On "gardens" and "cars": Otto Jespersen's metaphors for Interlinguistics and his quest for the best language

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Abstract

With this paper, I intend to present some theoretical contributions that Jespersen made to the field of Interlinguistics, by analysing some images he used for understanding the field of Interlinguistics and the character of interlanguages, based on his articles published from 1921 to 1933: "Artificial languages after the World War" (AL 1921), "History of our language" (HL 1921); "Introduction, an international language" (IL 1928), "Interlinguistics" (I 1931) and "Nature and art in language" (NA 1933). I assume here a broad definition of Interlinguistics, as the interdisciplinary branch of linguistic knowledge dealing with international communication by means of interlanguages, which can be both ethnic languages used as a common ground for speakers of different mother tongues, and created languages, such as Esperanto, designed for international and intercultural communication. I approach particularly the concepts and terminology proposed by Jespersen to refer to these interlanguages and the parameters and norms for the construction, standardization and adoption of a planned language for international communication. I do not intend to present a general overview of Jespersen's contributions to Theoretical Linguistics or to English Language Studies.

1. Introduction

The Dane Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) is recognized as one of the most important linguists of the 20th century. He is the renowned author of reference works on Language Theory and on the English language in particular, such as the monumental seven-volume *Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (1909-49), *The Philosophy of Grammar* (1924) and *Analytic Syntax* (1937). He also published more than 800 articles on a diverse range of linguistic topics, including contributions to Interlinguistics and to interlanguages in particular, such as Ido, Novial and others (Juul, Nielsen 1989; Aarts 2016; Barandovská-Frank 2020). During his 30-year professorship at the University of Copenhagen, he devoted himself mainly to the research and teaching of the English language, but also contributed to other subjects, such as Language Theory (Phonetics, Syntax), Language Pedagogy (Foreign Language Teaching), Interlinguistics and Language Policy. As Falk (1992) asserts:

> In an age when linguistics in Europe was frequently organized into movements and schools, from the Neogrammarians to the Cercle linguistique de Prague, Jespersen was a markedly independent scholar. An explanation he once offered for his shift from the study of law to the study of language also characterizes his lifelong research and writing: "I wanted to go my own way and not to have my opinions dictated to me from outside". This intellectual independence, along with exceptional breadth of interest and depth of study, makes Jespersen's work difficult to summarize.
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> (Falk 1992: 466)

With this paper, I intend to present some of the theoretical contributions that Jespersen made to the field of Interlinguistics. I assume here a broad definition of Interlinguistics, as the interdisciplinary branch of linguistic knowledge dealing with international communication by means of interlanguages, which can be both ethnic languages when used as a common ground for speakers of

different mother tongues, and planned languages, such as Esperanto, designed
for international and intercultural communication.

My aim is to discuss part of the theoretical contribution that Jespersen made
to the field of Interlinguistics, based on his articles published from 1921 to
1933: "Artificial languages after the World War" (AL 1921), "History of our
language" (HL 1921); "Introduction, an international language" (IL 1928),
"Interlinguistics" (I 1931) and "Nature and art in language" (NA 1933). I access
those texts through the collection *Selected Writings of Otto Jespersen* (first
published in 1960, with a second reissue of 2010), and analyze two of their
main aspects: the concept and terminology concerning interlanguages; the
norms and parameters for the standardization, construction and selection of
the 'best' created international language available at his time. I do not propose
to present a general overview of Jespersen's contributions to Theoretical
Linguistics or to the English Language Studies (which can be seen, for instance
in Koerner 2002; Graffi 2006), neither do I intend to deal with the discussions
about particular interlanguages that Jespersen proposed and analyzed (for
instance, Novial and Ido, have already been sufficiently discussed by
Barandovská-Frank 2020: 205-225). This paper merely intends to illuminate
how some discussions concerning this new field of language science –
Interlinguistics – were received by Jespersen after the World War I, and how
he dealt with the emerging terminology associated to it. Such a contribution
may be of interest of the History of the language sciences.

2. The art of the gardener or the age-old dilemma nature *vs.* art

The first problem for Interlinguistics is to clearly define the concept of
interlanguage, and consequently to propose and choose appropriate
terminology. Several expressions are used: "interlanguage", "international
language", "artificial language", "planned language" etc. These are not always
interchangeable, because they draw attention to different aspects of the
phenomenon. In addition, they lack accuracy, since they do not always

describe the same linguistic reality. By the late 1920s, Jespersen considered the simple opposition between artificial and natural language to be neither sufficient nor suitable to characterize constructed languages such as Esperanto, Novial, Ido and others in contrast to ethnic languages such as English, Danish, French etc.

This simple way of separating these two classes of languages implies that, while the first group is a completely and totally artificial product, the second class is entirely natural and its members have no artistic features. From a sociological and linguistic point of view, such a distinction seems to be a serious mistake: not only have the ethnic languages built a solid cultural and literary enterprise, affecting their language system itself, but also the so-called artificial languages proved to follow natural processes of learning and acquisition.

Therefore, Jespersen rejected the terms "natural language" and "artificial language", and proposed the distinction between "national" and "international" (according to the purpose of the communicative act), and the additional epithet "auxiliary", in order to emphasize their additional use, coexisting with the use of the mother tongue. To emphasize the fact that these languages were products of human intellect, the linguist accepted the term "planned". So, languages like Esperanto should more precisely be called *international planned auxiliary languages* (NA 1933 [2010]: 387; IL 1928 [2010]: 400).

The basis for refusing the term "artificial language" was that it seemed unreasonable to think of completely natural languages. In addition, such reasoning came from past – and by then already old fashioned – linguistic theories, no longer acceptable in the light of more modern thoughts on language:

> Formerly languages were often spoken as organisms whose natural growth was thought to be analogous to that of plants or even animals; but linguists have come to realize that this is a wrong view, because a language has no independent existence apart from those individuals who speak it.
>
> (Jespersen, *NA*, 1933 [2010]: 387)

In fact, the entire discussion regarding the naturalness of languages was culturally constructed. As Joseph (2007: 4) shows, the discussion about *nature* originates from the reasoning of some philosophers from the 16th and 17th centuries, such as Gassendi (1592–1655), Hobbes (1588-1679) and Locke (1632–1704), whose thoughts influenced the linguistic science of the 19th and early 20th century. Although the naturalistic idea of languages can still be encountered in some recent theories [1], the way such an idea was quite dogmatically taken two centuries ago could not be accepted by structuralists like Jespersen. In fact, we owe to the work of the German August Schleicher (1821–1868) the application of Charles Darwin's concepts to the understanding of language development. As a consequence, a kind of biologically based philology (Taub 1993; Faraco 2005) was developed. It is reasonable to assume that such approaches to the linguistic phenomena were still somehow influential during Jespersen's time, which contributed to the acceptance of an almost unbridgeable chasm between naturalness and artificiality regarding languages.

However, Jespersen considered this way of understanding language rather imprecise and vague, and stated so in his "Language, its nature, development and origin" (1922 [2007]), as well as in his "Introduction to International

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[1] Although that idea still plays a role in some cognitive and mental approaches to languages, for example that of Noam Chomsky (Joseph 2007: 4).

Language" (IL). There, he grounded his arguments on the theoretical thinking of Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927) and other linguists[2]:

> Languages are not organisms, and their 'life' is not to be compared with that of animals and plants. Forty years ago, Schuchardt was able to make short work of this objection by showing how much in the so-called natural languages was really artificial (...)".
>
> (Jespersen, *IL* 1928 [2010]: 405)

Also in his 1933 article, "Nature and art in language", Jespersen briefly expounds on his ideas regarding this theme. In the first part, he presents several aspects that reveal the artificiality of ethnic languages. Through several examples of English, Danish, French, Russian and other ethnic languages, he shows that the creation of neologisms and slang, the proposal and use of scientific terminology, new word derivations and compounds, the introduction of foreign words and even the written code, are artificial, not natural, elements of living languages. On the other hand, he argues, the so-called "artificial" languages could present elements as "natural" as those of any national living language. Jespersen explains the difference between these two groups of languages with the metaphor of the *garden*. Plants and flowers beautifully organized in a garden are not strictly "natural" in the sense that the very existence of the garden depends on the work of a gardener who designs, creates and technically cares for it. However, the flowers and plants in this garden are not "artificial", but simple plants and flowers – only more beautiful and decorated, and with other functions. This is how Jespersen concludes:

> The art of the perfect gardener is not to make artificial flowers but to select the finest of those plants with which nature provides: him,

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[2] Besides H. Schuchardt, Jespersen explicitly mentions Vilhelm Thomsen (1842-1927) and Antoine Meillet (1866-1936) as supporters of the idea of 'natural' planned languages. Other authors linked to Interlinguistics mentioned are, among others: Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1929) and Edward Sapir (1884-1939), the latter two had been linked to IALA since 1924.

to arrange them so that they form a harmonious whole, and perhaps to produce new species by means of the same processes that Nature herself employs. This also describes the task of the interlinguist".

(Jespersen, *NA* 1933 [2010]: 398)

3. The best language between typewriters and automobiles

La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea (1993) by Umberto Eco addresses the history of the human endeavor to create an ideal language, as a means to solve the conflicts generated after the fall of the mythical tower of Babel. Also the interlinguistic research of the early decades of the last century might be considered as an additional step in that direction. In fact, according to Jespersen, Interlinguistics was a new science aiming to "set standards for interlanguages – i.e. auxiliary languages intended for oral and written use among people who are unable to communicate with each other through their own mother tongues" (I 1931 [2010]: 422).

By highlighting the normative side of this science, Jespersen seemed to imply a desire to achieve the best language for international use, either through the improvement of the already existing auxiliary languages of that time[3], or through the creation of new languages for international use based on specialized linguistic research. Jespersen himself supported the development of at least two languages, Ido and Novial (Barandovská-Frank 2020: 208). The idea of creating or perfecting a previously existing language for intercultural communication was not new. In effect, this was an endeavor pursued by many others before Jespersen. However, the difference was that at the beginning of the 20th century, linguistics was still a developing science and trained linguists involved in this task, such as Jespersen and others (for instance, Meillet and Bloomfield), tried to create a more scientific approach to this old quest.

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[3] Jespersen mentions in his article from 1931 (I), six successful language projects: Esperanto (1887, by Zamenhof), Ido (1907, from collective work under the intellectual guidance of L. Couturat and De Beaufront), Nov-Esperanto (final version of 1929, by René de Saussure), Latino sine flexione (originally from 1903, by G. Peano), Occidental (1922, by Edgar Wahl), and Novial (1928, by Jespersen himself).

The utopia that Zamenhof had sought merely three decades before with the introduction of his language still persisted: to find the solution for the problem of Babel, that is to say, the misunderstandings and language injustice that derive from the unequal use of a great diversity of languages on a global scale.

More than a project or an initiative placed in history, the idea of creating a common language for communication based on equality and justice and therefore aiding the promotion of peace can be said to be a *utopia*. Naturally, I am not referring here, by the term created by Thomas More, referring to something unrealizable or to a fantasy, but to a way of knowing and questioning the world and acting in practice to transform it. As Sargent (2010: 17), states:

> All utopias ask questions. They ask whether or not the way we live could be improved and answer that it could. Most utopias compare life in the present and life in the utopia and point out what is wrong with the way we now live, thus suggesting what needs to be done to improve things.

Jespersen addresses this utopia through the following paradox: despite the fact that technical development made international communications between people of different countries not only possible but increasingly easier, nationalism and mistrust between countries during the interwar period were increasingly strong (Jespersen, I 1931 [2010]: 422).

However, decades after the creation of Volapük, the flowering of Esperanto, the dozens of proposals for reforming it and the continuing popularity of the idea of adopting a new planned language for international communication, the

new science dealing with international planned languages promised great progress during the Jespersen era[4].

Otto Jespersen, like other interlinguists, considered it part of his professional duty not only to describe and understand the phenomenon of existing international auxiliary languages, but also to contribute in a practical way, by offering qualified criticism of these projects and proposing structural changes in them. This goal was justified by the idea that the possible success or an eventual failure of any interlanguage would be due mostly to the language structure itself – not to other political, economic and linguistic reasons. So, it was understandable that a professional linguist dealing with interlanguages would propose the means of improving these languages, searching for the best possible if not the 'perfect' language. The basic premise was that one could consciously introduce technical changes into a language:

> Nothing can be concluded from imperfect schemes, except just this, that we must make the interlanguage of the future more perfect, i.e. simpler. Volapük made the error of having four cases; Esperanto made a similar, though lesser, mistake with its compulsory accusative, used not only for the direct object, but also without preposition to indicate the place to (or towards) which.
>
> (Jespersen *IL* 1928 [2010]: 407)

As can be seen from the quote above, Jespersen retrospectively evaluated the linguistic quality of already existing interlanguages. Based on that analysis, he claimed to plan a language that would theoretically avoid the mistakes of the previous ones. However, considerations about the role of the language community for the progress of the language in question hardly appeared in

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4 In this sense, the article of 1931 is at the same time the culmination of decades of discussion based on real interlanguage experiments – from Volapük to Ido – and the beginning of a new stage for this science.

Jespersen's articles[5]. The reason for this absence is simple: during the earliest decades of the last century, the socially based language theories, which would give an important role to the language community for the change and development of language after some decades, did not yet prevail.

The works of Antoine Meillet (1866–1936) and Émile Benveniste (1902–1976), for example, after Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), would highlight the social aspect of a living language, but they were most probably not yet enough influential to have been considered by Jespersen. Therefore, in Jespersen's articles, the existence of a relatively wide and stable community of speakers of Esperanto, for example, does not seem to be a sufficiently important asset of that language, while some particular syntax features, such as the minimal case system, would be blamed for an eventual failure of the language and its inadequacy. In fact, that was probably the main reason why his opinion of Ido – a derivative language from Esperanto without a case system – was much more favorable.

Indeed, compared to Ido, Esperanto was considered to be inferior. In an article from 1921 (AL), he claims that, "for Esperanto, it can only be said that it has a greater number of followers than Ido" (AL 1921 [2010]: 417). He praised the fact that Ido, for example, was the product of several people who seriously considered the problem of international communication, instead of a product (albeit brilliant) of a single mind. He said that the final project of Ido succeeded in avoiding "the fantasies, whims and individual preferences that a single person can hardly avoid" (AL 1921 [2010]: 418).

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[5] In this sense, Zamenhof was more advanced than Jespersen. As is known, since the early days of Esperanto, when the language had not yet matured, the Polish creator took care of the simultaneous development of the Esperanto community – as a "people" – for example, through the creation of international literature and community, the "rondo familia" . The idea that Esperantists constitute a kind of single family is present in several documents by Zamenhof and the first Esperantists, as, for example, in the poem "La Espero". With that metaphor, one understands the desire to create an 'Esperanto people' (Rašić 1994).

Firstly, he emphasizes the linguistic advantages of Ido, compared to Esperanto:

> Everything else tells in favor of Ido. It is not the product of a single person, and for that reason it is free from the caprices, fancies and individual preferences which a single person can with difficulty avoid. It uses the already existing international vocabulary more extensively than does Esperanto, so that every educated European or American can understand at first sight almost every text, at any rate in his own specialty. It can be printed and telegraphed straight away, while Esperanto is defaced by several arbitrary consonants with circumflex accents; consequently, special types are necessary in printing-houses, and an Esperanto text must be transcribed in a special manner before it can be sent by telegraph. Ido has a vocabulary more extensive and worked out more exactly; it has in general a better conscience in all respects. This is shown among other things by the simple fact that the Ido magazines do very often what the Esperanto reviews avoid, namely, print for comparison the same texts in two columns, in Ido and Esperanto.
>
> (Jespersen, *AL* 1921 [2010]: 417)

The idea underlying his argument is that the lexical and even the typographical advantages of Ido would be responsible for its greater international acceptance, over Esperanto. Jespersen perhaps did not yet realize the importance that the linguistic community would have for the survival of the language and its diffusion.

Secondly, he highlights the fact that Ido was a more neutral language, based on the fact that it was never used as a propaganda of war. It is important to mention that his article was published just after the horrors of the first World War, so that the idea of neutrality during the previous years could be taken as

strong argument in favor of a language promising peace and mutual understanding. Jespersen continues:

> To this I will add a further circumstance which concerns not the language directly but those who use it: during the world war the Idists as such have observed the strictest neutrality, not wishing to use their language as warpropaganda, neither for the one nor for the other side, while German Esperantists regularly every month have edited a review paid by the German government and containing a defense of German methods of war and spiteful attacks on other nations. At the beginning of the war a similar magazine was published on the French side too, "Por Francujo per Esperanto." I do not know whether it has ceased to be conducted; but in any case paid work of that sort will not promote co-operation, when once we have peace.
>
> (Jespersen, *AL* 1921 [2010]: 417)

Jespersen does not mention the name of Zamenhof, "the single mind creating Esperanto", but he is implacable against the Esperanto community, which he considers to be fanatical, intolerant and not having an open mind to discussion on their language. According to Jespersen, on the occasion of a major crisis dividing the partisans of Ido (a reformed Esperanto) and the classical, unchanged Esperanto, the Esperantists refused any improvements which could benefit Esperanto, because they feared that, by introducing reforms, Esperanto would perish and disappear, the same way as Volapük had decades before (*AL* 1921 [2010]: 418).

In another article, from 1931, a similar reasoning comes out: any language is like technology, it needs therefore constant development and not by the users themselves, but by some educated interlinguists. It is interesting to note, that the argument of Jespersen here is exactly the opposite of that of Plato in *Cratylus* (390c-d). In that dialogue, the ancient Greek philosopher claimed

that it was the users, not the creators, who could attest the adequacy of an instrument – be it a violin or a noun. Thus, the same way technological products, such as cars, must be improved by experts, also languages should undergo informed and scientifically-based reforms. So, linguists, not the speakers, were supposed to be responsible for language developments. If language is a technological device, this idea should not be surprising:

> It has not been injurious to the production of good typewriters or automobiles that people have not been content with the models prevalent twenty years ago, but have been constantly at work experimenting and inventing new improvements, with the result that what we have now surpasses the earlier products very considerably. Correspondingly, it may be said of interlanguages that they have profited from the experimentation and discussion of the last twenty years or more.
>
> (Jespersen *I* 1931 [2010]: 424)

According to Jespersen, some linguistic features were considered to be better and more suitable for an interlanguage. Because of that, one should abandon the less appropriate past experiments such as Esperanto and adopt more perfected languages such as, for example, Ido. That idea appears in the two articles from 1921 appearing in the collection "Two papers on International Language in English and Ido". A few years later, in his text of 1928, "Introduction, an international language", and in the introduction to his Dictionary of Novial (*Novial Lexike*, 1930), we see that even Ido was later abandoned, in favor of an even better language, the one authored by Jespersen himself, *Novial.*

The problem, obviously, is that you never reach a perfect language, because the very idea of such a language is nonsense from a strictly sociological or anthropological point of view. "Perfection" implies completeness (the word

comes from the Latin *perficere*, "to complete, to fulfil, to carry out, to finish"). Human languages are closely linked to culture (Koutny 1998; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 2008), so they can only be characterized by an idea of openness. Just as one can never say a culture is already finished, complete, also languages can never be in their final state. There is always something else to happen, sometimes even unexpectedly. Another way of stating this is by saying that living languages are also historical developments, be it an ethnic language, whose history goes back many centuries, or a planned interlanguage, whose history may have a starting point but certainly does not have a defined point of arrival in the future, except those that have disappeared or have never survived past the stage of mere language projects.

However, the guiding principles for the construction of his allegedly *perfect* language were more and more solid from his theoretical framework: apart from the formal linguistic aspects (preference for the Latin alphabet without additional elements, simple phonetics, the existence of only the vowels *a, e, i, o u*, the absence of any case system, simple and regular verb conjugation etc.), Jespersen sought to find the really difficult balance between maximum simplicity and maximum expressiveness. The language proposed must be as simple as possible (concerning its internal elements), but not too schematic, which would not help expressiveness:

> Simplicity does not mean that the language we construct is to be a kind of pidgin incapable of expressing nuances of thought which are necessary to highly cultivated Europeans.
>
> (Jespersen *IL* 1928 [2010]: 407).

In addition to the dichotomy simplicity vs. expressiveness, another characteristic for the best interlanguage was, of course, internationality. But internationality could not be measured only by the number of international

words that the dictionary of this given language contained, but the spread of
this word in a vast transnational community.

> Internationality ought not to be measured by the number of
> languages in which the word occurs, but by the number of people
> who through their native language are acquainted with it.
>
> (Jespersen *HL* 1921 [2010]: 412)

In sum, these observations by Otto Jespersen reveal that the linguist agreed
with the then current ideas of what a perfect interlanguage should be. These
conceptions, prevalent until the middle of the 20th century, considered, above
all, the formal aspect of languages. The simplicity of grammar along with a
familiar graphic expression (a writing without special diacritics, for example)
were desirable from a pedagogical point of view, given that they should help a
more efficient teaching and learning. On the other hand, from a lexical point
of view, one should take into account the necessity of a lexicon that would be
sufficiently international, in the sense of being recognized, at that time, by
educated speakers of the great European languages – the Neo-Latin languages,
certainly, but also English, German and perhaps also Russian. Besides, it
should be sufficiently vast, in the sense of allowing the expression of abstract,
complex and nuanced ideas. In this sense, the linguist considered worthy the
effort to improve previously existing languages, which could culminate in the
proposal of a language that had all of these characteristics to the highest
degree. So, the ultimate end of Jespersen's interlinguistic work in those two
decades was the proposition of Novial.

However, what Jespersen seemed to lack was a less structuralist and formalist
understanding of the phenomenon of interlanguages. Certainly, Jespersen, as
one of the most important theorists of the so-called European Structuralism at
that point, understood language essentially as its grammatical structure and
could not foresee theoretical advances that would occur and become

mainstream only decades later (Graffi 2006). However, had he had access to linguistic theories that would only come to light decades later, such as Sociolinguistics, he might have understood that, in addition to the formal properties of a language, many other social, cultural and political factors play a role for the coherence, survival and success of a planned language. The very existence of a linguistic community with its own identity and a certain resistance to change – which he understood as problem of Esperanto! – could, on the contrary, be taken as a strong advantage in favor of this language. Not by chance, one could admit that Esperanto, not Novial, had more social success in the history of interlanguages.

Conclusion

Otto Jespersen played an important role in the history of the language sciences during the first decades of the last century. His contribution to interlinguistics were also considerable. Jespersen participated not only as an interested supporter, but also as a researcher, in several interlinguistic movements, and had theoretical and practical knowledge of the value of these enterprises for global communication. In addition to contributing, through his intellectual prestige, to the legitimacy of the use, teaching and creation of interlanguages, Jespersen, along with other pioneering interlinguists, helped to define the scientific and research branch of interlinguistics.

As this paper shows, Jespersen brought his experience as a professional linguist to the understanding, analysis, standardization and development of new interlanguages. He contributed to overcoming the Darwin-based understanding of language as a living organism, which underlined a kind of unbridgeable chasm between "natural" and "artificial" languages. According to this understanding, planned languages could be successful as a human means of communication, despite their lack of naturality. Instead, he proposed overcoming that classification with the more up-to-date understanding that

interlanguages could be as natural as ethnic languages, just as plants and flowers in gardens are not unnatural, but only planned. For this reason, he proposed a particular terminology to be adopted, that of "international planned auxiliary languages".

However, Jespersen gave little value to the social side of the language phenomenon. The language community of an interlanguage is hardly mentioned in his articles, and it does not seem to matter for the purpose of consolidating and improving a language. On the contrary, he had the idea that interlanguages are technologies that must be reformed and improved not by language use or by the speakers themselves, but by external language engineers and planners, namely interlinguists. Interlanguages were thus metaphorically understood as being like cars or typewriters. This understanding leads to an endless desire to reform and improve the language, which paralyzes, by itself, the course of a natural language development, through the insatiable search for the best language, that is the utopian "perfect language". Perhaps for this reason, Jespersen was never been completely content with any interlanguage known in his time, from Esperanto to Novial.

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