

# RETRANSLATION IN THE FINNISH THEATRE

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## **Abstract**

Translation scholars have recognized a number of reasons for retranslation in the theatre. In my paper, I propose to locate the motivation for retranslation in the specific context of the theatre and drama and study retranslation in terms of the targets the texts are aimed at. I argue that retranslation strategies in the theatre can be understood in terms of how precisely the target of the text can be monitored. The more closely a text can be targeted at a particular reception, the further away the translation strategy moves from that of literary translation. The opposite is also true: the more independence a retranslation has as a written text, the more likely it is to follow the praxis in literary translation. The precision of targeting can vary from a loose spatial and temporal socio-cultural frame to a specific concept in a concrete physical location at a precise time of the day. My findings are from the Finnish theatre, and, self-evidently, their generalization requires further study of conditions in other theatres. The Finnish theatre is relatively young and represents a marginalized language area. Finnish language as a literary medium is also young, which has its consequences for the retranslation of drama. My material is also restricted to the contact of the Finnish theatre with the dominant Anglo-American culture.

**Keywords:** Theatre Translation, Retranslation in the Theatre, Targeting in Theatre Translation.

Retranslation is an inherent part of text production in the Western text-based theatre, where texts are constantly being rewritten for new performances. In the theatrical environment, versatility and flexibility are virtues that help texts cross borders both in time and space, and turn them into classics, as can be seen by both synchronic and diachronic

studies of theatre translation (e.g. Aaltonen 2000, Delabastita and D'hulst 1993; Pavis 1996; Scolnikov and Holland 1989).

Retranslation in the theatre is not a monolithic category of text production, and it is not necessarily distinguishable from translation or indigenous writing. All these forms of writing create an element for a theatrical production. In some cases, the distinction may be clear, as, for example, when a director, wanting to produce a particular play, finds the existing translation dated, and commissions a retranslation. There are, however, a large number of contexts, in which the borderline between translation and retranslation is not so easy to draw. When a playwright rewrites a literal translation for the stage production, is the text a retranslation? When a director adjusts an existing translation to suit a particular concept, is this a retranslation? In indirect translation, the source text is already a translation. Is the new text therefore a retranslation? And finally, what time span is required to turn parallel translations into a translation and a retranslation?

(Re)translation may be closely related to indigenous writing as well. In concept (re)translation, in particular, when a play provides an idea or concept around which a new play is constructed, the distinction between the two may be difficult to define.

Texts generated in the above processes can be published in different forms, from a print-ready book version to an A4-sized draft for actors. Some part of the processes may be in the hands of language experts, whereas in others, theatre practitioners may take over. If one person does all the work, expertise in the theatre usually gets priority over that in the foreign language.

Apart from the need for linguistic updating, translation scholars have recognized the motivation for (re)translation in the underlying discourses in the target society (e.g. Brisset 1996). The chosen (re)translation strategy may also reflect either reverence or subversion (rebellion or disregard) towards alterity (Aaltonen 2000: 63). In what follows, I propose to move from the larger social context to a more specific context of the theatre and drama and study

retranslation in terms of the targets the texts are aimed at. What decides the strategy once the decision to retranslate has been taken? I will draw my material from the Finnish theatre but assume that my findings have a wider applicability and that similar patterns can be found in all Western theatre. I argue that retranslation strategies in the theatre can be understood in terms of how precisely the target of the text can be monitored. The more closely a text can be targeted at a particular reception, the further away the translation strategy moves from that of literary translation. The opposite is also true: the more independence a retranslation has as a written text, the more likely it is to follow the praxis in literary translation. The precision of targeting can vary from a loose spatial and temporal socio-cultural frame to a specific concept in a concrete physical location at a precise time of the day.

Parallels can be found between the targeting of translations and retranslations. There are, however, also differences due to the praxis of separating written drama and theatre texts. In what follows, I will use the term *retranslation* to refer to the instances, in which a new version of a foreign source text is produced. Whether or not the old translation is used in the retranslation process is not significant. In retranslation, the existence of both a foreign source text and an older translation can be assumed.

Real life resists categorization, and this is evident in my analysis as well. The circumstances in which targeting takes place are fluid and generalizations need to be made. *More or less* are, as usual, more accurate attributes than *either-or*. My findings are from the Finnish theatre, and, self-evidently, generalization requires further study of conditions in other theatres. Finnish theatre is relatively young – the national theatre was established only in 1872 - and it represents a marginalized language area. The Finnish language as a literary medium is also young: the first Finnish novel was published only in 1870. This has its consequences for the retranslation of drama. My material is further restricted to the contact of the Finnish theatre with the dominant Anglo-American culture.

## Theatre as an Environment for Translation Studies

The importance of contacts in intercultural theatre has been self-evident for theatre practitioners ever since antiquity. Texts have travelled from one culture to another and served a significant function both in the emergence of nations as well as in the introduction of new ideologies. (see e.g. Aaltonen 2000: 20-27). Almost equally self-evident has been the scarcity of research into theatre translation, although in recent years, efforts have been made to improve the situation by encouraging a variety of individual and joint projects as well as organizing conferences, where researchers can meet and join forces.

Theatre translation is a problematic and complex research site, which is, at least partly, to blame for the lack of academic interest in objects in this environment. It is an interdisciplinary research site, which would require cooperation between many parties, most notably between theatre practitioners and translation scholars, who have both tended to pursue their own interests independently and ignore each other's work. For translation scholars, the object of study appears as a moving target, never entirely controllable, always shifting when you think you have finally managed to catch it. Research into theatre translation requires simplification and generalization, which threatens to undermine the importance of the findings.

Three areas of difficulties in the research site are well recognized by translation scholars. Firstly, research into theatre translation is hampered by contextual ambiguity. How can one define and distinguish from each other drama as literature and drama as theatre texts, located in the two larger contexts of theatre and literature? Does the distinction need to be made? Both contexts follow their own conventions in their text generation processes. Research is complicated by the fact that texts may belong to both environments and move in and out of them as well as from one into the other. Formally, the distinction between the two text types is not always

possible. Drama as literature is interrelated with other literary genres, and theatres do not necessarily use a verbal component in their shows. In the theatre, a written text may stand in various relationships to a theatrical show. Theatres may use other than dramatic texts as their material, and, their repertoires may include poetry, letters, short stories, and novels. Only the function, past or present, rather than any intrinsic properties can define drama as literature or as theatre texts. Moreover, even within the theatre, a distinction must be made between the oral and written text, which are both elements of the theatrical production. The written theatre text has its counterpart, an oral text, on stage, but the two are different entities, each with its own semiotic system. Neither has priority over the other. (see also Aaltonen 1996: 56-63; Aaltonen 2000: cff).

Another difficulty arises from the heterogeneity of the research objects, which threatens the validity of the findings. Theatre translation is a complex phenomenon, and, as suggested above, there is a great deal of variation in the praxis, which generates texts. A stage translation, an indirect translation, and a director's edited version of a translation would all fall into the umbrella category of retranslation, but otherwise have very little in common.

Thirdly, if scholars manage to define the object in such a way that the number of contextual variables can be restricted and controlled, the findings will still be subject to national, cultural, geographical, historical and other diversification. Research carried out in the Western theatre may have little application outside it because of the difference in theatrical conventions. Even within the Western theatre there are great differences between theatrical conventions in marginal and dominant cultural areas. In addition, the findings may not have any validity beyond a particular point in time. (Schultze 1990: 267, Aaltonen 1996: 35-36, Aaltonen 2000: 17-20)

Enough research exists, however, to reach agreement on some contextual characteristics. Researchers generally agree on the uniqueness of the theatre as an environment for translation, which

is different from literary translation. Although diachronic study would reveal variation in literary translation strategies (see e.g. Chesterman 1997: 20-29), contemporary translations tend to have a close relation with the underlying work (Venuti 1995: 15). Theatre, on the other hand, favours versatility and multiple readings, which may lead to the use of a range of different translation strategies. Some of these may link the source text and its translation only very loosely, as evidenced by the persistent use of the terms 'adaptation' or 'version' aiming to signal a difference from 'translation proper', although the distinction between these strategies has remained largely unspecified.<sup>1</sup>

Another feature, which distinguishes the theatre from the literary environment, is its process of the production of meaning. In the theatre, texts or, more precisely, their counterparts, the verbal element on stage, are not self-contained. While readers have a choice of the time and place of their reading, theatre audiences are confined to controlled circumstances in a specific place (say, the London West End, Lagos in Nigeria, or Vaasa town theatre), at a specific point in time, (say a matiné performance, Saturday afternoon April, 1999). In addition, other elements of the stage production (acting, lights music, costume, make-up, props, scenery) may support or contradict the verbal element, draw attention to it, emphasize it, or distract the audience and draw their attention away from it. The text is by no means the most important element in a production. The production of meaning in the theatre is also unique in its immediacy. Drama on stage is written in the wind, and the reconstruction of its meanings resists documentation. Even videotape can only suggest how some of the elements interacted in a particular performance in a particular production. Once the performance is over, the evidence has gone forever.

In this environment and despite all the obstacles, translation scholars have been carrying out research to outline the parameters of theatre translation and searching for patterns or regularities in the labyrinth.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will search for regularities or

patterns in the relationship between targeting and the choice of (re)translation strategies within the Finnish theatrical practice.

### **Targeting in Theatrical Text Production**

Retranslation, like all translation, is inherently an egotistical activity, which takes place in a certain socio-cultural context. Both forms of text production are always targeted. The precision, with which a target is defined in different circumstances, varies, however, and three types of targets can be distinguished according to how carefully the reception of a text can be monitored. Important factors in monitoring the target are the predicted homogeneity and size of the audience, the time and space of the reception, the mode of reception, and the anticipated life span of the text.

The three types of targets can be understood as a set of three discs<sup>3</sup>, with the least precise target as the largest disc on the bottom, and the other two targets each more precise than the one immediately larger than itself. A large target can always be reworked to a more precise one, and, at least theoretically, a more precise target may over time extend to cover the entire socio-cultural context. In loosely targeted theatre (re)translation, texts are written for a large and diverse audience of readers, theatre practitioners, and viewers. There is no concrete link with a particular theatrical production, not even necessarily with the theatre itself, and the overall trigger to the translation process is usually found outside it. Texts are, above all, seen as literature. Loosely targeted (re)translations are not likely to highlight any particular thematic reading of their source text but rather encourage the perception of it as an open text. Their expected life span is long. The second category of targets is exceptional in the Finnish theatre and confined to drama, which has been sold to an English-speaking theatre. Retranslations are here aimed more precisely at a specific set of receivers, English playwrights, whose expertise is in the conventions of the English theatre. The openness

of readings is extended to the linguistic level, proposing to leave the final choice of expression to a theatre practitioner to be reworked to hit a precise target, a particular audience of viewers. Texts in the second category are intended to be received as written texts and their expected life span is shortest of all. The third disc forms the most precise target. Texts in this category are aimed at controllable reception on stage in a particular location at a precisely defined point in time by a precisely definable audience. They are intended to be received orally, and their anticipated life span can vary from one production to many productions and eventually to an afterlife as written drama.

Translation has always played an important role in Finland. Translations of foreign drama into Finnish have been important in establishing a national theatre. In contemporary theatre they account for some 50% of the repertoires of the theatres. (see Aaltonen 1996: 56-57) Finnish playwrights have also been interested in reaching foreign audiences through their texts, although admission to foreign stages has not been easy. Marginal language areas have usually great difficulties in selling their texts to foreign theatres, especially in gaining acceptance on the Anglo-American stage. This has not, however, discouraged Finnish playwrights. A number of Finnish theatre texts have been selected for translation into English (and through that for promotion in the English language). Those that have managed to become accepted for performance in the English-speaking theatre have later been retranslated to hit the precise target on a particular stage.

### **Loosely-targeted (Re)translation**

Loosely targeted retranslation presumes the existence of loosely targeted translation, which is most importantly a feature of literary drama, used to integrate foreign texts into the indigenous stock as cultural capital. While theatres select foreign texts for use on stage



in a particular production for a demographically definable theatre audience in a particular location at a specific point in time, the selection criteria for written drama is different. At the emergence of national cultures, the introduction of foreign drama may be important for many reasons. In Finland it was seen as an important means of helping the Finnish language develop into a literary medium, but it also helped to make a statement of the sophistication and developmental stage of the entire Finnish culture. (Helleman 1970: 419) Translation may also be important as a statement of the acceptance of the Foreign, and symbolic tokens of tolerance may be collected as evidence of the openness to difference.<sup>4</sup> In the theatre, the selection of suitable texts has other, more immediate motivations. The cast may need work: a star actor may need a suitable part, or a play needs to have parts for “two men and three women”. The scenery and props may limit the choice of the play. It may be important to amuse the audience or make them aware of a social injustice. A new physical location may offer new possibilities. Moreover, the life span of a theatre text only really needs to extend over one performance (preferably it should be longer, though), whereas the expected life span is a great deal longer for literary drama.

The division between the two types of drama, written drama and drama as theatre texts, has consequences for the translation process as well, and, according to Bassnett (1990: 79), two forms of translation had already developed in Europe by the nineteenth century. One was commercial translation, for which the eventual performance was crucial, and the other was the aesthetic translation of classical texts for the reader. In terms of its reception, the latter would be loosely targeted at a heterogeneous group of readers in contemporary society, while the former would be closely targeted at a particular audience in a theatrical event. Spatially and temporally loosely targeted aesthetic translation would not be adjusted to any particular physical location or point in time. As texts would be seen primarily as literature, the accepted translation

strategy would be that of literary translation. Theatre translators had more flexibility, which would also be easy to abuse. If a text only lived as long as the production, and was not even its most important element, there was more room for uneven work.

Loosely targeted literary translations have historically been an important means in the West of introducing canonical drama from other cultures. In contemporary society, they are important in cultures, which have a tradition of publishing drama as literature. The publishing policy varies between countries and, while written drama is not published or read in some countries, drama sections in bookshops may be quite significant in others. (Aaltonen 2000: 38-39)

Loosely targeted translation of written drama has been a significant cultural phenomenon also in Finland, whereas its counterpart in retranslation is far less so. This is because written drama is not published systematically any longer, and written drama therefore seldom gets retranslated primarily as written drama. In cases where retranslation is commissioned, the initiative usually comes from the theatre. In contemporary Finland, drama tends to be retranslated only if a director finds the existing translation not adequate any longer. The retranslation will then be targeted at a particular production. The perceived inadequacy may be due to the dissatisfaction with the translation strategy in the old translation, its inaccuracy or its linguistic ageing.

In Finland, dissatisfaction with the translation strategy triggered off new translations of written drama especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A change in the translation policy took place in within the first hundred years of Finnish as a literary medium. When plans were made to establish a national theatre in Finland at the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large number of plays were translated to prove that at least the size of the repertoire would justify a national theatre. Texts were thus needed primarily for the stage. The translation strategy underlined the familiarity of the texts, and, for example plays were typically reset in Finland. (Helleman 1970: 449) Holberg's *Erasmus Montanus* became

*Anttu Puuronen* and *Jeppe på Berget* became *Jeppe Niilonpoika*. The first Finnish *Macbeth* in 1834 was renamed *Ruunulinna* according to the name of the Finnish protagonist. It was written in runic verse, with hymn verses appearing as part of the porter's comments (Paloposki 1997: 136).

A change in the translation policy took place with Romanticism, as it became important to celebrate the writer-genius. For that purpose it was important to imitate the features of the source text as closely as possible. A number of literary dramas were translated following the new policy, which also gave rise to a retranslation of *Macbeth* in 1864. While the first *Macbeth* had been translated from a Swedish source text (which had a German source text), the 1864 version was based on the English "original", whose images and metre it imitated. The new *Macbeth* was only loosely targeted, and the mode of publication not pre-determined. The impetus for the retranslation was an invitation by the Finnish Literary Society to translate a Shakespeare play to celebrate the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth on 23 April 1864. The society promised a prize for the best play. The retranslation was later published with 15 other classics (works by Lessing, Schiller, Holberg and Sheridan), all carefully selected to form a valuable contribution to literature in Finnish. Parts of the play, most notable the sleep-walking scene of Lady Macbeth, were later performed on the stage of the newly established national theatre. (Aspelin-Haapkylä 1906: 40-41)

The early Finnish retranslation of *Macbeth* was a typical loosely targeted text. It was not aimed at any particular reception, but rather to conform to the accepted view of translation of valuable literary texts. The mode of publication was decided later: the play first came out as a written text and only later used as part of a theatre performance. The life span of a retranslation, such as the 1864 *Macbeth*, is likely to be long, provided that the expectations of the translation strategy do not change. In Finland, a new translation was already commissioned in 1885, as the Finnish language had developed further and its means of expression stabilized.

### **Target: New Source Texts**

In some cultures, the initial translation of a foreign theatre text is primarily commissioned to produce a new source text, which will then be reworked to write the final stage version. The receptor group of this initial translation is homogeneous: it targets writers whose expertise is in the particular register of theatrical language and its conventions. The expertise of the translators is expected to lie in the source language and culture, and their task is to imitate the source language text both linguistically and conceptually in the target language. There is not the choice between various options but rather the mapping of the options.

This praxis has both disadvantages and advantages. The commissioning of an initial literal translation is justified, if it is needed as a bridge between lesser-known languages and the receiving stage. It is justified, if it makes intercultural theatre possible. It may, however, also have negative consequences, if it is a commercial gimmick justifying the underpayment of the language expert and using the name of a well-known playwright to sell the production to the audience. (for the discussion, see Aaltonen 2000: 44)

In Finland, translations targeted at further rewriting are rare. Finnish translators are language experts, who are also expected to be familiar with the conventions in the theatre. Occasionally, when musicals are translated, the first draft may be prepared by a language expert and the stage version by a song maker or playwright (see e.g. Aaltonen 1996: 55; Ellonen 1998: 43). It is, however, common that the language expert makes both (Leskinen 1998: 87-91). Occasionally, a literal translation may also be needed, when a Finnish playtext is chosen for production on an English-speaking stage, where literal translations are required. Literal translations are then likely to be also retranslations, as the initial contact with foreign theatre practitioners has already been through a loosely targeted translation of the Finnish text, usually commissioned at the source.

So far literal translations have not been needed very frequently. All in all, English translations are available of some 110 Finnish plays, of which only a few have been used in English productions. These translations, whose main task is to sell the text to foreign theatre practitioners, are loosely targeted at all possible productions in many different cultures. When a Finnish text is then chosen for a production on an English stage, a loosely targeted translation may no longer be found sufficient, and a new text needs to be prepared, where the translator describes the textual and conceptual grid in the source text. The aim of this literal retranslation is to draw attention to the foreign origin of the text and its multiple options.

An example of a contemporary Finnish text, which has been retranslated for a foreign playwright to rework to a stage version is *Olga* by Laura Ruohonen.<sup>5</sup> The play was first performed in Finland in 1995 and discovered by Scottish theatre practitioners on their visit to Finland in 1999. They became interested and decided to produce it. *Olga* was premiered at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in December 2001. A loosely targeted English translation, which the Scottish theatre practitioners read first, had been made by Anselm Hollo, a well-known translator of Finnish literature into English. A literal version of *Olga* was prepared for the Traverse theatre by Angela Landon, a bilingual English-speaker. Her bracketed remarks were intended to provide options for the stage version but also to act as a starting point for discussions between Ruohonen and the Scottish playwright Linda McLean, who was commissioned to write the stage version. The stage version was based, in the first instance, on the literal version, but it was also checked against Hollo's loosely targeted translation. It was later published by Traverse Publishing in book form in connection with the performance.

The literal version provided a commentary at 120 different places in the text. A linguistic alternative was given in two cases, and a choice of register in three. The overall majority of remarks, 89, give a close translation of the Finnish

usage. In 11 cases, the literal version offers an explanation or clarification of an unusual Finnish usage (in some cases, the author's idiolect). Cultural concepts or practice has been commented on in 12 cases. As can be expected, a close imitation of the Finnish usage was not taken up in the stage version. Instead, it consciously used the vernacular Scots as an instrument of expression. The observations in the literal version thus mapped out the options for the translator of the stage version and left the final choice to her.

Literal translations targeted at experts in the language of the theatre belong to neither written drama nor theatre texts. The only acceptable translation strategy is the explicitation of the difference between the two language systems and cultural praxis. If both writing and translation are metonymic in that they involve a selection of elements for representation, a literal translation pretends to avoid this choice. It claims to leave the options open for someone else to make the choice. The life span of literal translation is very short; it is over as soon as the stage version is completed, and it cannot be resuscitated for later use.

### **Target: Controlled Viewing**

In Finland, drama is usually only commissioned for retranslation for a particular theatrical production. The audience, the theatre, the physical location as well as the point in time are all specified. One of the most common motivations for commissioning a retranslation is the need to update the language, which is done at regular intervals, estimated to be some 20 to 30 years (Jänis 1991: 216). Another motivation may be a director's wish to highlight a particular reading of the play or even a particular translation strategy. Practical considerations may also give rise to a retranslation. In Finland retranslation, like all translation, is in the hands of language experts, although it is not uncommon to have directors retranslating (often intra-lingually) foreign classics.

An example of targeted retranslation is the 1972 version of *Macbeth* by Matti Rossi for a production in the same year. The language in the retranslation was made more colloquial, and the director's reading of the parallels with the play's plot and a military coup provided the framework for the retranslation. Some ten years later, Rossi revised the text for a new production in Helsinki, and for the third time in 1997 for the director Kama Ginkas. Ginkas, from the Russian dramatic school, demanded unbroken metre and refused to accept anything else. The acting, set design and music in the production were unusual: the actors addressed some of their key lines to the audience, and used ritualistic choreography; old Finno-Ugric music was performed in the background with traditional instruments, and the stage resembled a large artistic installation. (Aaltonen 1999: 153-154) The latest retranslation of Rossi's *Macbeth* is that by the director, Jotaarkka Pennanen, who rewrote the text, for the production in Vaasa town theatre in 2002. Pennanen rearranged the scenes, combined them and the lines of minor characters in order to draw parallels with power struggles in contemporary society and Shakespeare's world.

The literal retranslation of *Olga*, discussed in the preceding section, was also further retranslated for the stage. Of the options of both linguistic and conceptual details offered by the literal version, the stage version made the final choice. It omitted details, but also made additions, and reshuffled lines. Omissions often included non-realistic insertions but also short scenes, which might have meant a digression from the main story. In some places the stage version made more of a detail than the original play, and added, for example, an English nursery rhyme. As can be expected, a close imitation of the Finnish usage was not taken up in the stage version. Instead, the stage version opted for Scots, and consciously used the vernacular as an instrument of expression.

Translation strategies in targeted retranslation can be many. The only limitation is the copyright law and the way it is monitored. The texts, although they may exceed the life span of a production, are

mainly seen as material for a particular production. Success in the theatre may also lead to the publication of the text, although in Finland this is rare.

### **Conclusion**

(Re)translation of drama is not a monolithic category of text production. The forms it can take depend on a country's and theatre's praxis to separate written drama from theatre texts or to rework texts for theatrical productions. I have distinguished three types of targeting within the Finnish theatrical praxis. Loosely targeted retranslation of drama is relatively rare in contemporary Finnish theatre, as texts there are only prepared for immediate use. Historically, it has been important, though, in particular when Romanticism introduced a change in the view of acceptable translation strategies. Retranslations targeted at foreign playwrights are needed when Finnish theatre texts have been accepted for production on an English-speaking stage. For drama translated into Finnish, these are not used. Finally, the majority of retranslations in Finland are targeted at contemporary productions and follow the director's concept of the language, theme and translation strategy in the text production. I argue that the three types of targeting can always be distinguished in the (re)translation process in the theatre. Only their frequency varies both historically and culturally.



## Notes

1. This was pointed out by David Johnston, who gives as an example one of David Hare's translations, where the phrases *translated and adapted by* appeared on the cover, and *version by* on the inside (Johnston 1996: 143).
2. The view of theatre translation as a labyrinth has been launched by Susan Bassnett in a pioneering article "Ways through the Labyrinth. Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts." In Hermans Theo (ed.) (1985) *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 87-102.
3. The structure is a modification of Richard Schechner's discs describing the difference between the concepts of *performance, theatre, script and drama*. It can be found in his article "Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance" in *The Drama Review*, Vol. 17, No 3, pp. 5-63. The article was published in 1973.
4. In Finland, drama is not usually published as reading material (see also Aaltonen 1996: 57-58).
5. The translations of *Olga* have been discussed in Aaltonen (*forthcoming*).

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