# ONCE UPON THE TIME...

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### **RESUMO:**

Este artigo explora a narrativa do texto entitulado "Feminism Now" publicado na revista \*Cosmopolitan\*. Com base nos estudos de Meurer (1998) e Caldas Coulthard (1996, 1997) e Heberle (1999) os resultados mostram como a narrativa textual constrói uma estratégia discursiva para reforçar valores socioculturais já consolidados sobre o feminismo. A análise léxico gramatical mostra que o novo feminismo, nesta edição da Cosmopolitan, tem a função de apenas mais um 'commodity' para ser adquirido pelas mulheres modernas.

Palavras-chave: Gênero; Discurso Crítico.

### ABSTRACT:

This article explores the narrative of the text entitled "Feminism Now" published in the Cosmopolitan magazine. This study is based on the studies of Meurer (1998), Caldas Coulthard (1996, 1997) and Heberle (1999). Results showed that the textual narrative constructs a discursive strategy to reinforce the socio-cultural values already consolidated on feminism. The analysis of the lexicogrammar provides evidence that "the new feminism" in this particular issue of the magazine, stands as just one more commodity for the new modern woman to purchase.

Keywords: Gender; Critical Discourse Analysis.

#### Introduction

For a long time, stories were meant to entertain and instruct people and everyone loved to listen to stories. This has not changed much, people still love story telling and, in principle, they listen attentively to stories when they hear them. Thus, story tellers usually rely on them to (re) capture their audience's attention.

Stories are told in all sorts of social contexts from the most informal such as an ordinary conversation, and magazines, to the most formal ones such as a classroom or a business presentation. Stories also differ in kind and purpose, they range from cultural myths to everyday mundane experiences, and are meant to entertain, instruct, illustrate arguments and make connections.

This paper focuses on how a narrative is used in the feature page of women's magazines. In particular, in a secondary instance, the analysis explores the way the author uses the narrative as a discursive strategy.

## Theoretical Background

A great deal of research has been developed in the area of language and gender. This research was influenced by the actions which resulted from feminist movement that started during the 60's. It was during this period that questions about the relationship between language and sexual roles were first raised. Scholars started to question the fact that in western society, since language was a system embedded in patriarchal social structures, it not only reflected but also reinforces the masculine supremacy.

The word 'gender', according to Caldas Coulthhard (1991), was first used by the Greeks to mean 'class' or 'type'. It later meant 'class related to sex'. These classes meant to relate the 'nouns' as feminine, masculine and neutral based on the biological sex. This grammatical classification of a determined language raises serious sociopolitical questions due to the fact that social practices, linguistically speaking, will favor a given sex, such as the case of the Portuguese language in which the masculine is given priority.

During the 70's and 80's, sex was used as an analytical category for gender studies, together with age and social class. These studies were later argued to be prejudiced and stereotyped because they presupposed feminine inferiority. One of the strong arguments used to criticize sociolinguistic studies developed during this time was that women were invisible or excluded from data collection, such as in the work of Labov (1972a, 1972b) which was based on the masculine production.

According to Cameron (1985), Labov himself started that the main representatives of the vernacular culture were the men (Labov et all, 1968:41). On the premises that the masculine linguistic behavior was taken as the basis for research development, they started questioning what truly characterized the vernacular culture. The way research was being developed lead to the belief that women were simply conceptualized as homogeneous group, meanwhile men were given an individual treatment which transcends gender.

During the 90's, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992a, Caldas Coulthard and Coulthard, 1996, Herbele, 1997) show how the social context as well as social roles and power relations determine linguistic production.

So, while the first stage of research on women and language, the main focus was on 'deficiency', where women were seen as a marginal and an oppressed minority group; in the second stage, women were simply different from men. These views reflected the two mainstream research lines about sex difference and communicative competence: the dominance model and the difference model.

Dale Spencer (1980) proposed the idea that language itself is a means of oppression and only an explicit intervention could lead to social change. Tannen (1986, 1991), on the other hand, disseminated the difference method by proposing that women

and men have different interactive styles, suggesting that in ordinary conversation, women tend to be more cooperative than men. She presumed that women share a common language different from the language shared by men.

From these studies, Cameron (1996a) suggests that as a result of the research made considering the difference model, a new 'prescriptivism' arose, i.e. a set of normative metalinguistic practices based on the conviction that some ways of using the language are functionally, aesthetically or morally preferable to others. Cameron argues that these normative practices should be evaluated, case by case, focusing not their mere existence but their actual substance, the values underlying them and the goals they are meant to achieve. Cameron and Coates (1988) suggest that the methods of analysis which consider the deficit, dominance and difference models are important but are sufficient. Cameron (1996:33) states that:

"(...) Apart from Romaine's point that inadequate social theory leads to inadequate sociolinguist explanation, there are a number of reasons why I believe we urgently need to develop more sophisticated theories of gender than those which have been common in our field since the mid-70's."

As stated by Caldas Coulthart, publications such as the work of Tannen and Gray, emphasize the difference between men and women and ignore their similarities, status unequal power relations. These books reinforce stereotypes and hide the fact that there are biological differences between men and women, so sex difference should not constitute a problem. Rather, the problem is raised by exclusion, and the construction of stereotypes.

Recent research has attempted to abandon the traditional dichotomies based on the binary division, seeking to raise new questions that challenge the polarization issue. Gender is thus taken as one more aspect of our multiple identities. So, any linguistic research should account for several aspects such as: how interaction takes place, which social roles are being articulated, the discursive practices in which they are being articulated, and how the social practices produce the identities. The rationale behind this new approach is that each person constantly negotiates the norms, behaviors and discourses that define masculinity and femininity within a given community at a particular point in history (Cameron, 1996b:45). Language is an act of identity; people should use language to mark their gender, class, race, group, etc.

According to Cameron (1996:47) the consequences of deconstructivism method is a change in focus, instead of asking how women and men behave linguistically; we can ask how particular linguistic practices contribute to the production of people's as 'women and men'. One recent development in studies on language and gender is the work by Holmes (1997) who suggests that men and women in New Zealand use personal narratives to construct and reinforce the dominant ideology of society concerning gender roles, reaffirming conservative normative social and cultural values. Nevertheless, she concludes that her analysis of the personal narratives told by men and women in New Zealand also reveal the potential of discourse in contributing and reinforcing a gradual emergence of a more feminist ideology.

Another gender study which investigates personal sex narratives is the work by Caldas Coulthard (1996) who analyses sex narratives in women's magazines. Caldas Coulthard concludes that narrative structures are apparatus of ideology. In her conclusive remarks, Caldas Coulthard states that although the sex narratives in women's magazines appear to be transgressive, they are transgressive only in terms of traditional view of sexual relationships. The reason for this is that these narratives are responsible for maintaining conservative social values. The female characters in the sex narratives are apparently liberated, but also subordinated to kinship evaluation. This evaluation implies social punishment, so the sex narratives do not challenge the hegemonic power of middle-class values, rather than they help to maintain it.

Next some narratives as a genre, which have also been investigated by other scholars, are presented.

A narrative of personal experience is "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clause to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred (Labov, 1972:359-60).

In other words, a narrative uses a sequence of temporarily order clauses to restate past experience. A narrative, then, shows a macro structure which consists of a situation, a problem, a solution and an evaluation.

## Example 1

I went out with my boyfriend yesterday but he insulted me and criticized my female friends with no reason so I ended up going back home without enjoying our date.

In the example above, 'I went out with my boyfriend yesterday' may be regarded as the situation; 'but he insulted me and criticized my female friends with no reason' would constitute the problem and 'so I ended up going back home without enjoying our date', the evaluation.

As Goodwin (1991 in Holmes 1997) explains it 'stories may be better described as 'cultural objects designed to operate in ongoing social projects'. The structure of narratives may be presented in different ways according to the cultural context in which it is old'.

According to Meurer (1998), "a narrative is to be understood as a stretch of a text (...) in which there is recounted a sequence of connected events in the past relative to the time of recounting" (p. 24). He further mentions that writers use narratives to help create some sort of different 'reality'. In his work he defines 'reality' in terms of world 1, 2 and 3, following Popper. By 'world 1 reality' he argues that "something is real if it can affect the behavior of a large scale physical object". World 2 reality' would consist of 'conscious and unconscious' states of mind. Last, 'World 3 reality' is defined as the product of human mind established by the intervention of conscious human beings. Narratives are ranked as a 'World 3' reality.

There is an interplay between word 1, 2 and 3. For instance, a narrative has the potential of affecting human being's state of mind (word 2 entities) which in turn

somehow affects the human body (word 1 entity). So narratives, regardless of the way they are used, may be meant to influence readers/listeners to create type of reality. Then 'reality' is considered as "a matter of perspective and interpretation, rather than an 'objective' property of a given situation" (Lee, 1992 in Meurer, 1998). So, as argued by Meurer (1998:30), 'states of the mind', when seen as real entities, can be influenced, changed reinforced by perspectives or viewpoints held by other human beings.

The author uses these concepts to explain how the authors of self-help books attempt to change reader's understanding of anger to influence their future behavior by using narratives which serve the purpose of: 1) inducing the reader to create or trigger a mental schema within which he/she may process the incoming text; 2) illustrating the various specific points the author discusses and tries to teach (the narrative is used as an argumentative strategy to substantiate the overall purpose of the book); 3) creating a context for further discussion and as an argumentative strategy altogether (in the illustration-context narrative, the narrative functions at the same time as illustration and a context for further discussion. In terms of the text itself this pattern would be realized as a generalization, followed by the narrative and then further discussion); 4) being a unifying, community-building device. The reason one uses narratives as a community-building device is that they have property of abridging and replicating difficulties/solutions possibly similar to the ones readers face. In other word, readers see the characters in narratives as social agents as if they were themselves, and are encouraged to share the values of this community and imitate them as a means of bringing about a given social change.

To quote Meurer (1998);

"(...) The recounted case studies help reassure the readers that they also can develop new states of mind (world 2 entities) and this way improve their relationships and their quality of life similarly to the individual characters in action in the narratives."

In sum, narratives as products of the human mind do not have only a single notional structure; they may show different functions such as context building, illustration strategy, and as a community-building device, as shown by this author's analysis of the self-help books. So, narratives as a 'world 3 entity' may be used to affect readers' state of mind ('world 2 reality') which in turn will affect events and actions involving the readers themselves ('world 1 entities'). To put it in Meurer's (1998) terms "The three types of 'reality' interact through narrative surface structures and their different notional structures".

Next, I will present the selected text and the analytic tools used for the analysis, followed by the analysis proper and final remarks.

#### Data

In order to develop this study, I chose one text at random from a women's magazine – the feature page. It is an article from the 1993 issue of Cosmopolitan

Magazines entitled 'Feminism Now' by Marcelle d'Argy Smith, edited by Hilary Burden.

### Method

In this study, I drew on the works by Meurer (1998) and Caldas Coulthard (1996, 1997). First, I investigated the way the narrative is used in the selected text and analyzed it according to the narrative functions established by Meurer (1998); second, according to the studies developed by Caldas Coulthard (1996, 1997), I investigated how narrative structures are used in female magazines as apparatuses of ideology. Next, I will carry out the analysis of the selected text.

## **Analysis**

Cosmopolitan is a monthly magazine sold in many countries besides Great Britain. It has 27 overseas editions with Nova as its counterpart in Brazil. It was established in 1972 and has a circulation is of 477, 437, according to my study in 1993. Most of its readers are women from 18-35.

*Cosmopolitan* is also known as 'glossies' for the fine paper with which it is published and it leads the British market in terms of circulation (Heberle, 1997).

The selected text advertises the 21 page special article on 'feminism' that constitutes the 1983 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Among the titles advertised for the special article of the select magazine are 'Can you be a feminist and still be attractive to men?' by Naomi Wolf; 'The choice of the new generation' by Dr. Julian Hafner, 'Cosmo's hall of fame-inism' by Katharine Viner, 'Action Women' by Lesley Abdela, and 'If I were prime minister tomorrow...'

Viner, 'Action Women' by Lesley Abdela, and 'If I were prime minister tomorrow...' by Hilary Burden.]

In the selected text by Marcelle d'Argy Smith- 'Feminism Now', she points out that if the readers never thought of themselves as being 'feminists', now it is the right time they gave it a second thought. She makes use of a personal narrative as strategy to illustrate her point as well as context building for further discussion and a community building device (Meurer, 1998).

In analyzing this text, I will start by identifying the parts of the narrative according to Caldas Coulthard (1997), i.e., the abstract orientation, complicating action, evaluation result and coda. In order to do that, I will answer the following questions: l) What was this about?; 2) Who, when, what, where?; 3) What happened?; 4) So what?; 5) Finally what happened?; 6) What explicitly signals the end of the narrative?.

In answering the question 'What was the narrative about?' it can be stated that it is about a woman who is telling how she realized she had become a feminist. In the abstract part of this narrative, the narrator addresses the reader directly by the use of a condition clause 'If you never thought of yourself as a feminist, it's time you thought again', which is printed over enormous voluptuous red lips. The lips, in my reading, are a semiotic sign of sex, pleasure, seduction – the idea of the woman being simultaneously a feminist and sexy. Feminism is associated with the stereotype of the feminine woman who is sensual (for her man). So, the new feminism involves being feminine and sexy,

and it is also realized through the picture of the voluptuous red lips.

In the situational clause, which is written over the voluptuous red lips right below the title 'Feminism Now', the narrator raises a problem for the reader – it is the time readers think of themselves as feminists! Then, she justifies her advice by describing feminism as... Relevant, Positive, Powerful, Sexy, and Strong, as opposed to something which is related to dungarees and hating men – 'It's not about dungarees and hating men'.

In analyzing the lexical choices used to define 'Feminism' in this narrative, such as *sexy, powerful, strong, positive, relevant*, we may question whether sexy is an attribute that should be conferred to feminism. According to most dictionaries, feminism is conceptualized as the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and chances as men and be treated in the same way, or else it is the set of activities intended to achieve this state.

In other words, her definition of feminism should reflect attributes conferred on to a given social belief. By defining feminism as SEXY, she is actually attempting to transform feminism into some kind of product that is sexy, i.e., has some sexual appeal. Thus, feminism turns into a commodity that can be purchased as the many other products that are sold in women's magazines.

Ms. D'Argy's point is that there is a misconception about the definition of feminism. She attempts to raise in the readers in learning more about feminism in order to avoid any type of prejudice in associating 'feminism' with a particular sexual role.

What the author implies is that readers should be better informed about what feminism is before they surrender to the belief that feminism is about wearing dungarees and hating men, i.e., the belief that feminism is not about being female, or lacking femininity. In order to account for that, she advises the readers to read the 21-page feminism special article of the magazine which shows how feminism can be an inspirational part of their lives – 'Our exclusive 21-page feminism special shows you how it can be an inspirational part of your life'.

The problem raised in the abstract part of this narrative follows from the cover page of magazine which shows the following statement:

#### "THE NEW FEMINISM

### You've never needed it more than now!"

In the cover headline, feminism is being presented as a merchandise with a new version – 'The new feminism'. 'You've never needed feminism more than now'. It is advising readers of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, who, in majority are women (Heberle, 1997), that they have never needed this new merchandise more than they need it now. Feminism, therefore, is advertised as a commodity. It raises the readers' interest for it advertises something new and useful as opposed to some of the old ideas about feminism. At the same time, it appeals to the readers to continue reading the magazine because it raises their curiosity about what this new feminism might be. This technique gives the tone of intimacy, which is pervasive in all women's magazines – (Heberle, 1997) -, the idea of the magazine as a friend who is advising or providing the solution to problems women have in common (Caldas Coulthard, 1997).

In answering the question 'So what happened?' We may state that in order to illustrate her point, Ms. D'Argy Smith tells her own experience in becoming a feminist – 'I didn't become a feminist until was 30. I didn't realize that what I felt and often expressed at inopportune moments during love affairs, between mascara application and increasingly at work, had a name'. Then, she recounts several episodes which made her realize she was a feminist.

First episode – 'I loved men who thought their careers were important, mine wasn't, and who assumed I would fit in, amoeba like, around their lives. And I argued'.

In this episode men assume women as amoebas, i.e., a very small simple organism consisting of only one cell – a germ or a disease-producing microorganism. In other words, women are not human beings, they should not be considered as such nor are they allowed to share the same social rights. There is a strong sign of inequality.

Second episode – 'I met parents of sons and daughters who only saw fit to educate their sons. And I protested'.

In the second episode, Ms. d'Argy implies that usually parents believe only men should be educated. Therefore, women do not have the right to be educated, another sign of inequality.

Third episode – 'I saw third-rate men getting first-rate jobs and I began to demand fairer treatment'.

In the third episode, the narrator implies that women are not given the right to decent jobs.

Here again, there is evidence of lack of equality.

Fourth episode – 'Also I remember that during a quiet moment one sophisticated and attractive man had mentioned over dinner, "The only tenable situation in a relationship is one of equality". That made me thoughtful'.

In the fourth episode, the author implies that women do not have the right to be equal. And they do, this right has to be granted by a men. There is a sign of the masculine supremacy.

Fifth episode – 'When my friends and colleagues became pregnant and had their babies I became outraged at the attitudes and treatment of them by their partners, employers and society in general. I've never wanted children but I'd defend to the end a woman's right to be fairly and properly treated and supported'.

In the fifth episode. She implies that men are irresponsible beings who sire children and yet do not fulfill their responsibilities as fathers. Women who bear the children do not even have the right to decent support and to be fairly treated. In this episode, as in the previous ones, there continues to be a sign of inequality.

Sixth episode – 'some women would sigh and say (and still do), "It's a man's world" as if that were that and there was nothing more to be done about their second-class lives'.

In the sixth episode, she implies that women are passive with regard to their

social roles as mothers and housewives, by which she means that women are complacent towards oppression.

As the analysis shows, Ms. d'Argy Smith is telling of the complicating episodes she went through in her life, and the problems she faced in being a woman. It reveals a discourse which protests against typical attitudes such as men being portrayed as almighty, men as educated, men getting away with being irresponsible, men getting the better jobs, and women as passive victims and powerless. In other words, d'Argy Smith protests against the everlasting problem of inequality between men and women.

In answering the question 'So what?' it can be observed that Ms. d'Argy Smith's reactions to these situations are negative. By utilizing verbs such as to argue, to protest, to demand fairer treatment, to become outraged', the author is implying actions which reflect disapproval, questioning of, and/or lack of with certain social standards. Ms. d'Argy is portrayed as a woman who stands up for her rights.

As stated by Caldas Coulthard (1996)

"In the newer glossies, there seems to have been an acceptance and incorporation of some basic feminist and liberal principles: there is some criticism of mysogymy and prejudice, and women are encouraged to stand up for their rights."

However, no further evidence or explanation of and about her reactions is properly given. There is so sign of a socially relevant solution. In other words, information is not provided for the reader with regard to whom Ms. d'Argy protested against, who she argued against, who were her friends partners whose attitudes outraged her. Therefore, the readers are devoid of an overt, explicit evaluation of the episodes.

In a way, this narrative portrays situations that may be familiar to the readers. They may recall having gone through these situations before in their lives. In other words, not only might readers identify themselves with the situations raised in the narrative but they may also identify with Marcelle's reactions to these situations. Or they even find in her way of reacting to the situations a stimulating way of changing their own attitudes.

Meurer (1998) states that "narratives are an excellent rhetorical means to bring agents into action." And in narrative structures readers can mirror themselves in the action of the characters". Nevertheless, in relation to the complicating actions and their resolutions in the episodes, no results are provided, and the characters, with the exception of Ms. d"Argy herself, are not identifiable. Thus, the readers are left to imagine what might have happened, and the narrative stars to lose credibility.

So, even though the readers are encouraged to acknowledge the episodes in order to know what situations drove her to became aware she was a feminist, the episodes resolutions do not allow the reader to make a thorough analysis of feminism beyond the surface-level philosophy, one which is compatible with political conservatism.

As stated by Caldas Coulthard (1996)

"The conservative discourse of separate spheres between men and women and of female passivity, however, continue to coexist with a liberal discourse of the independent woman."

In other words, as the analysis of the episodes in this narrative shows, the readers are not intellectually or politically challenged; many of Ms. d'Argy's reactions are at an individual level, no further evidence of change at a collective level is presented, i.e., the actual change that was brought about from her personal attitudes is not provided in the narrative. The only information provided is that she protested, argued, and demanded fairer treatment. According to Halliday (1994), to protest, demand and to argue, are verbal processes. So, on the one hand, Ms d'Argy is liberal in a sense that she constructs her identity as a feminist, one who fights for her rights. On the other hand, her actions as a feminist constitute verbal processes, all she does is argue, protest. Therefore, we speculate that the text may not have been written for actual feminist gain, but rather to portray feminism as a new fashion that the modern women should adhere to by buying the special issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine on 'Feminism now'.

As argued by Ballaster (1991)

"However unsatisfactory we might find much of the content of Cosmopolitan, there can be little doubt that feminism has had some impact (...) the difficulties and problems women face in the workplace or at home are, by and large, represented as part and parcel of being a woman, and never related to broader patterns of discrimination and inequality that might be fought and changed".

In this sense, we may argue that the feature page as well as the articles Ms. d'Argy advertises in the feature page, have the purpose of informing and entertaining the readers about 'feminism', but, above all, they function as a commercial vehicle.

In answering the question 'Finally what happened?' it can be stated that at last, Marcelle became aware she was a feminist, but she still enjoys male company -'(...) despite my general larkiness and the huge enjoyment I derived from male company and flattery and  $\sec - I$  was, in fact, a feminist'.

In this part of the narrative, Mr d'Argy's claims show that even though she explicitly declares herself a feminist, she does not deviate from the model of being feminist but suitably feminine, one who enjoys male companionship and is desirable to her companion.

In a way, Marcelle is adverse to be labeled a 'feminist'. She testifies this by stating 'I was in fact a feminist (...)', and her reluctance to believe she is a feminist is actually spotted in the following adversative clause' (...) but it didn't sound like me'. However, by realizing that there were masses of women and quite a few men who thought as she did, she felt at ease – 'But it was a relief to know that there were masses of women and quite a few men who thought as I did'.

Having reassured her identity as a feminist by conforming to masses of women's and *quite a few* men's way of thinking, provided her with a bit of comfort, but did not convince her completely. The deciding factor in her assuming herself as a feminist was a verbal statement made by Antonia Fraser – 'Perhaps Antonia Fraser's remark that all intelligent women were feminist was a deciding factor' – but even so, by stating 'perhaps' she is claiming a certain uncertainty about her convictions.

As suggested by Ballaster (1991) "even when writers explicitly declare their feminism, they rarely deviate from the model of being feminist but suitably feminine".

It is important to mention that we do not wish to suggest that the feminists cannot or should not be sexy women, what I am attempting to show through the analysis of this narrative is that, in this context (women's magazine), the sexy feminism is being used rather as an appeal to persuade readers to buy the magazine in order to read the texts. To take this even one step further, it has been used to attract a different audience from the one which is already captive consumers of the magazines.

As argued by Ballaster (1991) "(...) reading or being seen to read the right magazine is as important as the possession of any other commodity, in the establishment of social identity". Perhaps by buying the special issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine on the New Feminism now maybe the readers will realize they can become feminists and sexy women.

As can be seen in the last two sentences, the narrator addresses directly once again by the use of a condition clause 'If you are a regular Cosmo reader you'll know that we constantly wave the feminist banner. Now, why wouldn't you call yourself a feminist?' In reading these last sentences the reader is reminded of the problem raised in the abstract part of the narrative, that if she/he has never thought of herself/himself as a feminist, it is time to think again. One way to do this is to buy the exclusive 21-page feminism special issue of *Cosmo*. It shows how feminism can be an inspirational part of a woman's life.

### Conclusion

I have tried to show that this personal narrative in the feature page of the 1983 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine has been used as a strategy to illustrate a point, as well as context building for further discussion and as a community building device. The narrator intends to persuade the readers to be better informed about the 'new feminism'. In doing so, she recounts episodes of her experience as a woman and the difficulties she faced which drove her to become aware she was a feminist. The analysis has shown how the topic 'feminism' in this narrative has been used as commercial vehicle rather than for actual feminist gain. It has been used as an appeal for readers to read the texts as well as to attract a new community of readers apart from the usual consumers of the magazine. In sum, I have attempted to show through the analysis of this page, not for intellectual or political challenge, but for mere entertainment and information. As sad as it sounds, 'feminism' in this particular issue of the magazine, stands as just one more commodity for the new modern woman to buy.

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