

Conspiracy Theories Towards Language Development: a Case of Online Engagements*

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Abstract: With the ascendancy of digitalization over traditional modes of communication in the rapid dissemination of information, a proliferation of unsubstantiated claims has emerged, particularly within the domain of online learning. Such claims, frequently equated with fabrications, exert a notable influence on the shaping of public discourse. In this context, the present study seeks to examine the impact of conspiracy theories on language development within online learning environments. This qualitative investigation employed focus group interviews as the primary data collection method, chosen for their capacity to elicit in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences. The research sample comprised six conveniently selected teachers responsible for delivering language-related modules across varying levels of student registration. Data were obtained through the administration of open-ended questions, which facilitated the exploration of teachers' perceptions regarding the intersection of online learning and language development. The findings of the study underscore two principal concerns: (i) the necessity of investing in fact-checking initiatives to counteract the circulation of unverified information, and (ii) the detrimental impact of misinformation on public attitudes, which, in turn, undermines language development and disrupts established educational practices. In light of these outcomes, the study recommends the systematic promotion of digital media literacy as a pedagogical strategy to strengthen learners' linguistic competencies while simultaneously mitigating the influence of misinformation in online spaces. Ultimately, these measures converge toward the cultivation of learners as critical thinkers capable of navigating the complexities of digital communication.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; language development; online engagements; misinformation; digital platforms; communication

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Teorías de la conspiración en torno al desarrollo del lenguaje: un caso de interacciones en línea

Resumen: Con el auge de la digitalización sobre los modos tradicionales de comunicación en la rápida difusión de información, proliferan afirmaciones no fundamentadas, particularmente en el ámbito del aprendizaje en línea. Tales afirmaciones, frecuentemente equiparadas con fabricaciones, ejercen una notable influencia en la configuración del discurso público. En este contexto, el artículo busca examinar el impacto de las teorías de la conspiración en el desarrollo del lenguaje dentro de entornos de aprendizaje en línea. Esta investigación cualitativa empleó entrevistas a grupos focales como principal método de recolección de datos, seleccionadas por su capacidad para obtener perspectivas profundas sobre las experiencias vividas de los participantes. La muestra de investigación estuvo compuesta por seis docentes seleccionados por conveniencia, responsables de impartir módulos relacionados con el lenguaje en distintos niveles de formación estudiantil. Los datos se obtuvieron mediante la aplicación de preguntas abiertas, lo que facilitó la exploración de las percepciones de los docentes respecto a la intersección entre el aprendizaje en línea y el desarrollo del lenguaje. Los hallazgos del estudio destacan dos preocupaciones principales: 1) la necesidad de invertir en iniciativas de verificación de información para contrarrestar la circulación de datos no verificados, y 2) el impacto perjudicial de la desinformación en las actitudes públicas, que a su vez debilita el desarrollo del lenguaje y altera las prácticas educativas establecidas. A la luz de estos resultados, el estudio recomienda la promoción sistemática de la alfabetización mediática digital como estrategia pedagógica para fortalecer las competencias lingüísticas de los estudiantes, al tiempo que se mitiga la influencia de la desinformación en los entornos en línea. En última instancia, estas medidas convergen en la formación de estudiantes como pensadores críticos capaces de desenvolverse en las complejidades de la comunicación digital.

Palabras clave: teorías de la conspiración; desarrollo del lenguaje; interacciones en línea; desinformación; plataformas digitales; comunicación

Teorias da conspiração em torno do desenvolvimento da linguagem: um caso de interações online

Resumo: Com a ascensão da digitalização sobre os modos tradicionais de comunicação na rápida disseminação de informações, surgiu uma proliferação de alegações não fundamentadas, particularmente no domínio da aprendizagem online. Tais alegações, frequentemente equiparadas a fabricações, exercem uma influência significativa na configuração do discurso público. Nesse contexto, o presente estudo busca examinar o impacto das teorias da conspiração no desenvolvimento da linguagem em ambientes de aprendizagem online. Esta investigação qualitativa utilizou entrevistas com grupos focais como principal método de coleta de dados, escolhidas por sua capacidade de proporcionar percepções aprofundadas sobre as experiências vividas pelos participantes. A amostra da pesquisa foi composta por seis professores selecionados por conveniência, responsáveis por ministrar módulos relacionados à linguagem em diferentes níveis de formação dos estudantes. Os dados foram obtidos por meio da aplicação de perguntas abertas, o que possibilitou a exploração das percepções dos professores sobre a interseção entre a aprendizagem online e o desenvolvimento da linguagem. Os resultados do estudo destacam duas principais preocupações: 1) a necessidade de investir em iniciativas de verificação de fatos para combater a circulação de informações não verificadas, e 2) o impacto prejudicial da desinformação nas atitudes públicas, o que, por sua vez, compromete o desenvolvimento da linguagem e perturba práticas educacionais estabelecidas. À luz desses resultados, o estudo recomenda a promoção sistemática da alfabetização midiática digital como estratégia pedagógica para fortalecer as competências linguísticas dos estudantes, ao mesmo tempo em que mitiga a influência da desinformação nos ambientes online. Em última instância, essas medidas convergem para a formação de estudantes como pensadores críticos capazes de navegar pelas complexidades da comunicação digital.

Palavras-chave: teorias da conspiração; desenvolvimento da linguagem; interações online; desinformação; plataformas digitais; comunicação

Introduction

The rapid expansion of global connectedness has positioned online platforms as highly recognized channels for information dissemination, often superseding traditional modes of communication (Mancosu and Vegetti, 2020). While many scholars view this communication logic as fertile ground due to its perceived credibility, its reliability remains questionable (Cibik and Hardoš, 2022). Within this context, conspiracy theories related to language development have generated intense debate, frequently fueled by misinformation amplified through online traction (Pennycook and Rand, 2018). Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to examine the implications of such theories for policy imperatives and public discourse. Three subsidiary objectives guide this inquiry:

- To analyze prominent conspiracy theories related to language development in online spaces.
- To investigate the motivations underlying the transmission of such theories and their influence on language acquisition.
- To evaluate the broader implications of conspiracy theories for public discourse and language policy.

Although digital platforms facilitate rapid information dissemination and global knowledge exchange, scholars have identified significant risks associated with these channels (Cook, Lewandowsky, and Ecker, 2017). Online engagements, while powerful tools for accessibility, have also been associated with mistrust, misinformation, and misleading narratives that distort public understanding and generate unrealistic debates (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018). These dynamics contribute to reshaping societal beliefs, behaviors, and policy implementation, underscoring the importance of probing the complex interplay between online interaction and the propagation of unverified claims (Ward and Barker, 2013).

Douglas et al. (2019) highlight that, within educational and language development contexts, the spread of conspiracy theories is often rooted in psychological and social motivations. Individuals who feel threatened by complex social realities or

systemic uncertainties may gravitate toward conspiracy narratives as a means of imposing order on chaotic circumstances. Within education, such tendencies are particularly visible among those who struggle with language acquisition and seek to assign blame to external actors—teachers, school governing bodies, or policymakers (Kubota et al., 2022). These individuals may resort to conspiracy narratives that vilify established authorities when confronted with educational failures or challenges (Darabi et al., 2018).

The dissemination of conspiracy theories related to language development is further reinforced by social dynamics (Blommaert and Verschueren, 2022). Groups united by shared beliefs about language policy or educational systems often consolidate their collective identity through adherence to conspiracy theories. These dynamic fosters an “us versus them” discourse between teachers, policymakers, and the broader community. Consequently, conspiracy beliefs become embedded within broader political and ideological frameworks, thereby complicating the landscape of language acquisition in educational contexts. The interplay between individual psychological needs and societal pressures exacerbates these challenges, with significant implications for learners.

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to online learning communities, notable gaps remain in the literature regarding the ways in which digital-age misrepresentation shapes educational outcomes (DeWitt, Atkinson, and Wegner, 2018). This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how online engagement and conspiracy theory propagation intersect with language advancement (Dyrendal and Jolley, 2020). In addressing these gaps, it advocates for strategies to counter the proliferation of misinformation, thereby fostering evidence-based discourse in language education. Such efforts, it is argued, are essential for advancing language learning in the digital era and for supporting the cultivation of informed and critical learners (Berman and Stoddard, 2021).

Background

Enhanced language learning constitutes a foundational basis for human perception and

communication, shaping interactions in increasingly complex ways. Although language acquisition remains a critical component of language education, concerning trends have emerged with the rise of the digital landscape (Douglas, Uscinski, and Sutton, 2019). These developments challenge established knowledge and scientific consensus, as conspiracy theories are frequently invoked to explain events in the absence of credible evidence. Within the diverse curricular offerings of South African institutions of higher learning, language development has not been immune to the influence of such theories (Wood and Douglas, 2013).

Pearson and Rae (2017) observe that the fertile environment fostered by online learning platforms, coupled with the circulation of conspiracy theories, exerts a significant influence on language development. This influence is further reinforced by academics who, despite varying levels of expertise and intention, converge in the construction and dissemination of these narratives (Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019). Consequently, both internal and external educational stakeholders have been drawn into the debates generated by such claims. Teachers of additional languages—such as English, which is the primary focus of this investigation—have reported that conspiracy narratives directly and indirectly shape language learning practices. In this regard, Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson (2016) contend that online platforms function as primary vehicles for the dissemination of conspiracy theories, with implications for both language acquisition and broader processes of linguistic evolution.

Literature Review

The dynamics of conspiracy theories provide a critical foundation for exploring potential correlations between language development and online engagement, as examined from both psychological and communicative perspectives (Graeupner and Coman, 2017). In the current digital era, information consumption is profoundly shaped by the rapid spread of misinformation, particularly when connected to conspiracy theories. Pennycook and Rand (2018) argue that exposure to false claims disseminated online can paradoxically enhance

knowledge accuracy, though such encounters simultaneously underscore the pervasive influence of conspiracy theories on language development. Accordingly, psychological factors underpinning the persistence of conspiracy beliefs have been identified.

Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) emphasize that misinformation and conspiracy narratives are reinforced by underlying psychological mechanisms. Their work highlights online engagement as a key factor shaping social psychology, biases, and ultimately, processes of language development (Vaportzis, Giatsi Clausen, and Gow, 2017). Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) further associate the emergence of conspiracy theories with crisis situations across diverse linguistic communities and learner populations. For teaching and learning communities, it is therefore imperative to examine how contextual and digital factors jointly contribute to shaping language development in an environment where conspiracy theories gain traction.

From an educational standpoint, the implications of conspiracy theories for language advancement are substantial. Adler and Landa (2020) contend that the digital learning and teaching environment is directly impacted by conspiracy narratives, creating an urgent need for language teachers to foster critical thinking and media literacy skills to manage the dissemination of information effectively (Mercier and Sperber, 2017). The rapid circulation of conspiracy-related claims has heightened the prevalence of misinformation, with particularly adverse consequences for learners whose primary language is not English. Pennycook and Rand (2018) demonstrate that such false information narrows the scope of reliable sources available to learners, thereby undermining the credibility of knowledge acquisition and impeding language development.

Against this backdrop, the present study was undertaken to investigate the interplay between language development, online engagement, and conspiracy theories. Its central aim is to generate meaningful insights into the narratives that emerge within online learning communities and their implications for educational practice (Bridgman, Merkley, Zhilin, Loewen, Owen, and Ruths, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This inquiry is underpinned by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals categorize themselves into social groups, thereby shaping perceptions, behaviors, and interactions. Integrating perspectives from media literacy, communication studies, and social psychology, the theory provides a multi-faceted lens through which to examine online learning and language development. Such categorizations, however, can also foster exclusion, group polarization, and selective preferences—outcomes that may disrupt the balance of social ecosystems (Rogers, 2020). Within online communities, conspiracy theories exemplify these dynamics, as individuals frequently align themselves along group identities reinforced by social cohesion mechanisms (van Dijck, Winkel, and de Schafer, 2021).

The applicability of Social Identity Theory extends to the classroom environment, where its principles inform understandings of language development and online interactions (Craft, Ashley, and Maksl, 2017). The theory underscores the need for stakeholders across the education system—including policymakers, educators, and learners—to cultivate belonging and mutual respect within both physical and virtual learning contexts (Byford, 2011; Mahl, Zeng, and Schafer, 2021).

Accordingly, it becomes the responsibility of school management to strengthen positive group affiliations among teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, and the wider community. In higher education, the pursuit of shared goals fosters collaborative environments that may reduce the influence of conspiracy theories by reinforcing collective identity (Lantian, Muller, Nurra, and Douglas, 2017). An additional safeguard lies in promoting inclusive discussions, which enable learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds to transcend personal differences and engage constructively.

Educationally, these implications necessitate redefined pedagogical approaches and potential curriculum revisions aimed at fostering critical thinking and digital media literacy. Such measures would enable learners to navigate the complexities of misinformation, particularly conspiracy

theories, while simultaneously strengthening language development. Ultimately, these strategies contribute not only to enhanced linguistic competencies but also to the cultivation of resilient, critically engaged learners capable of applying these skills across disciplines (Barzilai and Chinn, 2020).

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative inquiry is grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR), a methodological design that actively involves both researchers and participants in a collaborative process aimed at generating a deeper understanding of underlying social dynamics (Flemming and Noyes, 2021). Through this approach, participants and researchers engage in dialogue and shared reflection, with the ultimate objective of fostering social change.

PAR is characterized by its core components—participation, action, research, and social transformation—each contributing to its orientation toward social justice. The high degree of participant involvement typically takes the form of focus group discussions and stakeholder dialogues, which facilitate the co-construction of knowledge. One of the central strengths of PAR lies in its function as an evaluative tool that promotes learning among those most directly engaged with processes of social change. By doing so, it generates public knowledge and contributes to the development of “theories of action” that inform broader collective initiatives.

Scholars emphasize that PAR is most effective when applied to contexts in which individuals work together to address a common problem, negotiating perspectives and clarifying shared concerns. The outcome of such deliberative processes often involves shifts in perception and understanding, leading to fundamental changes within participants’ social contexts. These outcomes are typically facilitated through practices of active listening, which encourage both self-reflection and critical reflection, thereby reinforcing the transformative potential of the approach.

Focus Groups

A qualitative data collection technique that uses group interviews is known as a focus group interview. As focus groups are mostly administered through convenience sampling, it was the same case for this qualitative investigation. One advantage of this data collection instrument is its combination of group members who form a combination of characteristics from an inclusive population (Booth, Noyes, Flemming, Moore, Tuncalp and Shakibazadeh, 2019). This benefit, therefore, is an attribute towards gaining a broader understanding of the investigated topic. The population for this study comprises all teachers from the same institution of higher learning, offering language-related modules like Home Language, First Additional Language, Communication Skills, and Academic Literacy Skills. For the purposes of this inquiry, six participants were identified.

Subsequently, the six nominated group members were at liberty as diverse opinions were allowed when discussions were administered. It was really an overwhelming yet interesting scene to observe participants agreeing and, at times, inconsistent with shared sentiments. These six participants were identified because of the similar characteristics they shared, which were offering language-related modules across differing levels of students' registration. Modules varied between English as an additional language and Communication Skills. All topics shared by this group revolved around beliefs in language development conspiracy theories for online learning imperatives.

As a group facilitator, thus catering to ethical observance when interacting with the participants, I ensured that an environment encouraging and permitting chances for shared perceptions among participants was generated. As I controlled and conducted the focus group processes, I ensured that I displayed a sense of being non-judgmental as diverse responses were shared by the participants, while also respecting the participants by being open-minded, leading to ensuring the quality of the generated data through focus group interviews.

Henceforth, after gathering all the data from the study informants, the time had arrived for the data to be analysed. This exercise was conducted through thematic analysis, and this data analysis technique gave guidance to the identification of themes where related and equivalent patterns were gathered, also taking cognizance of responses that somehow seemed dissimilar from the ones that were correlating (Atenas, Havemann and Timmermann, 2023). All along, I ensured to guard against biases with the likelihood of adversely influencing the research processes. Participant responses were pseudonymized.

Findings

For this study, which examined conspiracy theories related to language advancement in online learning environments, a variety of findings were obtained. The results revealed that initiatives focused on fact-checking, particularly those addressing unverified information and its influence on public attitudes in the context of misinformation, have a detrimental impact on language development. The following section presents the themes that emerged from the analysis and are discussed as the study's main findings.

Fact-Checking Initiatives

To ensure that online users have access to reliable and relevant information, it appears necessary for digital platforms to invest in fact-checking initiatives and warning systems. Such mechanisms would help identify and highlight disputed or unverified content. This finding aligns with the first research objective, which sought to examine prominent conspiracy theories surrounding language enhancement in online environments.

In support of this, Participant 1 (P1) observed:

"For both teachers and students to avoid accessing misleading information when consulting online sources, it would be preferable if platforms incorporated warnings with clear labels, enabling all users to recognize potentially inaccurate content."

Similarly, Participant 2 (P2) emphasized:

“Engaging with misleading content can negatively affect the articulation of information that diverges from what was anticipated. Therefore, fact-checking conducted by organizations and social media platforms can add value to the accuracy of online learning environments.”

In addition, Participant 3 (P3) noted:

“What appears to be escalating is a decline in trust, which educational institutions fail to maintain due to uncertainty. This stems partly from language policies that are vulnerable to manipulation under socio-political pressures.”

Along similar lines, Participant 4 (P4) argued:

“For language learning to improve, strategies should be implemented to counteract the influence of conspiracy theories. These may include, but are not limited to, curricula focused on critical thinking and digital literacy programs.”

Finally, Participant 5 (P5) highlighted the policy dimension:

“There is an urgent need for policymakers to address the spread and impact of conspiracy theories, as these have a detrimental effect on online language learning. This should serve as a wake-up call for community engagement stakeholders to develop strategies aimed at strengthening awareness of language development within digital learning environments.”

Public Attitudes

Given the extent to which public attitudes and behaviours shaped by conspiracy theories are well-recognized, it becomes imperative to argue that such consequences may emerge in the context of language development, thereby compromising educational pedagogies. When language development is influenced by the spread of conspiracy theories through public attitudes and discourse, the resulting impact directly aligns with this study's second and third objectives.

In this regard, Participant 1 (P1) reflected:

“Considering how external factors affected learning environments in the pre-digital era, there were virtually no threats to language strategies aimed at enhancing development. At present, however, it becomes crucial to identify the origins of conspiracy theories.”

Building on this, Participant 2 (P2) noted:

“Since the rise of social media platforms and the influence of online figures, one must question whether these conspiracy theories can be compared to historical forms of linguistic suppression or promotion.”

Similarly, Participant 3 (P3) expressed concern:

“As a language teacher, my greatest worry is that groups of learners increasingly demonstrate varied behaviours, often showing reluctance to engage with language learning platforms. This lack of engagement directly contributes to lower academic performance.”

Along the same lines, Participant 4 (P4) observed:

“Many students in higher education are caught up in stress and anxiety, and they require constant motivation to persevere. Such attitudes toward language learning inevitably affect performance across all curriculum subjects.”

In addition, Participant 5 (P5) pointed out:

“There is a noticeable trend of mistrust toward certain online educational resources for language acquisition and proficiency. This mistrust frequently results in learners producing assignments with insufficient or unreliable information, reflecting their dependence on unverified sources.”

Finally, Participant 6 (P6) emphasized the role of linguistic diversity:

“Students in my classes come from multilingual backgrounds, with a wide range of home languages. The exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction presents challenges, as divisions among learners are often exacerbated. When students from different language backgrounds are grouped together, they frequently express dissatisfaction. These cultural perceptions, in turn, reinforce stereotypical attitudes.”

Discussion

When examining the cohort of academics affected by conspiracy theories, it becomes evident that strengthening communication logistics requires the involvement of teachers, researchers, and stakeholders across the educational spectrum. Communicators, regardless of their disciplinary backgrounds, play a critical role in confronting misinformation and conspiracy narratives (Clark, 2018). To ensure that valid and scientifically grounded information is accessed for language development, deliberate efforts must be made to distinguish credible sources from unreliable ones (Goreis and Voracek, 2019). Such measures contribute to bridging gaps in public understanding, shaping perceptions of science communication as a tool to reduce misinformation (Lewandowsky, Oberauer and Gignac, 2013).

Accordingly, online communities must collectively engage in open dialogue to dispel misconceptions associated with conspiracy theories. Such collaborative strategies create opportunities for teachers, researchers, and communicators to critically engage with misleading narratives (Cook and Lewandowsky, 2016). Open and inclusive communication platforms, accessible to school stakeholders and broader audiences worldwide, can contribute to balanced perspectives on language development. This equilibrium is expected to reduce unfounded conspiracy theories within online learning contexts.

In this regard, digital platforms bear a responsibility to prevent the unintentional amplification of misinformation. Users reasonably expect online content to be accurate and reliable rather than misleading. As Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) argue, conspiracy theories not only influence public attitudes and behaviours but also exert significant pressure on policy formulation. Correcting these misconceptions is essential to ensuring more informed decision-making and redefining strategies aimed at mitigating misinformation.

The rise of digital misinformation highlights the intersection of conspiracy theories and language acquisition policies as a pressing concern. While online platforms provide diverse resources that foster learner autonomy (Sato and Loewen,

2022), they simultaneously expose learners to misinformation, including conspiracy theories that hinder language proficiency. As policies on language acquisition evolve in response to these challenges, stakeholders must prioritize media literacy in curriculum design (Van Hell, 2023). Enabling learners to critically evaluate the credibility of online resources strengthens their capacity to navigate the language learning landscape effectively.

Furthermore, within online education—particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic—conspiracy theories exacerbate learner anxiety, which negatively affects language acquisition (Douglas, 2021). Communication tasks conducted in digital environments frequently heighten such anxiety, further impeding learning processes. Therefore, pedagogical reforms should not only adopt advanced technological tools but also incorporate psychological support mechanisms to address the emotional burden of misinformation. A supportive environment is thus indispensable for successful language acquisition in a digital era (Dewaele and MacIntyre, 2019).

The findings of this investigation align with the study's underpinning theory, revealing that teaching practices are shaped by how educators perceive the influence of conspiracy theories on online learning and language development. These perceptions affect not only classroom practices but also the external reputation and credibility of educational institutions, which are increasingly scrutinized within virtual learning environments (Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran and Furnham, 2014). As such, mitigating the adverse effects of conspiracy theories must be prioritized within institutional strategies.

Ultimately, investigating conspiracy theories in relation to language development in online learning contexts provides comprehensive insights into this phenomenon. Such an inquiry underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers, learners, researchers, and policymakers (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020). By fostering collective engagement, stakeholders can develop holistic strategies to counteract the emergence and influence of conspiracy theories, thereby safeguarding language development in the digital age.

Recommendations

The study recommends that there is a need to promote digital media literacy within the circle of all age groups. For everybody across the entire world, online platforms seem to play an important role in disseminating conspiracy theories. With the provision of media literacy programs, education institutions, the country's legislature, and digital platforms are expected to collaborate to see to the implementation of media literacy programs. For these programmes to be fully fledged, all inhabitants would be equipped and attain the desired critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the online engagements' intricacies. In addition to that, when learners across all levels and across diverse curricula are registered and empowered to functionally make informed judgments of all forms of misinformation, they would have climbed a milestone to be considered critical thinkers with expertise to be global competitors within the sphere of career advancement.

Conclusion

The study recommends the promotion of digital media literacy across all age groups. Given the pivotal role online platforms play in disseminating conspiracy theories globally, it is imperative that educational institutions, legislative bodies, and digital platforms collaborate to implement comprehensive media literacy programs. For such initiatives to be effective, they must equip individuals with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the complexities of online engagement.

Furthermore, when learners across diverse educational levels and curricula are systematically empowered to make informed judgments regarding misinformation, they move closer to becoming critical thinkers capable of evaluating digital content with discernment. In doing so, they acquire essential competencies not only for academic success but also for positioning themselves as globally competitive professionals in their future careers.

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