

Dialogical Literacy

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Part One: Addressivity

Introduction

From the 1960s, when his work was rediscovered in the Soviet Union and then introduced to the West,¹ the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin has influenced a growing number of academic disciplines. The significance of his writings for education is now being more fully explored,² perhaps as the realisation comes home that although Bakhtin wrote very little specifically about education (at least in the works published outside Russia), his long career in teaching helped to shape his writing. This series of articles focusses on English teaching, particularly EFL, and in the first piece I consider the key Bakhtinian concept of dialogism in relation to addressivity and aesthetics .

Dialogism attempts to frame the plurality of human understanding as it manifests itself in the interaction of voices. “The plurality of human understanding” is both easily comprehensible and opaque. We may readily concede that no individual exists in isolation, and that understanding within a society is built up through individuals working together and against each other. Yet there is great difficulty in conceiving how understanding could be supra-individual, particularly when the person doing the conceiving is limited by his or her own finite individuality. How can the individual “I” entertain and investigate the idea of an understanding beyond itself?

To the first question of how an individual can conceive of plural understanding, we can add a second: How can one culture conceive of multi-cultural understanding? Bakhtin’s influence is being felt across a range of disciplines precisely because he provides various means for approaching these questions. To date, dialogism has been the most important of those means.

Sue Vice offers a useful three-fold account of dialogism (taken from L. Chernets via Carol Adlam), which I have loosely adopted in the three-part structure of these articles. First, “in the concept of addressivity and the alien word Bakhtin anticipates the reader’s response in dialogic understanding” (Vice, 46). I apply the concept to speaking, since for Bakhtin writing is speech-based, and dialogical literacy (my term) turns on understanding his view of the dynamics of speaking. Second, “in

his theory of genre and style Bakhtin proposes an intertextual dialogic relation,” in which, says Vice, “intersecting voices are those of different texts, and response and anticipation take place within ‘the chain of culture’ as a whole.” Third, “in the analysis of the interaction between author and hero undertaken in the studies of Dostoevsky and the essay ‘Author and Hero,’ Bakhtin discusses specifically intratextual dialogic relations.” Vice says that here the intersecting voices are within the text itself. My version, put briefly: dialogism is (1) a general language activity involving speaker and listener (Addressivity); (2) a language activity between texts (Intertextuality); and (3) a language activity within texts (Intratextuality).

Addressivity

Although it overlaps dialogue, dialogism is really a double-voicedness whose basic unit is the utterance, albeit in a different form than the kind understood by many involved in linguistics. In Bakhtin’s view “there are no ‘neutral’ words and forms – words and forms that can belong to ‘no one.’” Instead, “language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents” (1981, 293). Anyone using a language brings his or her intentions to bear upon the particular instance of its use (and Bakhtin himself is intent upon redefining Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole*). The speaker or writer makes the language expressive, investing it with meaning and feeling. However, the individual does not simply use the language for self-expression, since communication is shaped by the sense of another person. The utterance takes its form from the speaker’s relationship with that other person at a given moment in time. If I say “It’s warm today,” I cannot make that statement in a vacuum. It has to be addressed to someone in a particular place at a particular time. And the way I make the statement – its phrasing, rhythm, intonation – will depend on the kind of reply I expect from the other person – a grunt, chatty assent, or whatever.

Language, considered dialogically, is therefore simultaneously social and individual. One always works upon and in conjunction with the other. It is social because each utterance is informed by the sense of at least one other person, and by the relationship between speaker and listener(s). It is individual because the speaker frames the utterance (I have to decide in the first place that I want to comment on the weather), and because the relationship between the speaker and the listener expressed by that utterance takes place as a unique, unrepeatable event which affects both parties individually. Time, place, positioning and movement of the people, facial expression, and of course the voice itself and its words, can never be quite the same again. Even

the most routine “Good morning” necessarily partakes in a measure of dialogical activity.

Another person is active in the speaker’s utterance, which also reaches out to the other person. Shaped by the sense of an anticipated response, it looks to get an actual response. “Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse, toward the object” (1981, 292). The speaker uses the language to go beyond itself, to get something from another person. One calls forth another, and “any utterance is a link in the chain of speech communion” (1986, 84).

At first glance, the controlled activities of the communicative English (EFL) classroom may seem anything but dialogical. A teacher may want the students to learn certain structures and may accordingly identify the target language through reading and listening, model the structures, and adopt certain techniques such as pairwork for their use. The overall movement proceeds from recognition through cognition to application, with the teacher typically focussed on the correct use and internalisation of the target structures and language.

In actuality, of course, it may be very different. Much of the speaking does not go according to plan, and even when it does the teacher may be left nonplussed. Expressiveness is really the heart of the matter. Many students may bring an expressiveness to bear quite at odds with the material. Others may use the material accurately while emptying it of significance by playing down its expressiveness, sometimes with provoking deliberation. And yet others may be incapable of using language or unwilling to participate in speaking.

Bakhtin’s ideas about dialogism throw considerable light on language classrooms. For Bakhtin, dialogism is an aesthetic activity: in the utterance the speaker gives an expressive form to the unique event of a relationship between self and others. All language is immanently aesthetic, although in everyday and many other kinds of communication this may be played down because the speakers feel the need to impart and receive information with a straightforwardness that eases the business of living. A garage mechanic drawing spare parts from the stores may have a sensibility as fine as Virginia Woolf’s, but he has an exhaust pipe to fix before the customer comes back from lunch, so to get what he wants he has to cut to the chase.

Art, of course, is the playground of aesthetics, which is why the philosopher Bakhtin focusses on it, particularly on literature, and even more particularly on the novel. But for him there is no automatic difference in kind between saying hullo to your neighbour and the most sophisticated work of literature. The latter, though, has

the advantages of density, complexity (not for its own sake but for what it reveals about human understanding and culture), and ease of availability for study. Also, full aesthetic experience requires time. It requires the time for an active contemplation often ruled out by the busyness of daily life. However, Bakhtin shuns aestheticism: "When a human being is in art, he is not in life, and conversely. There is no unity between them and no inner interpenetration within the unity of an individual person" (1990, 4). Human communication is the unending process in which individuals become responsible for themselves (and that's what individuality is for Bakhtin) through responses to others that attempt to unify art and life. We shall see a little later how this works in the utterance and how dialogism is *not only* aesthetic. But to get to the non-aesthetic we must first recognise and examine the importance of the aesthetic.

A communicative language classroom is a decidedly unreal place, aiming to foster the natural use of language in an unreal setting. To do this, it employs a high degree of aesthetic activity, certainly much higher than that necessary for the mechanic drawing the spare parts. A certain amount of classroom activity obeys conventions which are known to teachers and students through long use, and which vary from country to country: the teacher follows set paths to impart knowledge, and the students are well-versed in set responses. Aesthetic activity is muted (but still utilized) by ritualization, which is easy to criticise but can be valuable for students, depending on the level of their commitment to ritualization and on its role in their culture. Aesthetic activity becomes overt rather than muted directly the teacher relaxes control of language use and seeks to pass more responsibility to the students. Now say something!

One way of encouraging responsibility is to choose materials that are relevant to the students. A good class may be one in which the teacher, through her relationship with the students, teaching strategies, selection of materials and interest in the subject, stimulates or provokes the students into a partial forgetting of themselves and the unreality of the situation (through interest in the matters on hand), while retaining just enough consciousness of the language to be able to use it again in the future. There is nothing foolproof about this, of course, and the good class can evaporate as quickly as it appeared. It may be that on another day, or later in the same lesson, the class simply can't or don't want to play the game of making a reality through language. Caprice should never be underestimated, but we should still recognise the demands made by aesthetic activity.

Whatever the relevance of the materials, topics for discussion and the language being used, from a Bakhtinian standpoint the student is being asked to commit himself to an aesthetic activity heightened in the language classroom by the clear artificiality of the situation and the use of another language. What may seem fairly natural to an English-speaking teacher spending a good deal of her working-life in language classrooms may be highly unnatural to a student coming from or living in a culture with different ideas about the relationship between education and aesthetic activity. For some students the language classroom may represent freedom and a venue for self-expression. For others it may be a punishing place that makes alien demands and imposes arbitrary rules.

Since aesthetic activity lives in the participants' willingness to enter into play, even those students who enjoy the freedom may find it difficult to take such learning seriously in the broader contexts of their lives, their education in their first language, and their culture's attitudes towards learning. For Irina Staragina, writing about the Ukraine (and about education in general in her country), a natural breach between speaking and writing is reinforced during primary school, to the detriment of the former: "The schoolchild associates the spoken utterance, in all its variety of form and expression (intonation, gesture, mimicry), with play, and in school this is considered to be 'childish,' and hence 'incorrect'" (367). An older student who has been early influenced in such a way may have very great difficulty in giving serious consideration to the speaking of a foreign language in a classroom.

It is not just a matter of expressive emotion through play. In Bakhtin's eyes the utterance is serious because of the particularity of the speaker's relationship with another person. Much is at stake. Expressiveness is paramount, but he defines this as "the speaker's subjective emotional evaluation of the referentially semantic content of his utterance" (1986, 84). That is, the speaker adopts an attitude towards the meaning of the words as she uses them. The words or sentences she uses may appear neutral in tendency (and this, says Bakhtin, is the material of conventional linguistics), but in using them she necessarily re-accentuates or double-voices them, investing the language with her own evaluation of the material shaped into her utterance. And we must add that her evaluation is itself shaped by the influence of another person and by her wish for response from him.

Evaluation is serious and difficult because it commits the speaker, expressing her as she finds and creates herself through the utterance. It also exposes the speaker, and this may be unwelcome for reasons that may be personal, social, and/or cultural.

Bakhtin is writing primarily about Russia, although he applies his thinking to other European languages and cultures, including English. The link between evaluation and expressiveness, fundamental to Bakhtin's dialogism, is well-suited to English, permeated as it is with Christian morality and in recent centuries with the authority of self-expression. Other cultures, on the other hand, don't necessarily make the same link, or not in the same way. We may at least entertain the possibility of languages which do not tend to posit evaluation as self-expression, and which consequently conceive evaluation differently. We should also note that English itself must contain elements of such otherness for us to be able to speak of such a possibility in the first place.

Dialogism, along with students' responses to its operation and possible consequences, is the working of the life within the ordinary activities of the language classroom. An example may make this clear. So, in the classroom preparatory work has been done and the students begin a role-play in pairs. Something typical: talking about what they did last weekend.

In one pair, Student A takes the role of sole questioner, with Student B doing the answering. A is able to employ the target language with great accuracy and good pronunciation. This is fine, but her usually expressive intonation is lacking, and it starts to become clear that she is double-voicing with a consciousness that emphasizes she is doing anything but speaking neutrally. Rather, she is assuming the authority of the unitary target language, while through the flatness of her intonation she is simultaneously showing that she is using it as a knowing mask. She has distanced herself from the language by withdrawing expressiveness. For she senses from Student B's replies, or maybe she knows from previous talk, that B doesn't want to talk in this situation or in this language about what she was doing at the weekend - going out with a boy or whatever. And A has what Bakhtin calls a "speech will" (1986, 77-8).

The target language for this exercise has only instructed how to reply openly, not how to evade, so B is left to her own resources, floundering linguistically as she tries to escape. B's attempted replies seem to encourage A's questions, which are notable for accuracy, clarity, and persistence. A knows that B knows that A knows, and B knows that A knows that B knows! All A has to do is to keep on being a model student with tongue in cheek in order to see what happens. By the time she gets to the fourth or fifth variant of "And what did you do after that?" the utterance is loaded with

innuendo, even though and because she is merely repeating the set forms of the textbook.

The scenario can work out in a number of ways. At first it looks as though A could be bullying B, later in the conversation as though they're working together. It depends on the emergence of their relationship through utterances that are expressive of their evaluative attitudes towards the language they're using. In refusing expressiveness for the target language, Student A draws attention to her mimicry, utilizing the authority of the language while asserting something else. B seems helpless, but she doesn't give up. Her persistent responsiveness against the odds makes A's continuing responses possible, and that dramatizes the situation. Or rather, through counterpointing their utterances they dramatize themselves in the situation.

B's bad grammar and intonation are played off against the other's correct flatness, one accentuating the other. It begins to look as though B is double-voicing her faulty language, emphasizing her broken English against the correctness of an authority she knows to be beyond her, in the other student and the teacher. She may be making fun of herself, but such an attitude towards the authoritative correctness of the language she's misusing in turn creates its own authority, and the laughter into which both students suddenly and simultaneously dissolve suggests a shared pleasure in what they've created. Maybe they didn't really know at the beginning what they were doing, or where the conversation was going, but they find out by doing it. It's a fragment of aesthetic experience, no more and no less. And out of such fragments friendships, the real business of creative language use for many students, are made, found, reworked and developed or not in a thousand ways as students test, use, refuse, subvert and supplement another language and its assumed authority. It's more than this, of course, since in the event the student brings other kinds of authority to bear upon that of English: the authority of the student's own culture and mother tongue, for instance, and her attitudes towards them.

Bakhtin says the utterance has certain very clear features. Its boundaries as a unit of speech communication are determined by a "change of speaking subjects" (1986, 71). Very often it is co-terminus with a sentence, but an utterance can also be one word or a great deal longer than a sentence. It ends with some indication perceived by the listener as a sign that the speaker has finished. Sentences can act in the same way, but if they do they have become utterances. The change of speaking subject is something real, not a linguistic convention, and for Bakhtin this distinguishes the utterance from other units of language.

The “second feature is the specific *finalization* of the utterance” (76). The speaker has said what he wants to say at that moment and in those circumstances. We know this from the pause or sign which indicates that he has finished, and which at the very same time points to the possibility of a response or of responsive understanding. There must be some kind of finalization in order for us to be able to respond to an utterance. A sentence, considered as a sentence, “cannot evoke a responsive reaction: it is comprehensible, but it is still not *all*. This *all* – the indicator of the *wholeness* of the utterance - is subject neither to grammatical nor to abstract semantic definition.”

The “finalized wholeness of the utterance,” crucial to guaranteeing the possibility of a response or of responsive understanding, is in turn determined by three inter-related factors. One is the “semantic exhaustiveness of the theme.” The speaker has to say everything that needs to be said to get a response. Obvious? Not so obvious in practice. Another factor is “the speaker’s plan or speech will.” In Bakhtin’s view, the listener is active and has to understand the speaker’s plan in order to respond. That’s one reason listening is such hard work. “We imagine to ourselves what the speaker wishes to say,” and this depends on the relationship between the participants and the ways in which they orient themselves “with respect to the situation and the preceding utterances” (77). We try to grasp what the other person wants to say, and as we do this it affects what is actually said. So, one person helps to shape another’s speech, and one person’s utterance really belongs to or is created by two people, although of course the speaker is the one who can be held responsible.

The finalization of the utterance makes it an aesthetic whole. The key element in the activity is the pause, which may be real or implied, and which Bakhtin terms a *dixi*.³ It is as though the speaker stands aside, mutely saying, “Look, this is what I’ve said. Now, what do you think of it?” The body of the utterance involves both cognition and ethics: the speaker has some kind of speech plan and an evaluative attitude towards her language. The *dixi* rounds it off, giving it form. As it does this, the aesthetic activity subsumes both cognition and ethics. This can be put very bluntly: even if the speaker know what she wants to say and is ethically committed to her utterance, the act of communication is likely to be marred if she cannot present an aesthetic whole for the other person’s response. Her attempt at communication will either run on, trampling the listener, or it will trail off, communicating its own failure, passively rather than actively inviting response. As Michael Bernard-Donals says, with reference to a different but related area of Bakhtin’s work: “Aesthetic

consummation completes cognitive and ethical aspects of an object by placing these aspects in relation with the individual human subject, the acting consciousness" (14). Along with other Bakhtin scholars, particularly Caryl Emerson, he insists on the importance to Bakhtin of this act of *outsideness*. The speaker stands aside and presents the utterance to the other person. It's done in a fraction of a second, but it's still done. And that in turn allows the other person to respond to *what* is said rather than just to *who* is speaking. Without this, the speaker may swamp the listener with his self, or he may simply be rebuffed. However urgent the subject and the need for expression, the act of aesthetic distancing is necessary if communication is to take place, if an utterance is to allow for a response from another person as another person. Without this, there is only the scream of naked emotion, or the manipulation of a power-play seeking to subordinate the response to the utterance.

The *dixi*, like Janus, faces two ways, looking backwards to an aesthetic finalization it has enacted and forwards, non-aesthetically, to an unknown future. Even if two people know each other well and are working closely together, with each of them helping to shape the other's utterances, there is still no way of knowing what will happen after the finishing/starting signal of the *dixi* is given. We don't know.⁴ We only know that certain responses have been made to certain utterances in the past. But the past is an uncertain guide, and the *dixi* signals the most ordinary and the most fraught human moments.

Ritualization glosses the matter so that the mechanic can quickly get the parts he needs. Yet it, too, is subject to re-accenting, often in very subtle ways, and even a speaker confident of a ritualized response cannot have complete fore-knowledge of its particular quality and effects. Rhetoric can also come into play. Bakhtin, though, takes a hostile view of rhetoric since he thinks it works to guarantee the other's response through manipulation, attempting to subsume the other person and her language within the unitary consciousness of the speaker. It should be said that academic rhetoricians, particularly in the United States, where Rhetoric is the theoretical side of Composition Studies, inevitably take issue with Bakhtin, and much effort has been devoted to redefining dialogism and rhetoric so that the one may include or combine with the other.⁵ These efforts will be considered in Part Two. Here, it is enough to say that Bakhtin dislikes rhetoric because it would completely aestheticize experience and the interaction between people. It would deny reality.

Back in the EFL classroom, does the non-aesthetic aspect of the *dixi* really matter? It does if we consider two students whose dialogue is aesthetically flawless and yet dead. There are many such dialogues. The students may have learned the forms, including the *dixi* as a supposed formal device, but for them communication remains purely an aesthetic matter. Working together, they can produce a perfect dialogue which is lifeless because the *dixi* indicates no sense of the non-aesthetic, no uncertainty about what will follow. No sense of fear, anticipation, the edge given by not knowing and by caring about the other's response.

Aesthetic activity, then, and the recognition of its importance, are central to the EFL classroom, but so is a sense of its limits, and this may be the most difficult point of all in teaching and learning a language. As Bakhtin says, even though it is constituted formally, language is beyond form, and as such is ultimately beyond systematised teaching. Thankfully, with or without the teacher's awareness the communication of the limits of form and of aesthetic activity may well be taking place anyway in the interaction between students and the native-speaking English teacher. All such teachers experience at least recurrent mystification in the EFL classroom, and so do their students. Teachers and students baffle each other, and this is right and proper.

Linguistic non-understanding and misunderstanding play a part in the bafflement, of course, but there is often more involved. For example, a flippant aside by a teacher in response to a seemingly trivial question may in turn provoke a response of real seriousness from the student which seems to the teacher to be out of all proportion to her original aside. This may be a failure to catch linguistic register, and behind this a difference of cultural attitudes. Within the chain of utterances, however, the most significant point may be the sense of unexpectedness in the other person's utterance, which has the effect of real (that is, non-aesthetic) communication. That effect is marked by fear, anxiety (not necessarily and always bad), impatience, hilarity, or at any rate by an intensity of feeling at odds with the aesthetic patterning aimed at by the teacher, who may simply want the students to get on with a particular set activity. This is not to suggest that a teacher should promote undue mystification. Its real quality is precisely that, and constant delving into the unknown is even more exhausting when the two parties belong to different cultures. But it exists, and it is a valuable and necessary element in language learning.

The third factor determining the finalized wholeness of the utterance is that the "speaker's speech will be manifested primarily in the *choice of a particular genre*"

(1986, 78). No one makes up completely new ways of speaking. Rather, we work from stable speech genres which we learn from other people's utterances before we ever learn grammar. Those stable genres organise our own speech. When responding to others, we guess "the genre from the very first words." We predict the length, foresee the end, and, because we know the genres so well, we can very precisely evaluate the particularity of the other person's utterance (which reworks the genre, contributing to its development). In this way, we use a kind of speedy iconic recognition, which allows us to sense the deviations from the pattern that create the particularity of meaning.

Standard genres such as greetings, farewells and congratulations tend to impose their own forms, although all genres can be re-accentuated. Many other genres are open to much freer creative reformulation. Bakhtin's own examples include genres of intimate conversations among friends, and intimate conversations within the family.

Speech genres are the *types* of utterances, "the drive belts from the history of society to the history of the language" (65). They develop from speech, but as more complex secondary genres evolve out of primary genres so writing comes to the fore. The next part of this article, on Intertextuality, will consider this further. Here, there are several points on speech genres and the language classroom still to be made.

Bakhtin is surely right when he says that the inability to command a repertoire of genres in one area can on occasion disable an otherwise competent speaker. The ability to speak English is not some kind of uniform property. In this respect, a particular strength of EFL teaching is also its weakness. The strength is that EFL, unlike almost all other kinds of teaching, is actually organised around speech genres. They are the *functions* dominating so much published material. The accompanying weakness is the restricted range of those functions when considered from the perspective of the repertoire of speech genres necessary to operate fluently in a language. This may partly be simplification for mass marketing, and it may also be that materials developers (depending on their awareness) rule out many speech genres as unsuitable. The myriad genres of intimacy or of aggression, for instance, may be excluded as too subtle, or as too disturbing in a classroom context.

If we want to make the selection of speech genres more inclusive, then one approach, at least in the case of the genres of intimacy, might be to promote their use through *greater* aesthetic activity in the classroom, especially through drama, which turns on the dialogical interplay between involvement and detachment. However, since

the element of play is so inescapable, it might in some cases need to be offset by supplementary activities which are convincing in their explicit seriousness.

Speech genres eventually bring the student to realise that a language has a history, which is another way of making a language real. As students really start to feel the life of speech genres – the types of past utterances, from the immediate past back over the centuries – so they can no longer produce utterances with the same freedom they once had. They lose their linguistic innocence. Not only do they work upon the language, but the language also works upon them, changing them. This is one reason learners so often move backwards before moving forwards.

The content of published materials for higher learners does often aim to give an historical sense (usually of the target culture), but one sees little attention paid to formal means of coming to terms with the diachronic nature of language. By and large, EFL operates in the here and now of the language classroom. This is fundamentally an issue of learning to live with the authority of language and with the changes it makes in the individual. It may simply be more convenient to go along with the pretence of English now in the synchronic classroom, but at least if it is recognised as a pretence there is the chance of utilizing it more effectively.

An ambivalence about dialogism may have been noticed. Does it simply already exist, so that we are calling for its recognition? Or is it still to be created, so that we are calling for its promotion? I can see that, following Bakhtin himself, I have been calling for both, sometimes simultaneously. The relationship between description and prescription is crucial to Bakhtin Studies, and it has an important bearing on education that will come into clearer focus in Parts Two and Three.

Notes

¹ For a brief account of the complex reception and influence of Bakhtin's writings, see Morson and Emerson, 3-4. For a contextualisation of Bakhtin's ideas on education and development, particularly in relation to Piaget and Vygotsky, see Holquist (77-85), and Morson and Emerson (205-15).

² Caryl Emerson speculates on the fields of inquiry likely to be influenced by Bakhtin's thinking in the twenty-first century: "The first, fueled by the Vygotsky centennial in 1995 and an accompanying surge of interest in developmental psychology, is the practice and theory of pedagogy" (274).

³ Thomas Kent sees the *dixi* as a "hermeneutic pause" that invites the listener to take part in a guessing game about genre: "Because communicative interaction cannot occur unless we recognize the generic wholeness of an utterance, the genre becomes

the social realization of the utterance, and our sense of the beginnings and ends of genres supplies us with the markers that allow us to know when an utterance is finalized" (39).

⁴ Not-knowing is the motor for communication, with our sense of a possible future shaping our expression in the present. According to Bakhtin, "the word in a living conversation is directly, blatantly oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (1981, 280). Kent argues that "no abstract model – models like those proposed by Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Noam Chomsky – can predict the hermeneutical moves we make when we communicate" (35). However, as Simon Dentith says, "this is not to deny that language has a systematic character; rather, the implication is that this systematicity has to be completed, and is always completed in actual language situations by the necessity of making language carry immediate meaning" (315).

⁵ See Dentith, "Bakhtin versus Rhetoric?" and Charles Schuster, "Mikhail Bakhtin as Rhetorical Theorist." For an account of Bakhtin's appropriation by rhetorical theorists in the late 1980s, see William McClellan. In his view, Bakhtin differs from the US rhetoricians in that he assigns much more active roles to the listener in shaping discourse.

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