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ABSTRACT

When beginning composition students are initiated into the discourse community of the academy, they often attempt to mimic academic discourse via a particular style of writing marked by fragmentation, incoherence, odd or inappropriate diction, the juxtaposition of colloquialisms with sophisticated academic structures, and an unintentionally humorous misuse of academic phrases and forms. Valerie M. Balester has described this style as "hyperfluency," and rather than dismissing it as a curious oddity, she suggests that it may be one of many possible "bridges" to acquisition and fluency in written academic discourse. The sociolinguistic concept of speech registers can be used to trace the roots of hyperfluency. One possible source for hyperfluency is the speech patterns of instructors themselves--especially when they speak in a particularly academic way in instructional situations. A comparison between excerpts from professors' speech patterns in classrooms and examples of hyperfluency from student papers strongly suggests a correlation. It should be noted that the presence of hyperfluency is not necessarily a bad thing, although the first pedagogical impulse is to eradicate it. Indeed, rather than trying to exterminate it, instructors should go in precisely the opposite direction: hyperfluency should be encouraged at some stages of the writing process because it may be a precursor to more sophisticated use of academic language. Several pedagogical approaches show how students can become aware of hyperfluency and work with it to bring it into closer alignment with academic discourse. (TB)

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Academic Register, Hyperfluency, and the Acquisition of Academic Discourse

(Abstract)

When we initiate beginning composition students into the discourse communities of the academy, we often see students attempting to mimic academic discourse via a particular style of writing marked by fragmentation, incoherence, odd or inappropriate diction, the juxtaposition of colloquialisms with sophisticated academic structures, and an unintentionally humorous misuse of academic phrases and forms. This style has been described as hyperfluency (Balester 1991), and, far from being a curious oddity, it is hypothesized as one of the many possible "bridges" to acquisition and fluency in written academic discourse(s).

In my presentation, I apply the sociolinguistic concept of speech registers (Reid 1956) to trace the roots of hyperfluency to their source in an elevated speech register used by some composition instructors. I draw on Ferguson's (1982) method of register location and analysis to demonstrate the points of similarity between students' hyperfluent written texts and the lexical, semantic, and syntactic constructions which give rise to them in instructors' use of academic register as a particularized speech style.

Spoken academic register is thus shown to be one of the target discourses students may emulate as they attempt to enter the academic discourse community. As such, it must be viewed as a powerful force in shaping students' perception of how academic discourse is constructed and used in the academy.

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ACADEMIC REGISTER, HYPERFLUENCY, AND THE ACQUISITION OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

When we initiate beginning students into the discourse communities of the academy, we often see students attempting to mimic academic discourse via a particular style of writing marked by fragmentation, incoherence, odd or inappropriate diction, the juxtaposition of colloquialisms with sophisticated academic structures, and an unintentionally humorous misuse of academic phrases and forms. This style has been described as hyperfluency (Balester 1991), and, far from being a curious oddity, it is hypothesized as one of the many possible "bridges" to acquisition and fluency in written academic discourse(s).

In this paper, I apply the sociolinguistic concept of speech registers (Ferguson 1985; Halliday and Hasan 1983) to trace the roots of hyperfluency to their hypothetical source in an elevated speech register used by some composition instructors. I draw on Ferguson's method of register location and analysis (1982) to demonstrate the points of similarity between students' hyperfluent written texts and the lexical, semantic, and syntactic constructions which could give rise to them in instructors' use of academic register as a particularized speech style.

Spoken academic register is thus hypothesized as one of the target discourses students may attempt to emulate as they enter the academic discourse community. As such, it must be viewed as a powerful force in shaping students' perception of how academic discourse is constructed and used in the academy.

The concept of hyperfluency in written texts is based on a parallel concept in speech styles identified by Labov (1972) as "hypercorrection," a speaker's overadjustment to perceived correctness or to perceived prestigious language use. For example, a speaker who wishes to

make a favorable impression (on an audience she perceives to be knowledgeable--say, an English teacher) may choose the construction "between you and I" rather than "between you and me" because she is hyperconscious of the need for a "correct" grammatical construction, and she may think that "me" is not correct, so she *over*corrects to a more prestigious form. Another example, heard frequently on radio and television programs, is the construction in which a speaker invites the audience to contact, for example, either "Jim Baker or myself" for more information. In the second case, "myself" is viewed as more prestigious or more "correct" than the actual "correct" construction. In both examples, the speaker perceives the need for a grammatically-correct combination but ends up making an "error" in the attempt to be formally appropriate.

In a parallel way, Balester points out that hyperfluent written text is characterized by many of the linguistic variables associated with elevated language register, such as the use of lengthy, left-branching sentences; elaborate diction; polysyllabic clusters; evaluative language; hypotactic organization; jargon and formulaic academic-sounding phrases; and rhetorical questions (82). In addition, however, hyperfluency is characterized by the "infelicitous mixture of informal language with formal language" (83) and by the sense that the writer has aimed at a lofty target discourse but has somehow *missed*, rather than hit, that target. In other words, as Balester says, "[P]roducers of hyperfluency . . . do not fully understand the conventions of the community they wish to join and thus their attempts to mimic its discourse fail" (83).

Hyperfluency and hypercorrection operate in a similar rhetorical context in that either might be produced in situations in which the writer/speaker perceives a negative linguistic differential in status, role, or knowledge between herself and an intended audience. In this light, the composition classroom represents an especially fertile rhetorical field for the production of hyperfluency because an English instructor in particular is viewed, by virtue of her role as instructor, as a knowledgeable person, one who is assumed to know what is and what is not grammatically correct. The instructor is additionally responsible for assigning grades and for the evaluation of written text, which furthers her aura of academic knowledge. Beyond the expectation of knowing "correct" grammatical forms, however, the composition instructor is also viewed as a person who, as a practicing member of the academy, represents the forms of language use appropriate to that membership. In other words, instructors are often seen as

representative models of "correct" or acceptable linguistic behavior by virtue of their *roles* as teachers, as members of the academy.

Classroom instructors are thus logical models for the kinds of linguistic patterns which appear in hyperfluent texts--especially when they speak in a particularly academic way in instructional situations. This is not to say that there are no other possible sources for hyperfluent forms and phrases; some written texts also provide the basis for some aspects of hyperfluent stylistic constructions. But the form of academic discourse most frequently encountered by students comes to them in the form of *spoken* text during classroom instruction, lecture, and "discussion." Students are bombarded by a steady stream of classroom language characterized by many of the same forms which appear--in bits and pieces--in some students' hyperfluent written texts.

A recent study of instructors' speech behaviors at the university level (Neal 1994) suggests that some composition and literature instructors employ an elevated speech variety as a common mode of instruction and interaction in the classroom. This elevated style might be described as a discrete *register* of speech, given the definition, by Halliday and Hasan, of register as a "variety of language, corresponding to a variety of situation" (38-39); sociolinguist Charles Ferguson defines register as "[language] variation conditioned by use, as opposed to dialect variation conditioned by the (geographical or social) place of the user" (Ferguson 391). Classroom instruction at the university level constitutes a specific rhetorical situation of use and is thus the context for a set of linguistic behaviors which differs from ordinary conversational speech patterns. Characteristics of academic register include distinctive features at all levels of language, including morphological, lexical, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic variables.

I would like to give several examples of the linguistic features of academic register and then to give several examples of students' hyperfluent written texts in an effort to demonstrate that one of the primary sources for hyperfluent written material may be the spoken language of instructors who employ academic register as a mode of instruction. If academic register can be demonstrated to be one of the sources for the target discourse students attempt to emulate in hyperfluent text, the implications for composition pedagogy become apparent.

A summary of the distinctive features of academic register at all levels of language (except the phonological level) would include **affixation**, **nominalization**, and **the use of polysyllabic words and word clusters** (morphology); **unglossed borrowing of foreign words and phrases, formal diction, the use of the communal "we,"** and **impersonal pronoun reference** (lexicon); **formulaic slot-filler phrases, adverbial intensification and qualification, jargon specific to subject,** and **hypotactic words and phrases** (semantics); and **parenthetical intrusions, long "sentences," parallel structure, left-branching structures, multiple negation, clausal density,** and **sequential prepositional phrases** (syntax).

At the pragmatic level, academic register features reflect asymmetrical role and status relationships among participants and include **instructor control over topics of discussion, turns for speaking,** and **volume of speech** (referring here to length of turn rather than to decibel level); also, the instructor may **violate common proscriptions against the use of overt slang and swearing** and may also employ specific types of **questions, evaluative and prescriptive language,** and **allusion**. In contrast, student speakers in classroom situations do not use the same kinds of questions and do not participate equally in these particular speech behaviors.

Generally speaking, two other ideas should be noted: first, in contrast to conversational discourse, academic register is characterized by the co-occurrence of multiple features at several different levels of language, rather than by the isolated use of jargon, polysyllabic words, or even a lengthy sentence containing clausal density and prepositional strings. Second, academic register is not necessarily marked by complexity or opacity; complexity may be a by-product of some of the constructions involved in academic speech, but is not a primary marker of it. Rather, academic register is characterized by a high degree of authority, which is conveyed by the use of evaluative commentary, the use of rhetorical questions to further the speaker's agenda, prescriptive language, and length of turn, among other possible variables. An example of an classroom excerpt which contains multiple features would be the following, from a literature course:

> Essentially what Fowles seems to be telling us in the course of Nicholas's development, his process of individuation which this novel maps out, is that one must come to an acceptance that what is real in human terms can be nothing more than one's own subjectively-based conception.

And that this subjectivity, this relativity, in terms of what is real and what is not, is what one must accept if one wants to become a magus.

Features of academic register which co-occur in this excerpt include impersonal reference ("one"); negation ("what is real . . . can be nothing more than . . ."); a single polysyllabic cluster which is not semantically difficult ("subjectively-based conception"); and left-branching sentence-initial material (in the first sentence, 23 words come before the copula "is"). Another example, this one from a course in modern rhetoric:

There you go, once again, the double insinuation about metaphor. Does it just rule over us, does it just dominate? Or is it a means for cognition and feeling? And also a way, if you will, a device for coming to know? I think--let's keep in mind all of those multiple connotations because indeed--especially within modern rhetorical theory, the propensity has been toward one of hermeneutic demystification, or suspicion, or a calling things into question. In Burke's case the gods, you know--in Marx's case, the phantoms of the superstructure, or in Neitzche's case the very notion of truth. Because they're rhetorical, that's also a disposition in itself. There are other instances where rhetoric is the viable counterpart of dialectic and therefore has a very positive valence . . .

This extract combines parallelism ("in Burke's case . . . in Marx's case . . . in Neitzche's case"); a polysyllabic cluster ("hermeneutic demystification"); a semantic slot-filler ("if you will"); parenthetical intrusion ("I think--let's keep in mind all of those multiple connotations because indeed"); rhetorical questions ("Does it just rule over us, does it just dominate? Or is it a means for cognition and feeling?"); formal, but not technical terms ("notion"); words used in uncommon ways ("valence"); and intensification ("very" and "indeed").

The extracts above show only small bits and pieces of some of the co-occurring features of academic register; to gain a more accurate picture of the register, an excerpt of some length is required. In the following, the speaker demonstrates how the register sounds in a much longer, but more realistic, segment--more realistic and more representative of the register because this is how the register is presented to students: in long, unbroken utterances which have many co-occurring features operating on various linguistic levels. This excerpt is from a sophomore-level course in argumentation and contains paragraph breaks for reading ease:

You know, there are a lot of versions of dialectic because it's obviously a pattern of *reasoning* . The other thing is--and again you know what I'll mention doesn't pertain to any particular existing order today--but Marx came along and some people like to say he turned Hegel upside down. Actually he said basically something like this: that what you need now, all this stuff that you're locating in the mind--you know one viewpoint as opposed to other

viewpoints--is not in fact in the mind because consciousness is itself a product of the social circumstances, that is, where it's produced--rather, contradictions are the products of similar forces at work, or of conflicting ideologies, conflicting belief systems, or conflicting ways of understanding the world.

In other words, I come to be--I wasn't born a pro-choicer, you know, or a pro-life person. Not at all. I wasn't born any of these things. But I mean I come within a community of interests, whether it's pro-choice or pro-life. To, uhm, have a position or perhaps get placed on one side of the fence or the other and then even begin to define myself in relation to the opposition, the what-is defining itself in relation to the what- is-not. Now what Marx did was to install, rather than an idealist way of thinking--well, you know these are conflicting viewpoints in the mind, OK-- he said, wait. The opposition between ideologies has to do not with mental forces or thesis and antithesis going all on in the mind, so to speak, but it has to do with social forces and the way that history is working itself out--and you see, this is where dialectic gets hooked up with dialectical materialism, because it's a materialist's understanding of the changes in history which then come to be seen as partaking of dialectical patterns.

That is, people begin to say something like this: that it is contradictions among forces and patterns in society that make for the course of history, not ideas in the mind-- and so I didn't end up directly answering your question, but I am saying this in response to Mary's question. Still--I'll get to you in just a minute, Carl--that one of the interesting things--and then what's one of the controversial things about dialectic is that it went from an idealist philosophical way of seeing things to being incorporated with an understanding of a certain *Marxian* approach to history, OK, and for some people--although not in Europe, I mean, in Europe it's sort of like, you know what Baptists are to--you know, uh, *Navasota Marxists* are to--among high school students here. I mean they're just sort of walking around a part of the population. But the point is in part that some people would perceive dialectical ways of understanding and explaining things as at times hooked up with Marxism, although again it's not a Marxism like any particular state, you know, you find today, or in any particular country.

It's Marxism as an approach to the understanding of historical and cultural phenomena because--I mean you see, there are the other grounds where you know if you read Marx. . . you're not getting that, you're getting someone who's interested in analyzing phenomenon like *religion* and its relationship to social movements, the economy and its relationship to labor patterns--you're getting someone who's really caught up in the midst of all the issues that could call the social sciences and the humanities together, and so there's a kind of Marxian science of culture which gets associated with the dialectical in one of its phases--in only one of its phases--but it's nonetheless one that's very sympathetic to the one that is defined for you by Raymond Williams. Did I give you the handout with dialectic? "A Short Essay on Dialectic" comes from Williams' book Key Words and of course Raymond Williams, as I mentioned to you, is a historical materialist, in effect, by world view, and that means to say something like this: he attempts to understand history in terms of the conflicts between different social forces and institutions--and of course that is what, in part, Marx attempts to do in the Communist Manifesto. How many of you have read the Communist Manifesto at some point ? OK, a four-week snore.

The superficial register markers in this passage include lengthy "sentences"; jargon specific to the subject ("dialectical materialism," "consciousness is . . .a product of the social circumstances," "conflicting ideologies, " "historical materialist"); left-branching sentence-initial material; clausal and propositional density; morphological affixation ("Marxian," "pro-choicer," "materialist," "materialism"); semantic slot-filler phrases ("so to speak"); and parenthetical intrusions of varying length ("one of the interesting things--and then what's one of the controversial things about dialectic," "and for some people--although not in Europe, I mean," "Raymond Williams, as I mentioned to you, is a historical materialist, in effect, by world view").

An additional notable point about the above extract is the speaker's control over the length of turn. At one point it is clear that a student has made some effort to interrupt the monologue ("Still--I'll get to you in a minute, Carl"), but the speaker is successful in maintaining the turn by acknowledging the interruption. He then continues the utterance for an additional 350 words, which would not be considered exceptionally lengthy--except that when the student *does* get a chance to ask his question later in the transcript, the student contribution totals 44 words, at which point the speaker picks up the thread of the discourse for an additional 1, 185 words. This differential in instructor/student volume and the speaker's control over turns also contribute to the construction of a sense of authority and would be considered characteristic of academic register at the pragmatic level.

Two features in this excerpt which may be the most important markers of the sense of authority found in academic register are the use of evaluative language and allusion. Evaluative language suggests expertise because it makes an informed judgment ("*obviously* it's a pattern of reasoning," "*of course* that is what, in part, Marx attempts to do") which does not invite disagreement or alternative interpretation. Allusion to texts (Communist Manifesto, Key Words) or to peripheral theoretical frameworks (Hegel, a "Marxian approach to history") also generates authority because listeners may not be able to draw on similar resources; thus, a differential in knowledge and expertise is established.

Given these samples of academic register, consider some extracts from students' written texts which illustrate hyperfluency. The first is from a sophomore-level research paper entitled "Ideas of the Self":

> Within the past century, affairs of the world have reached such a grandiose stage of political interaction that people have finally broken free of traditional ideas and accepted fully the idea of humans as units of a Society. The idea of persons as non-sovereign units within a sentient society has begun to dilute religious doctrine and pave the way for a society-oriented mass of people. The idea of a non-self was accepted. The idea of a non-self can be held in a Darwinistic or social context. . . .

The writer of this excerpt uses morphological affixation ("Darwinistic"); evaluative language ("affairs of the world have reached such a grandiose stage. . ."); polysyllabic clusters ("non-sovereign units within a sentient society"); and diction which, though perhaps only a little more

formal than conversational, is co fusing because it is without context or antecedent ("The idea of persons as non-sovereign units within a sentient society has begun to dilute religious doctrine and pave the way for a society-oriented mass of people").

Another excerpt from the same text:

These definitions in no way imply that an individual person's views correctly match any of them; the current transformation of theological mass culture to a societal view has birthed many fusions of the above views as to ease a society's naturally (by definition) conservative attitudes toward change. The above positions merely represent the any person's basic views as they would be seen without the inherent contradictions removed.

In this extract, the writer employs evaluative language ("merely"); jargon and academic-sounding diction ("inherent contradictions," "fusion," "current transformation of theological mass culture to a societal view"); odd syntactical constructions ("as to ease"); parenthetical intrusion ("by definition"); negation ("These definitions in no way imply"); and a mixed metaphorical image ("birthed many fusions"). In both excerpts, the writer makes use of academic forms and phrases and may be mimicking academic discourse, but the text is nearly incomprehensible.

Consider several excerpts from a freshman's literary analysis of *Oedipus the King*:

Tiresias asks Oedipus if he really knows who his parents are. The pieces start to fall in place. He refuses to be a leak in the puzzle, so he refers him to a shepherd. . . . Further in time, Jocasta discovers her husband is murdered. Through thought and contemplation, she realizes that the new king is her son. The fate is now aligning into perspective. . . . Through the whole play Jocasta is self interested in only becoming rich. She exposes an immoral side to mankind by revealing a materialistic value, versus loyalty to love. Although she is naive in the beginning, she soon becomes corrupt, and contains full knowledge of her son. This leads her to a destructive end.

In this sample, the writer attempts the use of sophisticated academic diction ("corrupt," "contemplation," "fate . . .aligning into perspective," "materialistic," "contains full knowledge of her son"), but the effect is confusing because the terms are used in combination with other words which do not make sense in the context in which they are used. When she says, "He refuses to be a leak in the puzzle," she is mimicking academic discourse in the use of analogy as a rhetorical device for illustration, but misses the target in the use of the word "leak." She also tries on a sense of authority in the assertion that "Through the whole play Jocasta is self interested in only becoming rich" and she also makes an effort to be authoritative when she claims that Jocasta "exposes an immoral side to mankind by revealing a materialistic value." The

attempts at creating authority fall short because evidence to support these claims is lacking.

A final example comes from a sophomore-level paper in which the assignment is to write a comparative critical analysis of two scholarly articles:

> Jo Ann McNamara begins her article with the background of Perpetua. By showing the background as a story, I think the author grabs the attention of her reader. In the second paragraph, McNamara announces that she has gotten most of her information from the African church. I think that this is nice to know. However, I feel that it is not necessary and it actually chops up her flow. . . . Another big problem is when McNamara begins talking about the man named Tertullian whom she does not introduce. This lost me totally. She uses Tertullian as an authority on the celibate women even though the reader does not know who he is. This actually shows that McNamara has no real authority on the subject. . . . One other problem is, McNamara inadvertently answers her thesis. This is the biggest clue that her paper is weak.

Note in this excerpt the misuse of an academic-sounding word ("inadvertently") and the combination of colloquial forms ("grabs the attention of the reader," "lost me totally," "chops up her flow") with attempts at elevated structures ("McNamara announces," "This . . . shows that McNamara has no real authority on the subject," "By showing the background as a story," "whom she does not introduce").

While it can be seen that there are some points of similarity between features of academic register and students' hyperfluent written texts, several disclaimers are also in order: first, the student texts can not be traced directly to instructors who provide the samples of academic register; a far more persuasive case might be made were research to be done in classrooms where the spoken text could be compared directly to student text produced within the rhetorical framework of that particular classroom. However, even though the two text sets are not directly correlated, points of similarity are still visible. In addition, students' sources for academic language are not limited to single courses in literature or composition, and so it may be possible that language heard in one course may be applied to texts written for another course. Academic register should appear in other disciplines as well, given the rich variety of rhetorical and instructional contexts in higher education classroom settings. It's also fair to note that classroom instructors' speech is not the only possible source for hyperfluent constructions; in several student texts I studied, I observed excerpts which appear to have been plagiarized from common written sources (Cliff Notes summaries in particular). In these cases, the text demonstrates many of the features of hyperfluency: fragmentation, the combination of colloquialisms with formal

academic forms and phrases, and the use of evaluative language with little context to warrant the judgment given.

In spite of these limitations, it can be seen that academic register is, if not an unequivocal source, at least a strong possibility for the target language used--in fragments--in hyperfluent text. If so, several issues related to pedagogy can be raised. But it should also be noted that the presence of hyperfluency is not necessarily a bad thing, although the first pedagogical impulse is to try to eradicate it. I would argue that, rather than trying to exterminate it, we should go in precisely the opposite direction: hyperfluency should be *encouraged* at some stages of the writing process because it may be a precursor to more sophisticated use of academic language. Balester claims that hyperfluency represents a "bridge," not a barrier, to fluent academic discourse and as such, it should be seen as a sign of the student's awareness of the differential between colloquial, informal, or anecdotal writing and more formal academic structures. The use of hyperfluency indicates that a student is aware of the forms and phrases which are markers of academic discourse, even though she may not be successful in the attempt at using these structures fluently. The student who "tries on the discourse," as David Bartholomae has put it, should therefore be encouraged to continue to try it on, rather than to eliminate it.

This is not to say that clarity is unimportant, or that we should reward incoherent texts. But it is to say that we should avoid the first impulse when we encounter hyperfluency, which is to "fix" it by asking for revision which simplifies linguistic structure. If we do that, we avoid the issue of how to teach the conventions of academic discourse, and we also avoid the opportunity for students to develop, with practice, a genuine sense of personal authority.

I suggest two possible pedagogical approaches for dealing with hyperfluency; one has to do with writing, and the other deals with instructor speech in the classroom. As a writing assignment, a radical approach to hyperfluency might be to show students samples of hyperfluent text, discuss the structural inconsistencies and stylistic collisions which characterize it, and then to ask, not that they avoid it, but that they actively *practice* it: ask that they write, for example, two pages of hyperfluent text--the more academic-sounding, inconsistent, and convoluted, the better. But don't stop there. After this is written, students should also be asked to reflect and comment on *how* they produced this text and what the differences are between hyperfluent text,

simplified versions of it, and fluent academic discourse. The aim in this exercise is to deal with hyperfluency by approaching it directly rather than avoiding it entirely. By consciously imitating its forms and structures, students become much more aware of forms that sound contradictory, confusing, or humorous to a reader because, in active reflection, they themselves become detached readers of their own writing. This is especially important in the case of hyperfluency because many students who produce hyperfluent texts are unaware that their writing could be construed as unclear or confusing.

It should also be clear that if we want students to generate a senseof academic authority, we need to examine the ways in which *instructors* generate authority; then we need to invite students to participate in those classroom practices. I'm not suggesting here that instructors adopt formulaic academic structures and then share those spoken formulas with students. What I am suggesting is a radical shift in the speech behaviors of the classroom: we need to share, not only in the talk of the classroom, but in the turn-taking, the volume of speech produced, and the possibilities for developing academic authority--by asking open-ended questions rather than knowledge-checking questions, for example. We also need to allow students time to ramble (as *we* often do) without interference. It might also be productive to distinguish between lecture and discussion, so that we do not confuse students by lecture disguised as "discussion," which is often promoted as an egalitarian exercise--but which rarely lives up to its name.

It should be noted that what is missing in students' hyperfluent texts is not complexity, but a justifiable, practiced sense of authority. Given that, if we want students to stretch beyond hyperfluency to genuine fluency, we need to watch our own language in the classroom, not in the sense that we need to avoid complex academic forms and structures, but so that we allow students a real chance to do what we do, to practice what we preach.

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