

Advocating for Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction in Moroccan Multilingual Public Schools

By *Rabia Redouane**

Since independence, Morocco has adopted Arabization, a monolingual policy that entails the use of Standard Arabic as the sole medium of instruction in public schools. But recent policies have advocated for a multilingual education that promotes mother tongues' use in early instruction in public schools and foreign languages. In 2003, a National Education and Training Charter called for teaching the mother tongue Tamazight. As a result, Tamazight was recognized as an official language and was integrated into the school system. Although Moroccan Arabic or Darija is also the mother tongue that most Moroccans learn to speak since their birth, and the language of daily communication, it is overlooked in the education sector. Recent debates have advocated for its use in public schools and for its standardization to obtain an official standing with Standard Arabic and Tamazight. This paper aims to contribute to discussions about mother tongues education and attempts to shed light on the importance of both mother tongues, Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight in Morocco. First, I will provide a description of Moroccan linguistic landscape considering all languages spoken, their status and their use. Secondly, I will discuss different past and present linguistic and educational policies focusing on the current one advocating for mother tongue Moroccan Arabic. Thirdly, I will examine challenges and problems that could face the implementation of this mother tongue policy. Finally, I will end this paper with recommendations for using Moroccan Arabic along with Standard Arabic and Tamazight in public schools.

Keywords: *mother tongue policy, Moroccan educational policies, implementation assessment*

Introduction

Upon their independence, colonized countries faced myriad issues and challenges such as infrastructure, economic instability and dependence, ethnic rivalries, and lack of resources. But one of the key issues is the return to national identity and use of the national language as the sole medium of instruction in schools, a language that was eradicated and replaced by the language of the colonizer. This paper reports, on the one hand, the debate about the current educational reform that advocates for the use of mother tongue Moroccan Arabic in early instruction in public schools, and on the other hand, discusses challenges that face its implementation. It consists of five sections. First, a presentation of local and foreign languages spoken in Morocco that characterizes a linguistic diverse and complex society will be followed by an examination of past and present linguistic and educational policies that have influenced the choice and the

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vehicle of language(s) in schools. Third, challenges and problems that could face the implementation of this mother tongue policy will be investigated, and finally recommendations for the use of Moroccan Arabic along with Standard Arabic and Tamazight will be offered.

Moroccan Linguistic Situation

National Languages

Morocco is a multilingual country that boasts a rich linguistic diversity characterized by a presence of two mother tongues (Moroccan Arabic or Darija, and Berber or Tamazight), Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic or Fusha and foreign languages, mainly French, Spanish, and English. All these languages have a different status and do not benefit from equal footing in Moroccan's society in the education. First, Berber is the language of Berbers, the Indigenous population of Morocco. Berbers call themselves Amazigh and refer to their language as Tamazight which is used in reference to a particular variety of Berber in Morocco, of which there are three dialects: Tarifit spoken in Rif mountains in the North, Tashlehait spoken in the Southwest, especially in the Souss Valley, and Tamazight spoken in the Middle Atlas and the eastern half of the high Atlas Mountains. At least 30% of Moroccans speak one of the three Berber dialects and deem it their mother tongue (El Amraoui 2007).

Second, Arabic language which was introduced to Morocco in the seventh century during the Arab invasion and was adopted by Berbers as the language of administration, legislation, and education during that time. Today, three varieties of Arabic are in use in Morocco and stand in a triglossic relationship, that is three varieties of the same language existing side by side, each enjoying a particular status and fulfilling different sociolinguistic functions: Classical Arabic, the high variety, is the language of the Qur'an taught in religious schools and used in religious functions (Ayoub 2017, p. 2). The Modern version of Classical Arabic is Standard Arabic (SA). It is the official language of Morocco used in formal settings, government, administration, and education. The third variety is Moroccan Arabic (MA) or Darija spoken by 60% of the population. It is the low variety of Arabic since it is an oral and non-standardized language. It is the mother tongue of all Moroccans, except in Amazigh-speaking area and used for everyday communication by both Arabic and Amazigh speakers. This is the variety that some concerned Moroccans advocate for its use in early instruction.

Foreign Languages

In addition to these local languages, three major foreign languages (French, Spanish, and English) are added to Moroccan repertoire. Among these foreign languages, French is still prevalent in Morocco even after sixty-seven years of independence from French occupation, and it is used significantly in many spheres of Moroccan public life, overshadowing local languages in official and unofficial

communication. Spanish, on the other hand, is spoken mostly in the North of Morocco because of its geographic proximity to Spain. It is also spoken in the Western Sahara region of Southern Morocco. Spanish “has been in constant decline because of its absence in the unified educational system (Benzakour et al. 2000, pp. 71-72).

The last foreign language is English which occupies a considerable place near French due to the advent of globalization. It is used particularly in the fields of tourism, media, and finance. In education, it is taught as a foreign language in high schools and universities, and for several private institutions for a higher education, it is the only language of instruction.

Pre-and Post-Independence Educational Policies

The French and Spanish Educational Policy

During the French protectorate in Morocco from 1912 to 1956, French was imposed and instituted as the main language of instruction at all levels of education in schools, and Standard Arabic as a foreign language. French colonizers practiced a linguistic policy “based on what they perceived to be their *mission civilisatrice*” (Ezzaki and Wagner 1991, p. 216) – spreading their language and values by educating Moroccans to believe in the universality and superiority of the French culture and language, which they then imposed in the cities and certain selected rural areas as “the only language of civilization and advancement” (Bourhis 1982, p. 14). This French educational policy intended to weaken the status of Standard Arabic, the perceived symbol of national and cultural identity by promoting mother tongues (Tamazight dialects and Arabic vernaculars) through formal teaching, and by closing Arabic Koranic schools in Amazigh-speaking regions. This was done through the *Dahir berbère* (Berber Decree) of 1930, which created a type of schools, where Standard Arabic was excluded and only French and Tamazight were taught.

During the Spanish occupation in the Northern part of Morocco and Western Sahara, even though the Spanish hounded the same language policy as French in advancing their language and culture in Morocco at the disadvantage of Arab culture and Islamic schools, it did not influence the linguistic situation of Morocco as French did because “there was not any sort of Spanish-style “civilizing mission” directed toward the local population. In the education, Spanish has not played a significant role “due to the fact that it is not normally a first language even for the relatively few who speak it fluently.” (Daniel Myra and Ball 2009, p. 128).

Arabization Policy

Since Morocco obtained its independence in 1956, it has been a national priority to eradicate the use of French and promote Standard Arabic as the sole medium of instruction and as the language of literacy and wider communication. A

monolingual policy known as Arabization was adopted. It is a cultural counterpart of political and economic independence aiming at restoring ‘authenticity,’ asserting Morocco’s Arabo-Islamic identity, and removing French cultural influence. Arabization was at first implemented sporadically, as teachers and funds were available. In the 1970’s, Standard Arabic was added to existing curricula in French at elementary and secondary schools; and by the end of 1990-1991, it was completed for all primary and secondary levels in public schools and became the language of all subjects across all grades. While widespread support for this principle was politically inevitable, its implementation has proven an arduous process. For example, a politically charged and sustained debate developed between the proponents of a modern and Westernized trend who favor balance bilingual education and the supporters of the Arabo-Islamic culture who advocate radical Arabization. Also, its pace and scope has depended largely on which of these groups has had more power in the government at a given time.

Mother Languages (Tamazight and Moroccan Arabic) Policy

Arabization was carried on until 2000, a year that marked the launching of the national Charter of Education and Training by King Mohamed VI. This Charter provided major changes and reforms in education and introduced a new educational policy that stressed a multilingual education in Morocco by improving the teaching and use of Modern Standard Arabic and promoting the diversification of foreign languages for teaching science and technology. Most importantly, it called for the openness to teaching all the three Berber dialects (Tarifit, Tamazight, and Tashelhit) to satisfy the regional needs of the heterogeneous population, and to give local independence to schools (Daniel Myra and Ball 2010, p. 131). For the first time in many decades, Tamazight language is officially recognized and deemed as a valued component of Moroccan identity, and “part of the country’s cultural inheritance” (COSEF 2000, p. 43). It was constitutionalized by a Royal Dahir decree as a national language, and declared in 2011 as an official language of Morocco besides, Standard Arabic as proclaimed in Article 5 of Morocco’s constitution:

“Tamazight [Berber/amazighe] constitutes an official language of the State, being common patrimony of all Moroccans without exception. An organic law defines the process of implementation of the official character of this language, as well as the modalities of its integration into teaching and into the priority domains of public life, so that it may be permitted in time to fulfill its function as an official language.” (Morocco’s Constitution 2011).

As a result, Tamazight has changed from a spoken non-recognized language to a written codified and standardized language, and its status has been uplifted. In 2003, Tamazight was integrated into the school system, first in elementary level across the country and gradually in all levels (Errihani 2006). Based on the household and region, Tamazight has been taught in the three varieties (Tomastik 2010).

Although Moroccan Arabic or Darija is the mother-tongue that most Moroccans learn to speak since their birth, it is not taught in schools. Formal learning in public schools is conducted in Standard Arabic, a language considered a second language for Arabic and non-Arabic speaking Moroccan students. A Moroccan child, whether Berber or Arab origin, it is within his family that he learns gradually, without even being aware of it, his mother tongue Moroccan Arabic or Berber (Tamazight). Once he gets to school, he will learn Standard Arabic and other foreign languages. The educational system includes three levels: 6 years of primary, 3 years of lower-middle and 3 years of upper secondary. Most Moroccan families enroll their children for two to three years in pre-school and in Quranic pre-school. In this latter, they learn the Arabic alphabet and Quran verses until they are of age to attend primary school. At the ages of 5 to 6, children will then attend primary school for the following 6 years where they are taught in Standard Arabic and French. English as a language is introduced in public schools until the seventh grade. In the middle school, students also learn another foreign language either English, Spanish, or German.

But, in recent years, there is an urge for the use of Darija in instruction at the elementary level to ease the learning of Standard Arabic. The emerging interest in reinforcing the significant role played by the mother tongue languages in the domain of education emerged right after King Mohammed VI's speech on August 20th, 2013, in which he drew attention to the educational problems and crisis in Morocco and urged for an educational reform. One of the reasons of Moroccan education failure stated by King Mohammed VI in his speech is "the disruptions caused by changing the language of instruction from Arabic, at the primary and secondary levels, to some foreign languages, for the teaching of scientific and technical subjects in higher education" (Morocco World News 2013). After the King's speech, Nourredine Ayouch, a well-known Moroccan businessman and a founder of a local educational foundation Zakoura, organized an international conference "Le chemin de la réussite" (The Path to success) in Casablanca on October 4th and 5th 2013 that gathered policy makers, scholars, linguists, and educators to discuss the origins of public schools' problems and propose solutions to these problems. One of the educational claims was to advocate for the use of the mother tongue Darija as the language of instruction from preschool through the first years of primary school with a gradual shift to Standard Arabic in the third grade. A rationale behind this proposal was that Moroccan children struggle and drop out of school because they are taught in a language they do not speak at home. So, since Darija is the mother tongue of most Moroccan children and is spoken and understood by most Amazigh-speaking children, its use in the educational system in early years of education might be beneficial for early leaning because it would facilitate and ease the acquisition of SA (Hall 2015, p. 278).

The use of mother tongue as medium of instruction has been found by researchers and educators to be valuable for school learners, especially in the first years of primary school. According to a report of the Hong Kong Education Department (1965), the use of mother tongue in teaching and learning facilitates the intake of knowledge, mastery of concepts, and discussion in the classroom.

Also, in 1984, a Commission Report of the same department indicated that mother tongue is the best instructional medium for teaching and learning. Various research studies on mother tongue education carried out in different contexts (e.g., Ndamba 2008, Iyamu and Ogiogbaen 2007, Ejieh 2017, Abiri 2003, Mohanlal 2001, among others) reveal that the best medium for teaching a child is the mother tongue because this is the language that children understand best and express themselves freely in (Ndamba 2008, Njoroge and Gatambuki Gathigia 2011).

Advocating for Moroccan Arabic in early instruction was met with resentment and skepticism and initiated heated debates among policy makers, activists, scholars, and linguists. While some advocate for the use of Darija in early instruction, others oppose firmly to its application and implementation. The paragraphs below present these contrasting views and positions of different Moroccans. Following the October colloquium, a debate between Nouredine Ayouch and the historian Abdellah Laroui took place on November 27, 2013, in a televised program called "Moubacharat Maâakoum". Ayouch supported the use of Darija as a language of instruction arguing that is the main mother tongue and more than 89% of Moroccans use it to communicate. He also endorsed his argument by referring to the UNESCO's (2008) recommendations, which propose that children who begin their instruction with their mother tongue continue to perform better than children who must acquire another language when they enter school (Ball 2010). UNESCO also declares that the teaching in the mother tongue helps in reducing the number of school dropouts (Bender et al. 2005).

Laroui, on the other hand, opposed to this policy stating that "Standard Arabic is linguistically rich, and that Darija is not qualified to cover Sciences and Academia because it lacks rules and standard practices in writing and syntax" (cited by Ait El Caid 2014, pp. 2-3). He argued that Darija should not be used into the scholarly domain because it "is not sufficiently rich to be utilized as a part of the educated community and is not able to offer the information base that [standard] Arabic is right now giving" (Al Jazeera English 2015, p. 2). He added that since teaching and learning are associated with written textbooks, and that the leading role for oral communication in school is to access these written books, Darija thus cannot fulfil this role. He also claimed that Darija cannot be a medium for higher learning because it is not a language 'of culture' that can be classified at the same level as other foreign languages (Hall 2015, pp. 283-284).

Another advocate of this policy is Ahmed Najim, Chief executive of Goud Ayouch, an online magazine who asserts that the use of Darija in early instruction could help improve Morocco's education dilemma because Moroccan students are often baffled by the switch from Darija at home to Fusha at school. According to him "Darija is fascinating in the sense that it is close to the Moroccan psyche. It simply strikes a chord with readers and has an enormous impact." (Al Jazeera 2014, p. 2).

Other adversaries like Fouad Abou Ali, president of the National Coalition for the Defense of Arabic Language, a grassroots advocacy organization, and Moqri Abouzayd, member of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) and of the parliament assert that the problem is not simply linguistic but political averring that this is another ploy to divide Moroccan society and deprive it from its Arab

and Islamic bequest (Al Jazeera 2014, p. 2), and adopting an unwritten tongue with a regional variation in instruction is an attempt to divide Moroccan society and culture. For instance, Fouad Abou Ali affirms that Fusha is “the language of Islam and “endeavors to estrange it focus on the social and religious quality framework it speaks to and will strip away Morocco’s Arabic and Islamic characters” (Al Jazeera 2015). Moqri Abouzayd, on the other hand, criticizes this policy and condemns it as “an endeavor to obliterate the establishments of the country and a scheme against Islam.” (Al Jazeera 2014, p. 2).

The above reactions demonstrate that the issue of language of instruction in school is not only a pedagogical concern, but also a social and political issue. They also show that most Moroccans do not approve of this reform and the use of Moroccan Arabic in schools instead they believe clearly in the significance and the value of Standard Arabic as the language of public education.

Problems Facing Implementation of Mother Tongue Policy

Most educational policies face challenges that hinder their implementation and this policy is no exception. One of the challenges could be attributed to practical factors. Individuals who called for this policy seem to act alone and are driven by ideological considerations rather than by educational values of the policy and real needs and concerns of individuals. Ayouch, one big proponent of this policy and who is mostly known as “an adamant francophone” has been accused by critics of “trying to serve a foreign agenda against the Arabic and Islamic identity of the country, though creating a dis-unified society whose communities would have different views shaped by their distinct languages, which would eventually lead to the alienation of SA” (Loutfi and Noamane 2020, p. 3). He was even attacked by Abdelilah Benkirane, the former Prime Minister of Morocco, who called him a businessperson who continuously tries to find someone to sell his country to (Al Raji 2014). In addition, the proposal for the reform was not supported by the Ministry of Education. Until now no partnership has been established between this governmental entity and Ayouch to carefully study this proposal and evaluate its validity.

Another challenge could be appertained to an attitudinal factor. A considerable number of studies have reported that most Moroccans hold negative attitudes towards their mother tongues -Darija and Tamazight (e.g., Loutfi 2020, Loutfi and Noamane 2020, Belhaiah and Lamallam 2020, Ait Dada 2011, El kirat El Allame et al. 2010, Errihani 2008 among others). For example, in Loutfi’s (2020) study that examined the status of language in use in Morocco and the impact of Arabization on the status of mother tongues, the findings reveal that most respondents (teachers and students) express negative attitudes towards their mother tongues and disapprove of the idea of introducing them in education because these languages might undervalue the status of Arabic. “For them, Arabic is the language which represents them and with which they project their identity in the world. The nature of this negative attitude is motivated by the fact that these mother tongues, particularly MA, are neither officially recognized by the state nor

the language guarantees economic returns” (p. 10). Also, findings of Belhaiah and Lamallam’s study (2020) which examined students’ and teachers’ perceptions on the use of Amazigh and Darija as medium of instruction in Morocco show that “while teachers and students alike agree that mother tongues can facilitate learning, mother tongues are less likely to be adopted as official media of instruction due to economic and socio-political factors” (p. 92). In addition, the results of Ait Dada’s (2011) study about Moroccan’s attitudes towards their mother tongues reveal that Darija is perceived as “corrupt and incorrect form of Arabic, which is associated with poverty and downgrade and therefore considered to be inferior to Classical Arabic for it is neither codified nor standardized” (p. 19). Furthermore, in El kirat El Allame et al. et al.’s (2010) study, about language attitudes towards the mother tongues and the language in use in Morocco among the students at Mohammed V University in Rabat, it was revealed that respondents’ language choice and attitudes are determined by their language instruction and by the importance of global impacts of the language. Several respondents have expressed an instrumental attachment to French and English through their use for social promotion, a sentimental attachment to Standard Arabic. However, the use of mother tongues was associated with communication in informal domains for the use of mother tongues (p. 348). Even though Darija is one of the mother tongues along with Tamazight, Moroccans hold negative attitudes towards it because they consider it not a significant and valuable language to be used in instruction in schools. Moroccans who are for bilingual education in two languages might appreciate the principles behind teaching Darija, but, for practical reasons, they prefer foreign languages in particular French because of their value and their guarantee of success in the job market. Others, however, hold a favorable attitude toward teaching and learning Moroccan Arabic, feeling that using Moroccan Arabic is somehow the right thing to do and that there is an obligation for them to promote its merit.

The nature of Moroccan Arabic could also be a factor causing hindrance to a successful implementation. In Morocco there are an abundance of regional varieties of Moroccan Arabic, namely Rabati, Fassi, Marrakshi, shamali, etc. These dialectal varieties bear many linguistic differences concerning mainly phonetics, pronunciation, morphology, and lexicology. So, the question which dialect variety should be resorted to for instruction in schools? The Moroccan variety used in two central Moroccan regions (Casablanca-Settat and Rabat-Salé-Kenitra) represents the largest population group and which according to Ayouch and his team is understandable in all Morocco could be the one taught in all schools (Chabal 2016). In fact, this variety is used to create the first Moroccan Arabic dictionary by Zakoura foundation. Of equal importance is impoverishment of Moroccan Arabic lexicon due to lexical borrowings from French and Spanish. These borrowings make Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic two deviated and separate languages rather than varieties on a continuum. Thus, the transition from one to the other could be uncertain and difficult and there is a need to renovate Moroccan Arabic and develop and adequate terminology compatible to Standard Arabic. For these reasons both Ayouch and Laroui recommend a new form of Moroccan Arabic as the language of instruction that would be easy for children to learn and understand.

Ayouch suggested an “elevated” Moroccan Arabic that would be codified and could be used in writing whereas Laroui recommended the creation of a “simplified” Standard Arabic only for oral use.

In this regard, Ayouch launched a first Moroccan Arabic dictionary which explains Arabic words with Moroccan Arabic. In a press conference held in Casablanca, Ayouch explained that this dictionary, prepared by the Zagoura Development Center, was supervised by several Moroccan experts and researchers who worked on it for four years. He added that this dictionary is “the first of its kind to make Moroccan Arabic language alive and continuous, pointing out that for every two years there will be a publication of a new dictionary, and soon there will be a preparation of an electronic dictionary in the Moroccan dialect to enable Moroccans from different places to add words and their explanation. Khalil Mgharfaoui, university professor pointed out that “this dictionary is part of a range of projects that aim to use Moroccan Arabic professionally,” and that the team who worked on this dictionary “tried to make it easy and clear and avoid separating between Standard Arabic and Moroccan Arabic”. Mgharfaoui also added that the team faced great problems, especially the way of writing because words vary in pronunciation, therefore different writing was required. He, moreover, emphasized that the method of writing used in the dictionary is based on principles that facilitate the passage from Moroccan Arabic to Standard Arabic, especially for learners. Other future projects of the Zagora Center involve the publication of a selection of texts in Darija to strengthen its presence, as well as preparation of grammatical rules that will help with understanding the rules to facilitate their learning.

Recommendations for the use of Mother Tongue (Moroccan Arabic) along with Standard Arabic and Tamazight

In the remaining pages, some recommendations for the use of Moroccan Arabic in early instruction. First, attention should be paid to the way Standard Arabic is presented to the students. Since it is not the first acquired language, but is formally taught in school, an alternative approach to its teaching should integrate Moroccan Arabic in the classroom context. A significant merit of this approach is that it takes advantage of the fact that Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic are varieties of the same language which share a number of linguistic features and alleviates some of the problems between the dialect and the standard in instructing and explaining the language would ease some of the problems facing the students in learning Standard Arabic and facilitate their understanding as it was expressed by primary and secondary teachers who were observed by Loutfi (2020) in his study. Even though teachers expressed negative attitudes on their questionnaire answers, their classroom observation showed the opposite. Moroccan Arabic was extremely used as the language of introduction and explanation in both schools because it makes students “feel at ease and have access to the information being delivered easily” (Loutfi 2020, p. 10).

Offering instruction in a specific variety of Moroccan Arabic could help smooth the transition from Moroccan Arabic to Standard Arabic. Since Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic are varieties of the same language which share several linguistic features, alternating between the dialect and the Standard in instructing and explaining the language would ease some of the problems facing the students in learning Standard Arabic, and facilitate their understanding.

Providing competent and suitably trained local teachers on effective language teaching based on the latest innovations in language pedagogy to provide instruction in any Moroccan Arabic variety chosen as well as in Moroccan Arabic would avoid the problem of having students, upon achieving a more advanced level, will face the problem of not continuing with the same variety of the dialect. Teachers should also be trained and taught the teaching pedagogies and methods of learning and teaching languages that will be equipped for teaching better. Upgrading methodology for teaching Moroccan Arabic right in the pre-schooling would be another worthwhile step for successful transition to Standard Arabic. Teaching Moroccan Arabic must also introduce textbooks that deal with everyday life situations and reflect meaningful real situations and contexts. Teachers should be supplemented with interesting and authentic materials and use communicative-based tasks and activities to make Moroccan Arabic more attractive and livelier. Most textbooks that have been used so far in public schools to teach Standard Arabic are predominantly centered on written materials ignoring the oral skill. This is in fact an area in the language that needs to be developed. Some Arabic and Berber-speaking Moroccan children before reaching the age for schooling, they attend Koranic pre-schools from age 4 to 6 where they learn Arabic alphabet and reading skill in Standard Arabic. So, this written and reading knowledge in Standard Arabic gained in Koranic schools should be used as early as kindergarten to foster oral competency in Standard Arabic. It could also “serve as a scaffold to more successful reading development in the Arabic language.” (Daniel and Ball 2010, p. 133).

Conclusion

Even though the claim to implement Moroccan Arabic in the educational system is still debatable and has received many criticisms, the reality is that in recent years, its use has increased significantly among Moroccans in social and academic life. Moroccan Arabic has moved from being a dialect into a potential and operative language in many domains. Nowadays, it is used “as a medium of communication between members of Moroccan organizations and in conferences and seminars among intellectuals, linguists and journalists” (Zouhir 2013, p. 276), and widely used in advertising and marketing, online media, and in cartoon strips and kid’s shows. More importantly, it is used in television and radio for broadcasting programs and debates between politicians about political subjects and problems (Al Jazeera 2014, p. 3). This paper about Moroccan Arabic, mother tongue policy and its implementation in early instruction offers an opportunity to better understand the issues of using mother tongues, local and national languages in multilingual

societies. It also serves as an example and resource for dealing with the same problems and disputes involving other countries that have same linguistic diversity as Morocco. Most importantly, it makes a significant contribution in the field of language policy, and in particular mother language policies.

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