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**A Classroom Ethnographic Study on Silence among EFL Graduate Students:  
A Case Study**

**Awwad Othman Abdelaziz Ahmed,**  
**Professor of Applied Linguistics**  
**Department of Foreign Languages**  
**College of Arts, Taif University, Saudi Arabia**  
**Corresponding email: [drawwad.ahmed@gmail.com](mailto:drawwad.ahmed@gmail.com)**

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**ABSTRACT**

Miscellaneous investigations have been implemented to investigate the factor of silence among Asian students in the ESL and EFL contexts and has generated huge literature most of which is related to ESL/EFL students' silence because of several cultural and social factors. The study in hand reports on an ethnographic investigation of silence attitudes among Sudanese graduate learners in the EFL graduate linguistics environments with their academic staff in Gezira University, Sudan. The study has exploited a previously developed ethnographic interview protocol as well as observations with EFL graduate students and teachers in the MA linguistics. The researcher has investigated the probable patterns of silence among Sudanese EFL learners, explored the reasons behind this phenomenon and has attempted to trace the cultural interpretations among Sudanese silence. The participants of the study were eleven first-year graduates of English (all 26-38 years old) and 6 professors. The whole sample of the study was from Gezira University situated in the central region of Sudan. Another important factor is that the participants of this study came from different parts of Sudan including Khartoum, Darfur, and Gezira State etc. All the participants have BA and BEd in English language enrolling in Gezira University MA Program. The results of the study representing sufficient empirical proof highlight/emphasize that the Face Negotiation Model (Ting-Toomey 1994; West and Turner 2010; Wang and Yang 2005) indicates that Sudanese students' silence behaviors are reported to be determined Sudanese cultural factors including its notions of face, sense of impact and infrequent social interactions.

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**1. Introduction:**

Language has its recognized features on ethnography and vice versa. As a matter of fact, silence causes breaks in communication but this does not mean that it can cause failure of exchanging roles between

participants in a conversation. This study attempts to identify the occurrences of silence as a communication feature of language from a cross-cultural point of view. Sudanese context will be taken as a setting for this study.

## 2. Literature review

Silence in classrooms among EFL language learners can result from lacking the understanding of the target language. However, several studies reflect culturally related explanation for silence in EFL classrooms. For example, Tannen & Saville-Troike (1985) have attempted to pose the relevant survey on silence from various perspectives emphasizing the fact that this construct has a very complicated context as a cultural trend. Samovar & Porter (1991) has adopted a cross-cultural facet of the construct of 'Silence'. Jaworski (1997) approached silence from different dimensions, including sociological, anthropological, aesthetical and ethnographical perspectives. Furthermore, Nakane (2006) has conducted ethnographical surveys on silence models as well as their cultural perspective in the EFL classes in the Mainland China in particular. Each of the mentioned research involves certain types or aspects of silence. Some studies approach silence from pragmatic and ethnographic angles such as Zuo Yan (1996); Xueyan, (2003) and Liu & Zhong (2005). EFL classrooms learners need to be provided with knowledge and understanding of silence. It is important to investigate and analyze activate negotiation process between learners and the teachers from various perspectives. The way in which students express themselves needs to be taken care of and respected in a culturally sensitive way. It is suggested that the contexts for communication should be investigated and presented within specific social relations, interactional histories and to be grasped ethnographically. This means that linguistic ethnography may be applied widely in its empirical scope, investigating communication within social processes that involve (Rampton, 2007).

As mentioned above silence can occur in classroom and can inhibit effects on both teaching and learning processes (Vrettos, 2003; Collins, 1996). These investigations provide insufficient view into instructors' conceptions of what are the causes of silencing in their classrooms. Ollin (2008) identified different types of silence and reported how they have implemented and executed various silences during their teaching sessions, which seems to suggest that various kinds of silence can be used effectively in teaching and learning.

There has been a growing mass of research available to investigate silence phenomenon among Asian EFL students that has been conducted in the ESL contexts of the US, UK and Australia as well in some EFL contexts (Liu, 2000; Jackson, 2002; Chen, 2003; Nakane, 2006). Among several studies, Song (2005) has investigated East Asian students in American universities and stated that learners felt

discomfort and stressed when they were involved in group discussions and when they were asked questions in classes, they resorted to silence. He suggested that that their respective culture and past learning experiences might be the possible factors to be blamed for their silence. A study that has involved Asian graduate students and attempted to found out their communication model in class at university level in the mid-western area of the United States, Liu (2000) has reported that this phenomenon is quite common among Asian students and their silence has been caused by multiple factors including cognitive, educational, affective and socio-cultural factors as well as the English language proficiency of Asian students. Chen (2003) has exploited natural observations and interviews to find out the communication patterns among Asian students studying at university level in an ESL context of the USA and reported that Asian students were found passive in class activities and keep silence because of their past learning experiences as well their culture. Nakane (2006) has investigated Japanese students who were studying in an Australian university and exploited observations and interviews and has stated that silence was rather a technique that has been used by majority of Japanese students as a face-saving method. Several studies have been conducted in the EFL context in South-east Asian countries and majority of them have partially confirmed the studies which have been done in the ESL context as the results of these studies have revealed that the major causes for silence among Asian students have been teaching practices, attitudes of Asian students towards their teachers and classroom activities, anxiety, English language proficiency and several other factors related to socio-cultural paradigms (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Tsui, 1996; Liu and Littlewood, 1997; Cheng, 2000; Li and Jia, 2006).

It is the paper's potential of carrying out the study to get some knowledge about the engagement of MA linguistics students' in our own EFL setting in the Sudanese region of Gezira, i.e., Gezira University. To achieve that prospective objective, the researcher resorts to Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) methodology which explored the silence phenomenon from the view point of the faculty, their personal experiences. It is also important to understand that they ignored students' own perceptions as well as the context of the teaching/learning process. The researcher has applied an ethnographical study that bears the benefit of tackling the social and institutional factors in the teaching/learning context in a comprehensive prospect (Gegeo, 1988). Moreover, the present investigation is an ethnographical investigation about silencing attitude that is present between Sudanese EFL learners with their teachers.

### 3. Research Method

#### *Scope and Participants*

The researcher followed and noted all the courses given to the graduate students of English Linguistics on a weekly basis. Moreover, as MA and PhD theses supervisor in Gezira University, I know the learners as well as the teachers therefore; it is quite probable to get honest and clear answers from the participants of this survey. In addition, I focused on how students interact fully with their peers and instructors. It is my belief that without interact; no learning of language can be successful.

The participants in the research were eleven first-year graduates of English and their professors have been working in Gezira University in the Central region of Sudan. The participants in this university ranged between twenty six to thirty eight years old, of whom eight were born (and grew up) in different regions and graduated from varied schools in Sudan. Two participants came from the Darfur area where they were born, grew up, and earned their BAs from institutions there. One participant was born, grew up and got his BA in North Kordfan State in the west of Sudan. Five of the participants taught as intermediate school and college levels before pursuing their graduate programme, and four were secondary school teachers. These graduates chose to enroll in the MA in linguistics after passing the university test and interview. Therefore, the subjects in the experiment revealed an acceptable, overall proficiency level in the target language particularly the oral English proficiency. All the experiences of the participants may have influenced their answers in the interviews during the experiment.

### 4. Collecting data to analyze

#### **Observation**

The participants had academic schedule in the second term of the academic year 2020-2021. The researcher had followed and observed these classes carefully. The majority of these linguistics courses were recorded and transcribed. Furthermore, note summaries were written down in the meantime of delivering these classes. Finally, the results of the observing were analyzed in line with the interviews.

#### **Interview**

Eleven learners were the participants of this survey who attended the Linguistics & Culture in the fall semester of the year 2020, among whom seven attended Language & the Human Mind in the spring semester of 2020. Altogether, the eleven participants were interviewed by using the interview protocol which developed by Liu & Mou (2008). All learners' names were not mentioned in the study context, the participants were given enough time to express themselves over the questions. The interviews have been done in Arabic so that the effect of the foreign language competency may be minimized. Each interview,

extended from twenty-five to fifty minutes. All these interviews have been recorded, later on transcribed and then translated. The researcher has also used analytic memos as well as the sheets of interview material have been noted down to keep them as a record.

In the classroom, the researcher interviewed the participants with particular reference to their attitudes towards keep themselves silent. Through his observation to his students, it is found that their answers in the interview contrasted to a large extent with what had been observed in the classroom.

## **5. Results**

### **Results of the observations**

The researcher has presented the results from the interviews and observations in this part and the discussion has been done to understand why these students prefer to keep silent in their classroom. It has been observed that the majority prefer to be quiet, do not participate in class activities and even not raising their hands when teacher asks some questions. The researcher has coded these interviews and observations as 'characteristics' that are related to various speech acts such as the settings of the teaching, the level of the participants, the goals, act sequences, keys, perspectives and genres.

#### **Classroom moment (1)**

MA students were silent in a class entitled "Linguistics & Culture".

**Setting:** a well-equipped classroom accommodates comfortably the eleven students, a green board facing the students.

**Participants:** There are two kinds of participants. The first is a Sudanese professor and the second are eleven first-year English linguistics graduate learners.

**Ending:** To hand over and initiating the topic of discussion

**Scene event:** The instructor got into the classroom greeting his students. They were busy with taking notes from their classmates. The notes were of the previous class. They were given some minutes to finish them. As feedback he asked them a question related to their previous lecture and connected with their current lecture and they did not respond actively. They even avoid eye contacts with their professor. The professor started demonstrating the answer after long absence from the students.

**Key:** Serious but hesitant to take part

**Instrumentalities:** The professor used different teaching techniques that is a "Power Point presentation " to promote interaction. An easy lecture topic. Open the floor. Elicit answers. Give their own views but the norms of interaction were as follows:

- + students- students (silence)
- + students- teachers (silence)
- + teacher - students (try to break up silence)

**Genre:** lecture introduction

### **Classroom moment (2)**

The professor presented some topics on the green board to warm them up towards selecting their graduation projects. The professor and the students had meetings on a weekly basis to follow their projects progress.

**Setting:** MA classroom equipped with modern teaching aids

**Participants:** A female professor and eleven first –year English Linguistics graduate students.

**Ending:** Share and initiating the topic for presentation

**Norms of speech strategies:** (Students in groups)

- + students- students (do not appear to want to speak)
- + students- teachers (not reluctant speakers)
- + teacher - students (lack of confidence, telling his own experience)

**Genre:** lecture on Linguistics & culture

## **6. Findings of Interviews**

The main purpose of this research was to identify the phenomenon of silence in EFL classes in the context of Sudan and to identify the existence of silence with illocutionary force and without illocutionary force through using the technique of interviewing from the cohort of this research study. It is also important to mention that the overall findings of the interview of the participants of this research are in line with the results of what has been gathered through the technique of observation. It is reported that silence is a ‘background’ to verbal communication and that it comprises of various acts and shapes of human communication (Nakane 2006). It is argued that Silence may without illocutionary force, which falls into the category of non-propositional silence whereas the opposite to it carries illocutionary force (Troike, 2003). Troike (2003) further explains that silence with illocutionary force can be involved in the communication interaction, which can give more emphasis on sentence types, which form the fundamental unit of linguistics communication. One can ask if she or he says something without delivering a word. On the other hand, silence without illocutionary force may be result of ultimate apprehension, distress and hesitant (Kurzon, 1997 cited in Nakane, 2006).

While responding for interview question, a vast majority of the respondents stated that, they are usually in the habit of asking anything from their teachers or even they feel hesitant to reply to the teachers' questions. Thus, what transpires is that majority of Sudanese EFL learners neither actively participate in the proceedings of the teaching sessions nor do they communicate with their teachers or class fellows.

One of the students responded in these words: "I feel comfortable not to speak or ask questions from my professors because I do not like that my friends may feel that my questions are not important". Another responded that "my class fellows do not help me to speak more in class, I mean, um... they are not very helpful ..... frankly sometimes they make fun in front of the teachers or after the classes". Another important aspect has been highlighted by third participant who stated that "if you ask me, some teachers also smile when I ask a question which is stupid, ah...not very smart. And this also makes us shy".

The responses of the participants of this study may be summarized as follows:

Majority of the students prefer to keep silent during the classroom proceedings and most of the times, it is one-way traffic with the teachers lecturing while the students are busy taking notes without any active participation in the process of classroom interactions. Most of the times, majority of the students prefer to ask the questions about the points they do not understand after the classroom proceedings which highlight the previous research that a great number of Sudanese students feel embarrassed and shy to speak in the target language in front of their peers because they are afraid of they may make fun of them.

### **Reported Causes behind Silence in Classes**

The data generated through the intervention of the researcher through observations and interviews has revealed several causes and reasons behind making it difficult for Sudanese EFL learners actively communicate in classes with their peers and professors. The following are some of the participants' answers, which reveal the causes behind their silence.

#### **Preference for using Arabic**

Several students have mentioned that their mother tongue plays an important role in their habit of being hesitant to communicate in the target language. One participant responded as follows:

*"We Arabs love our language Arabic you know. Many of us feel that Arabic language is superior to others and may be why we use more Arabic language in discussion in our classes"*

#### **Problems with the Target Language**

It has also been revealed that majority of students are not very proficient in English language even at post-graduate level and this lack of confidence in the target language somehow force them to stick to Arabic language. Furthermore, it is also probable that they do it so that they understand each other better.

*“If I have to ask something from my teacher, I like to ask in Arabic and when teacher force me to speak English, sometimes I do not ask my questions. I do not want my friends laugh because of my poor language”*

*“When I speak or ask question in English language, my teachers do not understand exactly what my question is. I do not ask in class. I ask after class”*

### **Lack of Confidence**

Some students lack of confidence is another major cause as identified by interviews.

*“My English not very good. If I speak I am worry and feel shame when my fellows smile or look at me. I like to keep silent. Or I ask in Arabic language. In my opinion, my class fellows should help. If they do not smile, may be I speak and ask more questions.”*

### **Large Classes**

*“Now we are not many friends in class now. But we have big classes in schools and also in university. All were not my friends. It is difficult for me to speak in front of many students. I ask questions from my teachers when I finish classes.”*

It transpires that presence of many students around them and especially the one who are not much familiar to them make them shy and force them not to interact in the target language so that they do not lose face in front of their peers.

### **Cultural Inhibition**

#### **Role of the teachers**

Four students out of the total eleven has stated that sometimes the roles of the teachers are not very encouraging that inculcates inhibition and deter them to use the target language inside classrooms while talking to their teachers or even their peers. One of the responses has been:

*“Some teachers also smile when I make a mistake ...may be in grammar or even in pronunciation. And one more bad thing is when any teacher does that, the other students also make fun. I sometimes feel afraid to ask questions”*

### **Fear of Peer Responses**

One such response is as follows:

*“Your peers will laugh if you make a stupid mistake....I mean sometimes my friends feel that when I ask a question I am showing off. That makes me not to ask more questions.”*



**Nature of Activities** *"Sometimes we do participate and speak to each other you know ....., we were active... In the Linguistics & Culture course, we spoke to each other more and actively when the teacher gave us work to finish in group work."*

**Past experiences**

*"Now the teachers are more helpful and sometimes they talk about to other students.....I mean they stop students to smile or make fun and that encourage us to use English language..... but actually in schools we had this problem so much. All students laughed when we even tried to speak and teachers also with them. Our past experience is also a cause which make us silent"*

**Influence of Peers**

A vast majority has expressed a strong concern about the behavior of their peers and friends because their negative behavior and comments have been identified one of the major causes behind the shyness and inhibition. They prefer to be silent in class to avoid being laughed at. It is also informed that as all other students keep silent, I also prefer to be silent as well.

*"Your peers will laugh if you make a stupid mistake....I mean sometimes my friends feel that when I ask a question I am showing off. That makes me not to ask more questions."*

**7. Comparison of Contradicting Results from Observations and Interviews**

There seems an apparent contradiction in the data generated from observations and interviews as some of the students are shy by nature and that makes them keep silent indicating that are not external reasons but only because that some students are not social by nature. Rather some students have been quoted as being introvert who prefer to keep silent. But the researcher has found out that there was no denying the facts that some students were very silent and they preferred not to respond to any type of questions and not to interact with any types of replies. However, there were differences in their attitudes as most of them did answer some of the questions in a seminar room whereas their behavior was strictly opposite when they were in big classrooms. Another important finding has been that most of the students, who preferred not to participate in any class activity, were rather very active in talking to their friends in corridors after the classes. But certainly, they were not interacting in the target language but resorted to use Arabic language. This seems to suggest that it is not their personalities in terms of extroverts or introverts but their fears of using English language for some reasons.

## 8. Discussion (Silence Pattern)

The data generated from both data collection sources seemed to suggest that the silence pattern among the participants of this study has important propositional communicative component created most probably by illocutionary forces and culture inhibition that usually students prefer to keep silent. The data has reported that the main reasons behind their preference to keep silent include their past experiences, large classes, negative attitudes of the students as well as the teachers towards encouraging them to speak, their negative remarks, some classroom activities, silence of other students in classroom, lack of confidence, fear of adverse comments, cultural inhibitions to use English language in front of their peers and teachers.

The pattern of students' silence in the MA linguistics classes resembles significantly with the 'face model' presented by researchers in the field (Zhou & Ho, 1992; Wang & Yang, 2005). 'Face negotiation' is a construct that is related to psychology and bears social implications. As far the psychological implications are concerned, face aspect is identified by Zhou and Ho (1992) as a construct that is closely corresponded to social appreciation and self-assessment as well as morality/other evaluation. As for the social implications re concerned, 'face negotiation' is defined as a process to discuss the appropriate place in the system of relationship, executing the suitable roles, and behaving in a manner that is acceptable in the given cultural parameters of the group one belongs to (for example Sudanese EFL students) so that a person ensures acceptance and respect in the society. Therefore, we can conclude that a person is supposed to have 'face' if they are behaving in a manner, which is according to the expectations and standards of a society. It has also been reported that both psychological and social constructs bear a complex relationship and cannot be separated from one another and to some extent are indispensable. This seems to conclude that this complicated construct is an outcome of certain social and psychological factors (Zhou, 1992). Chen (2003) posits that a dynamic context is instrumental in providing a base where these psychological and social factors interplay which largely depends on the number of people involved, their abilities, level of acquaintance among the audience and to a large extent the level of formality of the situation concerned.

The results produced by the data analyses of the observations and interviews have indicated a strong association of 'face model' presented by the researchers in this social and psychological field (Zhou & Ho, 1992; Wang & Yang, 2005). The models of silencing of the learners in the MA linguistics classes seem to suggest that during their teaching sessions the students prefer to be silent to keep face so that they ensure harmony and close association with the group they belong. They do not want to behave in a manner which is not expected of an EFL learner or what other people feel foreign or not appropriate. This finding is in line with the proposition that the construct of face is not related to individual personalities but face negotiation is closely bound to the social factors of context and the situation concerned (Zhou & Ho, 1992).

The results also offer valuable insights into the fact that ‘face negotiation’ is to some extent influenced by the personality of the students but largely it depends on external factors such as their past experiences, large classes, negative attitudes of the students as well as the teachers towards encouraging them to speak, their negative remarks, some classroom activities, silence of other students in classroom, lack of confidence, fear of adverse comments, cultural inhibitions to use English language in front of their peers and teachers.

The results partially confirm the findings of the previous research that has been conducted in the same academic context. For example Ahmed (2018) has stated that large classes the main cause behind ineffective English language teaching in Saudi universities because this factor hinders them to take an active part in classroom discussions as well culturally they seem hesitant to communicate in English language with their classmates. A study conducted by Al-Seghayer (2011) also bears strong affinity with the findings of the study in hand. He has reported that among the various other factors that negatively affect English language teaching process in the KSA, the Saudi EFL learners’ cultural inhibition and their inability to take an active part in classroom proceedings and activities is the main reason. He has further mentioned that another factor is related to less qualified English language teachers who unknowingly enhance their students’ confidence to speak in front of their class fellows. Al-Jarf (2008) has investigated the situation of English language teaching and reported that lack of encouragement from their peers is a main reason of Saudi students’ silence.

Al-Zahrani (2008) has investigated Saudi university undergraduates from King Saud university and concluded that they lack the required level of proficiency in the target language because of their negative attitudes towards various important learning techniques such as taking active part in classroom discussion, having enough practice through mutual discussion and utilizing the modern internet facility to enhance their oral skills. The findings of this study also confirm the results of Educational Testing Services (2009) which suggest that the results of Saudi students in international text seems to suggest that they are far behind their counterparts from other Asian countries because of their cultural inhibitions. Ahmed (2020) has also reported lack of integrative motivation is the reason that they do not want to learn English as a mean to communicate; therefore, lack a genuine urge to take part in class discussions and improve their oral skills. The same findings have been reported by Rababah (2003) who has investigated communication Problems among Jordanian EFL learners and concluded that they are unable to achieve the required proficiency in the oral skills in English language because of lack of the required support from their peers, teachers and the society in general. A growing mass of investigations made in Arab context seem to suggest that students’ inability to actively participate in class discussion, lack of practice in the target language, large classes,

cultural inhibitions, lack of support from peers and society, etc. are the main reason behind low proficiency level among Arab learners (AlFadly, 2003, Al-Hazmi, 2004, Ministry of Education, 2006, ).

Results also indicate that usually there are mixed ability groups and the students with high English language proficiency dominate the classes and frequently ask questions from their teachers; thus, leaving little space for weaker students to take part in classroom discussions. Furthermore, the weaker students also feel that if they speak and make mistakes, the students with higher proficiency will make fun of them and consequently, the weaker students are caught in the vicious circle and remain rather weaker because of their lack of active participation. The social feature of the process of face is another strong reason behind this situation as because of the well-accepted rules and frames mentioned above to ensure harmony with the society as well as to keep the hierarchical relationship intact also force the students to keep silent in classes. Some participants emphasize that it is feature- lengthen tendency one keeps silent in these types of classes and unfortunately, it has become a part of negative practices. Similarly, the following comments also show that some students prefer to keep silent but they do not want to give impression to their peers that are showing off, *“Your peers will laugh if you make a stupid mistake....I mean sometimes my friends fee that when I ask a question I am showing off. That makes me not to ask more questions.”*

## 9. Conclusion and Recommendations

This section contains the main conclusions based on the results generated through the data analyses of the observations and interviews conducted with the participants of this study. It has been reflected that the informants of this paper prefer to keep silent during teaching sessions for various reasons. The first reason is that they do not want to lose face and want to keep harmonious relationships. Their efforts to main ‘face negotiation’ is reported to have been influenced by various factors such as large groups, unfriendly classroom seating plan, level of familiarity with their peers, kinds of classroom activities, social relationships, cultural inhibitions, their lack of confidence on their own abilities and fear of negative evaluation by their peers and teachers.

The data analyses suggest that EFL postgraduate learners represented by the participants of this study bear strong inhibitions towards taking an active part in various classroom activities because of fear of negative responses from their class fellows in general and sometimes from their teachers as well. It is also reported that usually the situation is not as bad at university level as it is there in Sudanese schools. However, some postgraduate students bear these fears because of their previous unpleasant experiences and incidents they encountered when they used to be at schools. These unpleasant memories have entrenched deep in the psychology that make it rather difficult at university level as well to interact with their teachers and peers during their teaching sessions. Likewise, it is also reported that due to the presence of some better

students in classes who usually dominate the classes, relatively weaker students find it rather difficult to overcome their fears, come forward, and participate actively in discussions. Low proficiency level is yet another reason that force the students not to communicate in the target language with their teachers and peers. The paper, hence, posits that the in-class concealment of face, as a matter of general practice as well as a religious bodily practice, is identified as a strong marker of local culture that creates strong reactions which often, if not always, inculcates an emotional repertoire that create strong fear causing silence in classes.

Based on the conclusions presented above, it is recommended that for better English language teaching process it is important that these psychological and social inhibitions be tackled professionally and on urgent bases so that postgraduate students are able to get maximum academic benefit from the teaching sessions. It seems important that English language teachers should discuss these issues candidly and frankly with their postgraduate students. There will be no denying of the fact that as the students are adults and because of their mature attitudes, they will be able to understand that their fears are unfound and baseless. Once this is established, then it will become extremely easy to motivate them to start interacting with their teachers as well as peers to discuss various academic topics in classes. It is also imperative that the teachers should encourage them by providing positive reinforcement when they ask any question or comment on any academic discussion. It is also suggested that the students should be encouraged to help each other in asking questions and becoming active participants of classroom proceedings. Inclusion of frequent group work and pair work will be an effective technique to provide them with an opportunity to overcome their fear of speaking in front of the whole class.

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