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THE GRAMMAR OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN: A CASE STUDY OF PORT HARCOURT PIDGIN GRAMMAR

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Abstract

This study examines the grammar of Nigerian Pidgin with a special focus on the grammar of Port Harcourt pidgin. The data collected for the study was from a recorded tape conversation and the data was analyzed by carefully picking some sentences from Port Harcourt pidgin and compared them grammatically with those of English. The areas compared include the formation of comparisons, inflection, expressing of future tenses, constructions of active and passive sentences, the use of reciprocal pronouns, sentences and clauses. During their comparisons, the researchers used the abbreviation 'PP' for Port Harcourt pidgin. The study adopted Derek Bickerton's Universalist theory.

Introduction

Every human being uses language. Language is the most important tool and asset man has ever possessed. There can be no development without language. Language and man are inseparable. Man uses language to communicate and interact within his society. Without man there will be no language and without language man's existence is futile.

Several scholars have given their various views about language. For Sapir (1921) language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Stork and Widowson (1974) assert that all languages are highly developed and sophisticated communication system, all capable of meeting the demands of the society in which they are used, and the personal needs of the individual of the society in terms of expressing emotions and giving and receiving information. Ofoegbu (2008) cited in Ofoegbu (2017) defines language as a human system of communication. He says it is a means by which humans alone communicate and it serves among other things as a binding factor for all humans. Hall (1969) cited in Ofoegbu (2008)

opines that language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitual used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols.

All the definitions of language given above by the various scholars have one thing in common: language is basically used for communication. According to Ofoegbu (2017) man uses language to communicate his individual thoughts, inner feelings and personal psychological experiences. Ofoegbu notes that language is as living as the society in which it serves and has a rhythm of evolution in tune with that of the society. It is clear that one cannot divorce language from the society. For an individual to adapt superbly in any society and thus meet his daily needs, the use of language must come to the fore.

All languages in the world are primarily used for communication among their speakers. One of the world's languages that have been used extensively is the English language. English is a global language. Crystal (2003: 3) defines a global language as a language which achieves a global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. Crystal notes that for a language to develop a "special role" for it to be recognized in every country that language must be used as a mother tongue by large number of people who speak that particular language as it is in USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc. and also to achieve the status of "special role" a language has to be taken up by other countries around the world and these countries must decide to give it a special place within their communities, even though they have few (or no) mother tongue speakers.

Crystal (p,4) further notes that in order to achieve this, a language can be made the official language of a country where that language is often described as a second language as it is in Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore, etc.

The English language being a second language in Nigeria has developed into several varieties as one of such varieties is the Nigerian Pidgin English. The Nigerian Pidgin English is mostly used in heterogeneous places like Port Harcourt, Warri, Sapele, Benin, Ughelli, and Lagos. It is worthy to note that the Pidgin English spoken in each of these cities is different from one another. The way Pidgin English is spoken in Port Harcourt is different from the way it is spoken in Warri as their grammars are not the same. Pidgin English is extensively used in Port Harcourt, Rivers State of Nigeria. Residents in Port Harcourt use Pidgin English in almost all their daily activities as some of them have acquired it as their native language owing to the fact that they were born and bred in Port-Harcourt. Pidgin English is used in Port Harcourt in informal and sometimes in formal settings. Just like any other languages, Port Harcourt Pidgin English has met all and is still meeting all the communicative needs of Port Harcourt residents. Port Harcourt Pidgin English is performing all the functions any language can afford its immediate environment.

The Concept of Pidgin

According to Richard and Schmidt (2010: 437), pidgin is a language which develops as a contact language when groups of people who speak different languages try to communicate with one another on a regular basis. They note that this has occurred many times in the past when foreign traders had to communicate with the local population or group of workers from different language backgrounds on plantations or in factories. For Crystal (2008: 369) pidgin is a term used in sociolinguistics to refer to a language with a markedly reduced grammatical structure, lexicon and stylistic range, compared with other languages, and which is the native language of no one. Crystal notes that pidgins are formed by two mutually unintelligible speech

communities attempting to communicate, each successively approximating to the more obvious features of the other's language. Crystal further notes that such developments need considerable motivation on the part of the speakers, and it is therefore not surprising that pidgin languages flourish in areas of economic development, as in the pidgin based on English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, in the East and West Indies, Africa and the Americas (where they were often referred to as trade languages). Elugbe and Omamor describe pidgin as a contact or trade language used by people who do not share language in common in a given geographical area. For Hudson (1996: 59), apart from code-switching and borrowing, in which varieties may get mixed up with each other, there is yet another way, namely by the process of creating a new variety out of two (or more) existing ones. Hudson notes that this process of "variety-synthesis" may take a number of different forms, including for instance the creation of artificial auxiliary languages like Esperanto and Basic English. He, however, notes further that by far the most important manifestation is the process of pidginisation, whereby pidgin languages or pidgins, are created. Hudson asserts that pidgin languages are varieties created for very practical and immediate purposes of communication between people who otherwise would have no common language whatsoever, and learned by one person from another within the communities concerned as the accepted way of communicating with members of the other community. Hudson (p.60) buttresses further by arguing that since the reason for wanting to communicate with members of the other communities is often trade, a pidgin may be what is called a trade language, but not all pidgins are restricted to being used as trade languages, nor are all trade languages pidgin. A pidgin is a variety, specially created for the purpose of communicating with some other group, and not used by any community for communication among themselves. Hudson points out that, a pidgin should be as simple to learn as possible, especially for those who benefit least from learning it, and the consequence of this is that the vocabulary is generally based on the vocabulary of the dominant group.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Universalist theory. This theory was propounded by Derek Bickerton in 1981. Universalist theory is one central factor or mechanism involved in the explanation of the striking structural similarities of pidgin and creole languages. Universalist theories aim to explain structural similarities among the world's pidgins and creoles on the basis of the assumption that all humans are characterized by an innate ability to simplify language. Hence, structural similarities are the result of universal strategies for language simplification. They are applied in pidginization processes – the active creation of a pidgin by different speakers with different native languages. These strategies are universal because they are shared by all humans worldwide. One particular Universalist theory is the foreign talk theory. Foreign talk describes a specific style of speech applied by native speakers of a language when addressing foreigners in typical speech situations. For instance, the foreigner asks for directions and the native speaker assumes that the foreigner is not able to understand the native speaker correctly when using his or her usual, prestigious speech variety. In such cases, native speakers might decide to use foreign talk in order to make themselves understandable: a modified, structural simplified variety of a language. The variety is used by non-speakers for communication with foreigners.

Summing up, Universalist theories assume that pidgins are created on the basis of a simplified output, like in foreigner talk. This theory is of the opinion that the grammars of the

world's pidgins are similar. This structural simplification is the result of the fact that the learners of a pidgin are exposed to a structural simplified version- a foreigner talk version- of the lexifier language. The lexifier language is regarded as the target language in the language learning process.

Nigerian Pidgin English

Nigeria pidgin is related in a way to the other "Pidgin" of West African and the Caribbean. People from various linguist backgrounds migrate into urban towns and cities for one reason or the other. Because they are from different linguistic backgrounds, this brings about a search for a common language for communication. The language for communication that evolved in the case of Nigeria is called Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) and its origin can be traced back to the arrival of the Portuguese and English speaking missionaries including colonialists in large numbers in the southern Part of Nigeria in 1842. Although, these missionaries were resisted by the natives at the initial stage, some of them wanted to establish close relationship with the white man. These groups of Nigerians were engaged in the missionary houses, the European firms, centres and hospitals. Some were even engaged either as cooks, stewards, gardeners, interpreters or teachers. These groups of Nigerians needed to communicate with the Europeans.

With independence and mass urban migration coupled with growth of many towns, many tribes and races which constitute Nigeria began interacting linguistically. In fact, much of what is observed and called Nigerian Pidgin English in Nigeria by the uninitiated is either "bad" (incompletely constructed English). English passed off as "pidgin" by the well- educated elite proficient in the use of Standard English, or "broken" (manifestly incompetent) English connected by the uneducated and minimally educated, in other words, spontaneous ad hoc Englishlike language constructed to meet certain imperative communicative needs in a given urban or social setting.

Agheyisi (1984) has identified two varieties of Nigeria Pidgin English: Varieties A and B. Variety A is what she called the Nigeria dialect of the original English based on West African pidgin. This variety is spoken by people who have a high fluency in the language and who need to use it regularly like traders, mechanics, small business entrepreneurs, taxi drivers and massagers in offices. Variety B is the one used by people who lack linguistic competence in the language and covers all the degrees of fluency that fall into the range of the state called inter-language stage in second language learning. She says that variety A approximates to the purest form of the English based pidgin.

The status of Nigerian pidgin as a language is a point that is still in contention. Some linguists believe that Nigerian pidgin has reached a stage in its development where it can be accorded by the status of a language. Others are of the opposite view that the pidgin has not attained the status of a language. There is no doubt that when Nigeria pidgin emerged, it was meant to serve as means of communication between Nigerians and Europeans first for trade purposes and then later between Nigerians of different ethnolinguistic group. English language is the superstratum while the indigenous languages serve as substrate, depending on the area where the pidgin is spoken. Even though the colonialists have left, the Nigerian pidgin still remains, and has even developed. It is now used mainly in culturally heterogeneous areas like urban areas especially in Port-Harcourt (River state), Warri, Sapele (Delta State), Benin City (Edo

state) and Lagos (Lagos state). It is also used in culturally heterogeneous areas in the rural areas like Abraka, Ughelli, Sapele (Delta State), Aba, Umuahia (Abia State). ***

Nigerian Pidgin English has also been seriously proposed as Nigeria national language. The basis for this proposal is that Nigerian Pidgin English is the most, widely used language of communication in Nigeria and easily acquired second language in Nigeria according to the proponents of this option. However, both claims just mentioned are actually erroneous. The coastal regions of Nigeria which had the earliest sustained contacts with the British and their English language, especially the Warri Delta Zone, is the main geographical base for Nigerian Pidgin English; the language is also well used in parts of Edo State in the former Midwestern Nigeria; less used in Northern Nigeria.

Nigerian Pidgin English itself, like any other natural language, is a complex communication tool. As such, it is not the language of most Nigerians and definitely needs a considerable period or dedicated learning as a second language before most Nigerians can become proficient on its use. Much more seriously, Nigerian Pidgin English is not yet really indigenous to Nigerians: although its semantic base is largely indigenous and its form (sound and writing) is evolving according to the formal rules of indigenous Nigerian languages, English language is still the perceived source for the words, concepts and even sentence structure of Nigerian Pidgin English.

The principal users of Nigerian Pidgin English, in Nigeria, do indeed identify with the language so closely that they consider it indigenous to Nigeria and assume erroneously thereby that the rest of Nigerians relate psychologically towards the language as they do. But, in actual fact, Nigerian Pidgin English is foreign to most Nigerians, foreign to the well-educated elite, very proficient in English, who do not want any other “English” to “corrupt” their “English”. As a language created originally to serve the local and mostly unsophisticated needs of people from many different linguistic backgrounds, the communication potential of Nigerian Pidgin English is low as regards its importance in contemporary realities of science and technology.

The Origin and Development of Nigerian Pidgin

Faraclas (1996: 2) observes that with a large and vigorous population and a long tradition of ethnic and linguistic diversity and tolerance, Nigeria was able to develop a highly mercantile society with major urban centres centuries before the landing of European merchant ships in the fifteenth century or the arrival of the Jihad in the thirteenth century. Owing to trading, travel, city life and intermarriage, Nigerians who speak different languages for thousands of years were able to have a close contact with one another. Faraclas notes that bilingualism and multilingualism have always been the norm rather than the exception in most part of Nigeria. According to him, for these reasons, it is very likely that pidginized versions of Nigerian languages were widely used in many areas. Faraclas asserts that pidginized Hausa is still spoken by non-native speakers of Hausa in the markets around Lake Chad while a pidginized form of Igbo is used at present in some Niger Delta markets.

Faraclas further explains:

Nigerian pidgin may very well have developed from one or several such pidginized Nigerian languages that were spoken along the coast before the Europeans arrived. Because of the importance of European trade and the reluctance of Europeans to learn other languages, European words would have been substituted Nigerian words to facilitate communication. Since the Portuguese arrived first, Portuguese derived items such as *sabi* “know” and *pikin*

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“child” would have been initially adopted, but as the British consolidated power over Nigeria, more and more English words would have been integrated into the language. Along with British colonialism came European education via missionaries, many of whom were Krio speakers from Sierra Leone (mostly ex-slaves or descendants or repatriated slaves from the Caribbean).

Whether Nigerian pidgin developed from marketplace contacts between Europeans traders and the various ethnic groups along the coast or from the influence of missionaries from Sierra Leone, it is impossible to determine, given the present state of knowledge. Faraclas explains that it is reasonable to assume that both of these factors played some parts, but scholars must be very careful not to over-emphasize the role of either the traders or the missionaries in the evolution of Nigerian pidgin. He added that in the frantic search for origins, creolists typically ignore the fact that at every stage of its history, Nigerian pidgin has been used primarily as a means of communication among Nigerians rather Nigerians and traders, missionaries or other foreigners. Faraclas finally notes that mounting evidence indicates that it is impossible to formulate any plausible scenario for the origin and development of Nigerian pidgin that does not ascribe a significant role to influence from the linguistic patterns with which Southern Nigerians have always been the most familiar: the structures that typify the languages of Southern Nigeria.

Functions of Pidgin in Nigeria

- i. It serves as lingua franca among people from different ethnic groups.
- ii. It serves the function of second language to the older generations of Nigerians.
- iii. Among children, pidgin plays a more functional role because sometimes it is their first language. They use it in school, neighborhood etc.
- iv. It helps to encourage and sustain intra-tribal marriage among people from different ethnic groups.
- v. It is a convenient lingua franca among families from different linguistic group.

Method of Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from a recorded tape of conversations which contained Port Harcourt Pidgin English. In addition, the researchers themselves were born and bred in Port Harcourt and have used Port Harcourt pidgin extensively in their communication and interaction with others the way the language is used in the streets of Port Harcourt. The researchers are native speakers of Port Harcourt pidgin and they are not just extracting sentences from a recorded tape.

Method of Data Analysis

The researchers carefully picked out some sentences from the recorded tape on Port Harcourt pidgin and compare them with English sentences pointing out their grammatical differences.

The Grammar of Port Harcourt pidgin

The grammar of English is not similar to the grammar of Port-Harcourt pidgin. However, this study is going to look at the grammatical structures of the Nigerian Pidgin as they are used in Port-Harcourt, Rivers State.

1. According to Quirk and Grenbaum (1979: 134) in English grammar, comparison is achieved using *-er* and *-est* inflection for monosyllabic adjectives, *more* and *most* for disyllabic adjectives

and a small group of adjectives form their comparison from different system. However, Port-Harcourt pidgin grammar uses *pas* to indicate all levels of comparison.

- **Comparison using monosyllabic adjective**

PP: Okon *fat pas* James

English: Okon is *fatter than* James

PsP: John *tall pas* Ada and Mike

English: Of all the Children, John *is the tallest*

- **Comparison using disyllabic adjective**

PP: Ngozi *fain pas* Helen

English: Ngozi is *more beautiful* than Helen

PP: Ngozi *fain pas* Helen and Lizzy

English: Ngozi is *the most beautiful* among the girls

- **Comparison using different stems**

PP: Ebi *gud pas* Tari

English: Ebi is *better than* Tari

PP: Matthew *bad pas* Tony and Timothy

English: Matthew is *worse than* Tony and Timothy.

2. English grammar uses the inflection *-ed* to indicate past actions of the verb, *ing* for progressive forms, the plural maker- *s* to indicate number and also *s* to indicate concord.

However, Port-Harcourt pidgin lacks inflection to indicate past actions, progressive action, plurality and concord.

PP: My Pikin *dey Chop* rais (habitual action lacking concord)

English: My child *eats* rice (habitual action indicating concord)

PP: Wan man *kom* luk for you yestidey (indicating past tense without past tense inflection)

English: One man *came* to look for you yesterday (the verb *came* shows past tense)

PP: ai get *tu buk* (plurality without a plural marker inflection)

English: I have *two books* (books indicating plurality)

PP: ai dey chop biskit (Progressive action without the- *ing* marker)

English: I am eating biscuit (*eating* indicating progressive action)

3. While expressing *future tense*, English grammar uses *will* but

Port-Harcourt pidgin uses "*go*" to express future tense.

PP: ai *go go* home tuumoro

English: I *will* go home tomorrow.

PP: dem *go* atend de mitin

English: They *will* attend the meeting.

PP: ai *go* see you leter.

English: I *will* see you later.

4. Passive sentence

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In English grammar, the subject of a sentence does not always do the action of the verb. Sometimes the action is done to the subject. Such sentences are called passive sentences because the subjects are being passive i.e. not doing anything. Port-Harcourt pidgin grammar, however, lacks such passive sentences.

PP: de hunta shoot de animal
(Active sentence without passive equivalent)

English: The hunter shot the animal (Active sentence)
The animal was shot by the hunter (Passive sentence)

5. Whereas English Grammar uses *each other* and *one another* as reciprocal pronouns, Port-Harcourt pidgin uses “*dem sef*” as reciprocal pronouns.

PP: John and Tari luv *demsef*
English: John and Tari love *each other*.

PP: Ebi, Tari and James luv *demsef*.
English: Ebi, Tari and James love *one another*.

Note: English grammar uses *each other* for two people and *one another* for more than two people. However, Port-Harcourt pidgin grammar uses *demsef* irrespective of the number of people involved.

6. English grammar uses the second person personal pronoun “*you*” for both singular and plural referent; Port-Harcourt pidgin grammar uses *you* for only singular referent but uses *una* for plural referent.

PP: ai dey tok tu you (Singular)
ai dey tok tu *una* (Plural)
English: I am talking to *you*. (Singular)
I am talking to *you*. (Plural)

7. Permission
English grammar uses *can* or *may* to express permission, but Port-Harcourt Pidgin grammar uses *fit* to express permission.

PP: you *fit* boro me ₦ 10,000.00?
English: *Can* you lend me ₦ 10,000.00?

Note: When someone is requesting for (financial) assistance, that person is said to be “borrowing” and the person who offers the assistance is “lending” (the money) but Port-Harcourt pidgin uses *borrow* to refer to the borrower and the lender.

8. Sentences
Port-Harcourt pidgin has simple and complex sentences as English does.

Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is any sentence that has only one main clause and no subordinate clauses.

Port-Harcourt pidgin grammar has simple sentences. For instance

PP: ai dey slip

English: I am sleeping.

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1979), a sentence may alternatively be seen as comprising five units called elements of sentence or clause structure: subject, verb, complement, object and adverbial abbreviated as SVCOA. It is interesting to note that Port Harcourt pidgin grammar also has the above stated sentence elements. For example:

PP: di pikin krai

S V

English: The child cried

S V

PP: pol kil di dog

S V O

English: Paul killed the dog

S V O

PP: my moda na ticher

S V Cs

English: My mother is a teacher

S V Cs

PP: my fada bai me nu shue

S V IO DO

English: My father bought me a new shoe

S V IO DO

PP: ai put di orange for di basket

S V DO A

English: I put the orange in the basket

S V DO A

Complex Sentence

Leech and Svartvik (2002) define a complex sentence as a sentence containing more than one clause. Port Harcourt pidgin grammar has complex sentences as English grammar does: noun clause, adjectival clause and adverbial clause.

Noun Clauses: Noun clauses function as subject, object, complement, prepositional complement (Leech & Svartvik: 2002).

In English grammar, noun clauses can be expressed using *that, what, where, how etc.*

However, Port Harcourt pidgin grammar uses *sey, wetin, haw and weer* to express noun clauses as it functions as subject, object, complement, etc.

For example

Subject

PP: wetin him dey faind na moni

English: What he is looking for is money.

PP: haw him wan kari sove di prublem na him sabi

English: How he intends to solve the problem depends on him.

Direct object

PP: ai no sey him dey lie

English: I know that he is lying.

PP: ai go vote huever I laik

English: I will vote whoever I wish to.

Object complement

PP: di polis neva tel am wetin bi him ofens

English: The police have not told him what his offence is.

PP: yu fit kal me wetin yu laik

English: You can call me whatever names you like.

Subject Complement

PP: hom na weer yur frend and famly dey

English: Home is where your friends and family are.

Adjectival clauses

According to Benjamin (2003: 168), an adjectival clause is a group of words containing a subject and a predicate, functioning as an adjective but does not make a complete sense on its own. Adjectival clauses are introduced by the relative pronouns: **who, whom, whose, which** and **that**. Port Harcourt pidgin grammar has adjectival clauses as well but is introduced by **wey**.

For example:

PP: de man wey visit me las nite na loya

English: The man who visited me last night is a lawyer.

PP: de wuman wey her dota mari yestdey na profisor

English: The woman whose daughter got married yesterday is a professor.

Adverbial Clauses

According to Webster's Reference Library (2006: 7), an adverbial clause is a subordinate clause that modifies the main or principal clause by adding information about time, place, concession, condition, manner, purpose and result. This type of clause is introduced by the subordinating conjunctions: because, since, if when, etc. Port Harcourt pidgin grammar has adverbial clauses which are also introduced by the same subordinators. For example,

PP: ai neva see Mary since shi kom from skool (adverbial clause of time)

English: I have not seen Mary since she came from school.

PP: he no go work bcos rane fal (adverbial clause of reason)

English: He didn't go to work because it rained.

9. Contracted forms

English grammar has contracted forms (shortened forms) for the operator but the grammar of Port Harcourt pidgin lacks such forms. For example,

PP: he dey kom (no contracted forms)

English: He is coming. (No contracted form)

He's coming. (Contracted form)

PP: he no dey kom (no contracted form)

English: **He's** not coming (contracted form)

He **isn't** coming. (Contracted form)

10. Questions

Yes-no questions

According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1979), in English grammar yes-no questions are usually formed by placing the operator before the subject. However, the grammar of Port Harcourt pidgin does not form yes-no questions this way, rather it uses intonation.

PP: de pikin don chop (statement)
 de pikin don chop? (Yes-no question)

English: The child has eaten. (Statement)

Has the child eaten? (Yes-no question)

Also in forming yes-no questions, sometimes they *do* and *will* auxiliaries are used in English grammar, but Port-Harcourt pidgin grammar lacks the *do* and *will* construction forms but instead uses *dey* and *go*.

PP: you *dey* liv for nembe wota side? (Yes-no question)

English: *Do* you live at Nembe water side? (Yes-no question)

PP: you *go* chop yam? (Yes-no question)

English: *Will* you eat yam? (Yes-no question)

Tag questions

Leech and Svartvik (2002:132) assert that tag questions are added to the end of a statement to ask for the confirmation of the truth of the statement. They note that if the statement is positive, the tag is negative, and vice versa. Quirk and Greenbaum (1979: 194) note that tag questions consist of operator plus pronoun, with or without a negative particle. They also confirm that if the superordinate clause is positive, the tag is negative, and vice versa. However, Port Harcourt pidgin uses *abi* or *no beso* as its tags for the confirmation of the truth of a statement without indicating positive or negative.

For example,

PP: you no go skool yestdey, *abi*?

You don chop rice, *no be so*?

English: You didn't go to school yesterday, *did you*?

You have eaten the rice, *haven't you*?

Alternative Questions

In English grammar, alternative questions include two or more conjoined sentences in an "or" coordination constructions. Quirk and Greenbaum affirm that there are two types of alternative question, the first resembling a yes-no question, and the second a who-question. On the other hand, Port Harcourt pidgin grammar uses *abi* in alternative question.

For example,

PP: yur moda go work *abi* she goes shush?

English: Did your mother go to work or she went to church?

Conclusion

This study has examined some differences between the grammar of Port-Harcourt pidgin and the grammar of Standard English. The differences between the grammars are found in areas like comparisons, questions, contracted forms, permission, sentences, etc. The study has revealed that Port Harcourt pidgin grammar is unique in its own usage as speakers of the language use it for their day to day communicative needs.

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