# The English Translation of Chinese Internet Catchwords From Memetic Pespective

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## Abstract
Internet catchword is a kind of newly created language with its peculiar characteristics. Language and meme are interdependent. Language is a kind of meme and meme is embodied in language. Both Chinese memes and English memes should be taken into consideration during the process of the English Translation of Chinese Internet catchwords. A translator should be not only the decoder of the source memes but also the transmitter of them. The study is beneficial for intercultural communication and for foreigners to acknowledge and understand China.

**Key words:** Chinese Internet catchword; Memetics; Genotype memes; Phenotype memes; Translation

## INTRODUCTION

With the rapid popularization of Internet and increasing number of netizens in China, more and more Internet catchwords originated from the Internet and spread to people's daily communication, reflecting the unique Chinese phenomenon. As a part of Internet language, Internet catchwords refer to a special kind of unique, vivid and novel language with their creators as netizens, which are usually inspired by hot social events and quickly spread from the Internet to people's daily conversation. As a language variety, Chinese Internet catchwords are endowed with its own characteristics, which pose great difficulties for the better understanding of foreigners. The English translation of Chinese Internet catchwords is both important and beneficial in this fast-developing information society, especially for intercultural communicators.

## 1. MEMETICS
Memetics is a newly developed theory of evolution, which is primarily used to interpret cultural heredity.

### 1.1 Meme
The word "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins, a British ethnologist and biologist. He compared meme to gene in his book *The Selfish Gene* published in 1976. Based on his observation of how human evolve by gene's replication and competition, he proposed in his book for the first time that "meme", which is parallel to "gene", can be used to describe the evolution of cultural phenomena in human society on the ground that culture is also spread and imitated by some smaller units. He introduced the definition of meme as follows:

> We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation. "Mimene" comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like"gene". I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to "memory" or to the French word même. It should be pronounced to rhyme with "cream". Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrase, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in

the gene pool by leaping from body to body via eggs or sperm, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain via process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins, 1976, p.206)

Blackmore (2000) redefined "meme" in the article *The Power of Memes* as "whatever is copied from one person to another person, whether habits, skills, songs, stories, or any other kind of information".

The Chinese scholar He (2005) stated in his article *Memes in Language* that meme was always described as "virus" in memetics which can infect other brains or transmit into other people. Once someone is infected by this kind of "virus", the virus will parasitize in this brain, afterwards, this "virus" could be spread to other people or next generation. This "virus" can be slogan, buzzword, musical rhythm, invention or fashion, everything that are imitated by people and get spread can be called "virus" or meme. Meme has greatly transformed people's conventional thoughts about the way in which culture develops and evolves and gets accepted gradually.

To sum up, a meme is a cultural unit that can be transmitted from one person to another person, and from one culture to another culture through the methods of replication and imitation.

## 1.2 Genotype Meme and Phenotype Meme

In the 1990s, a field of study called memetics arose to explore the concepts and transmission of memes in terms of an evolutionary model. The memetic theory holds that meme is a kind of cultural gene, it survives by replication and transmission.

Blackmore (1999) proposed that there are two different ways for meme's replication and transmission: genotype transmission and phenotype transmission. Genotype transmission means the same information transmits in different context with different or similar forms, and phenotype transmission means the same form can convey different content in different context. Some memes have different or similar forms but the same content while other memes have different content but the same forms. That is genotype and phenotype meme, a pair of concept borrowed from biology as well. As meme is a concept evolved from the biological term "gene", memes can also be divided into genotype memes and phenotype memes according to Blackmore (p. 158). Examples of genotype memes are "bei, ju (杯具)", "xi, ju (洗具)", etc. and examples of phenotype memes are "da, jiang, you (打酱油)", "shan, zhai (山寨)", "lei (雷)", "jiong (囧)", etc..

## 1.3 Language and Meme

Memetics is primarily used to interpret cultural phenomena. Language, as the carrier of cultural information, is itself the element of culture. Language and meme are interdependent.

Language is a kind of meme. He (2005) believed that language in itself is meme, and meme is embodied in language, every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph even discourse can be meme provided that it gets transmitted and replicated through imitation. The development of language is closely related with its users' constant imitation, transmission and replication, in other words, once language is not used and imitated, it will be forgotten by people. One example is "jiong (囧)", an abandoned ancient word. Nearly no people know its meaning or use it in modern Chinese society, however, it has become a catchword once it is used and transmitted by netizens online, relevant language memes such as "jiong, shi(囧事)", "ren, zai, jiong, tu (人在囧途)", "o(╯□╰)o" are produced. Language functions as the carrier of the replication and transmission of cultural memes and on the other hand, the replication and transmission of cultural memes promotes the innovation and development of language. He (2005) pointed out that memes benefit the development of language and memes rely on language to replicate and transmit. Hence, language and memes are interconnected closely.

Language is one of the carriers of memes, by which people get to know various kinds of cultures. On the other hand, meme uncovers and explains the laws and mechanism governing the spread of language itself: the spread of memes accompanies the spread of words, phrases, sentences and even the whole text.

To sum up, in a memetic view, language is created by memes and for memes. Thus, meme is closely related to language and they interact with each other, which is well reflected by the quote of Blackmore, "The human language faculty primarily provided a selective advantage to memes, not gene. In other words, the function of language is to spread memes" (Blackmore, 1999, p.158).

## 1.4 Translation and Meme

The memetic theory devotes to make sense of the general relations of everything as well as cultural heredity from the synchronic and diachronic angle (He, 2005). Memetics can be applied to research of many disciplines, translation is one of them.

Chesterman is the first scholar to bring memetics to the field of translation studies and one of the most authoritative figures who devote to the study of memetics and translation. He establishes the memetic translation studies. The relationship between translation and memes is captured perfectly in his book *Memes of Translation: the Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory*, "For a meme to be transmitted verbally across cultures, it needs a translation…this gives us a fundamental definition of a translation: translation is survival machine for memes" (Chesterman, 1997, p.7).

Translation is also a kind of imitation, which imitates the meaning of the source language (Xie & Lin, 2008). The process of tanslation can be considered to be the process of source culture memes spreading to target culture or target culture memes transmitting

to source culture through language. In cross-cultural communication, the replicating and transmission of a meme is realized by translation activities.

Nida (1993) held the view that the essence of translation lies in conveying the connotative meanings to the target readers without considering about the fixed style of the original words. A free translator can change the original work's figures of speech, sentence structures or patterns, but he cannot make addition or omission of the original meaning at will. Translation is conducted to communicate information, if the translation cannot be understood by the target readers or cannot serve as a bridge for cultural transmission, then it is a failing translation.

## 2. A MEMETIC ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE INTERNET CATCHWORDS

Memetically, Chinese Internet catchwords can be divided into Chinese Internet catchwords with genotype memes and Chinese Internet catchwords with phenotype memes.

### 2.1 Translation of Chinese Internet Catchwords With Genotype Memes

For the sake of clarity, Chinese Internet catchwords with genotype memes are subdivided into acronyms, homophones, code mixing, emoticons and key-coined icons and the translation analysis of them is conducted respectively.

#### 2.1.1 Acronym

Acronym refers to a word formed from the initial letters of the several words in the name. Chinese Internet catchwords in the form of acronym usually take the form of abbreviated language structure, for instance, "ren, jian, bu, chai (人艰不拆)" is the shortened form of "ren, sheng, yi, jing, ru, ci, jian,nan, jiu, bu, yao,zai, chai, chuan (人生已经如此艰难, 就不要再拆穿)", "xi, si, ji, kong (细思极恐)" for "zi, xi, xiang, xiang, kong, bu, zhi, ji (仔细想想，恐怖至极)" ; "lei, jue, bu, ai (累觉不爱)" for "hen, lei, gan, jue, zi, ji, bu, hui, zai,ai, le (很累, 感觉自己不会再爱了)"; "ran, bing, luan (然并卵)" for "ran, er, bing, mei, you, shen, me, luan, yong (然而并没有什么卵用)"; "gao, fu, shuai (高富帅)" for "nan, ren, zhang, de, gao,s huai, you, you, qian (男人长得高、帅、又有钱)", etc..

The Chinese Internet catchwords in the form of acronym are usually translated by providing its complete version or background information. Thus, "ren,jian,bu,chai (人艰不拆)" is commonly translated into "life is already so hard, so do not uncover others' lies"; "xi, si, ji, kong (细思极恐)" into "if you think it carefully, it is rather dreadful."; "lei, jue, bu, ai (累觉不爱)" into "someone is too tired to love"; "ran,bing,luan (然并卵)" into "something is great and awesome superficially but have no point in essence."; "(gao, leng) 高冷" into "cold and

elegant"; "gao, fu, shuai (高富帅)" into "the boys who are tall, rich and handsome"; "ai, qiong, cuo (矮穷矬)" into "the boys who are short and poor "; "tu, fei, yuan (土肥圆)" into "the boys who are fat and countrified " ; "bai, fu, mei (白富美)" into "the girls who are fair-skinned, rich and beautiful".

However, thus translated, the economical advantage of expression, which is conducive to its transmission as a meme, is lost. So, from the memetic perspective, it is advisable to translate them into "hard life, do not unmask it"; "think carefully, dreadful"; "Too tired to love"; "However, no damn use", "arrogant", " charming prince", "ugly pauper" , "hillbilly" and "stunner" respectively.

Hence, for the translation of this kind of Chinese Internet catchwords, it's better to restore their original meaning first and then give their translation according to their connotation for the sake of mutual understanding. Otherwise foreigners can not sense the flavour of them as Internet catchwords and may even get confused if we only translate them literally.

#### 2.1.2 Homophone

Homophones refer to the words that are with the same pronunciation but different in meaning or spelling or both. Examples of Chinese Internet Catchwords of this kind are as follows. "IC" is the homophone of the English phrase "I see" because "C" has similar pronunciation with the word "see" in English. "88" pronounced as "baba" in Chinese is similar to the pronunciation of "bye-bye" in English. "1314" pronounced as "yi, san, yi, si", which sound similar to the pronunciation of the Chinese characters "yi, sheng, yi, shi (一生一世)", means that two persons will be together for the whole life. 9494 is pronounced as "jiu, si, jiu, si", which sound similar to the pronunciation of the Chinese characters "jiu,shi,jiu,shi (就是就是)"; 555 is pronounced as "wu, wu, wu" which sound similar to the pronunciation of the Chinese characters "wu, wu, wu (呜呜呜)".

For homophones derived from the sounds of English words such as "GF", "BY", "PK" , "IC", "CU","88" and "tu,yang,tu,sen,po (图样图森破)", they are often back-translated into their original memes, in the forms of , "GF (girl friend)", "BY (boy friend)", "PK (player killing)" , "IC（I see）", "CU (see you) ", 88 (bye-bye)" and "too yong too simple". More examples are "hei, ke (黑客)" which comes from "hacker", "tuo, kou, xiu (脱口秀)" from "talk show", "luo, li (萝莉)" from "Lolita" , "nao, tai, tao (闹太套)" from "not at all" and so on. For this category of transliterated versions of English, translators only need to translate it back into their original language for the sake of preseving its original memes.

Given the unfamiliarity of the foreigners with the Chinese phonology, it is better to annotate Pinyin besides the translation for the Chinese Internet catchwords derived from the sounds of Chinese Pinyin, which bears some similarity with the phonology system of English such

as "1314 ("yi, san, yi, si" similar pronunciation to "yi, sheng, yi, shi" in Chinese, means 'forever')"; 9494 ("jiu, si, jiu, si" similar pronunciation to "jiu,shi,jiu,shi" in Chinese, means 'That's it' ); 4242 ("si, er, si,er" similar pronunciation to "shi, a, shi, a", means "yes, yes"); 995 ("jiu, jiu, wu" similar pronunciation to "jiu, jiu,wo)", means "help"); 555 ("wu, wu, wu" similar pronunciation to "wu, wu, wu" in Chinese, means 'sob'); "MM ("mei, mei" similar pronunciation to "mei, mei", means "younger sister"); "GG ("ge, ge" similar pronunciation to "ge, ge ", means "elder brother")"; "PL ("piao, liang" similar pronunciation to "piao,liang", means "beautiful")"; "PP" (similar pronunciation to "pi, ping ", means "criticize"); .

Netizens prefer to use "杯具 (bei,ju)" and "洗具 (xi, ju)" to substitute "悲剧 (tragedy)" and "喜剧 (comedy)", for the reason that the former ones are more humorous and impressive than the latter ones. For the translation of this kind of Chinese Internet catchwords, the best mode is "杯具（"beiju" similar pronunciation to "bei, ju" in Chinese, means "tragedy"）", and "洗具 ("xi, ju", similar pronunciation to "xi, ju" in Chinese, means "comedy")".

More examples are: "he, xie (河蟹)", the homophone of "和谐"; "xie, xie (蟹蟹) for "谢谢"; "tong, xie（童鞋）for "同学"; "pen, you (盆友) for "朋友" etc.. They are created by netizens to obtain a humorous or ironic effect. The appropriate translation for them are "he,xie" (similar pronunciation to "he ,xie" in Chinese, which means 'harmony')"; "xie, xie" (similar pronunciation to "xie, xie" in Chinese, which means 'Thank you')"; "tong ,xie（similar pronunciation to "tong,xue", which means "students"); "pen, you" (similar pronunciation to "peng, you", which means "friend") respectively.

"Shen, ma, dou, shi, fu,y un (神马都是浮云)" is one of the most popular Chinese Internet catchwords. "(shen, ma) 神马" is the homophone of the Chinese word "shen,ma (什么)", meaning "what" in English instead of "magic horse". It is better to translate it into "Nothing is important" or "Everything is just floating cloud". "ya, li (鸭梨 pear)" is the homophone of "ya, li (压力)" in Chinese, which bears the connotation of "pressure", so "ya, li, shan, da (鸭梨山大)" is translated into "under great pressure". "lan, shou, xiang, gu (蓝瘦香菇)", the homophone of the Chinese words "nan, shou, xiang, ku (难受想哭 )", means "I feel awful, I want to cry". If thus translated, its flvaour of novelty and fashionability as a Chinese Internet catchword will be totally lost, "depressed" is ok for the foreigners.

### 2.1.3 Code Mixing
Code-mixing or "code-switching" refers to the mixing of two or more languages or language varieties in speech, which is usually involved with the use of elements from one language in an utterance to another language. Myers Scotton (1988) defines codeswitching as "the use of any two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation,

whether they are different languages, styles, or dialects" (p.201).

Generally speaking, there are four motivations for using code-mixing in Chinese expressions: euphemism to avoid embarrassment, specificity to avoid ambiguity of Chinese, bilingual punning to produce a double meaning with English, and principle of economy to avoid the lengthy problem of Chinese. Besides, English language normally has simple language structures than Chinese. With those characteristics of English language and the motivations, it is not hard to explain why code-mixing in Chinese Internet catchwords blossom. For example, "Hold 住 (hold zhu)", "XX style, such as "jiang, nan style (江南 style)", "tao,bao style (淘宝style)", etc..

For the translation of those Chinese Internet catchwords, it is a little risky to jump to the conclusion that the code-mixing does not need translation. On the contrary, translation is still needed for the spread of the memes and better understnding.

"Hold 住(hold zhu)" came from a Hongkong university student, Miss Lin, who became popular for her pet phrase "the whole scene I hold live" and "a second variable case". It's better to translate "Hold 住" into "hold live".

"zuo, ren, bu, yao, tai CNN(做人不要太CNN)" originated from the distorted and biased report of CNN. Chinese netizens created this phrase to criticize American Cable News Network. The translation of it should explain its connotation and background information. Thus, it is appropriate to translate it into "Don't be too CNN (Do not distort the fact)".

"word 哥" which means "my elder brother" and "word 姐" which means "my elder sister" literally are actually titles addressed to girls and boys in a general sense to enhance intimacy. To retain their original memes, they may be simply translated into "Dear boys" and "Dear girls".

### 2.1.4 Emoticons and Key-Coined Icons
A limitation of verbal communication on online is that emotions and feelings can not be well expressed and sensed by nitizens. Owing to this limitation, netizens try to make some emoticons by means of keyboard or make use of pictures to express emotions and feelings. Keyboard emoticons are symbols looking like human's facial expression, such as: -), :　）and: -). They are effective in making your tone sensed during the process of communication. In this instance, it makes your voice get friendlier and more playful instead of being cold. This kind of Internet catchword memes is widely used among Chinese netizens in the chat room.

It is of value to pay attention to the fact that those emoticons are symbols instead of verbal language. One of the most salient features of emoticons is the universality that all the people in the world share the same facial expression at the time of sadness, happiness, and dullness.

This means that memes in terms of emoticons are the same among various cultures. Thus, the activity of such translation is sometimes given the least effort but can achieve the best communication effect. For the translation of those emoticons, translators can apply this mode, : -) (a smiling face); : ) (a smiling face); : -) (a smiling face);: -) (a sad face); (-_-) (silent); (⊙?⊙) (surprised); (▽) (cheers!) .

## 2.2 Translation of Chinese Internet Catchwords With Phenotype Memes

For the sake of convenience, the translation of Chinese Internet catchwords with phenotype memes is discussed from the following two aspects.

### 2.2.1 Root Morpheme and Affix Morpheme

A root is the basic unchangeable part of a word, and it conveys the main lexical meaning of a word. It is the part of a word remaining when all affixes have been removed．A root can be a free morpheme，e.g. "work" in "worker", "think" in "unthinkable", or a bound morpheme, e. g. "-ceive" in "perceive", "-tain" in "retain", "vit-" in "vital" (Miao, 2010, p.32). An affix is a bound morpheme that is used only when added to another word or morpheme. It is used to mark the grammatical function of a word or create a new word. Affixes can be further classified into inflectional morphemes and derivational morphemes (Miao, 2010, p.32).

Chinese Internet catchwords with phenotype memes are prevalent which  usually take the form of a fixed structure with a single word or phrase as the root. If the root or affix of the Chinese Internet catchwords has corresponding lexical units in English, translation is easy. For instance, the equivalent root or affix for the Chinese characters "(chao) 超, (men) 门, (nu) 奴, kong (控), (er, dai) 二代" of the Chinese Internet catchwords "超X", "X门", "X奴", "X控", "X二代" can be found in English vocabulary, "超X" can be translated to "superX", such as "(chao, nu) 超女" to "super girl" and "(chao, mo) 超模" to "supermodel"; "XX门" can be translated into "XX gate" or "XX scandal", such as "(shui,men,shi,jian) 水门事件" into "water gate event/scandal", "(yan,zhao,men) 艳照门" into "nude picture gate/scandal". In English "slave" has the corresponding meaning of "奴" in Chinese, so the translation of "X奴"can be "XX slave". For example, "fang, nu (房奴)", "ka,nu (卡奴)", "hai, nu (孩奴)" can be translated into "mortgage slave", "card slave", and "child slave" respectively, which refers to a certain amount of people who become slaved or controlled by their mortgage payment, credit card or child. "Complex" in English is the equivalent for "控" in Chinese, so the translation of "(wei, bo, kong) 微博控", which refers to someone who is extremely excited about micoblog and thinks too much about it, can be "Miccoblog complex"; "X二代" refers to the second generation of a certain kind of people in China, such as "富/穷二代", "官

/民二代". There is a equivalent phrase of "(er, dai) 二代" in English as "the second generation", so the translation is applicable to be "the second rich/poor generation", "the second officer/farmer/ generation".

"(shan, zhai) 山寨" used to refer to "mountain stronghold". Nowadays, as a root morpheme, some Chinese Internet catchwords are derived from it such as xian,xiang (山寨现象)", "shan,zhai,wen,hua (山寨文化)", "shan, zhai, chan, pin (山寨产品)", which poses great challenge to the understanding of foreigners, who favor the translation of "(shan, zhai) 山寨" as "copycat" which takes the memes of their culture and language. "Copycat phenomenon", "copycat culture", "copycat product" are appropriate translation versions for them respectively.

For those Chinese Internet catchwords with phenotype memes, whose roots or affixes have no corresponding lexical units in English, translators should trace their origin and provide background information to translate them accurately and vividly. For example, "bei,dai,biao (被代表) (the public get represented without knowing…)", "(bei,zi,sha) 被自杀  (somebody, especially the celebrity is said to be dead but in fact not)", and "(bei, jiu, ye) 被就业 (somebody is said to be employed but in fact not )".

### 2.2.2 Neologism

With the development of society, new concepts have been generated, and language, as a method to signify objects in the world is innovative and update, too, which is well manifested in the use of Internet catchwords. Peter Newmark defined neologism in his book *A Textbook of Translation* as "newly coined lexical units or existing lexical units that acquire a new sense" (Newmark, 2001).

With the emergence of microblog, the fashionable communication tool of the Internet, its Chinese name, the linguistic sign "wei, bo (微博)" comes into existence, which can be translated into "microblog" where people share and get information with limited words. "zhi, wei, bo (织围脖), which originally means "knitting a scarf" for Chinese, means "microblogging" as an Internet catchword. Another example is the sudden popularity of "duang" on the Internet. "Duang" seems to be an example of onomatopoeia, a word that phonetically imitates the sound of "dang ( )". It started with Hong Kong action star Jackie Chan, who in 2004 wa*s* featured in a shampoo commercial where he defended his sleek, black hair using the rhythmical-sounding "duang", which means "adding special effect". It seems that there's no perfect translation for the word "duang", but it could be used as an adjective to give emphasis to the word that follows it. A kitten might be "duang cute", for example. Or you might be "very duang confused".

Some neologisms are old words taking on new meanings, such as "jiong (囧)", "lei (雷)", "qi, pa (奇葩)", "da, jiang, you (打酱油)". Translators should get familiar with their evolution process to present accurate and impressive translation according to the context. "jiong

囧" means "light" originally in ancient Chinese, netizens use it to express the embarrassed and awkward feeling because it looks like the embarrassed facial expression of people. So the translation of "jiong 囧" is suitable to be "embarrassed". "Lei (雷)" means "thunder" while "lei, ren (雷人)" refers to a person whose behaviour is strange, making people shocked. So it should be tranaled into "freak". The original meaning of "qi, pa (奇葩)" is exotic flower, which is often used to refer to " rare and outstanding ojects". As an Interner catchword it refers to those people who do somethig ridiculous or do things quite differently from normal people. The appropriate translation for it should be "weirdo". The traditional meaning for "da, jiang, you (打酱油)" is to buy soy sauce when it was retailed in the past in China. The Internet catchword "da, jiang,you (打酱油)" originated from TV news that when a reporter asked a passer-by his viewpoint about the photo scandal he answered that he just came to buy soy source to show he was not interested in that and it's none of his business. The English translation for "da, jiang, you (打酱油)" should be "none of one's business".

Some neologisms are totally created by netizens without any reference to foreign languages or Chinese words, such as "tu, cao (吐槽)", "da, ren (达人)", "bei, cui (悲催)", "nao, can (脑残)", "gei, li (给力)". "tu,c ao (吐槽)" means "disclose others' secret or embarrassed experience online", nowadays it has evolved the meaning of expressing one's complaint and criticism. Netizens have created th word "spitslot" as its English equivalent, which is quite popular among netizens and foreigners. "da, ren (达人)" is translated into "expert", "(bei, cui) 悲催" into "misery", and "nao ,can (脑残) " into "brainless". "gei, li (给力)" is also a newly created word meaning "great, awesome and splendid", Netizens created a new English word "gelivable" for it according to the pronunciation of "给力", which can convey its meaning accurately and creatively. For this kind of memes in Chinese Internet Catchwords, an understandable translation is needed, origin and background information should be cited if necessary. Otherwise foreigners and even some Chinese who don't use Internet frequently may feel confused about their connotations.

That all of the above mentioned Chinese Internet catchwords are created and then spread quickly is due to their conciseness and simplicity in form, consistency in meaning, economy and fashionability in expression, and humor in effect, which save a lot of time for online chatting and is beneficial to popularity.

## CONCLUSION

Translation is an effective and important way of replicating and transmitting memes from one culture to another. Chinese Internet catchwords are closely related with Chinese culture, its translation should be conducted on the premise of a mastery of Chinese culture and foreign culture should also be taken into consideration at the same time, which is the basis for introducing and transmitting the memes from the Chinesece language to English language.

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