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Positive orientation and the perception of feedback in foreign language learners

The primary aim of the present study is to examine the relationship between foreign language learners' positive orientation and their perception of teacher and peer feedback. It also investigates gender differences and the relationship between the frequency of receiving feedback and the perception of its different dimensions. 429 foreign language university students were asked to complete an online questionnaire. Subsequently, statistical analysis of the data was carried out in order to obtain results, which indicated that positive orientation positively correlated with the feeling of comfort while receiving feedback, regardless of source or setting. Regarding the differences between genders, it was found that men felt more comfortable than women receiving feedback highlighting their mistakes and feedback given in public; conversely, women preferred feedback focused on positive aspects and feedback given in private. Finally, it was observed that students who receive feedback often feel more comfortable with the potentially stressful dimensions, such as a public setting and focus on mistakes. The most important pedagogical implication is that teachers should provide feedback regularly and employ

strategies to boost their students' positive orientation levels, which may in turn lead to their increased satisfaction from receiving feedback.

Keywords: foreign language learning, positive orientation, teacher feedback, peer feedback, teaching strategies

Słowa kluczowe: nauka języka obcego, orientacja pozytywna, informacja zwrotna nauczyciela, koleżeńska informacja zwrotna, strategie nauczania

1. Introduction

The growth of humanistic psychology resulted in increased interest in the role of emotions and positive affect (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961). However, almost a decade ago, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) indicated that despite the fact that emotions play a huge role in human life, they had been rather neglected by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, attributing this state of affairs to the prevalence of the cognitivist tradition within this particular field of science. This situation may have changed due to the exploration of the role of affect in language learning (Arnold, 1999) as well as the development of positive psychology and its focus on the factors that help people thrive and flourish (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman, 2011). Interest in building positive emotions, increasing student engagement and boosting the appreciation of life consequently led SLA scholars to move away from the emphasis on negative emotions, i.e., foreign language classroom anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), and adopt a more holistic view of language learners and study a broader range of emotions, such as foreign language enjoyment (Dewaele, MacIntyre, 2014). One of the positive psychology theories that have found their way into education studies in general, and SLA studies in particular, is positive orientation (POS), defined as "a basic disposition predisposing people to appraise life and experiences with a positive outlook" (Caprara et al., 2012a: 702). It has been observed that students with higher POS levels tend to have more positive emotions towards their teachers, peers and class events (Alessandri et al., 2012) and suffer from lower levels of classroom anxiety (Yin, Dewaele, 2018).

This study aims at examining the relationship between POS and the perception of feedback in foreign language students, our main intention being to verify whether students with a more positive orientation will have a more positive view of classroom feedback as well. In addition, it plans to investigate the influence of gender and feedback frequency on the perception of different dimensions of feedback.

2. Literature review

2.1. Positive orientation

Positive orientation (POS), previously known as "positive thinking" (Caprara, Steca, 2005), emerged within the positive psychology framework (Sheldon, King, 2001), which examines the components of well-being that comprise optimal psychological functioning and allow people to flourish (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is conceptualized as a fundamental trait, representing a tendency to perceive life experiences with a positive attitude, allowing individuals to fulfil their potential (Caprara et al., 2013). POS consists of high self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism, three major indicators of optimal functioning (Caprara et al., 2012b). Caprara et al.'s (2009) research confirmed that it serves as a common, latent factor that explains the covariation within these traits.

It is reasoned that this predisposition is crucial because seeing oneself as worthy, life as worth living, and the future as promising is what allows people to cope, despite various setbacks, adversities, and difficulties (Caprara et al., 2009). Positive orientation is positively correlated with hedonic balance, physical health and perceived social support from parents, friends and teachers (Caprara et al., 2010). It positively and significantly predicts positive affectivity, the quality of friendships and ego resiliency (Alessandri et al., 2012). There is also a positive relationship between POS and generalized self-efficacy (Oleś et al., 2013), extraversion and conscientiousness and a negative one between POS and neuroticism (Miciuk et al., 2016) as well as foreign language classroom anxiety (Jin, Dewaele, 2018).

2.2. Feedback

Feedback may be conceptualized as information provided by an agent concerning aspects of one's performance or understanding, the agent being animate, e.g., teacher, peer, parent or self, or inanimate, e.g., a book or experience (Hattie, Timperley, 2007). This conceptualization covers a number of dimensions, such as source (Brett, Atwater, 2001; Fujii, Mackey, 2009), timing (Druskat, Wolff, 1999; Fu, Nassaji, 2016), specificity (Goodman, Wood, 2004), sign (Vancouver, Tischner, 2004), type (Earley et al., 1990; Nassaji, Swain, 2000), sociocultural setting (Lee, Kong, 2014) and frequency (Anderson, Kulhavy, Andre, 1971; Lyster, Ranta, 1997). Lam et al. (2011) observe that a substantial amount of research has focused on dimensions other than frequency, and it is commonly assumed that more frequent feedback boosts

both individual learning and task performance. A popular explanation is that more feedback offers more information, which the learner can subsequently employ in order to learn and use more effective task strategies that will eventually have a positive impact in subsequent performance (Lam et al., 2011). Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have also studied feedback dimensions directly related to learning outcomes, such as grammar (Ellis, 2007; Adams, Nuevo, Egi, 2007), pronunciation (Saito, Lyster, 2012), and speaking (Hartono et al., 2022).

Foreign language performance requires some form of feedback for at least three reasons. First, mistakes are a natural part of learning in most life contexts, so instead of leaving the learner with an unsupported trial-and-error approach to language learning, teachers could use a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining their students' errors (Ellis, Barkhuizen, 2008). Second, even in situations when a learner's language output does not contain mistakes per se, there may still be some discrepancy between the quality of the performance and the desired goal. Finally, students may benefit from feedback on progress, e.g., at the end of a semester or school year, which provides them with expert opinion on their achievement as well as the areas on which they need to focus in the future.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) propose that structuring feedback may occur at four levels. The first of these is feedback about the task, which may include advice aimed at acquiring extended, different, or correct information. Next, feedback can relate to task processing, focusing on the learning processes required to complete the task. The third level refers to the learner's self-regulation and self-evaluation mechanisms, which can influence their self-efficacy and self-beliefs. The last level is personal, directed to the "self," which, as it is unrelated to the task, is considered the least effective. While understanding the complexity of feedback is definitely desirable for both the foreign language scholar and the foreign language teacher, it must be observed that one of the most serious drawbacks in research on feedback has been the lack of attention devoted to the role of the individual in the learning process. As Papi et al. (2019: 1–2) claim, studies on feedback usually put language learners in the roles of passive recipients of feedback rather than "human agents who consciously, proactively, and selectively seek, attend to, and learn from such information." In contrast, SLA researchers who adopt a more interactionist view of learning have drawn attention to the learner's active role in the feedback exchange, proposing the effectiveness of mutually negotiated feedback (Nassaji, Swain, 2000). However, socially oriented studies tend to assume that learners, regardless of their motivational states and dispositions, respond to feedback in a similar manner as long as it is negotiated dialogically (Papi et al., 2019). Such

a view stands in contrast with research devoted to the importance of affective states or individual differences in the learning process.

In view of the abovementioned perspectives, our study aims to check to what extent a learner's positive orientation affects their perception of different feedback dimensions. Our research questions are as follows:

1) What is the relationship between a learner's positive orientation and their perception of feedback?
2) Are there any significant gender differences in the perception of feedback?
3) What is the relationship between the frequency of receiving feedback and the perception of its different dimensions?

3. Method

3.1. Context and participants

There were 429 participants in the study, (186 male, 226 female, 4 non-binary, 13 who preferred not to disclose their gender), foreign language university students from the following institutions based in Poland: the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology in Warsaw, the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków, the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, and the University of Warsaw. Average age was 20.81 (SD = 2.11). In keeping with the Polish regulations regarding formal foreign language instruction, prior to entering university, the informants had studied English for at least 12 years and should have reached a minimum of B2 (upper-intermediate) level, as specified by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The informants came from both Bachelor's (Years 1–3) and Master's (Years 4–5) programmes. At the time of the study, all the students were being given extensive tuition in English, both in practical, skill-based classes as well as professional courses.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. The P-scale

The P-scale, developed by Caprara et al. (2012a), is an 8-item scale designed to measure positivity, understood as the tendency to perceive one's life and experiences with a positive outlook. One sample item from the scale

is: *I have great faith in the future*. Item 6, *At times, the future seems unclear to me* is reverse scored.

All the items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with the following format: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *agree* (4), and *strongly agree* (5). The obtainable scores for the scale range between 8 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of positivity. The scale was given in the original language, English, due to the fact that all the respondents were able to understand and respond to the items.

3.2.2. The feedback scale

Before the formulation of the feedback scale, a group of 10 foreign language teachers and a group of 16 foreign language university students were asked to provide the elements of feedback that they considered essential, usual, components. The two groups mentioned the following areas: frequency, nature (summative/ descriptive vs numerical), source (teachers vs peers), setting (public vs private), orientation (focus on strong points vs focus on areas for improvement), subjective usefulness, and the learner's need to respond.

Based on these areas, we created a 13-item feedback scale, with the items being rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale for the first two items, referring to the frequency of feedback, was given the following format: *never* (1), *rarely* (2), *sometimes* (3), *frequently* (4), and *always* (5), while all the other items were rated as follows: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *agree* (4), and *strongly agree* (5). A sample item from the scale is *It's useful to get feedback that highlights mistakes*.

3.3. Procedure

Before the distribution of the questionnaires, participants were briefly informed about the purpose of collecting the data and encouraged to provide honest answers to the questions. In addition, they were informed that the questionnaire did not ask for any data considered sensitive by the General Data Protection Regulation, and that the information they provided would not be disclosed to anyone else nor used for any other objective than research purposes. The informants were advised that their participation in this study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. They were subsequently provided with a QR code and a link to the survey on Google Forms, which they completed electronically, using their mobile phones, tablets or laptops.

3.4. Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted using SPSS 29.0 to obtain informa-
tion about the profiles of the 429 participants' levels of positive orienta-
tion and their perception of feedback. Since Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests
indicated significant deviations from normality, Spearman's rho correla-
tion analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between posi-
tive orientation and the perception of feedback. The Mann-Whitney U test
was then used to assess gender differences, and the Kruskal-Wallis H test
was performed to examine differences in feedback perception among par-
ticipants who received feedback from their teachers with varying frequen-
cies. Post-hoc tests using the Mann-Whitney U test were also conducted fol-
lowing the Kruskal-Wallis H test to identify specific group differences.

4. Results

4.1. Simple correlation analysis

The relationship between positive orientation and the perception of various
dimensions of feedback was examined using Spearman's rho. The results of
this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations between the variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. POS	--											
2. I like receiving feedback in the form of numeri-cal grades.	.12*	--										
3. It's important for me to get feedback in the form of descripti-ve comments.	0.08	-.10*	--									
4. I am comfortable receiving feedback from my teachers in public.	.27**	0.09	.14**	--								
5. I like getting feedback from my teachers in a priva-te setting.	-0.02	0.01	.33**	-.19**	--							

Table 1 – cont.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
6. I am fine receiving feedback from my peers in a public setting.	.22**	0.05	0.08	.63**	-.15**	--						
7. I like being given feedback from my peers in private.	0.07	-0.02	.31**	0.05	.48**	.13**	--					
8. I benefit from feedback that focuses on the positive aspects of my work.	.16**	-0.01	.26**	-0.03	.33**	0.08	.34**	--				
9. It's useful to get feedback that highlights mistakes.	.18**	.14**	.33**	.22**	.23**	.17**	.26**	.23**	--			
10. I need to respond to the feedback provided by my peers.	.11*	0.03	.15**	.20**	.13**	.15**	.22**	.10*	.20**	--		
11. I consider feedback from my peers to be as valuable as feedback from my teachers.	.10*	-0.03	0.09	.14**	0.02	.26**	.26**	0.09	.19**	.24**	--	
12. Feedback from my peers has helped me improve my academic work.	.12*	-0.03	.14**	.15**	.10*	.28**	.32**	.18**	.17**	.30**	.59**	--

Note. POS = positive orientation; * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

The correlation analysis using Spearman's rho coefficient indicates several significant relationships between positive orientation and the perception of feedback. The strongest positive correlation was found between POS and being comfortable receiving feedback from teachers in public ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$) and being fine receiving feedback from peers in a public setting ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, POS was positively correlated with liking receiving feedback in the form of numerical grades, benefitting from feedback focusing on the positive as well as feedback that highlights mistakes, and having the need to respond to peer feedback. Finally, positive correlation was also found between POS and perceiving peer and teacher feedback as equally valuable, and recognizing peer feedback as useful in one's academic work.

4.2. Mann-Whitney U tests analysis

Table 2 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests conducted to examine gender differences in the perception of different dimensions of feedback.

The results of the Mann-Whitney U tests show statistically significant differences between men and women regarding positive orientation and preferences for receiving feedback. Men (Mean rank = 231.81) exhibited higher POS than women (Mean rank = 185.67), (U = 16309.5, p < 0.001, r = 0.19).

In the context of feedback preferences, significant differences were observed in several areas. With respect to receiving feedback from teachers in public, men are significantly more comfortable (Mean rank = 255.18) than women (Mean rank = 166.44), (U = 11963.5, p < 0.001, r = 0.38). Men also reported feeling significantly more fine receiving feedback from their peers in a public setting (Mean rank = 243.06) in contrast to women (Mean rank = 176.41), (U = 14217.5, p < 0.001. r = 0.29). Other significant differences included men showing a higher need to respond to the feedback provided by peers (Mean rank = 221.31) compared to women (Mean rank = 194.31) (U = 18263.5, p < 0.017, r = 0.12), as well as men perceiving getting feedback that highlights mistakes as more useful (Mean rank = 223.4) than women (Mean rank = 192.59), (U = 18456, p = 0.023, r = 0.11).

On the other hand, women showed a stronger preference for receiving feedback from teachers in a private setting (Mean rank for women = 220.45 vs Mean rank for men = 189.55), (U = 17864.5, p = 0.006, r = 0.14). Women also believe that they benefit from feedback that focuses on the positive aspects of their work more (Mean rank = 217.84) when compared to men (Mean rank = 192.73), (U = 18456, p = 0.023, r = 0.11).

4.3. Kruskal-Wallis H tests analysis

As most informants reported receiving feedback from their teachers more often than from their peers (M = 3.34, SD = 0.94 and M = 2.96, SD = 1.06, respectively), we decided to investigate this source of feedback in more detail. Table 3 reveals the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H tests, which were conducted to assess differences in feedback perception based on the frequency of feedback received from teachers. The analysis reveals significant differences in the perception of different dimensions of feedback across different frequency groups.

Table 2. Results of Mann-Whitney U tests

Variable	Male (n = 186) Mean rank	Female (n = 226) Mean rank	U	Z	p value	r
POS	231.81	185.67	16309.5	3.919	**<.001**	0.19
1. I like receiving feedback in the form of numerical grades.	216.73	198.08	19116	1.633	0.102	0.08
2. It's important for me to get feedback in the form of descriptive comments.	196.02	215.12	19069	1.727	0.084	0.09
3. I am comfortable receiving feedback from my teachers in public.	255.18	166.44	11963.5	7.694	**<.001**	0.38
4. I like getting feedback from my teachers in a private setting.	189.55	220.45	17864.5	2.771	**0.006**	0.14
5. I am fine receiving feedback from my peers in a public setting.	243.06	176.41	14217.5	5.813	**<.001**	0.29
6. I like being given feedback from my peers in private.	199.53	212.24	19721	1.131	0.258	0.06
7. I benefit from feedback that focuses on the positive aspects of my work.	192.73	217.84	18456	2.273	**0.023**	0.11
8. It's useful to get feedback that highlights mistakes.	223.4	192.59	17875	2.844	**0.004**	0.14
9. I need to respond to the feedback provided by my peers.	221.31	194.31	18263.5	2.377	**0.017**	0.12
10. I consider feedback from my peers to be as valuable as feedback from my teachers.	219.26	196	18645	2.038	**0.042**	0.10
11. Feedback from my peers has helped me improve my academic work.	226.25	190.24	17344	3.16	**0.002**	0.16

Table 3. Results of Kruskal-Wallis H tests

Variable	H	df	p value
1. I like receiving feedback in the form of numerical grades.	9.88	4	0.043
2. It's important for me to get feedback in the form of descriptive comments.	17.17	4	0.002
3. I am comfortable receiving feedback from my teachers in public.	13.21	4	0.01
4. I like getting feedback from my teachers in a private setting.	4.40	4	0.355
5. I am fine receiving feedback from my peers in a public setting.	4.26	4	0.372
6. I like being given feedback from my peers in private.	12.60	4	0.013
7. I benefit from feedback that focuses on the positive aspects of my work.	19.66	4	<.001
8. It's useful to get feedback that highlights mistakes.	23.39	4	<.001
9. I need to respond to the feedback provided by my peers.	6.52	4	0.164
10. I consider feedback from my peers to be as valuable as feedback from my teachers.	3.60	4	0.463
11. Feedback from my peers has helped me improve my academic work.	6.07	4	0.194

A post hoc analysis using the Mann-Whitney U tests was conducted to identify specific differences between pairs of groups following the significant results from the Kruskal-Wallis test. The Bonferroni correction was applied, setting the significance level at $p = 0.005$. The analysis provided a number of interesting findings. First, students who reported receiving feedback from their teachers very often enjoy receiving feedback in the form of numerical grades more than those who receive feedback rarely ($U = 1045$, $p = 0.003$, $r = 0.28$). Second, informants who receive feedback very often perceive receiving feedback in the form of descriptive comments as more important compared to students who receive feedback rarely ($U = 1101.5$, $p = 0.005$, $r = 0.26$), sometimes ($U = 2089$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.28$), and often ($U = 2270$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.24$). Next, respondents who receive feedback from their teachers sometimes feel less comfortable receiving feedback from teachers in public than students who receive feedback very often ($U = 2259$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.23$). Furthermore, students who receive feedback from their teachers very often like being given feedback from their peers in private, in contrast to students who receive feedback rarely ($U = 993$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.31$), sometimes ($U = 2316.5$, $p = 0.002$, $r = 0.22$), and often ($U = 2377$, $p = 0.004$, $r = 0.21$).

With regard to feedback that focuses on positive aspects, it was found that learners who receive feedback from their teachers sometimes

believe that they benefit from this kind of feedback less, compared to students who receive feedback often (U = 9221, p < 0.001, r = 0.19) and very often (U = 2108.5, p < 0.001, r = 0.27). In a similar manner, when it comes to feedback that highlights mistakes, students who reported receiving feedback from their teachers very often perceive this kind of feedback as more useful than students who receive feedback rarely (U = 1078, p = 0.003, r = 0.28), or sometimes (U = 2037.5, p < 0.001, r = 0.29). Additionally, students who receive feedback often perceive such feedback as more useful, in contrast to students who receive it sometimes (U = 9518.5, p < 0.003, r = 0.17).

5. Discussion

The present study investigated the relationship between a learner's positive orientation (POS) and their perception of feedback. It also examined gender differences in the perception of feedback as well as the relationship between the frequency of receiving feedback and the perception of its different dimensions.

   The results showed that POS significantly predicted a feeling of comfort while receiving feedback in public, be it from teachers or peers. This may be explained by the fact that individuals with a positive mindset are more likely to approach feedback in terms of an opportunity for growth than to take it as personal criticism, suggesting that the content of the feedback may be more important than the setting. Such an explanation appears to be in keeping with the findings of Dewaele et al. (2008) and Shao et al. (2013) that foreign language learners who score high in Trait Emotional Intelligence, the facets of which are optimism, happiness, and emotional control, report lower levels of foreign language anxiety. Furthermore, POS was positively correlated with enjoying both feedback that focuses on the positive and that which highlights mistakes, as well as finding peer feedback valuable and useful in one's academic work. A likely explanation here is the fact that POS represents one's general inclination to respond to life experiences with a positive attitude and to rebound from frustrations more quickly (Caprara, Alessandri, Barbaranelli, 2010). In addition, foreign language students with a higher degree of POS view setbacks in learning as less threatening (Yin, Dewaele, 2018).

   Regarding gender differences and the perception of feedback, the most important findings are that men are significantly more comfortable receiving feedback in public settings than women, regardless of whether it comes from their teachers or peers. In contrast, women prefer being given feedback from their teachers in private; however, the same preference

was not noted in relation to peer feedback. It was also found that men perceive feedback highlighting mistakes as more useful than women; men also have a stronger need to respond to peer feedback. One possible justification for the dissimilarities between men and women is the fact that the former exhibited significantly higher POS measures than the latter, as already noted. This, in turn, may explain a less optimistic approach to situations that are connected with stress or anxiety, which is the case with having one's performance discussed in public, not to mention having one's mistakes pointed out in a classroom setting. Some previous studies have also confirmed that women suffer from more anxiety, worry significantly more about their mistakes and are less confident in using foreign language than men (Dewaele et al., 2016; Dewaele et al., 2017). However, some studies have found the opposite pattern (Donovan, MacIntyre, 2004; Arnaiz, Guillén, 2012), and some have found no pattern for gender at all (Dewaele, Petrides, Furnham, 2008; Dewaele, 2013). Consequently, it seems that in order to obtain more conclusive results, gender studies in language research should receive more attention, as observed by Henry and Cliffordson (2013).

Finally, when it comes to the relationship between the frequency of feedback and the perception of its various dimensions, it was found that students who receive feedback very often tend to enjoy both numerical grades and descriptive comments more than those who receive feedback less frequently. Such a situation may be caused by the fact that students learn to treat both types of feedback as a routine element of their learning, rather than an exception to the regular functioning of the classroom. The same pattern seems to be true for feeling comfortable while receiving feedback from teachers in public, as more frequent exposure may make an individual accustomed to having their performance discussed or evaluated. With regard to feedback focusing on the positive elements and that which highlights mistakes, it was found that both types are more readily welcomed by students who receive feedback often, which may indicate that it is not the content that learners find either intrinsically desirable or harmful, but the frequency which can contribute to feedback being a classroom routine, or an unexpected disruption.

Needless to say, this study has at least two limitations. First, even though the participants were selected from a number of tertiary education institutions, they mostly came from one cultural background. Second, they were relatively homogenous in terms of their age and linguistic competence. For these reasons, it is recommended that future studies are carried out order to indicate whether the same tendencies are observable across other educational levels, other cultural contexts, age groups and levels of linguistic proficiency.

6. Conclusion

While the findings may not be generalized across all foreign language learning contexts, they may still have important implications for structuring feedback strategies in universities in mid-central Europe. First, the study reveals a relationship between the frequency of feedback and learners' feeling of comfort regarding the source and the setting. A possible pedagogical implication is that while educators may want to devote time and effort to devising their feedback strategies, it might be more efficient for them to pay attention to the regularity of feedback, ensuring that it becomes a standard classroom practice, rather than an irregular occurrence. By doing so, they may contribute to making the classroom a stable and consistent learning environment. Next, in view of the research results regarding gender differences, teachers may need to reconsider adjusting their feedback strategies, depending on the setting, (public or private), and focus, (stressing the positive elements, or highlighting mistakes). Last but by no means least, as the study indicates the importance of positive orientation in the perception of feedback, it may be beneficial for teachers to employ strategies aimed at improving their students' positivity levels, which will be conducive not only to language learning, but also to their overall emotional development.

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