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How angry can you be in French and Italian? Integrating research and teaching for the development of pragmatic competence in L2 classrooms

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Abstract

In recent years, discourse analysis has contributed to raising language practitioners' awareness of the pragmatic aspects of culture in language and communication. However, the application of research data to teaching has often been limited to ESL contexts. On the other hand, the need to use research data in teaching cross-cultural pragmatic competence has been strongly advocated in the literature on SLA (Kasper, 1997), in view of the well-documented absence of the socio-pragmatic aspects of language/culture from foreign language texts-books (Liddicoat, 1997).

In this paper we illustrate the rationale, as well as the main theoretical and practical aspects, of a research project designed to allow closer interaction between our research and teaching activities. In 2003, we initiated a cross-cultural investigation of emotion display and self-disclosure by Anglo-Australian, French and Italian speakers, based on the observation and analysis of non-verbal behaviour displayed in contemporary feature films. Following a discussion of issues that pertain to our research, we suggest ways in which our results can be brought into the classroom, with a view to provide opportunities for the development of socio-pragmatic competence in learners of French and Italian.

1 Introduction

In this article we illustrate the rationale, as well as the main theoretical and practical aspects, of a research project designed to allow a closer interaction between our research and teaching activities. The project investigates patterns of emotion display among Anglo-Australian, French, and Italian speakers, therefore adopting an intercultural pragmatics perspective. After a discussion of issues that pertain to our research in this field, we suggest ways in which the findings of this project can be brought into language classrooms, with a view to providing opportunities for the development of socio-pragmatic competence in learners of French and Italian as a second language (L2).

2 The research project

In defining the focus of our project, based on the available research, we identified a need to investigate the socio-cultural norms regulating the communication of feelings and emotions in interpersonal relationships involving various degrees of formality and intimacy among conversation partners.

The communication of emotions is regulated through cultural scripts, which define the circumstances and modalities of expression that are considered socially appropriate in a given context. Individuals participating in inter-cultural exchanges may inadvertently break the conventions observed by their interlocutors, generating misunderstandings and, at worst, communication breakdowns. When socio-cultural norms are not respected, native speakers will tend to consider the resulting failure in communication as a deliberate act of the non-native speaker ([Gass & Varonis 1991](#)), and will almost certainly develop unfavourable evaluations about the cultural group concerned, thus creating, or reinforcing, negative stereotypes.

Socio-cultural norms generally operate on the subconscious level and it is assumed that rules of communication are tacitly acquired by native speakers, and become automatically available to second language learners when they reach an advanced level of competence in the target language. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that intercultural awareness is rarely developed in the absence of specific

training or personal reflection. Therefore, it is essential to make these rules more explicit through awareness raising activities in order to provide L2 learners with opportunities to fully develop their competence in the target-language culture.

In view of the well-documented absence of the socio-pragmatic aspects of language/culture in foreign language textbooks ([Liddicoat 1997](#)), the need to use research-based materials in teaching cross-cultural pragmatic competence is strongly supported by pedagogic research ([Kasper 1997](#)). Hence, the primary aim of our project is to identify any differences in socio-cultural norms regulating emotion communication, with a particular focus on anger and on non-verbal behaviour among the three cultural groups considered, with a view to providing learners with reliable information on these aspects.

In the next section, we discuss the theoretical issues that form the basis of our project. In particular, we provide a brief overview of the available research on emotion communication through non-verbal behaviour, with a focus on anger and on observed differences between the cultural groups considered for our study.

2.1 Theoretical Background

As previously mentioned, our project focuses on patterns of emotion communication, mainly through non-verbal behaviour. Most current research on emotion in a cross-cultural perspective converges on the view that emotions are “a set of socially shared scripts composed of various processes — physiological, subjective, and behavioural” ([Markus & Kitayama 1994:339](#)). Not only is the behavioural display of emotion more readily available for observation, but different social groups hold different expectations about when and why an emotion will be experienced in response to specific situational contexts. This expressive behaviour is especially interesting as, although the *experience* of emotions appears to be fairly similar across cultures, whether and how emotions are *displayed* or communicated depends on socio-cultural norms. As Matsumoto and colleagues have observed

Emotions are not only markers of special episodes in subjective individual experience, they are also motivators and regulators of social interaction. (...) They are a particularly fascinating topic for intercultural study, because their antecedents, reactions, display, perception, and roles (...) can differ substantially across cultures ([Matsumoto, Wallbott & Scherer 1994:225](#)).

Among the basic emotions experienced by humans, such as joy, fear, shame, and contempt, anger is one of the most “active” emotions ([Matsumoto, Wallbott & Scherer 1994:237](#)); that is, it is expressed through a range of non-verbal behaviours involving the face (characteristically the angry stare includes wide open eyes and drawn brows), the voice (noticeable in changes in intensity, tempo, pitch, etc.), and body movements or postures (such as making threatening moves, throwing things, stomping, or holding the body rigidly).

Non-verbal behaviour is especially interesting to observe in intercultural encounters, as it is believed to play a crucial role in the communication of information about the speakers’ personality, beliefs and values, and social status ([Birdwhistell 1970](#); [Burgoon et al. 1989](#); [Mehrabian 1969, 1972](#)). Moreover, researchers (e.g. [Ekman & Friesen 1969](#)) have identified non-verbal behaviour as a primary means to signal changes in interpersonal relationships, and as a fundamental basis for evaluations, opinions and judgements that individuals generate about their interlocutors.

Another factor that makes anger particularly relevant to our project is the fact that anger, together with joy, has been identified as one of the “most socially based emotions” (1994:237) and it is also greatly externalised – that is, expressive reactions to anger are far greater than its physiological symptoms. Furthermore, anger is considered a negative emotion ([Matsumoto, Kudoh, Scherer & Wallbott 1988](#)), which entails that, while it is among the most frequently experienced emotions ([Matsumoto, Wallbott & Scherer 1994](#)), its display in social situations is much less frequent ([Matsumoto et al. 1988, 1994](#)). This is due to the fact that *display rules* ([Ekman & Friesen 1971](#)) tend to prescribe that feelings of anger be kept under control and not expressed to their full intensity. Since display rules vary across cultures, anger is especially interesting, as it can be expected that different cultural groups will observe different degrees of control depending on the level of acceptability of anger communication within the culture to which they belong.

The three cultural groups considered in our study indeed present some interesting differences on a number of socio-cultural dimensions, which leads us to expect differences in patterns of emotion display through non-verbal behaviour. Some of these differences have already been pointed out by earlier research. For example, in her study of interactions between Anglo-Australians and French work colleagues, [Béal](#) noted that emotions are more often shown in French culture, and added that “the expression of anger, in particular, is much more socially acceptable than in the Australian culture and can be a source of conflict” (1990:28).

[Béal](#) further discusses the fact that French people need to “have an opinion on just about everything”, according to one of the

respondents (1992:46), and “to let other people know exactly what one thinks [or *feels* about an issue] is almost a form of respect”. (1992:47). By contrast, being ‘nice’ is a fundamental value in Australian culture, which translates into an effort to maintain informality as well as to preserve social harmony. As a result, distance is often preferred over confrontation in order to avoid potential conflict.

Similar observations have been made in relation to Italian socio-cultural norms. For example, [Carroli, Pavone and Tudini](#) have noted that “in Italian culture, conflict is generally seen as a natural, even pleasant and creative path, to consensus” (2003: 184). The presence of conflict is to a large extent influenced by the status relationship between speakers, their individual style and cultural habits ([Bazzanella 1994](#)). In addition, Anglo-Australians often misconstrue the lively tone, high pitch, expressive gestures and facial expressions observed in Italian conversations as violent argumentation.

Vice versa the restraint shown by Anglo-Australians in interpersonal relations is often interpreted as coldness by Mediterranean cultures. [Wierzbicka](#) (1999:19) remarks that while in English the term *emotional* has negative connotations, in Italian, “the term ‘emozione’ is more akin to ‘passion’”.

A possible reason for these observed differences in communicative norms is the greater clarity in power relations established through linguistic means in the French and Italian languages, for example through the use of address pronouns. As a result, expressing one’s feelings is not necessarily considered as an index of intimacy or reduced social distance in these cultures. By contrast, minimising the amount of information about one’s emotional state that is communicated is a way for Australians to maintain social distance, which also involves respecting each other’s privacy.

In light of the above observations, it can be expected that the French and the Italians will be more likely to display negative emotions in interpersonal encounters than Anglo-Australians, since the public display of negative emotions in Anglo-Saxon cultures tends to be socially disapproved of, in order to avoid conflict and embarrassment. Reliable information on socio-cultural norms regulating the display of anger among these groups is however scarce, and several researchers have identified an urgent need for further research involving observation and analysis of naturalistic interactions from a cross-cultural perspective. (e.g. [Matsumoto 1990](#); [Zammuner & Fischer 1995](#)).

The major aim of our project, therefore, is to contribute to a better understanding of differences in socio-cultural norms regulating the non-verbal communication of emotions, with a particular focus on anger, among the three cultural groups considered: Anglo-Australian, French, and Italian. In the next section, we discuss methodological issues related to data collection that will inform our research project, with a view to building a corpus of interactions that can also be employed as a source of authentic materials in our language classrooms.

3 Data Collection

In order to build a corpus of naturalistic interactions to be used for both our research project and our teaching practice, we have decided to select scenes from commercial feature films in which the characters could be expected to experience anger. In particular, we focus on scenes in which the characters interact with work colleagues, acquaintances or strangers, therefore excluding family relations and close friends. This is because we expect socio-cultural norms to be more stringent in these situations. Furthermore, the risks involved in miscommunication and negative perceptions due to inappropriate behaviour can be expected to be greater in these contexts, especially when work relationships are at stake.

Films were chosen as a preferred medium for two main reasons. Firstly, because through their condensed narratives they offer a privileged perspective on a variety of private issues that would not be accessible otherwise; and secondly, because they allow researchers to circumvent restrictions in place when conducting research on human subjects.

It could be argued that films are not reliable sources of data because they present fictitious scenarios, and that acting is not the same as spontaneous behaviour. However, these arguments can be equally applied to other ethnographic tools of data collection which attempt to capture behaviour in natural settings, as the risk of self-consciousness influencing the participants’ behaviour is always present ([Archer & Akert 1984](#); [Scherer & Ekman 1982](#)).

In order to ensure that the corpus is indeed representative of authentic behaviours, one of the selection criteria we identified implies that films present plausible situations to the individual investigators, who are themselves members of the cultural groups portrayed in the films. In our selection we also take notice of the deliberate use of music, camera shots, and special effects which may influence the dramatic interpretation of the narrative events for the purpose of engaging the audience’s feelings and emotions.

Although the 'artificiality' of the observed behaviour can affect the intensity of the display, according to Ekman, this presents some advantages, in that "posed emotions" are easier to analyse or "score" as their display tends to be deliberately intense ([Ekman 1982:74](#)). Moreover, video recordings provide definite advantages due to the researcher's ability to study complex behavioural patterns in great detail, for example by playing a video frame-by-frame or in slow-motion (Scherer & Ekman 1982).

For the purpose of this study, then, we will analyse a minimum of six feature films released in each of the three countries of reference (Australia, France, Italy) during the last 10 years approximately (i.e. 1993-2002) (see Appendix 1 for titles). The main selection criteria are the following:

- The films should be available in Australia, merely for reasons of convenience;
- There has to be some variety in the situations portrayed in the films, to allow for the representation of different interactional contexts (e.g. business meetings, school or university lectures, etc.);
- The films should show the main characters' involvement in frequent face-to-face interaction with other characters;
- The films should show the characters' behaviour in a way that may be considered socially appropriate by individuals of their cultural groups. In other words, the non-verbal behaviour displayed by the actors is not exaggerated for expressive or comical purposes. This criterion is obviously subjective; for this purpose we rely on the investigators' socio-cultural competence — as individuals belonging to the same cultural groups as the films' protagonists;
- The films should present a contemporary setting, which excludes period films, to control for changes in social patterns over the last century.

Because our aim is to identify different degrees of non-verbal communication of anger, and especially cases in which display rules may *inhibit* the display of anger, we cannot take voice changes or facial expression as starting points for the selection of scenes to be included in our corpus. This is because there may be situations in which the characters are expected to *feel* angry but socio-cultural norms prevent them *displaying* their anger. Therefore it is necessary to start from the experience of emotion itself. For this purpose, we have compiled a list of antecedent situations that were found to be the most common causes of anger in a seminal study coordinated by [Scherer & Wallbott \(1994\)](#) and conducted across 37 countries, involving almost 3,000 respondents.

The list includes 22 factors, including:

- failure of other people to conform to social norms, to be considerate about other persons and property;
- traffic;
- physical hurt;
- separation from significant others;
- failure to reach one's goals;
- injustice; or
- inconvenience, such as a machine breaking down.

The list can be used to select comparable situations that could be described as potentially anger-generating. Once the scenes are selected they will be digitised and saved onto DVD for easy access. Quantitative and qualitative analyses will be conducted in order to record and evaluate information relative to: (i) type of antecedent, (ii) power and intimacy relation between interactants as they were revealed in the "emotion scripts" (Fischer 1991), and (iii) degree of emotion display through:

- moving behaviour (towards or away from people and things);
- non-verbal behaviour (laughing/smiling, crying/sobbing, other facial expressions, other voice changes, gestures);
- paralinguistic behaviour: changes in intonation, tempo, etc.;

as suggested by Scherer and Wallbott (1994), among others.

Since our study is still in its preliminary phase, we are not yet able to present conclusive results. However, our initial observations have pointed to some interesting trends, which will need to be confirmed through further, more detailed analyses.

Firstly, preliminary viewings suggest that anger is indeed most often displayed with family or close friends. In the films we have viewed so far, an overwhelmingly high number of anger display instances involve family interactions. However, some instances of anger display among colleagues or even with strangers were also observed, and this happened across the three cultural groups considered, even though the norms regulating the intensity and modalities of the display may vary.

Interestingly, Anglo-Australian characters in these films seem to be rather vocal, which goes against the stereotyped image of the group, when compared to Italian or French groups. However, in some instances, our sensitivity as bicultural researchers suggests that portrayed behaviours that may be quite acceptable in France or Italy would be considered inappropriate in Australia, and therefore most likely suppressed. Frame-by-frame analyses of face and body movements, as well as spectral analyses of voice patterns, will enable us to detect any differences that may not be immediately apparent on initial viewing. Furthermore, after this initial phase of our project, we plan to continue our research by collecting more data in naturalistic settings. In particular, we are very interested in analysing Italian, French and Anglo-Australian native speakers' perceptions of the characters' personality, based on their behaviour in the selected scenes.

With regard to the second aim of our paper, starting this project made us more aware of the potential that this kind of research presents from a pedagogical perspective. In the next section, we discuss the relevance of our project for a cross-cultural teaching approach that aims to assist learners' development of *Intercultural Competence* (IC) in second language classrooms.

4 Implications for a cross-cultural teaching approach

Based on a definition proposed by [Byram \(1995\)](#), *Intercultural Competence* involves the acquisition of complex cognitive, affective and social competencies that are conveniently summarized by [Barraja-Rohan](#), (1999:143) as an "awareness of cultural diversity and ability to recognize and accept differences and manage them successfully". As such, IC entails acquiring norms of interaction through a detailed examination of spoken and non-verbal interaction in the native and target language.

In attempting to answer the question: "Can pragmatic competence be taught?", Kasper (1997) indeed supports the view that pragmatic ability can be developed through planned classroom activities. In her paper, Kasper reviews a number of classroom studies carried out in this particular field and conducted mainly in the US and Japan. Through these studies, it was found that learners' pragmatic abilities improve regardless of the teaching approach; however, students who have been explicitly taught about IC issues generally do better than those in groups taught inductively.

Explicit teaching generally involves description, explanation and discussion of the pragmatic features of interaction, in addition to input and practice. However, there are several obstacles to the achievement of these goals:

1) The socio-pragmatic aspects of interactions are generally not discussed in language textbooks (Liddicoat 1997), which present exercises and activities focusing on linguistic competence ([Steele & Suozzo 1994](#)). When they are discussed, the perspective of the learners is generally emphasised rather than that of the target community ([Kramsch 1987](#)). This indicates a need to develop and produce new materials for language teaching, based on research that describes the ways in which language is used in different cultures ([Liddicoat & Crozet 1997](#)).

2) Teachers have traditionally been trained as *language* teachers, with a focus on gaining native-like accuracy. Even when language pedagogical objectives have shifted to communicative competence as the goal set for learners, most of the language used in the classroom is still of the rehearsal type. Developing an increased understanding of one's own culture, and competence in the target culture, does not mean blindly adopting foreign cultural codes, but requires self-reflective practice and engaging into a negotiation of differences at the intra- and inter-personal level. This creative process demands that language teachers reassess their strategies and approaches, and redefine their role.

3) It is also a well-documented fact that teacher-fronted classrooms, where teachers do most of the talking ([Chaudron 1988](#); [Mrowa-Hopkins 1997](#)) do not provide learners with the input they need for pragmatic development, when compared to conversation outside classroom settings. With regard to pragmatic competence, traditional classroom-based activities tend to present only a limited range of communicative acts.

4) Non-verbal communication is even less present in language textbooks, except perhaps for a limited range of well codified emblems (Ekman & Friesen, 1969) that are sometimes taught. This obviously runs counter to the exceptional amount of information that is communicated through non-verbal behaviour in everyday conversation.

In light of the above observations, it is fundamental for language educators to integrate the results of research on the socio-pragmatic aspect of communication into their teaching practice. In the final section of this article, we suggest some sample activities that could be developed as part of a cross-cultural teaching approach, based on a corpus of interactions similar to the one we are constructing. The aim is to engage learners in an interactive process in which they formally explore their own and others' socio-pragmatic functions of

language use.

5 Sample activities

Several useful approaches can be employed to facilitate the development of learners' IC, depending on their level of linguistic competence. In general, all of these approaches involve some form of consciousness raising and opportunities for practice.

Learners' awareness of differences in socio-pragmatic rules can be raised, for example, through the observation of selected interactions extracted from contemporary films in the target language, and the identification of salient features for comparative and contrasting purposes. The aim is to encourage students to become researchers themselves, to observe actual instances of interaction and to make hypotheses on underlying socio-cultural rules while maintaining an open mind and being prepared to modify their hypotheses if required. This minimises the risk of stereotypical information being applied when learners find themselves interacting with members of the target cultural groups ([Balboni 1999](#)).

Prior to viewing selected film scenes that illustrate the display of certain emotions, students can be given a variety of observation tasks in or outside the classroom to determine, for example, if they can tell when someone is feeling angry, under what conditions Anglo-Australians get angry, and how they display their emotion. One successful task one of the authors has trialled with university students required them to submit a questionnaire to 10 people they knew about how they would react in certain situations. The scenarios included situations such as: "You have been standing in a line for 10 min. and someone jumps in front of you, how do you react?"; or "An invited guest goes to help him/herself in your fridge, how do you feel and what do you do?"¹

We could also ask our students to watch the scenes selected for our study, and to record their observations in an analysis grid that can be shared and commented on in class. Factors on which learners could focus are, for example, the level of familiarity between the interactants, what particular situation provokes people to become angry, and how the characters display their emotion non-verbally. A sample grid is included in Appendix 2.

Instead of using a simple analysis grid, we could devise activities that require students, for example, to complete or combine sentences, or to select options from a list in order to answer questions. Students could also be asked to reconstruct the sequence of a conversation in which native speakers display norms of interaction appropriate to the context. These techniques would encourage learners to focus on the socio-pragmatic or pragma-linguistic aspects of communication.

Observations could then be followed by small group or class discussions in which students will be encouraged to focus on questions similar to these:

- Is this situation common in your culture? Where is it likely to happen?
- After viewing these scenes, which cultural pattern do you recognise?
- To which social category can you ascribe this cultural pattern? To which major value of the French, the Italian or the Australian culture can you relate this cultural pattern?

After observation tasks have been carried out, students could be asked to engage in practice activities, such as role-plays, in which they act out appropriate or inappropriate behaviours given the situation, and other students can be asked to make hypotheses on the reactions that might be triggered by these behaviours in members of the target culture.

Another possibility for skill development through practice could be for the teacher to select a scene from a film in which anger is displayed by one or more of the characters, and ask students to collect information about the context and speakers, including the antecedent for anger, the power relation and degree of intimacy between the characters, and other contextual information. Students can later be asked to write scripts for a role-play on the basis of this information. Following this task, students would be allocated some time to prepare, then they would act out their scene, which would be videorecorded. The recording would be played and commented on by the class, focusing on appropriateness of behaviours and possible reactions by members of the target culture. Finally, the original scene from the film would be played, in order to compare and contrast it with the students' performance.

Other possible ways of involving students in reflection over similarities and differences in socio-cultural norms regulating emotion communication could be to ask them to write journal entries in which they record their own thoughts on the observation process, to exchange questions with a partner from another school in the home country or in the target language country, or even to design open-ended questionnaires in order to carry out ethnographic interviews in the community.

Through activities such as those suggested above, learners have opportunities to develop their IC in the three stages identified by Hofstede (1992:231), that is: awareness raising, knowledge acquisition and practice. The effectiveness of the above suggestions in the context of tertiary teaching awaits confirmation through the results of classroom-based research, which is also one of the aims of our project.

6 Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed one way in which pragmatic research can be integrated into the teaching of intercultural competence. We contend that such an approach would be useful to encourage learners to explore the socio-pragmatic aspects of communication in their native and the target cultures in order to develop meta-pragmatic awareness, knowledge and skills that ultimately lead to a greater degree of intercultural competence.

We have explained the rationale of our research project, including some of the theoretical and methodological issues that guided our design, and have offered some insight into the results of our preliminary observations. These point towards interesting trends that will guide our future analyses. We expect the results of these analyses to contribute to a better understanding of cultural scripts regulating emotion communication in the three groups considered for our study.

More importantly, this project provides us with opportunities not only to increase our understanding of the norms regulating emotion communication in a cross-cultural perspective, but also to share our findings with both learners and other teachers. We believe that this is essential to train language learners and teachers in observation techniques and ethnographic fieldwork, and to encourage them to discover the rules of interaction through the systematic use of analysis and explanation of the cultural variables related to setting, role relationships and ethnicity.

Training learners to recognise differences in socio-cultural norms can be done most effectively by using samples of real-life interactions in a contrastive perspective, and by encouraging learners to become researchers themselves. This way we can sharpen our awareness of cultural diversity and develop intercultural understanding, while limiting tendencies towards generalisation and oversimplification that can lead to the application of stereotypes.

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Notes

[1] More useful examples of situation reactions are available from the Cultura website:
<http://web.mit.edu/french/culturaNEH/cultura2000-questions/index.html>.

Appendix 1 - Selected feature films:

Australian films:

1. *The Dish*, 2000, dir. Rob Sitch
2. *Mullet*, 2001, dir. David Caesar
3. *Go Big*, 2003, dir. Tony Tilse

4. *He Died With A Felafel In His Hand*, 2001, dir. Richard Lowenstein

5. *Lantana*, 2002, dir. Ray Lawrence

6. *Secret Mens' Business*, 1999, dir. Ken Cameron

French films:

1. *Va savoir (Who Knows?)*, 2002, dir. Jacques Rivette

2. *Le chaos (Chaos)*, 2003, dir. Coline Serreau

3. *Sur mes lèvres (Read My Lips)*, 2001, dir. Jacques Audiard

4. *Le gout des autres (It Takes All Kinds / The Taste of Others)*, 2000, dir. Agnès Jaoui

5. *Le placard (The Closet)*, 2001, dir. Francis Veber

6. *Grégoire Moulin contre l'humanité (G M against Humanity)*, 2001, dir. Artus De Penguern

7. *Une affaire privée (Private Investigation)*, 2002, dir. Guillaume Nicloux

Italian films:

1. *Commissario Montalbano – L'odore della notte (Inspector Montalbano – The scent of the night)*, 2002, dir. Alberto Sironi

2. *Domani (Tomorrow)*, 2001, dir. Francesca Archibugi

3. *Giorni (Days)*, 2001, dir. Laura Muscardin

4. *L'ultimo bacio (Last Kiss)*, 2000, dir. Gabriele Muccino

5. *Pane e tulipani (Bread and Tulips)*, 2000, dir. Silvio Soldini

6. *Per tutto il tempo che ci resta (Acts of Justice)*, 1998, dir. Vincenzo Terracciano

7. *Tre storie (Three stories)*, 1999, dir. Piergiorgio Gay & Roberto San Pietro

Appendix 2

[Sample grid for analysing videos \(Acrobat Reader version\)](#)

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