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First Person Expressions Used by Teenage Girl Characters in *Shōjo Manga*¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares possible uses of self-designating terms among similar types of fictional characters in works included in a *shōjo manga* corpus. The use of first-person terms by similar types of fictional characters is viewed with regard to the role of an individual character in a given narrative and the categorization of a singular use of self-reference terms as a *yakuwarigo* type/sub-type. The data suggest that the overall variety in the use of individual first-person expressions in *shōjo manga* is relatively low – the most frequently used expressions were *watashi* and *atashi* – and the utilization of role language to signal a specific character type was, in fact, very limited. However, the use of *watashi* by the *shōjo manga* protagonists corresponds to Shibamoto-Smith's (2004) findings regarding the first-person use by romance heroines. The frequent use of *uchi* by certain characters should not be classified as *yakuwarigo* but rather implies a very casual speech act performed by a character who can be perceived as active, lively and vigorous.

KEYWORDS: *shōjo manga*, first-person, manga corpus, fictional language, *yakuwarigo*

While the term *yakuwarigo* refers to the speech which consists of many elements of spoken Japanese, the expressions used for person reference can arguably be counted as some of its most salient features. Contemporary Japanese boasts a vast repertoire of expressions one can use to call oneself. The list includes *watakushi*, *watashi*, *atakushi*, *atashi*, *watai*, *wate*, *wai*, *atai*, *watchi*, *a(s)shi*, *wa(s)shi*, *boku*, *ore*, *ora*, *oira*, *onore*, *uchi*, *jibun*, *kochira*, *kotchi*, *kotcha*, *kochitora*, and *ware* (Martin 1988: 1076-1077). This list can easily be expanded by adding dialectical or historical terms. Besides designating the speaker, these expressions carry numerous semantic, stylistic and socio-cultural implications in their use. Traditionally,

¹ This paper is based on a part of the Author's dissertation thesis: "Teenage girls and female *shōjo* manga characters: Continuity or difference in the use of Japanese socio-person deixis?" (Kloutvorová 2020).

they were classified according to the gender of the speaker, or to be more accurate, whether these expressions are believed to convey femininity or masculinity. It is no small wonder that first-person expressions can therefore also play a part in the portrayal of fictional characters by being associated with some stereotypical characteristics.

The main focus of the paper is to map out which first-person expressions appear in the speech of female *shōjo manga* characters (that is, of manga characters depicting young women) through an analysis of a manga corpus, which was created based on the results of a survey among the manga readership. The reason why this paper's scope had been narrowed to include only teenage girl characters is that it enables the Author to compare possible differences in the use of self-designating terms among similar types of fictional characters with regard to the role of an individual character in a given narrative and the relationship of self-reference term use with *yakuwarigo*.

***Yakuwarigo* and *Shōjo Manga* Characters**

Yakuwarigo (lit. 'role language') is often used in various popular media (such as manga, anime, light novels etc.) to portray secondary characters and accordingly to highlight the protagonist, who requires a more detailed and nuanced description (Teshigawara and Kinsui 2012: 39). Kinsui noticed that the speech of a protagonist is the least marked with the use of *yakuwarigo* elements (2003: 66-67). Obviously, minor characters would therefore be more characterised through role language. Furthermore, the use of normative gendered language by fictional heroes and heroines of (hetero-)romance can be taken as an index of heterosexual attractiveness (Shibamoto-Smith 2004: 115), and although this linguistic femininity/masculinity as performed by romance novel characters cannot be explicitly defined as *yakuwarigo* as developed and interpreted by Kinsui, the language elements are used to indicate particular characteristics and serve as a cue for the reader, which suggests the interconnectedness of these two phenomena.

Female language (*onna kotoba*) is defined as a set of stereotypical gendered elements which are applicable to female characters in the broadest sense as a signal of a fictional character's gender. This notion is not exclusive to *yakuwarigo*. Inoue (2003: 315) even goes as far as to claim that nowadays *onna kotoba* (or *joseigo*) as used by female characters in fiction has become an example of the most authentic women's language, while the language of real Japanese women is naturally an amalgam of various elements and linguistic (and perhaps also

paralinguistic) features, which may traditionally be classified either as feminine, masculine, or neutral.

In the case of the young female *shōjo manga* characters, the role language types, which Kinsui and Yamakido (2015: 32-33) have identified and which are most likely to be used in this medium, are *ojō-sama* language (language evolved from the speech of Meiji schoolgirls), schoolgirl language, gal language (*gyarugo*) and the speech of delinquent girls. In terms of first-person use, the expression *atai* suggests a low-class uneducated woman or a member of a girl-gang (Kinsui 2014: 5-7), while *watakushi* and *atakushi* can be associated with an *ojō-sama* character (ibid. 204). *Atashi* is frequently employed to signal a female character in general (part of *onna kotoba*), but, as it lacks the formality associated with *watashi*, it is customarily found in the speech of young tomboyish women (ibid. 8).

Shōjo Manga Corpus

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the virtual language used in *shōjo manga*. Therefore, it has to be determined how characters who belong to one social group (namely high school students) use role language elements. This group of fictional high school students can be divided into various subcategories, such as delinquents, girls from well-off families etc. This paper intends to determine if these specific role language categories are reflected in the use of first-person expressions. This meant carrying out an analysis of a corpus of *shōjo manga* texts.

In order to ascertain which *shōjo manga* works should be included in the corpus, a questionnaire conducted during field work in Japan from January to March 2018 was used. 701 female junior high school students from several schools located in urban and suburban areas of major cities around Honshū Island responded to the survey.

The teenage girls were asked whether and how often they read manga (either in traditional print or digital), and those who identified themselves as readers of *shōjo manga* were asked to state their favourite manga titles². In total, out of 701 respondents, 385 girls claimed they read *shōjo manga* in print, and 337 read it online, which is also the most popular medium for frequent manga consumption (reading *shōjo manga* at least once a week). The ten most frequently mentioned works are shown below in order of their popularity among the respondents.

² The scope of questions included in the survey and their goal was broader than those presented here. The results of the survey thus highlight the titles that are the most popular and therefore relevant to the formation of the reader's experience of the intended audience, which was a crucial part of the Author's further research. However, discussing this is beyond the content of this paper.

Title	Author	First published	Magazine
1. <i>Aoharaido</i>	Sakisaka Io	2011	Bessatsu Māgaretto
2. <i>Chihayafuru</i>	Suetsugu Yuki	2007	BE LOVE
3. <i>Haru matsu boku-ra</i>	Anashin	2014	Dezāto
4. <i>Orenji</i>	Takano Ichigo	2012	Bessatsu Māgaretto
5. <i>Tsubasa-to hotaru</i>	Haruta Nana	2014	Ribon
6. <i>Sutorobo ejji</i>	Sakisaka Io	2007	Bessatsu Māgaretto
7. <i>Omoi, omoware, furi, furare</i>	Sakisaka Io	2015	Bessatsu Māgaretto
8. <i>Romanchika kurokku</i>	Maki Yōko	2012	Ribon
9. <i>P-to JK</i>	Miyoshi Maki	2012	Bessatsu Furendo
10. <i>Hana-yori dango</i>	Kamio Yōko	1992	Māgaretto

Table 1. Individual *shōjo manga* works

Source: based on the Author's research

All of the ten most frequently mentioned titles chosen by the respondents as their favourites belong to the school life subgenre of *shōjo manga*. This subgenre depicts the day-to-day lives of the protagonists in a realistic (or semi-realistic) high school setting. This setting also implies that the protagonists and other female characters usually represent students between the ages of 15 and 17. The corpus thus consists of the first³ *tankōbon* (lit. 'standalone/independent book') volumes of the *shōjo manga* titles listed above.

Corpus Analysis

³The exception is the manga *Chihayafuru*, where volume 2 (chapters 6-11) was included in the corpus instead in order to keep the ages of protagonists consistent (volume 1 takes place primarily during the protagonist's elementary school years).

The teenage girl characters appearing in the collected texts are divided into three categories: protagonists, major characters and minor characters. This method was chosen in accordance with Kinsui's idea that the rate of utilization of role language differs significantly according to the prominence of a given character in a narrative. Every token (overt use of a person-designating term by a specific teenage *shōjo manga* character)⁴ was recorded and assigned to an individual character. One of the typical features of *shōjo manga* as a genre is the inclusion of the inner thoughts/inner monologues of a fictitious character in the form of an overt soliloquy. Thus, soliloquies appearing in the selected narratives were also included in the study. In total, 657 tokens of first-person use were collected.

Protagonists

According to the data presented in Figure 1., *watashi*, arguably the most unmarked first-person expression a female speaker of standard Japanese can use (see, e.g., Ide 1989, Shibamoto-Smith 2003 etc.), is the dominant means of self-reference for all but one of the protagonists. The only exception is the heroine of the classic manga *Hana-yori dango*, first published in 1992, who uses the feminine *atashi* throughout all the collected material. Instances of the use of other self-designating terms are severely limited, and as the evidence suggests, the protagonists do not change their first-person expressions based on a situational context, emotional stance or their interaction partners (a phenomenon found in a natural spoken discourse). Out of the possible non-standard first-person expressions, that is expressions which might be interpreted as instances of character language (as defined by Kinsui and Yamakido 2015), only *asshi*, a contracted variant of *atashi*, is used once by the protagonist of the manga *P-to JK*. Kinsui (2014: 11-12) categorizes *asshi* as either a role language of *yakuza* members or a part of *Edo kotoba* ('language of Edo/Tōkyō natives'). Therefore, it is apparent that the presence of *asshi* in the corpus should be interpreted as an example of casual speech added to highlight the scene where the protagonist – a high school student – poses as a carefree older woman.

⁴ While singular and plural forms are not identical in terms of their referents, they are not discussed here separately, as the aim of this study is to determine whether a given expression is used in the corpus at all.

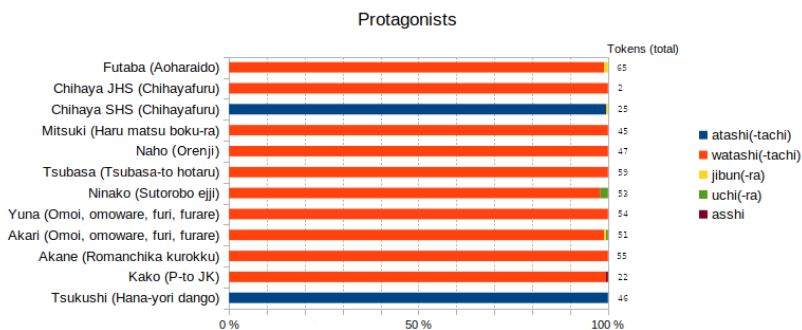


Figure 1. Protagonists

Source: based on the Author's research

The other occasionally employed expressions are *uchi* and *jibun*, or rather their plural forms derived by the suffix *-ra*: *uchi-ra* (used twice) and *jibun-ra* (once). The only use of *jibun-ra* is illustrated below.

(1) *Jibun-ra-mo burikko surya i: ja-n.*⁵

‘We should all pretend to be cute.’

(interaction with a friend of the same gender),

Aoharaido, vol. 1.

The overall variation of choice of first-person expressions among the protagonists is very low. Several factors may contribute to this result. One of them may be the characterization of the protagonists – none of them can be seen as an extreme or a member of a specific or marginal social subgroup or sub-culture. And accordingly, their assigned self-reference expressions are the most standard ones. The least marked *watashi* might have been chosen for the protagonists to promote the readers' identification with them. Moreover, technical aspects of manga as a medium may also have limited the range of self-reference expressions found in the corpus.

Major Characters

⁵ The transcription here denotes an irregular/non-standard graphic realization in the original manga text.

The major characters in the analysed manga were usually defined by their relationship to the protagonists. They very often served as close friends, friends or schoolmates. In total, 97 tokens of self-designating terms used by the major characters appeared in the corpus. When compared to the speech of protagonists, the data presented in Figure 2. suggest that self-reference is slightly more varied in the case of major characters.

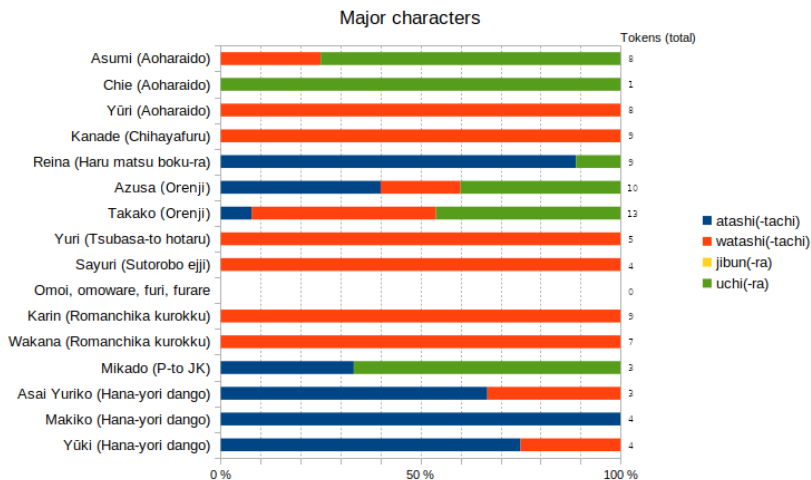


Figure 2. Major Characters

Source: based on the Author's research

This applies not only in the ratio of primary forms of self-reference – *watashi* versus *atashi* – but also in the variations the individual characters employ. Quite interestingly, a plural form *uchi-ra*, which is used only in severely limited cases in the utterances of the heroines of the stories, seems to be more frequent in the speech of major characters. One of the typical usages of *uchi-ra* can be illustrated by the following example, in which Azusa (*Orenji*) implores the main character Naho to participate in a softball game.

(2) *Naho-ga dokan-to hitto uttara uchi-ra yūshō da-yo.*
 ‘If you can bat a strong safe hit, we will win.’
 (interaction with a friend of the same gender),
Orenji, vol. 1.

The plural form *uchi-ra* in this example is used in a casual interaction and denotes a group of classmates. In the second example shown below, *uchi-ra* is used while gossiping about an absent member of a group of young female friends and indicates the speaker and the hearer.

(3) *Futaba tte-sa an kurai joshiryoku hikui-kara issho-ni irare-n da-yo-nē uchi-ra.*

‘Because Futaba’s girlishness is so low, we can let her hang out with us.’

(interaction with a friend of the same gender),

Aoharaido, vol. 1.

However, besides the three forms mentioned above (*watashi*, *atashi*, *uchi-ra*), no other self-reference expressions were observed in the collected data.

Minor Characters

The female characters appearing in the selected manga who were classified as minor were chiefly classmates or schoolmates appearing in the background. They were usually left unnamed, and their minor role in the narrative was also often marked by how they were depicted visually (drawn in fewer details and typified). In the majority of instances, their input to the story were just isolated utterances. As seen in Figure 3., *watashi* prevailed as the most recurrent first person term, with the feminine casual *atashi* being the second most frequent. Except for one isolated use of *uchi-ra* and one of *jibun*, no non-standard expressions appeared in the corpus. The only instance of self-reference by one’s first name is found in the speech of Mayuka, an older sister of the protagonist’s friend in *Sutorobo ejji*. In it, Mayuka jokingly reminds her brother to entertain her during their meeting.

(4) *Nani-yo. Motto yorokobi nasai-yo. Sekkaku onē-sama-ga kite ageta-no-ni.*

‘What’s this? Be more cheerful since your big sister generously came to see you.’

(interaction with a younger brother),

Sutorobo ejji, vol. 1.

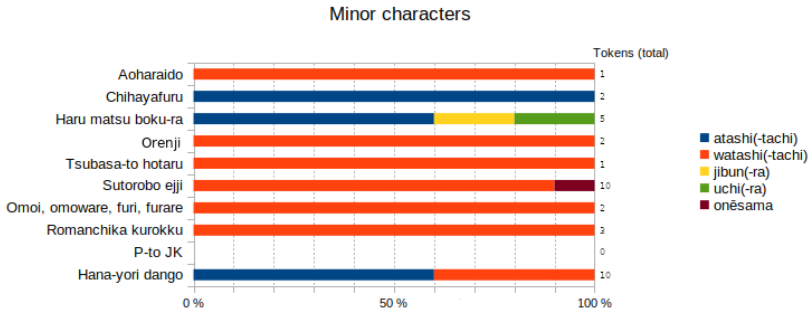


Figure 3. Minor Characters

Source: based on the Author's research

In the following conversation, Mayuka uses *watashi*, which leads to the assumption that it may be her primary self-reference expression even during interactions with her brother. The relatively constant use of low variation of first-person expressions indicates that there are no expressions employed which could be immediately placed as pointing to a role language type/subtype and, consequently, to a specific character type (such as *ojō-sama*).

The Protagonist Chihaya and the *Burikko Yūri*

Chihaya, the main character of the manga *Chihayafuru*, appears briefly as an 18-year old young woman on a two-page spread and in one panel in a short prologue in volume 1. The remaining five chapters contain a volume-length flashback to the time when the protagonist was an elementary school student and found her passion for *karuta*, a Japanese card game, through an encounter with one of her classmates. The second volume then follows Chihaya in high school, but again with flashbacks to both her elementary school and junior high school years.

As a senior high school student, Chihaya uses *watashi* as her primary (and only) means of self-reference. In this, she is no different from the majority of analysed protagonists. Chihaya, both as an elementary school student and as a junior high school student (presumably)⁶, uses *atashi* as her

⁶ The data of Chihaya as a junior high school student are unfortunately very limited in the available corpus.

dominant self-reference form. This transition from the casual feminine *atashi* towards the more formal *watashi* denotes Chihaya's maturing.

(5) *Okā-san atashi D-kyū-de yūshō shita-n da-yo.*

‘Mum, I won in the D group!’

(JHS student Chihaya, interaction with her mother),

Chihayafuru, vol. 2.

(6) *Watashi-wa buji-ni kōkōsei-ni natta.*

‘Without trouble, I became a high school student.’

(SHS student Chihaya, soliloquy),

Chihayafuru, vol. 2.

However, it is necessary to note that also the protagonist from the manga *Aoharaido*, whose story also starts with the opening chapter taking place during her junior high school days, consistently uses *watashi* only throughout the analysed material. And similarly, the main character of *Romanchika kurokku*, who remains a junior high school student for the duration of the whole narrative, also primarily uses *watashi*. So, although in the case of Chihaya the author decided to depict the protagonist's ageing also through the change of her choice of the first-person expression, it is not a universally used strategy and could be perceived as an artistic choice.

The manga *Aoharaido* features Yūri, the protagonist's classmate, who eventually becomes a friend of the main heroine as the story progresses. Yūri is ostracized by her female classmates and is directly branded as a *burikko*⁷ by them because of her popularity among boys. Her female classmates perceive it as a direct result of Yūri's overly feminine behaviour. However, while it is possible to argue that, in overall comparison to the other teenage girl characters of this manga, Yūri's speech might be considered slightly more feminine, this assumption is not reflected in Yūri's use of first-person expressions, which bears no significant difference to that of other characters. Inversely, Yūri is not labelled negatively as a *burikko* due to her employing a specific character language.

Role Language in the Corpus – The Case of *Uchi(-ra)*

⁷ *Burikko* is usually defined as a woman exhibiting overly feminine, childish and innocent behaviour to an extent and/or in a situation where such behaviour is not deemed appropriate (Miller 2004: 150).

While the speech of all *shōjo manga* characters exhibits to some extent the characteristics of *onna kotoba*, overall, there were no significant occurrences of self-designating terms typical for *yakuwarigo* belonging to a more specific social group or subgroup (e.g. *ojō-sama* language, ‘a lady’s language’, or a delinquent girl language). Similarly, idiosyncratic non-standard pronominal expressions, which could be categorized as a part of specific character’s idiolect, i.e. character language, appear only in a limited number of instances. Even though the manga *Hana-yori dango* takes place at an elite urban high school, no character uses the self-reference expressions such as *atakushi* or *watakushi*, which are directly categorized as typical for the *ojō-sama* language (Kinsui 2014: 204). However, in comparison with other manga works, a relatively higher occurrence of sentence-final particles categorized as a part of *onna kotoba* (*no-yo*, *wa-yo* etc.) is, in fact, present in the speech of female characters in *Hana-yori dango*. Nevertheless, this may also be influenced by this work being older than other *shōjo manga* works included in the corpus (*Hana-yori dango* was first published in 1992, while the rest first appeared between 2000-2015).

In the analysed corpus, several characters used *uchi* and the plural form *uchi-ra* as their first-person expressions. In his dictionary of role language expressions, Kinsui defines *uchi* as a first-person pronoun often used by women in the Kansai dialect, where the original idea of *uchi*, literally meaning ‘household/home’, was expanded to identify first-person as well (Kinsui 2014: 25). He subsequently identifies two main uses of *uchi* as role language – the first is its use in the Ōsaka/Kansai dialect for characters of young women (ibid. 25); the second is the use of *uchi* as an element of *gyarugo* (lit. ‘language of gals’), a language of young female fashionistas (ibid. 26).

The language of the analysed major and minor characters does not contain other elements of *gyarugo* (such as popular abbreviations or copula). Neither could the characters be immediately placed as *gyaru* by visual clues (typical fashion and styling choices), meaning they were not intended to be depicted as members of the *gyaru/kogyaru* subculture. However, drawing on the close relation between *gyarugo* and *wakamono kotoba* (lit. ‘young people’s language’) or *shinhōgen* (lit. ‘new dialects’) in general (Miller 2004b: 232), and the rise of popularity of *uchi* used as a self-designating term by teenage girls (see, e.g., Miyazaki 2004, Hishikari 2007, Honda 2011), this paper suggests that the use of the first-person expression *uchi* – or, more precisely, its plural form *uchi-ra* – by *shōjo manga* characters does not fall into the *yakuwarigo* category per se. However,

when connecting the collected data with the visual and other types of clues presented in the narratives, it can be said that *uchi* frequently denotes a very casual speech act performed by a manga character who can be interpreted as active, lively and vigorous (as a counterpart to a more studious or serious type of character).

Conclusions

There seems to be a strong overall tendency towards a low variation of self-reference terms in the speech of characters in the collected data. In other words, each *shōjo manga* character usually uses only one primary self-reference expression. This tendency is the most prevalent in the case of protagonists. The overall number of individual first-person expressions appearing in the corpus is also relatively low – the most frequently used ones are, in fact, *watashi* and *atashi*.

One of the reasons for the low variation of expressions used is the nature of *shōjo manga* narratives. The discourse in *shōjo manga* follows the code of realism, and while the discussed topics often include the character's emotions, the speech remains casual, as would be expected from teenagers. Moreover, while an appearance of a new character or progress in an existing relationship is often one of the key elements of the plot, the character groups are stable on the axis of social distance and relatively stable on the axis of psychological distance. Together with the low social gap, this makes the use of more formal expressions (i.e. *watakushi* for women) unnecessary. There is very little switching between codes to be found. As the *shōjo manga* works included in the corpus fall in the semi-realistic school-life subgenre, further research, including a comparison to works belonging to other subgenres of *shōjo manga*, would certainly provide valuable insights into the variation of first-person use and role language elements utilized.

Shibamoto-Smith (2004), during her research on the use of gender normative language in romance fiction aimed at adult women, remarked that romance heroines in *happīendo* (lit. 'happy-end') romance stories used *watashi* more often than the protagonists of tragic romance novels, who used other feminine expressions such as *atashi*, *uchi* or even one's name more often. Shibamoto-Smith then suggests that:

Women in love should stick to *watashi* rather than turning to more 'feminine' forms of self-reference. Certain kinds of hyperfemininity are, it seems, not desirable. (2004: 123)

Her findings do indeed correspond to the results of the corpus analysis presented in this study, as the *shōjo manga* protagonists also predominantly used *watashi* for self-reference. As romance was one of the main, if not fundamental, themes in all of the analysed *shōjo manga* titles, it can be assumed that a trend similar to adult romance stories is at play here, as well. Moreover, Hiramoto (2013) also links the use of gender normative expressions with a fictional character's desirability. Therefore, it might be said that, regardless of her age, a romance story heroine should present herself by using the most prestigious *watashi* to convey her feminine attractiveness.

The technical explanation for this relatively low variation in the first-person reference is not dissimilar to the use of role language as a reader-friendly device. In the case of minor characters, it is often more economical, as well as more comprehensible, to choose stereotypical language. Correspondingly, using one primary means of self-reference may help the reader ascribe each utterance to its producer even in the scenes where the speech balloons are either placed too far from the character, have no tails linking them with their speakers, or appear in a panel otherwise devoid of speaking entities. However, it would be fascinating to see whether a more extensive variation in person markers can be found in manga aimed at an older and more experienced readership.

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