

THE CULTURAL-ACADEMIC GAPS FACED BY THE EFL LEARNERS IN UNDERSTANDING AND USING ENGLISH TENSES

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Abstract

That there are many grammatical features of English which are different from those of bahasa Indonesia and of other local languages in Indonesia should be academically and culturally understood by EFL learners in Indonesia. Most EFL learners say that they have known grammatical features and functions concerning with the English tenses, but some facts tell that they fail to use the appropriate tenses in speaking and in writing short texts. This condition was found at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang. This paper discusses the cultural-academic gaps commonly faced by the EFL learners at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang. The discussion of this paper is based on the questions: (i) what are the grammatical problems made by the English Department students of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta in writing essays concerning with the use of English tenses?; (ii) do they face cultural and academic gaps in understanding and using the English tenses appropriately?; and (iii) why do they face such cultural and academic gaps? The data and discussion presented in this paper are based on the results of pre-research conducted on January 2012, as a part of stages of a Research and Development (R & D) conducted at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang.

Key words/phrases: English, grammar, tenses, EFL learners, cultural gaps, academic gaps

A. Introduction

'Grammar is back!' This was the newspaper headline with which David Crystal prefaced one of his English Now radio programs a few years ago (see Tonkyn in Bygate et. al (eds.), 1994:1). Tonkyn intentionally uses such a kind of emotional expression in his article as the introduction for a book entitled 'Grammar and the Language Teachers' (Bygate et. al (eds.), 1994). Tonkyn further states that the importance of teaching-learning grammar is not only for foreign languages, but also for second and first languages. Teachers and learners should be aware that the teaching-learning grammar of languages being learnt becomes a core program of language department. Moreover, this program becomes more necessary at the university level of EFL Teacher-Training. It should be understood, then, that human languages are learnable and teachable because they have systematic rules and regulations conventionally; human languages have grammar.

The teaching-learning processes of English grammar at the English Department of Educational Program which train the candidates of

EFL teachers become one of main focuses of curriculum and teaching-learning activities in the classroom. The student-teachers have to be aware of grammatical features of English, particularly in pedagogical grammar. The awareness is really needed because they will be teachers and models of EFL later. The student-teachers should have linguistic and communicative competence in English in order that they are able to transfer the grammatical knowledge and to model the language skills to their students, then. The linguistic competence and communicative skills support their success as professional teachers.

Learners of EFL in Indonesia are frequently confused by the grammatical features and language typology which are mostly different from those of their national language (*bahasa Indonesia*) and mother tongue (local languages in Indonesia). In addition, as a cultural phenomenon, language is highly influenced by socio-cultural features of the speech community. In this case, language uses and communicative functions are various from one language to another. Consequently, the teach-

ing-learning processes of EFL in Indonesia should give serious attentions to the grammatical features and cultural uses of English as there are many differences found. Therefore, the problems and difficulties faced by EFL learners in Indonesia may come from linguistic and cultural differences.

The phenomena of English tenses, in fact, are the ones which make EFL learners in Indonesia face serious problems. Most learners, as well as those of English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta*, feel that learning (English) grammar is difficult, confusing, and boring. In addition, some learners think that (English) grammar is not necessary; language uses do not always need (good) grammar and the most important thing in learning and using language is practice. Some students believe on “strange” statements such as: (i) *Just use the language, do not seriously think about grammar*; (ii) *As far as someone understand you, that is all, what is grammar for?*; (iii) *Language is practice, not grammar, no practices no use of language learning*; or (iv) *I want to communicate in English well, but I do not need to study the English grammar seriously*.

Let's say for the time being that those statements are true. Are they alright for all cases? Are the “strange” ideas reasonable for EFL in Indonesia? In sociolinguistics, it is stated that language without or less grammatical features is a pidgin. It is certain that the main purpose of teaching EFL in Indonesia is not for teaching English in pidgin style. Teaching-learning EFL with less academic attention on grammar may result in learners with the language skills in English pidgin; they do not have ability to use the foreign language grammatically. If this condition is allowed all time and at all formal levels, particularly at university level of teacher training, such as at the English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta*, the EFL teaching and learning in Indonesia can be in a serious problem.

In accordance with the status of English, it is impossible for EFL teaching-learning at formal institutions in Indonesia not to include the grammar. Moreover, the needs for the teaching-learning of English grammar become academically and pedagogically higher at the English Department of Teacher-Training at university level. The learners of English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta*, for instance, do not only need to comprehend the main grammatical features of English, but

they also have to be able to use them grammatically in language skills, and transfer the knowledge to their students, as well. Therefore, a serious attention to and well-planned programs of teaching-learning grammar of English at the university level are highly instructed.

Based on the facts, experience as a lecturer of English grammar, and focused-observation at the English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta* so far, there are many difficulties and problems faced by the learners at the department to understand and use grammatical features of English, both in spoken and written language. Consequently, many learners make mistakes and errors in speaking and writing English. Related to these facts, it can be argued also that there are many factors arising the difficulties and problems. Among the others, the differences of grammatical features and language typology existing between English and bahasa Indonesia and most of learners' mother tongues are the causes of the students' problems and difficulties. That English has tenses and bahasa Indonesia and most of learners' mother tongues do not can be argued as the main cause of their difficulties and problems in understanding and using English tenses appropriately. The differences of grammatical features and language typology may lead learners to have cultural and academic “gaps” in understanding and using appropriate tenses.

This paper discusses the cultural and academic gaps commonly faced by the EFL learners at the English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang*. The discussion of this paper is based on the questions: (i) *what are the grammatical problems made by the English Department students of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta in writing essays concerning with the use of the English tenses appropriately?*; (ii) *do they face cultural and academic gaps?*; and (iii) *why do they face such cultural and academic gaps?* The analysis and discussion presented in this paper are based on relevant linguistic typology and language teaching theories. The data are those of sentences and clauses written by students in their pretests, a part of the results of pre-research as the first stage of a research and development (R & D) conducted on January 2012, at the English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta*.

Language and the Teaching Grammar of a Foreign Language

General views on human language can be seen as a social fact, a psychological state, a set of structures, or as a collection of outputs. In accordance with these views, Bauer (2007:3 – 5) states that as a social fact, language is a kind of social contract. It exists not only in an individual, but in a community as well. In this sense, a language is an individual and social phenomena and entities. As a psychological state, a language is viewed as a mental reality. It exists in the heads of people who speak it. It is assumed that its mental state has something to do with people's ability to learn languages in learning languages in general and their practice in dealing with at least one particular language. Language as a psychological state can be referred as grammar, systems of language in mind. Then, as a set of structure, a language is defined as the total of utterances that can be made in a speech community. A language is a set finite and infinite of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements. In more general idea, a language is the human capacity, the feature which distinguishes humans from other animals.

Functionally, language is defined as a "tool" that people use to accomplish the "job" of communication; the main purpose of human language is communication. In this sense, a language is a tool and every tool has two components, namely: a function and a form. It has been known that the main function of language is to facilitate human beings in having communication. Then, in its form, a language has sounds which arrange to form words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourses. Linguists, in this idea, commonly assume that language consists of elements of form that people employ to "mean", "express", "represent", or "refer to" other things. Forms and functions of a language composite in complex ways in order to be used by humans in communication (see Payne, 2006:1- 3).

Human language is academically possible to be learned and taught as it has internal systems and rules which govern the forms and functions of the language. In general idea, the internal systems and rules conventionally governing the forms and functions of languages are called *grammar* (see Jufrizal, 2009; Jufrizal, 2010). Actually, the term grammar has many

meanings for linguists and language teachers. Tonkyn (in Bygate et. al. (eds.), 1994:1 – 2) states that grammar can be seen as descriptive – the stuff of reference grammars and linguistic theory – of pedagogical – the stuff of lessons and textbooks. Odlin (in Odlin (ed.), 1994) says that the conceptions of grammar can be categorized into grammar as prescription, grammar as description, grammar as an internal system, and grammar as an axiomatic system. Although the term grammar may have more than one sense, it can be argued that grammar is one of main cores of language as a tool of communication. Without grammar, human languages might be full of unidentified and unpredictable tools and functions of communication.

Theoretically, language teaching and learning cannot avoid the linguistic facts and grammatical features of language being learnt. Linguistics and language teaching are those of mutual partner in the studies of language and language teaching with their various directions and purposes. It is necessary to know that language teaching will be in unplanned programs if there is no accommodation of linguistic items as the main concerns of descriptive studies. Stern (1994:119) argues that it is hardly imaginable that a language could be taught without some underlying conceptions of the general nature of language. It would be unreasonable for language teaching theory to disregard what linguistics has to say about language.

In addition, quoting Spolski, Stern (1994) mentions that the relations between linguistics and language teaching as dual: 'applications and implications'. The description of language made by linguists can be 'applied' in the sense that they provide the data needed for writing about teaching grammars, course books, and dictionaries. The need for grammar teaching in any form and level is not only for a foreign language (FL), but also for a second (L2) and first language (L1). In this idea, Brown (2001:65) says also that one thing that must be concerned with is that language itself and how. Other additional ideas about pedagogical grammar are described by Odlin in Odlin (ed.) (1994:10 – 11). According to him, descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar may have implications for language teaching, and none of them alone satisfactory covers the concerns of practitioners of pedagogical grammar. Without question, teaching grammar in a

second (and a foreign) language setting involves prescription, yet the range of structures important to consider resembles a descriptive grammar much more than a prescriptive grammar for native speakers. Moreover, teachers concerned about how their students succeed in learning any grammar will naturally be curious about the psychological constructs that underlie inter-language competence and performance. Pedagogical grammar is thus a practically oriented hybrid drawing on work in several fields. As with the fields that contribute to it, pedagogical grammar is not static.

Grammar teaching and learning programs in EFL become necessary not only because they are highly needed to build and facilitate learners' linguistic-grammatical competence, but also to show that the grammatical features of English are much more different from those of learners' first languages. These ideas are useful to make learners aware of grammatical features of the language being learnt and are able to produce and use language in well-formed grammar. Grammatical sentences and utterances are really appreciated in language uses, both in spoken and written forms. Therefore, university students and advanced learners of EFL have to realize that the teaching and learning of grammatical features are academically and culturally needed, then.

2. Grammatical Typology and Problems in Learning English Tenses

Although human languages have universal characteristics as the universal grammar cross-linguistically, unfortunately, the human languages do have various specifications and different grammatical features. The natural facts are interesting and challenging for linguistic explorations and for theoretical-grammatical implications in linguistic studies. These conditions, however, can be the sources of problems and difficulties in language teaching and learning, especially in a second or a foreign language. The 'high' differences of grammatical typology between learners' native languages and those of language learnt may cause academic and cultural problems and difficulties in a foreign language learning; there may be academic and cultural 'gaps' in understanding and using the different grammatical features. In this case, of course, grammatical explanations and exercises are really necessary in order to 'bridge' and to

'minimize' the academic and cultural gaps.

Related to the teaching-learning EFL in Indonesia, the phenomena of tense may be the causes of serious problems and difficulties for many learners at every level. It happens as the logical consequence of the differences in grammatical typology existing in English and in most of learners' first language. In the case of grammatical typology, English belongs to tenseless languages, while bahasa Indonesia and most local languages in Indonesia are the tenseless languages. Typologically, aspect and tense in a tenseless language, such as English, are grammatically expressed in the predicate of a given clause or sentence; they are involved in grammatical features of core arguments of a clause and/or a sentence. In other side, tense and aspect are not the predicative matters of clauses and sentences in a tenseless language, such in bahasa Indonesia, Javanese, or Minangkabau. In a tenseless language, tense and aspect are just expressed in the form of lexicon or in adverbial phrases. Therefore, tense and aspect become the fundamental grammatical features which must be in clause constructions in a tenseless language, such as English (see Lyons, 1990; Comrie, 1985a, 1985b.).

The grammatical features of two or more different languages with different grammatical typology are of course different. The differences may cause various problems and difficulties for the learners of a foreign language, because almost all cases of teaching and learning in a foreign language are talking about different grammatical features. The grammatical features of languages are also complex systems and regulations which conventionally possessed by the languages as the socio-cultural products of the speech community. It can be stated that language forms, grammatical features, and language uses as well are much influenced by socio-cultural factors and other extra-linguistic factors. The phenomena of tense in a tenseless language, for example, are the factors of language, culture, and thought of the speakers (see Jourdan and Tuite (eds.), 2006). In this relation, it can be said that the phenomena of tense in English may cause academic and cultural problems in EFL learning in Indonesia. Most of the ideas on the close inter-relationships between language, culture, and thought in sociolinguistic and anthropological studies, including in psycholinguistics are derived from the linguistic

relativity theory and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Among the claims of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which are close to the discussion of English tense and academic-cultural problems and difficulties can be summarized as follow (see Wardhaugh, 1988; Foley, 1997; Jourdan and Tuite (eds.), 2006):

- the structure of language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world;
- the culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ;
- there is little or no relationship between language and culture;
- the structure of language influences how its speakers view the world.

Based on these claims, linguistic and grammatical features do not automatically appear as what they are, but they have interrelationship with culture of the speech community and what are in their mind and brain when using language.

Teaching English Grammar at University

The focus of discussion presented in this paper is about the academic and cultural gaps faced by EFL learners at university level of teacher-training and education study program. The learners are programmed and trained in order to be professional teachers of EFL; the learners are adult and assumed as the intermediate and advanced students. The teaching-learning grammar of EFL at university needs theoretical-grammatical explanation and understanding in order to build and develop linguistic competence on the learnt language. In addition, the appropriate theoretical-grammatical explanation and information on the nature of English grammar, such as tenses and aspects, will help learners to have competence, knowledge, and social-cultural awareness on the nature of the foreign language grammar and its uses. It is academically believed that the competence may support the success of communicative skill and language use (see Jufrizal et. al., 2009).

The teaching-learning programs of EFL at university level should be understood also as the teaching-learning for adults. Brown (2001:90 – 91) says that adults have superior cognitive abilities that can render them more successfully in certain classroom endeavors. Their needs for sensory inputs rely a little more on their imaginations. Their level of shyness

can be equal to or greater than that of children, but they usually have acquired a self-confidence no found in children. According to him, (i) adults are more able to handle abstract rules and concepts; (ii) adults have longer attention spans for material that may not be intrinsically interesting to them; (iii) sensory inputs needs not always be quite varied with adults, but one of the secrets of lively adults classes is their appeal to multiple senses; (iv) adults often bring a modicum of general self-confidence (global self-esteem) into a classroom; and (v) adults, with their more developed abstract thinking ability, are better able to understand context-reduced segment of language.

In addition, Dixon (1992:5 – 6) also states that teaching-learning language should seriously involve the teaching-learning grammar, including the study of language meaning. According to him, the study of language must surely pay close attention to meaning, the meaning of words and their grammatical properties, and how these interrelate. Then, languages differ in the weightings they assign to different parts of grammar. Some languages have a simple morphology, but make up for this by having complex rules for the ways in which words combine. Every language may have different grammatical systems; the grammar should be taught and learnt in appropriate portion and exercises.

The Data Presentation and Discussion

As mentioned above, the focus of discussion in this paper is why the students of the English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta*, Padang face the cultural and academic gaps in understanding and using English tenses appropriately. The data are the sentences or clauses made by the students in their short essays after they learned tense(s) as a grammatical feature of English. The essays they wrote are based on the topic given as the assessment of grammar teaching focused on English tense at the department. This works belong to the part of a research in the form of research and development (R & D) conducted at the English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang* on January 2012.

Forms of Grammatical Problems Faced by the Students Concerning with Tense

This part shows and discusses the forms grammatical problems concerning with

English tenses made the students as the forms of cultural and academic gaps they faced in understanding and using the tenses appropriately.

The followings are the selected sentences and clauses written by the students in their essays which are the most problematic ones when they were asked to write short essays in a given title. The writing activity was done after the teaching-learning processes in certain topics concerning with English tenses were held. The forms and types of grammatical problems were not made by majority students, but they are made by many students in various styles and can be said as similar forms and types.

I. The Present Continuous Tense:

- (1) *I usually is singing and I can is singing everywhere.*
- (2) *I am singing every time, I am singing with my sister and my friends.*
- (3) *This week, I am doing reading magazine.*
- (4) *I now studying Structure I with lecturer.*

II. The Simple Present Tense:

- (5) *I seldom to do it with my friend's.*
- (6) *If I feel be sad, I always to do traveling.*
- (7) *My friend don't usually play the badminton.*
- (8) *I'm really like poetry.*
- (9) *I have plan going to Bukittinggi.*
- (10) *Our coach and also our school very proud of us.*
- (11) *I am feel playing badminton very happy because I like sport.*

III. The Simple Future Tense:

- (12) *I am going to traveling with everyday.*
- (13) *I will my life healthy and keep with my hobby is badminton.*
- (14) *I will changed my hobby for tomorrow.*
- (15) *I will to make story about my experience.*
- (16) *If I will be success personality, I am going to make gallery ...*

IV. The Simple Past Tense:

- (17) *When I senior high school, I was ever go competition Jepang sing.*
- (18) *Four years ago, I see my friend play football in field.*
- (19) *I have a planned ... I was to followed activities is singing.*
- (20) *When I senior high school, I had hobby and interesting for me.*

The data above are just the examples of the most problematic forms and types of grammatical problems made by the first year students at the second semester of English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta*, Padang found in their essays. The essays were written by the students after they had lecture and grammatical explanation on *Structure I* subject. It was programmed that the topics of discussion in the first-half of semester of *Structure I* subject were focused on four basic tenses in English, namely The Present Continuous Tense, The Simple Present Tense, The Simple Future Tense, and The Simple Past Tense. As a matter of fact, there are so many grammatical features which are in problems in the students' essays, but for this paper, the attention is just particularly given on the problems faced by the students in understanding and using tenses.

Based on the data of this research, it is assumed that around 30% of students are in serious problems in understanding and using English tenses. The selected data above tell that there are, at least, four types of grammatical problems made by the students in understanding and using English tenses in their essays. The first one is that they are in serious problem in using *to be* (copular) and *other auxiliary* grammatically. Some students use *to be* (is) all time without any consideration whether the sentences are verbal or non-verbal constructions, and some others do not use *to be* in non-verbal sentences. In addition, they do not use auxiliary verb grammatically. It seemed that they just use the auxiliary randomly; there is no grammatical judgment. These grammatical features and the uses had been introduced and discussed before they were asked to write in order to see how they understand and use they grammatical features in language skill (in this case in writing skill).

Secondly, the students faced problem and difficulty in using appropriate verb forms (regular and irregular) for "expected" tenses. It can be seen from the cases that their sentences cannot be understood grammatically since the readers (and maybe listeners) are in doubt with sentential constructions. This is serious grammatical problems in the sense that they want to have certain meanings but their sentential constructions are confusing; whether it is in present, past, or future tenses. They just use lexical meanings without giving attentions on grammatical features of verbs

for grammatical meanings, and those are not grammatical in English.

Thirdly, it seems that the students “maximally” use the meanings of adverbial phrases to give the meaning grammatically conveyed by tense(s) as the natural ways of expressions in tenseless languages. This type of grammatical problem is common because the easiest way to show the meaning of “time expressions” in sentences or utterances is through the use of related adverbial phrases. Although this way is acceptable in tenseless languages, but that is not grammatical in a tenseless language, like in English. As it has been stated above, the semantic relationship between action and the time of action in a tenseless language are grammatically constructed in predicate of sentence or clause. Therefore, they are expressed only in the uses of related adverb of time, that is the way naturally used in tenseless language, like bahasa Indonesia.

The last type of grammatical problem is in the case of formulating the whole meaning of sentences or clauses by having lexical meanings of words. Many students do not pay attention to the grammatical features (in this case tenses) and sentential constructions as the nature of tenseless languages. It seems that they forget to change their mind that they are writing in English, not in their mother tongues which are mostly the tenseless languages. Consequently, their sentences are full of grammatical problems, especially concerning with tenses, although they are pragmatically understood based on collective lexical meanings. These are the deviations of standard language; it is commonly known as a pidgin or a creole.

Based on the four types of grammatical problems made by the students, it can be said that they faced academic and cultural “gaps” in understanding and using English tenses. Academically, the students do not understand the nature of tense in English; they construct sentences and clauses ungrammatically. As the candidate of English teachers at high schools, this condition is problematic. It is academically “dangerous” if they speak or write English in ungrammatical constructions. Moreover, it will be worse if they teach English, particularly on the grammatical feature *tense*, at high schools or other institutions based on unacceptable grammatical comprehension. Culturally, the existence and the appearance of such kinds of grammatical

problems are also understandable. Although they are learning English, but they are thinking in bahasa Indonesia or in their own native languages. They have to write or to speak in English, in a tenseless language, but they still think and semantically construct sentences in the nature of tenseless language, as in bahasa Indonesia or other local languages.

Why Do They Face Cultural and Academic Gaps?

It can be argued here that many students at the English Department of *FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta* faced cultural-academic gaps. Some of students’ problems in understanding and using tenses may be categorized as academic problems (see type of problem no. 1 and 2), and the others are those of cultural ones (types of problem no. 3 and 4).

Why do the EFL learners commonly face such cultural-academic gaps? Actually, there are many reasons which cause the existence of the gaps. However, this paper just discusses the reasons based on related theories of anthropological linguistics and language teaching. In nature, there are three reasons which make the students have such kinds of cultural-academic gaps. Firstly is the case of the high differences of grammatical typology. Most EFL learners in Indonesia are spoken in tenseless languages as their first language. The grammatical features of the students’ first language are highly different from those of the language learnt. The “high differences” in grammatical typology cause academic and cultural difficulties. In daily life, they naturally communicate by means of languages with less attention to the predicative categories so called tense, but when they learn EFL, they have to construct sentences or clauses in high attention to the predicative categories. It is natural that the beginners or intermediate students of EFL are hard to make “smooth” changes in mind and cognitive processes.

Secondly, the cultural-academic gaps are caused by the mind processes and cultural behavior in constructing language and utterances. The idea of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis claiming that there is close inter-relationship between language, culture, and thought is assumed having significant contributions in language formulation and constructions. When the students want to express ideas or to communicate something by means of language, the cognitive processes and linguistic

framework in their mind automatically conceptualize and formulate forms of sentences or utterances. The automatic processes, at the first occasion, are of course in their mother tongue. As the result, they try to use English vocabularies but the way to construct sentences and utterances are much more influenced by their first language. It is believed that to change the conceptualized framework is not easy, so that they face cultural-academic problems in the phenomena of the English tenses.

Thirdly, the cultural-academic gaps are caused by the negative-side accesses of language interference (L1 influence FL) in language FL learning, especially in grammatical interference. In the processes of language learning, the language interference naturally occurs at the first periods. Once the EFL learners are in serious problems and difficulties to understand and to use complicated grammatical features, they naturally come to use the "similar" grammatical features they have got, their mother tongue. This condition may be regarded as the "way out" of grammatical problems and difficulties they face. As the result, many EFL learners made cultural-academic gaps in understanding and using the English tenses.

Concluding Remarks

That the EFL learners in Indonesia face cultural-academic gaps in understanding and using tenses appropriately may be seen as natural phenomena and as academic problems, as well. Based on socio-cultural points of views, such kind of gaps are not "serious" problems because that is the nature of language itself. However, it becomes "unexpected" conditions in formal-academic processes. So that, the teaching-learning programs of EFL at the English Department of FKIP Universitas Bung Hatta, Padang, for example, should minimize the gaps and if it is possible, let them away. In this idea, it is necessary for the lecturers and learners at university level to introduce and to explain the nature of English tenses as the main parts of English grammar. In addition, let have various ways to build learners' linguistic-grammatical competence and communicative skills well. The problems and difficulties lead students to have cultural-academic gaps concerning with the English tenses. These gaps may generate other serious problems in understanding and

using grammatical features of EFL. The condition will cause problems in building linguistic-grammatical competence and communicative competence. Thus, students will be lack of competence and performance in EFL.

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