

# Converging Features in the Englishes of North America

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## ABSTRACT

*Among many changes in progress in the Englishes of North America, several have the unusual property of leveling variants in what were heretofore standard varieties. For instance, certain variants in Northern U.S. English are being supplanted by variants favoured in Canadian English, and vice-versa. In this paper, I describe three specific changes of this kind: the spread of Canadian Raising to the United States, and the standardization of two irregular past tense forms. *dove* for *dived* and *snuck* for *sneaked*. The progress of the changes illustrates the way in which standard dialects are converging to form a supranational standard. (Keywords: sociolinguistics, language change, standardization, Canadian English).*

## RESUMEN

*De entre los muchos cambios que están en progreso en las variedades del inglés de Norteamérica, algunos tienen la singular propiedad de igualar variantes de lo que hasta ahora eran variedades estándares. Por ejemplo, algunas variantes del inglés del norte de los Estados Unidos están siendo sustituidas por otras mejor valoradas en Canadá, y viceversa. En el presente artículo describo tres cambios concretos de este tipo: la extensión del 'Canadian Raising' por los Estados Unidos y la estandarización de dos formas irregulares del tiempo pasado, *dove* en lugar de *dived* y *snuck* en lugar de *sneaked*. El desarrollo progresivo de estos cambios es un claro ejemplo del modo en que los dialectos estándares están convergiendo hasta formar un estándar supranacional. (Palabras Clave: sociolingüística, cambio lingüístico, estandarización, inglés canadiense).*

It is natural for languages to develop regional varieties as time passes. Variation usually increases when communities are separated by barriers, whether those barriers are physical, like mountains and oceans, or sociopolitical, like ethnic enclaves and international borders.

Contrary developments, whereby accents and dialects become more homogenous as time passes, occur only in rare and unusual social situations. One such situation occurs when the founders of a brand-new community speak diverse accents and dialects, as they did in many New-World regions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The offspring of these founders — the first native generation — grow up speaking unlike their parents but like one another. Developments of this sort have been described and discussed under such headings as hornogenization (Chambers 1995: 58–66) and koinéization (Trudgill 1986: 143–48; Kerswill and Williams 1999).

Another situation in which linguistic varieties become more similar to one another takes place when standardization spreads. Here, one variety gains prestige at the expense of others, gets codified, and becomes the variety spoken by people of a certain social status in all regions. The absence of regional variation is one of the defining traits of the standard accent and dialect. In Western civilization, the growth of nations in the fifteenth century stimulated the ascendancy of vernacular languages, and the spread of standard varieties was pretty much confined to national boundaries. As a result, we tend to identify standard varieties with nations, differentiating, for example, Castilian Spanish and Argentinian Spanish, or British English (RP) and (General) Australian English.

In our time, national boundaries have become more transparent. Multinational corporations, international travel and global communications broaden spheres of interaction and consequently weaken the barrier effect of borders. We should expect sociopolitical changes of this magnitude to have linguistic consequences. In particular, we should expect to observe the international spread of features in national standard varieties and the leveling of standard varieties across national borders. If enough features spread, they would give rise to a superordinate standard variety, that is, an international standard.

## I. THE CONTINENTAL STANDARD IN NORTH AMERICA

A developing international standard is becoming visible in North America at this moment. There are presently numerous changes in progress in the various Englishes of North America. Viewed separately, each change appears to be progressing in its own way, with its own social and linguistic constraints. Some of these changes involve similar linguistic elements, and they are changing in similar ways in several regions. It is only when they are viewed together that their impact on standard English becomes clear, and only when they are compared across regional and national boundaries that their role in a continental standard English becomes discernible.

The border between Canada and the United States provides a kind of linguistic observatory for viewing the supranational developments. Geographically, the border is vast, covering some 4500 kilometres, and it is undefended, with customs officials at crossing points but no military installations. Nevertheless, it has long been a linguistic barrier of considerable influence, just as it is a cultural divider. As Householder (1983:7) put it: «Anyone who crosses the Canadian border can hardly help but be struck by the peculiar coincidence of certain isogloss boundaries with that border, all the way from the Pacific to the Atlantic, most obviously *about the house* and *fight the lice*. This agrees, curiously enough, with the availability of bran muffins and locally-brewed porter». Householder must have been so over-awed by Canadian lager as compared to its watery American counterpart that he

mis-identified it as porter, an entirely different species, but in other regards his observation is certainly correct.

Nowadays, with some of the former Canadian-American linguistic differences being leveled, some people assume that Canadian English is surrendering its distinctiveness by taking on American features. This is wrong in both possible interpretations. In the first place, the Canadian-American border remains an estimable barrier with (in Householder's terms) dozens of isogloss boundaries coinciding there: stable differences of this kind are described in detail elsewhere (Chambers 1997, Easson 1998) and will not be discussed here. In the second place, the features which are converging in Canadian and American varieties are not always American features spreading northward but are sometimes Canadian features spreading southward, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

In the rest of this article, I take a close look at three features that are converging in American and Canadian standard varieties in order to show how the changes are progressing and what the dynamics are.

## II. CANADIAN RAISING IN THE UNITED STATES

The most distinctive feature of Canadian English (CE) by contrast to its closest congeners in the United States is the allophonic adjustment known as Canadian Raising. The CE diphthongs /aj/ and /aw/ have low onsets in most environments, as in most varieties of North American English. In the speech of older Canadians, these onsets are normally back, so that [ɔj] is the nucleus before voiced segments as in *wives*, *wide*, *wise* and *tiger* and in word-final position as in *why*, and [aw] is the nucleus before voiced segments in *loud*, *rouse*, *gouge* and *power* and in word-final position as in *now*. Before tautosyllabic voiceless consonants, however, the onset vowel becomes mid, so that in the speech of older Canadians the nucleus is [ɛj] in words like *pipe*, *rife*, *tight*, *rice*, and *pike*, and the nucleus is [ɔw] in words like *mouth*, *tout*, *mouse*, and *couch* (for a summation of the phonology, sociolinguistics and history of Canadian Raising, see Chambers 1989).

It is Canadian Raising that Householder was referring to above, when he cited *about the house* and *fight the lice* as "isogloss boundaries" that coincide with the U.S.-Canadian border. Occurrences of the raised back-gliding diphthong, [ɔw], as in an expression like 'ab[ɔw]t the h[ɔw]se', have long been picked out by Americans (and others) as markers of CE. By contrast, Americans almost never pick out the front-gliding [ɛj] vowel as a peculiar Canadianism. Those who do are linguists, like Householder. In fact, closer analysis of American and Canadian speech reveals that American regions along the Canadian border characteristically have the same raised onset as CE in the front-gliding diphthong. That is, they also have the raised onset for /aj/ before tautosyllabic voiceless consonants (Vance 1987, Dailey-O'Cain 1997). Since many Americans in the north have raised onsets in expressions like 'f[ɛj]ght the l[ɛj]ce', as Canadians do, American observers fail to notice Canadian Raising in [ɛj] because they do not differ markedly from American speech.

The best evidence for the American raising of /aj/ is Jennifer Dailey-O'Cain's study of the speech of 30 subjects in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a small city about 85 kilometres from the Canadian border. Dailey-O'Cain (1997: 111) discovered, as expected, highly frequent /aj/-raising in her Ann Arbor subjects of all ages: over 90 per cent of /aj/-tokens had raised onsets before voiceless consonants, the classic Canadian Raising context.

Dailey-O'Cain also noticed sporadic instances of /aw/-raising in the speech of her Ann Arbor subjects. Raising of the back-gliding vowel on the American side of the border has not hitherto been reported, and Dailey-O'Cain's study is the first to investigate its frequency and social significance in a systematic manner. For her whole sample, with people in three age groups and both sexes, /aw/-raising proved infrequent and superficially inconsequential: instances of /aw/-raising occurred in only about 8 per cent of the tokens before voiceless consonants (1997: 113). However, when Dailey-O'Cain correlated /aw/-raising with sex and age, it turned out to be socially significant.

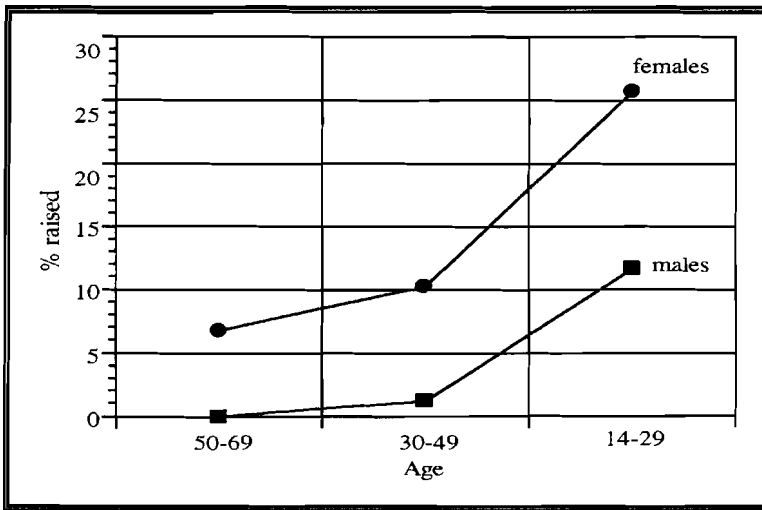


Figure 1: /aw/-raising before voiceless consonants in Ann Arbor by sex and age (based on Dailey-O'Cain 1997: Table 8, 115).

Figure 1 provides a graphic view of Dailey-O'Cain's main results on /aw/-raising. Though the relative frequency is low, the way in which /aw/-raising correlates with age and sex reveals a prototypical pattern of a change in progress in its early stages. The raised onsets occur mostly in the speech of younger Ann Arborites, and most frequently in the speech of younger women. In fact, they do not occur at all in the speech of the oldest men, though there are a few instances (7 per cent) in the speech of the oldest women.

Dailey-O'Cain also notes another striking similarity in the speech of young Ann Arborites as compared to young Canadians. In Canada, for the past 20 years, we have been observing a phonetic change in Canadian Raising so that the back onsets used by older speakers are variably fronted by younger Canadians (as summarized in Chambers 1989). Dailey-O'Cain (1997: 117) describes the similarity with her Ann Arbor subjects as follows:

My results are particularly interesting in light of what we know about the Canadian varieties that have been studied, where the change in progress is in the direction of fronting. Because both the change in Canadian varieties toward fronting /au/ and the change in AM Arbor English toward raising and fronting it are being led by young women, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest

that the two varieties may be converging. In Canada, although a great many young women fail to raise, the much more significant change is in the direction of fronting. In AM Arbor, the acoustic analysis of the raised variants indicates that, when /au/ is raised, it is also often fronted. If this is, indeed, a case of convergence, both changes should finally result in a fronted, raised diphthong in the environments where raising occurs.

As Dailey-O'Cain makes clear, the growing similarities between speech of young people in both places involves not only the phonological allophony of raising but also the fine phonetic adjustment of fronting.

The convergence of Canadian and American middle-class varieties in this regard is all the more striking because of the social (or national) salience of Canadian Raising as a feature of CE. As a phonological variable, /aw/-fronting presumably has greater significance than convergences of lexical and pronunciation variables of the sort I will discuss next. In both these respects, it stands as a prime exhibit in the case for the growing similarity of standard North American accents.

### III. THE IRREGULARIZATION OF DZVE IN THE PAST TENSE

The next example of a variable that is converging in North American English varieties is much less salient structurally. It is the past tense form of the verb *dive*, which for many years has varied between the historically established weak form *dived* and an innovative strong form *dove*. I have discussed this variable at considerable length elsewhere (Chambers 1998: 19–22) and will here review only the essential aspects of the change in order to make its progress evident. Although this variable might appear to be a fairly simple morphological shift, it takes on special significance because the available evidence reinforces the main point of this article, that standard varieties of North American English are converging to make a superordinate (super-regional, supranational) variety.

Variability in the form of the past tense of the verb *dive* appears to be one of the oldest variables in CE. The new form, *dove*, was castigated as a "lawless and vulgar innovation" as long ago as 1857, ten years before Confederation (Chambers 1993: 17). Though teachers and parents condemned *dove* for many years, the form persisted. Usage surveys from the 1950s and 1970s showed the two forms *dived* and *dow* contending with one another in CE in roughly equal numbers.

The innovative form *dove* probably originated by analogy with the few English strong verbs that alternate [aj] in the present stem and [o] in the past tense, that is, *drive*, *ride*, *rise*, *stride*, *write* and the archaic verbs *smite* and *shrive*. The analogy has not, however, generalized to the past participle; *dive* has not developed a past participle analogous to the past participles *driven*, *ridden*, *risen*, and so on.

What has happened to the variability of *dived* and *dove* in the past 80 years in Canada is dramatically illustrated by evidence gathered in my project on the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe (Chambers 1994). The Golden Horseshoe is a region in central Canada at the western tip of Lake Ontario. It is the most densely populated part of Canada, comprising a U-shaped strip from Oshawa to Niagara Falls, taking in the cities of Toronto and Hamilton, among others. Though this conurbation is only 250 kilometres long, it is the home of more

than one-sixth of Canada's population. Dialect Topography is a set of methods for gathering and analyzing dialect data from a representative, socially stratified population. In the Golden Horseshoe, the sample consisted of 1,015 men and women ranging in age from 14 to over 80, including 80 from the American side of the border in the Niagara region.

For *dive*, we asked respondents to supply the past tense of the verb in two different contexts, one about a person diving and the other about a submarine diving. The reason for asking for two responses is that some speakers claim to use *dove* with animate subjects only (as in *the man dove*) and *dived* with inanimates (as in *the submarine dived*). Our subjects provided only mild support for that distinction, with 9.3 per cent making their selections in ways that were consistent with it. By far the most striking result was in the predominance of *dove* in Canadian English: only 8.2 per cent used *dived* in both contexts but 74 per cent used *dove* in both.

The century-long competition between the two variants has been resolved decisively in favour of *dove*. The new dispensation is evident in Figure 2, which plots the *dove* responses for the two sentences (*he.dove* for the animate subject, *sub.dove* for the inanimate) from the oldest respondents to the youngest. More than 82 per cent of all respondents use *dove*, and about 90 per cent of respondents under 30 use it. The significant replacement of *dived* by *dove* takes place with the 50-year-olds, that is, with people born in the 1940s. The graph looks like the top of an S-curve, suggesting that we are viewing the change in its final stages. The two oldest groups appear to be transitional. Although the change to *dove* was well advanced in their formative years—the 1920s and 1930s—their inconsistency suggests that they are aware of its novelty and perhaps sensitive to its 'correctness'.

Superficially, the ascendancy of *dove* over *dived* in the Golden Horseshoe might be interpreted as an American incursion into CE. *Dove* is the form used on the American side of the Niagara border almost unanimously. The American respondents in the Dialect Topography survey, in their answers to the same two questions, favoured *dove* by more than 96 per cent. The younger Canadians, 30 and under, appear to be conforming to the American standard, whereas their parents and grandparents differed from the American standard more noticeably.

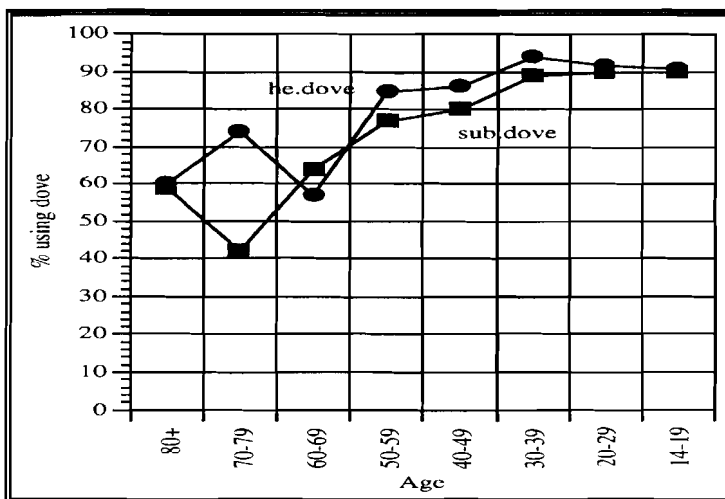


Figure 2: Use of *dove* not *dived* by Canadians of different ages in the Golden Horseshoe

As it happens, the younger Canadians are not the only North Americans of their generation who are adopting *dove*. Historically, *dove* originated in the Northern dialect belt of the United States, and its currency until recently was mainly in the northeastern quarter of the United States. Now Americans in every other region are also adopting it. It is spreading not only northward into Canada but also southward and westward in the United States.

As evidence of its incursion into the American South, Bernstein (1994) reports that Texas A & M students show «almost universal preference... for *dove*», and almost three-quarters of high school students surveyed by Bernstein in Silsbee, Texas, also prefer it.

Because the younger Texans and other Americans are making exactly the same change as the younger Canadians, it is clear that both are leveling what were formerly regional standard patterns of variability in favour of the superordinate variant. They are participating in a change that affects standard middle-class speech from Texas to the Golden Horseshoe and beyond.

#### IV. THE IRREGULARIZATION OF SNEAK IN THE PAST TENSE

My third and final example involves a similar change in past tense morphology. The verb *sneak* traditionally had a weak past tense form, *sneaked*. Sometime in this century, a competing strong form, *snuck*, developed in Canadian usage. The origin of *snuck* is more mysterious than the origin of *dove*. There are in fact no other instances of strong verbs analogous to *sneak*: *snuck*. Verbs like *tweak* and *leak*, for instance, all have weak past forms (*tweaked*, *leaked*) instead of *\*twuck* and *\*luck*. There is a fairly large sub-class of verbs with [A] in the past but they all have lax [ɪ] in the stem: *cling*, *dig*, *fling*, *sling*, *slink*, *spin*, *stick*, *sting*, *stink*, *swing*, *win* and *wring*. These verbs, together with eight other verbs that have [A] in the preterite (but [æ] in the past), including the highly frequent verbs *begin*, *drink* and *sing*, give [A] an unusual salience as a past marker in contemporary English. (This salience shows up in child language, where the strong past of *bring* often gets formed as *bi-ung* before settling into standard *brought*.) Presumably, the form *snuck* originated analogously, if obliquely, from these forms.

Earliest attestation for *snuck* in any dialect is 1887, when it appeared in a story set in the Deep South of the United States (Creswell 1994: 146). Its first appearance in CE seems to be much later, and by inference it did not become a significant variant until about 50 years ago (Chambers 1998: 22–24). Its progress, however, has been remarkable. In the urban middle-class CE of the Golden Horseshoe, *snuck* is used by about 90 per cent of people under the age of 40 (as will be evident in Figure 3 below).

For the purposes of this paper, the progress of *snuck* is important not only because it has accelerated in the large urban areas but also because its use has accelerated in many out-of-the-way regional dialects as well. That is to say, the development of a continental standard dialect is reflected not only in the convergence of particular variants in the national standard varieties of English but also in the increased use of those same variants in regional varieties. It would be surprising, of course, if this were *not* the case if the massive shift in the standard varieties left the regional varieties completely unaffected.

In Canadian English, we have apparent-time evidence of the progress of *snuck* not only in the densely populated, highly urbanized Golden Horseshoe region, but also in the Québec City region, which is virtually its demographic opposite. Québec City is the seat of francophone culture and francophone power in Canada. Although English has been spoken

there since 1763, the population with English as a mother tongue has dwindled both in power and in size, to the point where it comprises less than two per cent today.

The Québec City anglophones are, predictably, an insular, self-contained minority. As a result, Québec City English generally shows different patterns of variation from other Canadian regions (Chambers and Heisler 1998)

Under these circumstances, it is surprising to discover a variable which shows a great similarity in its pattern of change in the Golden Horseshoe and Québec City. Figure 3 compares the results for two questions involving the past tense of *sneak*. The two questions distinguish it as a bare verb form (*The little devil sneaked/snuck into the theatre*) and a phrasal verb form (*...snuck/sneaked by...*), a distinction which, incidentally, so far appears to be insignificant in any region. The 306 Québec City respondents and the 935 Golden Horseshoe respondents are proportioned according to age in Figure 3, ranging from the octogenarians (over 80) on the left to the teenagers (14-19) on the right, with the others in decades (70-79, 60-69, etc.) in between.

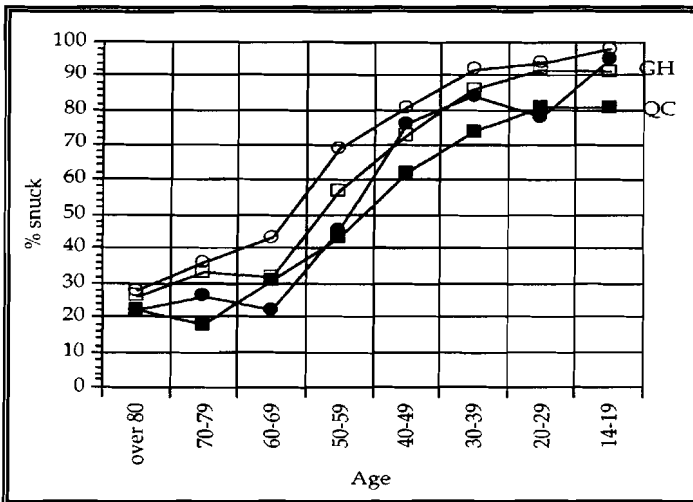


Figure 3: Use of *snuck* not *sneaked* by Canadians of different ages in the Golden Horseshoe (GH, shown in white) and in Québec City (QC, shown in black).

The most obvious observation about Figure 3 is that the lines for Québec City (labeled QC) and the Golden Horseshoe (GH) are parallel throughout the figure. The Québec City lines are always below the Golden Horseshoe lines, so that the change in Québec City appears to be running about a decade behind the Golden Horseshoe. The traditional form *sneaked* remained the majority form in Québec City until the 1950s, when the 40-year-olds were born; in the Golden Horseshoe, it had ceased to be a majority form in the speech of the 50-year-olds. It held steady in the speech of the three oldest groups, the people 60 and over, as it also did in the Golden Horseshoe, but the variant *snuck* accelerated dramatically (20 percentage points) in the speech of people now in their 50s, and accelerated again (more than 20 percentage points) in the next decade as well, in the speech of people in their 40s, when it became the majority form. Its use by the two youngest groups, those under 30, is more than



80 per cent.

Figure 3 suggests that in the last 40 years *snuck* has become established as the standard form in Québec City as it also has in the Golden Horseshoe. In this same period, it has also become the standard form in American English by people of all educational levels in all regions, and it is spreading beyond North America. Creswell (1994: 147) says, «*snuck*, whatever its status in the past, is now well established, fully standard, and in widespread general use in both the U.S. and Canada, and in growing use in Britain and Australia».

In this light, it is not surprising that *snuck* in Québec City reflects the pattern of change in the Golden Horseshoe. That pattern is somehow compelling, because it is not only happening in Canadian English but beyond it, in the United States and (perhaps more dimly) in other parts of the English-speaking world.

## V. THE PATTERN OF CONVERGENCE

Historically, almost but not quite within living memory, the past tense of *sneak* has altered from being unanimously *sneaked* to being almost unanimously *snuck*, with an interval of about a century when the two forms competed. This is the pattern in Canadian English, not only in the highly urbanized central region of the Golden Horseshoe but also in an insular anglophone enclave far removed from it. The predominance of *snuck* establishes it as the standard in CE, and the resolution of the variation in the two regions exemplifies the spread of standardization. However, this change has larger significance because it is not only happening in the standard and regional varieties of Canadian English, but at the same time it is happening beyond the Canadian border, in varieties of American English.

Similarly, the upstart form *dove* has all but supplanted *dived*, after a slightly longer period of competition and against greater opposition from teachers, parents, and other arbiters of language. In this instance, we have the rise of a variant, *dove*, that was once associated with the speech of one region of the United States. Other regions, including Canada and the American South, preferred the variant *dived* until recently. Urban, middle-class varieties in North America thus exhibited different preferences, and in that respect the regional standards differed. Now, with respect to this variable and several others, those regional differences have been leveled.

At a deeper level, there is evidence of the spread of Canadian Raising and its concomitant feature of (aw)-fronting. These features are well established in Canadian English phonology and they have begun spreading into adjacent varieties of American English. That spread might be thought of as only minor significance, except that it is taking place over a fairly large region — by European measures, a vast region. Like the other changes we have looked at, it is affecting urban, middle-class varieties, that is, standard varieties. It is too soon to know how far or how fast the feature may spread in the United States, but the fact that it is spreading across national borders makes it comparable to the pattern of convergence we have traced for the morphological features. Each of these changes is interesting in its own right but they take on greater significance when viewed together. They appear to be the harbingers of a superordinate North American standard English, stimulated by supranational communication and interaction.

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