

## Space and voice: A comparative study of Chinese adolescents' English use in China and Canada

Yamin Qian

*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE),  
University of Toronto, Canada*

*Institute of English Education, Guangdong University of  
Foreign Studies, P.R. China*

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### Abstract

Sociocultural theory stresses the nature of language as a mediation tool between learners and the society. In this regard, learning a language by nature is learning a symbolic tool assisting in achieving learners' goals (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Thus, the significance of context needs to be identified in ESL/EFL study to understand language learners' English learning and identity construction (Norton, 1995). This qualitative study investigates the impacts of social context on language learners' experiences with English learning and their identity construction, respectively in EFL and ESL contexts. Participants were two groups of adolescents, of which one group was the first year university students in China, and another group was high school students resided in Canada for the average of 1.5 years. Open-ended questions were asked with regards to their perceptions of contexts, in which they were embedded, on their English use. This study found that both groups of participants preferred English to their first language in their daily life. Perceiving constant contacts with English-speaking counterparts as a legitimate strategy in learning English, both groups showed deliberate efforts in affiliating with English-speaking communities. However, participants in China created their own English-speaking community among themselves, within which they practiced, and even dreamed, in English (Zhao, Qian, Liu & Chen, 2011). On the other hand, participants in Canada explored chances to approach their English-speaking counterparts, in the process of which they hesitated and questioned. A discussion in light of the impacts of English globalization on language learners' identity in ESL and EFL contexts will conclude this article. This article will also suggest a re-identification of ESL and EFL contexts, which have been altered as a consequence of an increasing wave of global migration between nations for the sake of symbolic capital.

**Keywords:** Symbolic space, mediated action, ESL and EFL context, symbolic capital

### Mediated Action with Language as Mediation Means

A major aspect of Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) theory is that tools and signs mediate human's actions. Such mediational means (Wertsch, 1991) include not only physical objects, but also signs, inclusive of language (Wertsch, 1985, 1991) and culture (Cole, 1996). Mediation connects individual's mental developments with the society (Wertsch, 1991; Vadeboncoeur, Hirst & Kostogriz, 2006). Mediation is stimulated by external social interactions, and realized from "participation in and appropriation of, the forms of cultural mediation integrated into social activities (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009, p.459)".

Thus, the nature of language as mediational means links learners and the society. Learning a language is learning the changing meaning of sign systems emerging from social interactions (Wertsch, 1991). It is learning mediational means which assists in achieving learners' goals (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). In other words, it is a process of understanding the tension between mediational means and social-cultural settings (Wertsch, 1994), and a form of social practice (Fairclough, 2001). Learning a language cannot be merely considered as individual efforts; rather, it is both individual and social. It is individual in that it is usually oriented by individual goals (Wertsch, 1985); it is social since motivation and goals are socially and culturally rooted (Cole, 1996). One major outcome of such mediated actions is to have an access to and maintain a relationship with a certain group of people (Bourdieu, 1977). To emphasize the social-cultural aspects of language learning, this study will employ *English use* interchangeably with *English learning*.

## Space

In recent years, there are growing interests in using "space" for its weight on situationality and dynamics (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007). In this study, *space* will be used instead of *community* or *world*. However, it is necessary to start with definitions of those terms in order to depict the nature of *space*.

Lave and Wenger (1991) defines *community* as a group of people sharing the same interests or goals. People in this community have varied level of expertise facilitating members of the community zone of proximal development (ZPD). Hymes (1974) defines *speech community* as a group of people considering their language use different from others. This community defines its membership by language that people use. *World* (Phelan, Locke, & Hanh, 1991) is referred to a group of people sharing the same cultural norms. People in the same world share similar cultural knowledge upon which they act. Crossing different worlds means adapting to different cultural norms.

While *community*, *speech community* and *world* all stress a sense of affiliation through either interests, goals, language or cultural norms, people engaged in a mutual activity in the real world do not always have the same perception regarding affiliation (Gee, 2004). In other words, people involved in the same activity can have different interests, goals, and backgrounds of language or culture (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). Consequently, they do not necessarily consider each other affiliated to the same community, speech community or world. Neither do they intend to maintain such affiliation. For example, even though people are engaged in the same project, they do not necessarily consider each other as a member of a community, nor do they consider such interactions representative of a community.

In this article, *space* will be used instead of three aforementioned terms in order to stress the divergent perception of interactants: Interactants do not necessarily have the same view toward their status in relation to each other or to a community. They do not necessarily share the same interests or goals even when they are engaged in the same task. More importantly, they do not always share the same language or cultural background.

A space is an activity system (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejeda, 1999). It stresses the connection between the geographical context and sociocultural development. It is socially, culturally and historically structured (Kostogriz, 2006), shaping individuals' experiences. It identifies the dialectics between the locality in which individuals live and their mediated actions.

For the study of space, there are many dimensions for specific interests: symbolic space (Brockmeier, 2001), natural space (Comber, Nixon, Ashmore, Loo, & Cook, 2006), classroom space and imagined space (Brown & Renshaw, 2006; Firth & Wagner, 2007). In this study, I will focus on participants' out-of-class space with their friends in regard to English use.

## Voice

This study uses the term *voice* instead of *identity* in order to emphasize the dialectic nature between language learning and space. In this regard, *voice* does not only reveal social relationships that have been constructed from language use (Joseph, 2004). Most important of all, it reveals both social communicative and individual psychological process (Wertsch, 1991).

Voice links individuals' experiences of social communication to mediational means (Wertsch, 1991). It reveals individuals' desire of recognition and association, showing "...the quest for existential meaning and material resources (West, 1992, p.21)" in a space. In other words, voice reflects individuals' mediated actions in response to the social realities structured by a space in which individuals live in (Gérin-Lajoie, 2003, 2005). Thus, voice manifests individuals' mediated actions in accordance with the materiality of mediational means (Wertsch, 1998). In the case of language learning, the materiality of mediational means does not only refer to physical materials, such as curriculum or dictionary; moreover, it includes social network and chances of communication (Minichiello, 2001; Norton, 1995; Toohey, 2000).

The nature of voice reveals a dialectical relationship between learners and the materiality of mediational means. It reveals the perceived roles of mediational means in individuals' real life experience (Curdt-Christiansen & Maguire, 2007), which inform an outcome of linguistic social practice rather than a source (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In this regard, voice indicates how individuals understand their mediated actions with mediational means in a space (Norton, 1995).

## Spaces, Mediated Action, and Voices

This study postulates that learning is situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and occurs in social situations (Hanks, 1991). To be specific, learning takes place in learners' social interactions in a space and across spaces through mediated actions with mediational means, from which emerges learners' voice.

Learners act with a language in a space laden with local and situational structures. Using language as mediational means, language learners produce and reproduce local social-cultural norms, meanwhile construct their social networks (Bayley & Schecter, 2003). In other words, language learning is a process of socialization, and the outcome of such learning is a form of social accomplishment (Firth & Wagner, 2007). This study will provide a situated analysis of out-of-class space of two groups of learners, focusing on their mediated actions with mediational means in two different spaces.

English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners are in a homogeneous context in which both teachers and learners share the same cultural and first language background (Barrat & Kontra, 2000; Kriegger, 2005). Thus, EFL learners tend to have more cultural and social supports in learning English (Baker, 2003). Meanwhile, EFL learners showed strong

desires to use English as their daily language (Zhao, Qian, Chen, & Liu, 2011). In out-of-class space, Chinese EFL learners chose to listen to more English materials (Liu, 2007), and read English literacies (Peng, 2002), most of which were related to in-class teaching materials (Deng, 2004). They also watched movies or listened to English songs (Ma, 2010), and studied English through Internet (Ye, 2008). Some practiced their oral English in “English Corner” in which usually teachers or students gathered and conversed with each other. They were also encouraged to write journals after school (Liu, 2007) and memorize words to expand their vocabulary. EFL students encountered more difficulties in learning English out of class. Some studies concluded that it was because of students’ low motivation, therefore structured instruction should be offered to scaffold their learning (Liu, 2007; Peng, 2002; Ye, 2008). Those studies provide insightful understandings on learners’ learning experience. However, few studies look at EFL learners’ learning experience from an emic (participant-centered) perspective (Firth & Wagner, 1997).

English as Second Language (ESL) learners are in a heterogeneous context in which the dominant language and culture is English. Adolescent ESL learners coming to an English-speaking country after age of 15 are usually termed as late-arrivals, as a contrast to those who came at a younger age (Roessingh, 2008). Even though located in an English space, Asian late-arrivals found themselves in an EFL space in that their social space was mostly of their first language (Gunderson, 2007; Miller, 2003). In particular, they had more difficulties in constructing social networks with English counterparts, because of lower English proficiency (Anderson, 2002; Chuang, 2010; Miller, 2003) and the lack of shared life experience with local students (Olsen, 2000). The aforementioned research has identified difficulties that this group has encountered in accessing a local space and their voices. However, more studies are needed to understand how they mediate with mediational means in response to such difficulties in a local space.

### Objectives of the study

This study investigates EFL learners’ and ESL learners’ perception of their out-of-class space regarding English use and their voices. Following are the specific points under study.

- a) How do EFL and ESL learners perceive their out-of-class space of English use?
- b) How do EFL and ESL learners act in response to their out-of-class space of English use?
- c) What voice(s) emerge from EFL and ESL learners’ respective mediated action in out-of-class space?

#### a) A Southern Chinese University in China

The data regarding EFL learners were collected in a Southern Chinese university in 2008. This university is widely known for its communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and the substantial amount of teaching hours assigned for English courses. To reinforce the impacts of CLT, the whole campus has a dominant culture of using English on various occasions. Throughout the academic year, a multitude of extracurricular activities such as debating in English and English pronunciation competitions are designed to create and support such a culture. Research participants in our study were in their second year of a four-year Bachelor of Education program. Their age was approximately between 19 and 20.

## b) the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada

Canada has been receiving a large number of immigrants for decades. According to Statcan (2007), 19.8% of the Canadian population was born out of Canada, while 70.2% of them speak a language other than English or French as mother tongue. The GTA has been one of the major areas receiving immigrants and temporary residents. Three participants, Joe, Angle and Amanda, landed on the GTA approximately 18 months ago by the time of the study. And they were all full-time high school students. Joe, 17 years old, was a boarding student in a private school in which the majority of students were from white middle-class families. Angle, 18 years old, was a student in a private international school where the majority of students were from China. Amanda, 20 years old, studied in a culturally diversified public school.

### Methodology

The data used for this article were drawn from two broader studies, both of which used qualitative case study method.

Participants in the southern Chinese university were given three sets of questions. To make the questions "understandable" to the participants, wordings of the questions were chosen based on their preferred sets of vocabulary, which may appear less standard. Research participants had one week to answer the questions in details and were asked to email the answers to a shared email address created by the author and two colleagues. Participants were not mandated to reveal their real names to researchers. Since participation in this research was not part of the final evaluation of the course they were taking, participants' response to the research questions was considered valid and trustworthy.

Participants in Canada received a clearly written introduction of the research beforehand. Consent forms were given to participants above 18 years of age whilst distributed to the parents for permission for those under 18. After the researcher collected consent forms, three semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mandarin. Participation in this research was voluntary and participants were reminded of rights to terminate interviews at any time.

Data analysis in qualitative research is generally inductive, which involves data consolidation, combination, reduction and interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Code analysis (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993; Krippendorff, 1980) was employed to analyze the data set for this article. Data were first organized topically after Chinese text was translated into English by "back-translation" method (Bracken & Barona, 1991). Afterwards, patterns and regularities were identified, transformed into categories, and made inferences to the research questions of this study.

## Findings

This section presents findings related to three research questions.

Question one: How do EFL and ESL learners perceive their out-of-class space of English use?

### a) EFL Learners' Perception

EFL participants were identified as three groups in terms of their perceptions toward the focal issue. The first group felt that their out-of-class space for English use was limited. They wished that their out-of-class space could be dominantly English. They wanted to speak English "*as often as possible*", but regretted that "*(there is) no atmosphere*". Other participants wrote: "*speaking and thinking in English all the time is necessary.*" "*I am fond of speaking English all the time.*"

The second group showed a relational attitude. They felt that they needed more spaces for English use out of class. They believed that "*it's cool to speak English*", even though "*I will not speak to those who don't understand.*" However, they showed an awareness of social and cultural space in which they lived. One participant wrote, "*(I) feel weird if (I) has (sic) to speak to someone who does not know English.*"

The third group did not feel that they needed more space for English use out of class. Living in China, they showed resistance to the ideology of using English out of class. They believed that they should preserve spaces for their first language rather than expand spaces for English. One participant wrote, "*English is just a language (sic) communicate with foreigners.*" Another participant wrote: "*We are Chinese. We should not speak English all the time.*"

### b) ESL Learners

In the case of ESL learners, all the three participants considered their out of class space of English use insufficient, in that their social network after the class was mostly Mandarin or Cantonese speaking youth. In other words, their perception toward the space of English use was based on their social networks with local youth who spoke English as the first language.

Angle felt that all the friends she knew were Chinese, who speak either Mandarin or Cantonese as the first language. Amanda said in an interview: "*I feel that my social network is not big enough.*" Joe felt uncertain regarding his space of English use. Studying in a white-dominant middle class private school, he did not feel embedded in an English-speaking space. Joe said: "*If I have chance to approach them, they would be kind of friendly to me. Otherwise, I don't get the chance to talk to them.*"

Question two: How do EFL and ESL learners act in response to their out-of-class space of English learning?

### a) EFL Learners

The groups of participants which craved for more space of English use showed deliberate efforts to expand this space. They incorporated English into their daily life, and talked to their friends in English instead of the first language. One participant wrote: "*(we*

*should) try to find an English environment for ourselves. Try to speak English in our daily life.*” Other participants wrote: *“the key to grasp a language is to be in it. The dorm decides to speak English every night”*. *“(Eventually we should) dream in English.”* Some participants said that they managed to find a partner with whom they spoke English in their daily life.

## **b) ESL Learners**

Joe, Angel and Amanda all managed to affiliate to English speaking space. In other words, they showed purposeful endeavors to expand spaces for English use after class. They explored opportunities to converse with local youth, purposefully familiarized themselves with “hot” topics of local youth, and joined in various social activities.

Joe was a boarder who lived at school. In order to practice English, he purposefully sat at a “mixed table” in which a group of people from diversified backgrounds chose to dine together at school canteen. If sometimes there was not any mixed table, he would prefer to sit with Cantonese-speaking youth instead of Mandarin-speaking youth. Thus his friends had to speak English with him, since he could not understand Cantonese. Amanda purposefully shortened her time with her Chinese friends in order to expand her space of English use. During the daily one-hour lunch time, she decreased her social time with Chinese friends to 20 minutes, and went right to the school library in order to talk to English-speaking counterparts. As she said, *“I don’t want to waste any second of my time. I want to make full use of it (to improve my English).”* Angel registered several ESL courses in Toronto. The standard that she adopted to evaluate an ESL course was the number of Chinese students in the course. As she said in an interview: *“It (this ESL course) is good. There is no Chinese at all. I am the only (Chinese) there. Classmates are all over the worlds, mostly from Brazil, South Korea and Japan.”*

Other than aforementioned strategies, three participants all managed to expand their space of English use with their strengths in Maths and Physics. Joe and Amanda tutored Maths to their English speaking counterparts, and Angle worked as a voluntary Maths tutor at a summer school for more than 200 hours.

Joe tried to familiarize himself with local hot topics. After realized that the local youth were mostly fans of football games, he started to learn more about this game and found he liked it too, As he said: *“ You have to try new things in order to get acquainted with them....for example, ...I never played football before I came to Canada. ...after I tried football, it’s actually one of my favorite sports right now.”*

Question three: What voices emerge from EFL and ESL learners’ respective mediated action in space?

## **a) EFL Learners**

In accordance with three categories of perspectives regarding their spaces of English use, three types of voices emerged as well.

The majority of participants in this study felt happy if their space after class was dominantly English. They believed that, as a result of expanding space of English use, their English would achieve a higher level, and their life should become happier.

The second group showed conflictual voices. They wanted to have more space for English use after class, however they show reluctance in pursuing this goal. Some explained

that it was because of their limited English proficiency, while some claimed that they should not speak English to Chinese friends.

The third group showed stronger voice in defending a space for the first language after class. They were resistant to the idea that English permeated their out-of-class space. As students wrote: *“I am Chinese”*. *“Chinese is my native language”*. *“(it is) ridiculous to forget Chinese.”* *“Chinese is the most beautiful language in the world.”*

## b) ESL Learners

All three participants believed that expanding the space of English use was necessary since it was in Canada. They all showed frustration in accessing English space. When asked what caused such frustration, they felt that it was because of their low English proficiency. As Amanda said in an interview, *“local kids usually speak very fast. If you said ‘pardon me’ more than twice, they would become impatient. Next time they will not talk to you anymore.”* Moreover, they believed that it was also because of different life experience that caused such difficulties. In one interview, Joe asked, *“How do you talk to local kids? What topics should I start?”*

Also, they felt that their true inner voice had not yet been heard in the space of English. When in dispute with others, they felt incapable of defending themselves. Amanda said, *“I am all fine when I speak Chinese, making friends, expressing my deep thoughts, no problem at all. But when I have to speak English, the level of my confidence decreases.”* Joe did not pass the final test of a swimming course. However the reason he was told by the instructor did not convince him. Feeling incapable of defending himself, he quitted the course afterwards.

## Discussions

### ESL and EFL: Space, Actions, and Voice

Both ESL and the majority of EFL learners in this study consider their space of English use insufficient in that they feel they do not have enough chances to use English. However, the claimed reasons are different. ESL learners’ understanding of opportunities of use English is using English with people whose first language is English. On the other hand, EFL learners perceive their chances of using English as the possibilities of co-creating opportunities with their peers. In the light of space, EFL learners are with their peers of the same ethnics who do not necessarily share the same vision and goal regarding English use. They are insiders of the space thus their attention is on English use per se. ESL learners are in a space of diversified ethnics who do not unanimously consider each other insiders of the space. Accordingly, ESL learners make every endeavour to socialize with the members in the space by expanding chances of socialization, such as tutoring Maths and science.

ESL and EFL learners’ actions of expanding English use space in this study are dissimilar. Even though both groups believe that practice makes perfect, ESL learners explore resources other than language itself while EFL learners focus on language.

In the light of voice, while EFL learners question the needs and purposes of using English all the time, ESL learners are more concerned with approaches to access English-speaking counterparts. Moreover, ESL learners manage to avoid the social network of Chinese, which they consider a necessary step prior to entering into an English space. To

them, to expand the space of English use means discarding the space of Chinese and becoming a member of English use space.

### **ESL and EFL: English as Mediational Means and English as Mediated Actions**

Language learning is contextual and situated. Learning is dependent on the social and cultural structures in which a space offers (Norton & Toohey, 2001). However, it does not mean that language learners are subject to such structures (Norton, 1995). In this study, ESL learners and the larger group of EFL learners felt insufficient space for their English use. They preferred English to their first language, and explored opportunities to expand the space for English; however, the nature of such mediated actions is different.

In the case of EFL learners, English becomes a mediational means and using English is mediated actions. Their mediated actions reflect their goal: to improve English. Therefore, English is “about action (Roth & Lee, 2007, p.208)” of which the object of attention is on English language itself. With the materiality of mediational means in a Chinese space, EFL learners encounter structured insufficiency. In other words, their life experience and social network are dominantly socially and culturally Chinese, which makes all-English-after-class ideology strenuous. This also explains why most studies found that EFL students could not insist in using English all the time after the class. Such phenomenon cannot be merely interpreted as the lack of motivation. Rather, it is because of local situational space that structures individuals’ mediated actions.

Moreover, mediational means evolve from tool to praxis (Cole, 1996). Since the space has its local and situational knowledge of Chinese, mediated actions with evolving mediational means will eventually add new cultural and social norms to the current space. Thus, this mediated action in the current space cannot be considered neutral, in that mediational means will eventually evolve from a sign to praxis (Cole, 1996), where English will be used for and of action (Roth & Lee, 2007). To be specific, to expand the space of English use in a Chinese space is to change its situationality and locality of a Chinese space. This explains why some EFL learners are resistant to the expansion of English space, in that mediated actions eventually will bring changes to their life experience, i.e., praxis. Thus, using English in EFL out-of-class space is not merely neutral mediated actions, or a neutral replacement of one mediational means over another. Rather, it is to change the praxis of a local space.

In the case of ESL learners, even though they share the same goal as EFL learners: to improve English, their mediated actions have more layers and their mediational means are more complicated. Their mediated actions include constructing social networks with English speaking peers, and the mediational means contains English, Maths, sports and other “hot” topics.

The three ESL participants in this study show deliberate efforts in approaching and affiliating themselves with English space; however the outcomes are not as ideal as they desire. They believe that it is because they have not tried hard enough. However, expanding the space of English as ESL learners is more complicated than we have imagined. They do not just enter into an English space; rather, they also enter into a space of English praxis. In other words, ESL learners in this study do not simply use English language as a mediational means. For example, they make use of their excellence of Maths in helping local youth. Moreover, they also attempt to live a life of English inclusive of a wider range of mediational means. For instance, they familiarize themselves with sports or

other popular topics among the local youth in order to have common interests. In this case, sports or other popular topics become mediational means, understanding local culture is mediated action. As can be seen, mediational means are more than English language; rather, it is local life experience which is structured by this space. Further, it includes a speech genre that is closely related to the local experience yet dominant in this space. In this regard, ESL learners are using English for action, about action and of action (Roth & Lee, 2007).

### **The Implications on ESL and EFL Learning in the Global Wave**

The globalization of English has permeated both local and global spaces. This explains why both EFL and ESL learners in this study all perceive English as a dominant symbolic capital in their respective lived space. However, when ESL and EFL learners are considered as one category, the distinct sociocultural spaces in which learners are embedded are underestimated (Firth & Wagner, 1997). In this regard, this study suggests a reconsideration of EFL and ESL as respective categories due to their particular social spaces. From the sociocultural perspective, learners learn through mediated actions with mediational means in response to local situations they live in. Thus it is important to pay attention to different social and cultural situations in which ESL and EFL learners live. In other words, dissimilar social and cultural situations in which ESL and EFL learners live become a critical factor in understanding learners' experiences of English use and voices.

As other studies identified (Gu, 2010; Yokisawa, 2010), EFL learners create an imagined space intertwined with existent L1 spaces, within which they act in accordance with perceived social norms of English. Therefore, the nature of using English out-of-class all day is to build a globally dominant yet imagined social space of English within local L1 space within which their failure and resistance are silenced and repressed. In this study, EFL learners believe that the failure of incorporating English into daily social interactions is largely due to their lower proficiency and motivation. In other words, the failure of using English after-class is ostensibly due to EFL learners' lower English proficiency and lack of preservation, which is obvious supported by studies from different perspectives. Aligned with this belief, strategies aiming to increase their motivation and proficiency are constantly discussed and put into practice by studies aforementioned. This study attempts to point out that the study on the lack of engagement should be linked to the nature of social interactions in EFL learners' local social space. In other words, their voices of frustration, anxiety and resistance should be discussed in the light of their conflictual experiences of daily social interactions in imagined and local social spaces.

ESL learners also experience frustration and anxiety, yet their social interaction is by nature different in comparison with EFL learners. As linguistic minorities, ESL learners' English use in a multilingual social space are complicated and their identity of conflicts arise in the course of negotiation with and in dominant language social space. Thus, the nature of ESL learners' is to enter into a dominant English social space, in other words, another field of power in the society (Bourdieu, 1989). As linguistic minorities, their difficulties and frustration lie in the course of accessing the social space of English, which they believe should be achieved at the cost of their L1 social network.

In the end of the article, it is very important to point out that the author never intends to imply that ESL learning is for survival while EFL learning is for social prestige. Instead, the author wants to stress that both are social achievement (Firth & Wagner, 2007)

and active reaction to and participation in globalization (Watson-Gegeo, 2004). Expanding the framework of who does what with mediational means (Wertsch, 1991), this study adds the dimension of space into analysis, in order to explore the leverage of symbolic relations on language users' social space and their voices. With an anti-reductionistic frame, this study suggests that EFL learners mediate mediational means external to a space of theirs, while ESL learners mediate mediational means internal to the existent space of others.

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