Does Medium of Instruction Really Matter? The Language Question in Africa: The Tanzanian Experience

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Abstract

The debate about languages of instruction is not new in Africa. However, as we move towards the 21st century it assumes an even greater importance. Over twenty-five years after the first African country regained its political independence, virtually all African countries continue to educate its youth through the languages of the former colonisers. This is particularly noticeable with countries that have regained their independence within the last fifteen years. Since all of these newly independent countries use foreign languages as instructional languages, it would appear that a lesson they have learnt from the older independent countries is that the language of instruction does not really matter.

Focusing on the Tanzanian experience, this paper seeks to critique the notion that the language through which students learn is not a key issue. It traces some of the efforts of Tanzanian educators to change the medium of instruction for secondary schools from English to Kiswahili. Difficulties students encounter in the continued use of a foreign language are also considered in the effort to elucidate contradictions between privileging political over pedagogical concerns. The Tanzanian experience provides a lens for viewing the educational language issues in other African countries.

Introduction

Language choice in multilingual countries has been one of the most vexing issues of this century and promises to continue as such into the 21st century. Intense contest has characterised the issue of language choice in many parts of the world: e.g., Catalan vs. Spanish in Catalonia; Spanish vs. Quechua in

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Peru; French vs. English in Quebec, Canada; and English or French vs. indigenous languages in Africa and Asia. Even though the issue of language and education is one of the most pedagogically difficult and potentially explosive political issues faced by schools in many countries, yet it appears to be one of the least appreciated of all educational issues debated in international fora (Coombs, 1985).

It is indeed a pedagogically difficult issue for many countries, particularly those with a colonial legacy. Although the colonial period was short in the history of Africa, it was decisive in shaping the intellectual culture of the continent. The ideological hegemony of the colonial language has tended to blur the boundaries between education and knowledge. In many post-colonial territories, high status knowledge is associated with the colonial language—be it English, French or Portuguese—such that if one does not speak one of these languages that person is not considered educated.

Most colonial territories, particularly in Africa and Asia, had the language of their colonial rulers imposed upon them in areas of administration and formal education. Schools were seen as the avenue for securing what was conceived as a lucrative future—employment in the colonial service and the ensuing benefits. The language of the colonial rulers, the medium through which this education was rendered, was thus recognised by the colonised as an important vehicle for individual advancement in the society. This fusing of the colonial language, schooling and employment opportunities has contributed to the association of the colonial language with formal education.

The dilemma of which indigenous language should be designated as the national language, encountered by most multilingual countries after regaining their political independence, prompted many of these countries to opt for what they considered a neutral solution: retaining the colonial language as the official language and the language of education. This was particularly the case for many African countries where language tended to be linked with ethnicity, and the choice of one language would have been seen to politically advantage one group over the others.

There are, however, two categories of countries for which the choice of a common indigenous language is not a problem. The first comprises of countries which have one major language. In Africa these include: Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, Lesotho and Botswana. In Somalia, Somali is the native language of 97% of the population; in Burundi, Rundi is the native language for 99% of the population; in Rwanda, Rwanda is spoken by 98% of the population; in Lesotho, Sotho is the native language of 95% of the

population, and in Botswana, Setswana is spoken by 90% of the population. In Lesotho and Botswana, Sesotho and Setswana are used as national languages by 98% and 99% of the population respectively (Bamgbose, 1991).

Multilingual countries which have succeeded in institutionalising one indigenous language as a *lingua franca* and the national language, constitutes the second category. Tanzania is a prime example of such a country. Although Kiswahili is the native language of only 5% of the population, it is spoken by at least 90% of the population. Despite the existence of a common indigenous language, all of the countries noted above, except Somalia, continue to use a foreign language as the major language of education, especially for post-primary school education.

In the effort to explain this phenomenon, one might proffer that the language of instruction in schools is not really very important. It could be argued that most African countries which regained their political independence in the 1960s have educated sufficient numbers of nationals to fill their civil service and other bureaucracies, using the former colonial language. Within some of these countries there is even a surplus of university-trained nationals. This is clearly a message which countries which regained their political independence within the last fifteen years or so, and particularly in past five years, appear to have accepted.

This paper seeks to debunk the misconception that the language of instruction is not a substantial issue. It will first revisit the colonial legacy which has provided the barometer for educational language policies through naturalising the foreign language as the only viable medium of instruction. The Tanzanian experience will then be considered as a focal point for critiquing the notion that the language of instruction does not really matter.

The Colonial Legacy

The approach of colonial administrations towards language was guided by what they considered most expedient for their governance. Although in most cases the colonisers' language served as the language of power, some of the local languages were appropriated by the colonialists to assist them in their crusade to 'civilise' Africans. Converting Africans to Christianity was a key strategy in the subjugation of Africans without overt physical coercion. In this endeavour, missionaries translated the Bible into many of the local languages, as they appeared to be more viable media for reaching the soul of the Africans than foreign languages. Missionaries also developed grammars and

dictionaries, and established presses through which their deculturalisation efforts could be realised. Much of the literature they published discouraged African practices which they found objectionable, and promoted values they thought Africans should embrace.

Colonial education, the primary avenue for Africans to acquire the colonisers' language, was directed towards training a small elite to service the colonial bureaucracy, ensuring the subservience of the rest of the population to colonial rule. It is noteworthy that several policy documents and reports during the colonial era recommended the use of local languages in education (Great Britain, 1925; Jones, 1925; Binns Mission, 1952; Great Britain, 1955). Yet, while recommending the use of local languages, they opposed the use of Kiswahili as a *lingua franca* in East Africa.

The opposition to an African language as a *lingua franca,* and the encouragement of the use of local languages in education while retaining the colonial language as the language of power, appear to have been a clear policy of divide and rule. In most colonial territories, even in the French and Portuguese colonies where African languages were discouraged through assimilationist policies, very few Africans had access to the colonial language. Whether the colonial administrations encouraged or ignored the use of local languages in education, they relegated all the Africans languages to a low status. The European language—English, French, or Portuguese—was considered the language of civilisation. Education beyond a few initial years was offered in the foreign language, and often those students caught speaking the local language within the school compound were publicly ridiculed or punished.

The colonial attitude to language was internalised by the small elite which gained access to the colonial language and the rewards it offered, and those Africans who aspired for their children to have access to such opportunities. Such sentiments informed educational policies in the early 1960s when many African countries regained their political independence to retain the colonial language as the medium of education. In the quest towards modernisation, the form and function of inherited education systems, and much of the ideology that rationalised it, were accepted. The basic content and structure of the curriculum was generally not problematised, despite efforts of some countries to indigenise their curricula. Instruction through the mother tongue was allowed in many African countries at the primary school level, particularly in the first 2-3 years, after which time the former colonial language became the dominant language of education. It was generally taken for granted that after

initial education in the local language, the child was ready to begin education in the foreign language.

The vast numbers of indigenous languages of many of these countries militated against a consensus on which language should be used as the common language, and led to an exoglossic policy where the colonial language was used for official purposes, including education. In many cases the foreign language was viewed by the political leadership as a neutral language, and consequently the best alternative as the educational language. However, even those endoglossic countries with one common indigenous language opted to retain an exoglossic policy. Their primary arguments against using a local language beyond the first few years of primary schooling focused on the lexical and conceptual inadequacy of the African languages. This, however, was not an insurmountable problem. If the political will existed towards using local languages in schooling, the means of developing these languages to serve this capacity could have been found.

Somalia provides an apt illustration of an African country which surmounted technical difficulties to operationalise Somali as an educational language. Although in the final analysis the educational language policy in Somalia was effected through a decree from the military government, Somali did effectively become the medium of education, and textbooks and other materials were developed within a relatively short time (Latin 1977; Andrezejewski, 1991). The Tanzanian experience, which will be discussed later, also illuminates how language elaboration can be effected within a relatively short time.

Retaining a Foreign Language of Instruction

The inheritance of colonial languages has served to justify and naturalise the use of former colonial languages as media of instruction in most African countries. It is very closely linked with the educational inheritance. Efforts to educate students through a local language, beyond the initial years of schooling, has been met with resistance. A prime example of this is the resistance to education through the local languages in South Africa and Namibia. Education through the local languages was called Bantu Education in South Africa and Namibia. It was legislated by the apartheid government as the type of education which should be made available for Africans. The lack of effort to further develop these languages to enable them to cope with advanced knowledge meant that this education was inferior to that of the other

groups in South Africa. This was simply education for subjugation (Alexander, 1989; Haacke, 1987).

Besides the perverse cultural effects of using a foreign language as the medium of instruction, various other problems have been highlighted. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) has pointed out the role of colonial languages in the domination of the mental universe of the colonised. Paulo Freire (1985) has characterised the imposition of a foreign language as the medium of studying other subjects as a violation of the structure of thinking. Phillipson (1992) has characterised the continued use of an imposed language as the medium of education as linguistic imperialism, a form of cultural imperialism. Even within the United States, which is clearly portrayed as a monolingual country, English being the essential language, the problem of forcing students to receive knowledge in a language they do not understand well has been challenged. The landmark Lau v. Nichols supreme court decision of 1974 ruled that the rights of children not understanding the language of instruction were being violated. The notion of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1976) has been used to describe the process whereby subordinate classes come to accept as 'natural', ideas and practices which appear to be against their own best interests (Gibson, 1986). This conceptualisation could be applied to the use of a language which students lack adequate proficiency as the medium of instruction. Clarity of this contention will be provided through the Tanzanian experience.

Language and Education in Tanzania

Throughout Tanzania, a country on the East coast of Africa with a population of 25 million people, more than 120 languages are spoken. English, a foreign language, was introduced by the British during the colonial era as the important educational language. Although what was considered basic education was taught in the local language, Kiswahili, advanced primary and post-primary school education was through the medium of English. Positions of power and prestige in the colonial society were consequently related to knowledge of the English language.

When Tanzania regained its political independence in 1961, English remained as the important language of education, even though it assumed less importance in other spheres, particularly government, business and social interaction. Kiswahili, which had been an important *lingua franca* during the decolonisation struggle, was made the language of instruction for all primary

school education six years after independence. In the euphoria of the period now associated with the Arusha Declaration, the political leadership made bold claims towards developing Education for Self-Reliance (ESR). The educational language issue was addressed as an important aspect of ESR. Problems of a dual language policy (Kiswahili at the primary school level, and English at the secondary level) were duly indicated (URT, 1969).

Throughout the 1970s there was some posturing towards changing the medium of instruction from English to Kiswahili in secondary schools (Roy-Campbell, 1992). Mention was made of the problems students encounter when they move from Kiswahili medium primary school to English medium secondary school (URT, 1969). This point was reinforced by the Presidential Commission on Education Report of 1982 which recommended a timetable for changing the medium from English to Kiswahili in secondary schools, and ultimately at the university level. The 1980 Presidential Commission on Education was set up by the government to examine the problems within the Tanzanian educational system with a view to suggesting measures for improving it up to the year 2000 (Tume ya Rais, 1982).

The Commission's findings regarding the language of instruction were hardly surprising to anyone familiar with the contemporary history of Tanzania. Indeed, there is a plethora of literature addressing the problems of English as the medium of instruction in Tanzania, both prior to and subsequent to this Commission (Mvungi, 1974, 1982; Katigula, 1976; Mlekwa, 1977; Mlama and Matteru, 1977; Moshi, 1983; Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1987; Kibogoya, 1988; Roy-Campbell, 1990; Mongella, 1990).

One report in particular pointed out that the "... level of English in Forms I-IV is currently so low that English medium education is currently not possible" (Criper and Dodd 1984, p. 38). It admitted that "...were it not for the fact that much teaching is in practice carried out in Kiswahili...it is hard to see how any genuine education could take place at the lower secondary level" (p. 160). However, despite all of these studies, and the Presidential Commission's recommendation to switch to Kiswahili as the medium of instruction, English remains the medium of instruction for secondary schools in Tanzania. Even after commissioning the Criper and Dodd Report cited above, the British Government proceeded to fund a project for improving English in Tanzania to render it as a more viable medium of instruction. This funding was made under the condition that English remains the medium of instruction for secondary schools (Criper, 1986). However, after the first phase of the project, the monitoring report noted: "...the overall secondary

school ethos continues to favour Kiswahili and there are a few schools where the students feel confident or competent enough to speak to each other in English outside the classroom" (Simmonds *et al.*, 1991: 31-32).

Interviews with teachers and students conducted in Tanzania in December 1991 and January 1992, reinforced the anomaly of the continued use of English as the medium of instruction. In the next section, teachers', linguists', and students' portrayal of the educational language dilemma in Tanzanian secondary schools will be presented.

The Dilemma of the Medium of Instruction in Secondary Schools

Responses to open-ended questions in informal interviews as to which language should be used as the medium of instruction for secondary schools provided considerable insight into the current situation regarding instruction through the English language in Tanzania. It was generally accepted by all those interviewed that secondary school students have difficulties in understanding English, the medium of instruction. However, not all of them agreed that the most feasible response to this was to change the medium to Kiswahili.

One teacher characterised the current situation in secondary schools as one in which students are suffering because they do not understand what is going on. It was pointed out that the fact that English is not used within the country in the normal, everyday settings prevent English from being an effective medium of instruction. One contention was that students are divorced from reality with English as the medium of instruction.

The importance of continuity in the students' learning experience was voiced by several linguists and teachers. They cited students' familiarity with the use of Kiswahili in their school subjects since they used it throughout primary school, and noted that thereafter everything has to be reinterpreted instead of building upon what they have gained in Kiswahili. In their view, the use of English medium at the secondary school level leads to unnecessary duplication.

Regression by some students upon entering secondary school was noted as one consequence of this abrupt change of language of instruction. Several teachers contended that problems with the medium of instruction engender, within some students, the complex that they are not intelligent because they do not grasp what th teacher is presenting to them. One teacher recalled a letter he received from ondary school student declaring: "My intelligence is

not very good in English." Encapsulated in this statement is the situation created by the problem of instruction in a foreign medium (foreign here refers to a language which the students do not understand. It just happens to be English in this case, but the criticism would apply to any language which students do not understand). This plight was clearly articulated by one teacher who stated that so little knowledge is imparted through the medium of English because students cannot understand the language. The seriousness of this situation was highlighted in the view that a whole generation is being branded as 'unintelligent'.

Some informants insisted that if the purpose of learning is to understand what is being taught, then a language that students understand should be used as the teaching medium. One curriculum developer lamented over what she termed the injustice of forcing students to learn through a language they do not understand.

Teachers also commented on the limited participation of students in class. They noted that when students were asked why they do not speak in class, their response was that they know what the teacher wants them to say but they don't know how to answer in English. This was borne out by a secondary school student who related her own classroom experience: "In *Siasa* (Siasa is Political Education, the only subject other than Kiswahili which is taught in Kiswahili in Tanzanian secondary schools) there is a lot of discussion, and students challenge the teacher. But in other subjects there is not much discussion. Students can understand English but they cannot speak it." (Interview with student, December, 1991). This reality was corroborated by my experiences in observing secondary school classrooms and also substantiated by Brock-Utne (1992) in the recounting of her experiences in schools.

An example of students' inability to respond in English is provided by an experience I had in 1987 when engaged in a pilot study for a research project. When my colleague and I arrived at one secondary school to discuss our project with the head of the school and elicit the assistance of students and teachers in that school, the Head informed us that if we administered a questionnaire in English to students in that school many of the students would not understand the questions. Bearing in mind this concern, we decided to administer the questionnaire in both Kiswahili and English during the pilot study to determine which language we should use in our larger study. There was quite a difference in responses on the two versions of the questionnaire, a

confirmation that the Head's apprehension had not been unwarranted (Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1987).

Another example was provided by a former student of the Tanzanian educational system, Tamim Amijee, who recalled:

> ...there is the feeling of incompetence and loss of confidence as a result of a poor or hardly any grasp of English. I know classmates who stayed dumb in the classroom rather than embarrass themselves in a language they were not even sure they understood. ... All the student ends up doing is copying the notes from the textbooks, memorising them, and learning just enough English to be able to understand the exam paper, and hence to know which section of the textbooks is to be rewritten in the exams. In essence, these students—including myself at that stage—accepted without a thought what we were told and, as if playing a game, accepted the rule.

He proceeded to provide a voice to the students' cognitive processes when English is used as the medium of instruction:

> ...a student, although learning in English, is still thinking in Kiswahili. Every time he contributes in the classroom, he actually translates his thoughts into English first before speaking, unless he is merely required to mention a piece of information he memorised. And, worse still, the response from the teacher (or other students) will be translated back into Kiswahili in order for the student to actually understand the answer.

Another voice of the students' experience was provided by a student relating his oral history for another study:

> At school students use English in the classroom, outside they use Swahili or the language of their ethnic group. They don't use English outside the classroom because they have become accustomed to using Swahili. It is hard for them to use English. Also they are afraid that if they speak poorly everyone will laugh at them. So they just don't speak English because they don't want to be laughed at even in the classroom. Most of the teachers lecture in English but the discussions are carried on in Swahili. The students really get few chances to use English in the classroom. If the teacher asks a question, and the student wants to try to answer it in English, he may. The majority of students, however, try to answer all questions in Swahili (Tails 1987, p. 58).

The problem with the English medium was not only attributed to the students. Teachers' ability was also considered an important factor. Several linguists

and teacher educators contended that some teachers are inadequately prepared to teach in English. Overall the teacher's mastery of English is low. This prevents teachers from articulating the subject matter clearly. Characterising what goes on in the classroom, one teacher educator noted that even when the teacher has a command of English, still a lot of teaching goes on in Kiswahili.

An illustration of this was offered by a secondary school student who stated that in her school the teachers use Kiswahili in teaching, the discussions are in Kiswahili, but then they write notes on the blackboard in English. She admitted that students rarely speak to each other in English even in classrooms and group discussions, and noted that even though there are signs around the school enjoining them to 'SPEAK ENGLISH', very little English is heard around the school.

Most of the students interviewed tended to favor the retention of English as the medium of instruction. When asked why English should remain, most did not respond. A few said that they needed to be able to communicate with other countries, but none could offer a substantial reason why English should remain. It was interesting to note that many of the students who said that English should remain as the medium of instruction could barely carry on a conversation with me in English.

One result of the dual language environment was pointed out by a teacher who noted that in the National Form Four Examinations, students answer questions on the English Examination Paper by copying passages out of the comprehension passage, or copying down the question. There was a situation in the mid-1980s when a Form IV student answered a History question in the National Examination in Kiswahili. Although the answer was correct, it was not accepted because the student was required to answer in English, the medium of instruction. This situation was reported by several markers of the Form IV examinations in the mid-1980s. There is no reason to believe that this does not still occur. When students have to sit and answer questions for three hours and cannot write what they are expected to produce; it is not unreasonable for them to write nonsense or respond to the question in a language they are comfortable with.

The high failure rate in the National Form Four Examinations is clearly indicative of a serious problem (Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1987). Although it may be premature, to attribute the large failure rate solely to the problem of medium of instruction without empirical evidence, it must surely be one of the major factors.

In a study of attitudes to English as a medium of instruction, Rubagumya (1991) found that many secondary school students appeared to overestimate their ability in English. He also found out that while 66.5% of his respondents reported that they were more comfortable in Kiswahili than in English, slightly more than half (53.3%) felt that education standards would deteriorate if Kiswahili became the medium of instruction. Why should they feel this way when they can barely communicate in English? Responding to this question one cultural leader contended that "the students are psychologically brutalised, they can no longer identify their own interest." This could be seen as a form of symbolic violence acted upon the students by a system which does not appreciate the importance of language of instruction.

Clearly some students in Tanzania have successfully coped with instruction in English. However, the overwhelming evidence of the negative effects of English as the medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools is an indication that many students are being short-changed by the educational system. Brock-Utne (1992) characterises denying the right for students to use the language with which they are most familiar as the medium of instruction as linguistic oppression, a type of cultural violence akin to Bourdieu and Passeron's notion of symbolic violence. She emphasises this point by quoting Pai Obanya (1980) who asserted:

> It has always been felt by African educationalists that the African child's major learning problem is linguistic. Instruction is given in a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough (Brock-Utne, 6).

The question is, should the intelligence of the many be sacrificed for the intelligence of the few? If the aim of education is to reinforce cultural and status cleavages among classes, then the answer is yes. Those with sufficient cultural capital to benefit from English as the medium of instruction will be rewarded. If, however, there is concern for what happens to the vast majority of students, one needs to consider the effects of the continued use of English as the medium of instruction.

Lessons for Other Countries?

The reluctance of the Tanzanian government to take the bold step of instituting Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in secondary schools provides a practical justification for other countries not to move towards instruction beyond a few initial years in the local languages. Of particular

concern here are those newly independent countries which can be guided by the experiences of countries which became politically independent in the 1960s. These include Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. All three countries have an exoglossic policy with English as the official language. Namibia is of special interest here, since English was not even one of the central languages used in Namibia prior to independence.

Within most African countries, lines have become blurred between knowledge and language. Indeed, as Afolayan (1978) maintains:

> Formal education in post-colonial African countries has so characteristically been given through the medium of a foreign language that scholars, educationalists, and experts have tended to accept the equation that education for the African is equal to knowledge of the European language.

This acceptance has helped to shape the view that language is not an important educational issue. If it is considered natural to use a foreign language, because it has always been done, then suggestions that it is not appropriate will not be taken seriously. Among national problems to be addressed, this will clearly not be a priority. An indication of the low priority afforded the educational language issue in Africa is the scanty funding available for research into, and development of, local languages for educational purposes in comparison to other development issues.

The Tanzanian experience illustrates that even when technical concerns are answered, political agenda assumes an ascendancy over pedagogical matters. Even the United States has, at the level of the supreme court, recognised the detrimental effects of teaching children in a language they do not understand. This is a country which has long projected the ethos of a melting pot, a monolingual country where everyone accepts English as the American language. English language permeates the United States society: radio, television, most formal and informal settings, outside of small ethnic enclaves. So the issue of opportunities for practice of English, for speakers of other languages, outside the classroom does not even enter the debate. Yet, it has been legislated that students should be educated in a language they understand. This legislation has lent support to a transitional bilingual education policy in the United States, where students learn through their mother tongues, e.g., Chinese or Spanish, for the first three years of their education, after which they are mainstreamed into English as the medium of instruction (Baron, 1990). If a county like the United States could legislate

that educating students in a language they do not understand is criminal, what does this suggest for Tanzania? Is it any less criminal to educate students in a foreign language which they do not understand when there is a viable alternative?

If the future of Africa as an independent continent is to be taken seriously, government officials, educational planners, economists and politicians must become cognisant of the educational language issue. These policy makers must abandon the assumption that since they successfully made it through a foreign language as a medium of instruction, students today can do the same. In the era of structural adjustment where priorities are being redefined under the guidance of external lending agencies, the educational language issue will be relegated to a backburner. Tanzania provides an illustration of this. Since the onset of structural adjustment in the mid 1980s, educational policy documents have tended to either include only a few lines or ignore the issue of the medium of instruction altogether.

One shortcoming of the Tanzanian language debate is that it has been positioned as a dichotomy—either English or Kiswahili. This dichotomy has overshadowed the possibility of a viable bilingual alternative (Afolayan, 1978), where both English and Kiswahili are accepted as legitimate constituents of Tanzania's linguistic repertoire (Mochiwa, 1991). It is not the prerogative of this paper to suggest what form this bilingual education should take. There are several existing models which could guide educational and language planners in this effort.

As educational changes arising from majority rule are being formulated in South Africa, those who were at the forefront of the liberation struggle must ensure that the issue of language of instruction must be given due consideration. South Africa is in an ideal position to introduce bilingual education on a regional basis, making use of local languages. The historical precedent of using local languages for Bantu Education could be re-appropriated to enrich South African education. Use of the local languages does not have to mean sub-standard education. Can one really say that students who are educated through a language in which they lack adequate proficiency are receiving standard education? African languages must be developed to cope with scientific and technological developments.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the language of instruction does really matter. It is the key to the access of knowledge. The Tanzanian experience has shown that many students lack that key, and Tanzania is not unique to Africa. Struggles for decolonisation marked a great part of the 20th century in

Africa. Cultural decolonisation should be a priority in the progression towards the 21st century. Local languages, which are the repositories of a wealth of knowledge currently on the verge of extinction, have a great role to play in bringing about an independent African continent. African languages must not be marginal to education in Africa.

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