentence and even their sentences were mostly ungrammatical compared to the girls' speech. It was also surprising that boys answered the researchers' questions in a simpler way than girls did and also girls tried to make more complete sentences in answering the same questions than boys'. The two boys also stuttered more than girls. They had more mispronunciations and their rhythm of speech was also less perfect.

For example, in a scene of the film two boys were playing with a ball in a park. The researchers asked the participants to tell what they saw (the question: what are these kids doing?). Here are the answers:

Ava (girl, age: 2.8): toop bazi (playing with a ball), Rose (girls, age: 4): daran toop bazi mikonan (they are playing with a ball), Parsa (boy, age: 2.6): toop, toop, toop, (ball, ball, ball...), Mani (boy, age: 4): daran bazi mikonan, ba toop (they are playing, with a ball). As it is clear the smaller boy just shouted ball, ball, repeatedly and the older one did not make a complete sentence. In this case, he just said that: they are playing and the researchers then asked him another question: what with? After this question he answered: with a ball. But, the smaller girl used two words in answering this question and these two words could be regarded as a complete answer in Farsi (toop bazi, playing with a ball) and the older girl made a complete sentence.

Farsi فارسی	English Translation
The question: what are these kids doing? این بچه ها دارن چه کار می کنند؟	The question: What are these kids doing?
Ava (girl, age: 2.8): toop bazi, توپ بازی	Playing with a ball
Rose (girl, age: 4): daran toop bazi mikonan, دارن توپ بازی می کنن	They are playing with a ball
Parsa (boy, age: 2.6): toop, toop, توپ توپ...	Ball, ball,...
Mani (boy, age: 4): daran bazi mikonan, ba toop, دارن بازی می کنن. با توپ	They are playing, with a ball

More repetitions were also found in boys' speech than the girls'. The analysis showed that boys repeated many words while talking but in their speech girls used fewer repetitions. The transcripts also showed that both girls stated their ideas more directly about the subjects than boys and made more efforts to tell the events more clearly. One of the biggest differences between girls' and boys' forms of the language was in their structure of the sentences. The researchers noticed redundant information, lexical repetitions, false starts, hesitation fillers, pause fillers and misuse of words in both girls' and boys speech, but all these cases were more noticeable in boys' speech than in that of girls'.

Another example is about a scene of the film in which a dog was chasing a cat. The researchers asked the older girl and boy to tell whatever they see, but they asked the smaller girl and boy the same question in a different way. They asked them to tell what the dog in the film was doing? The smaller boys' response was funny. Because he repeatedly said Gorbah, Gorbah, Sag, Sag (cat, cat, dog, dog). The smaller girl also said: Sag, Gorbah, daran bazi mikonan (dog, cat, they are playing). But the researchers had to ask the question many times of her. The older boy also answered: y Sag ba y Gorbah daran bazi mikonan (a dog

and a cat are playing). The older girl answered this question this way: y Sag gozashteh donbale Gorbeh). It can be concluded that this is the most complete answer both in case of the structure and meaning. Totally, it can be somehow stated that, the smaller girls' response to the question was more meaningful and more structured than the smaller boys' response to the same question and the older girls' response was exactly to the point in compare to the boys' response to the same question.

Farsi فارسی	English Translation
The question: what is the dog doing? سگ داره چکار می کنه؟	The question? What is the dog doing?
Ava (girl, age: 2.8): Sag, Gorbeh, Bazi سگ گربه بازی می کنن mikonan	dog, cat, playing
Parsa (boy, age: 2.6): Gorbeh, Gorbeh, Sag, Sag گربه گربه سگ سگ	Cat, cat, dog dog...
The question: what do you see in the film?	The question: what do you see in the film?
Rose (girl, age: 4): y Sag gozashteh donbaleh Gorbeh یه سگ گذاشته دنبال گربه	A dog is chasing a cat
Mani (boy, age: 4): Sage ba Gorbeh, daran bazi mikonan, سگه با گربه دارن بازی می کنن	dog and cat are playing

The researchers could state that the native language produced by girls is significantly different from that of the boys. They noticed that girls' language was more complex and more intricate than boys'. However, it was found that the spoken language of the boys was containing more repetitions, more incomplete sentences, corrections and interruptions. It was also revealed that some grammatical constructions were only used by girls, as well as some kinds of vocabulary. It was also shown that girls' speech was more organized than boys' and contained more advanced structures. Contrary to the girls' speech, boys used simpler constructions. Their words were repeated and their sentences were rephrased many times. Furthermore, the researchers noticed some other differences between the girls' words and those of boys'. These differences were noticed during the exact analysis of the transcriptions and they are categorized as general differences and are stated as follows:

It seemed that girls talk about something that was emerging in the immediate context more fluently than boys. For example, both girls and boys sometimes asked questions of their mothers about the episodes of the film but after that, girls' sentences were more structured than those of the boys.

The researchers used the most informal language to ask their participants the questions and sometimes they had to repeat themselves many times. It was significantly noticed that girls may have more control over their speech than boys and try to be more formal in uttering their words.

It was also observed that boys were not able to make complete sentences as well as girls and their sentences were less grammatical than girls' sentences. They also were less encouraged to express their ideas and to give answers to the questions asked. E.g. as one of the questions the researchers showed the participants a colorful box of a cartoon and asked them to tell if they liked to watch it. Surprisingly the older girl (Rose) showed no interest in watching the film and said: *man khodam khili film daram* (I myself have many films), and then called her mother and asked her to bring her pack of films to show to us. The older boy (Mani) paused for some while gazing at the package and then said to her mother: *maman, film mikham* (mam, I want film). The smaller girl (Ava) shouted: *film, film, maman control, control* (movie, movie, mom, control, control) while she was running to the TV. The smaller boy (Parsa) looked at the pack and just said: *boby, boby* and then her mother said that he meant (Sponge Bob). Her mother told us that he watches the cartoon 'Sponge Bob' many times a day. So, as the sentences declared by the participants show, again the older girl made the most complete and relevant sentence in answering the question. What we showed to the older boy just tantalized him to watch a cartoon and although he made a complete sentence but it was not the answer that we expected him to give to our question. The smaller girl also was tantalized to watch a cartoon, but she did not make a complete answer. As usual the smaller boy said just a word and repeated it. What we showed to him, reminded him of a cartoon that he watched every day and he just repeated the name of the cartoon.

Farsi فارسی	English Translation
The question: do you like to watch a cartoon?	The question: do you like to watch a cartoon?
Rose (girl, age: 4): <i>khodam khili film daram</i> خودم خیلی فیلم دارم	I myself have many films
Mani (boy, age: 4): <i>maman, maman, film mikham</i> مامان مامان فیلم می خوام	Mom, mom, I want films

Ava (girl, age: 2.8): maman, maman, film, control, control مامان مامان فیلم کنترل کنترل	Mom, mom, film, control, control
Parsa (boy, age: 2.6): boby, boby بابی بابی	Boby, boby,...(he meant Sponge Bob)

Conclusions

Through the analysis of the transcripts it can be declared there are some differences between the sentences of girls and boys. Parts of these differences may be the result of some factors such as the literacy of the parents, the way they behave towards their children, the use of some types of educational instruments, kids' learning styles, the amount of films that kids watch, the families' relations and many other factors. But parts of the difference may also be related to the way that girls and boys acquire their first language.

Through the analysis of the results of this study it seemed that girls use their native language in a more facilitated way. They were more efficient in case of the use of their first language. It is not clear if parts of the brain which are responsible for understanding and producing the language such as Wernick's and Broca's areas mature sooner in girls' brains rather than in boys'.

It can also be state that part of the difference may be due to the concentration since it was somehow noticed that both boys were more distracted than girls during the project and they were not interested to cooperate with the project as well as the girls; however, all these claims must be approached with caution. In what follows, the differences in boys' and girls' speech are mentioned in a more detailed manner once more to give a clearer picture of these differences:

1. Oral language produced by the two female participants of this study proved to have a significant difference with the language produced by the two boys in some ways. For example it was richer in terms of the words used and in case of understandability.
2. It must be mentioned that the oral production of the first language of the girls was different with each other but it can be a difference due to the age factor because one of the girls was almost a year older than the other. This case also turned to be true for the boys too and the most significant reason can be again the age factor.

3. Girls' language showed to be more precise than boys' although the older boys' language was much richer than the younger girls' language. Therefore, the researchers could conclude that the age matters in acquiring the first language.
4. Boys proved to use more repetitions and needed more repetitions from the researchers to get the ideas. They hesitated more, paused more while speaking and they needed more time to answer. But the researchers surprisingly noticed that the younger girl repeated their own words and sentences a lot and more than even the younger boy.
5. It can be stated that both girls and boys used nonstandard words but it was again an age-related factor rather than a gender-related one since both the younger girl and boy used nonstandard words more frequently than both older girl and boy.
6. It was also shown that boys used more imitated words than girls. Comparing the words and the combination of the words that the participants of this study uttered even while talking to their mothers or fathers, the researchers noticed that boys imitated their parents words' more than girls. It was also noticed that girls provided more novel words than boys to the extent that they sometimes surprise their parents.

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