

Error Analysis of the Written English Essays of Junior Secondary School Two Students in Owerri North

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated errors in the English usage of junior secondary school students in Nigeria. The subjects who participated in the study were forty Junior Secondary School Two (JSS2) students drawn from Comprehensive Secondary School, Amakohia in Owerri North LGA. The instrument used for this study was participants' written essays in English language. Five hundred and eighty seven (587) errors in these essays were identified and classified into different categorizations. These errors are: punctuation, spellings, tense, word choice, syntax (sentence structure), number, prepositions, subject/ verb agreement, articles, wrong splitting of words and wrong amalgamation of words. The findings and the results of this study showed that the errors committed by the subjects were due to mother tongue interference, intralingual transfer and the carelessness of the participants. Finally, the study shed the light on the manner in which students internalize rules of target language and the findings are vital in designing curricula for the better fulfillment of the objectives of Second Language teaching and learning while providing guiding light to create effective teaching methodology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an interesting phenomenon that has been bestowed on man (Ojetunde, 2013:252). It is a means by which man expresses his ideas and gives meaning to his existence. Babatunde (2002:1) explicates that language is the expression of culture, the depository of culture and crucial mode of culture transmission. In a similar development (Osisanwo, 2003:5) describes language as an instrument of communication among human beings. In any human society, language performs transactional, interactional and educational functions.

Over the years after independence in Nigeria, the English language functions in various societal situations: it functions as language of official communication, language of official business, mass communication, a medium of transmitting knowledge in the field of technology, medicine, law and other professions. It is essentially the language of education and instruction in Nigeria. These functions are aptly corroborated by Adeyanju (2002:67) who states that the English language in Nigeria has, for long championed the course of human cooperation by performing effectively all the above mentioned roles.

This study aims at examining English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' communicative competence in English at the junior secondary school level. However, the primary objective of conducting this research is to explore the common errors Junior Secondary School Two (JSS2) students make in their written essays.

2 WHAT IS ERROR?

Error is a gross deviation from the norm or convention of the language and this could lead to a breakdown in communication (Njoku and Izuagba, 2001:76). Njoku and Izuagba (2001:76) explicate that:

Error that occurs at the pre-systematic stage is not known to the speaker and he does not even know he has made an error and so cannot correct himself even if it is identified. At the systematic stage, he may be aware that his sentence is erroneous. At the post-systematic stage he has gained control of the rules to a great extent and can correct himself and even explain why it is erroneous

It is often claimed that there is a danger in paying too much attention to learners' errors. However, the reduction of errors is an important criterion for increasing language proficiency since the ultimate goal of second language learning is the attainment of communicative competence in the language. Scholars like Brown (1987:83), Josephson (1989:85) have observed that there has been a shift from preventing errors to learning from them (errors). According to Choon (1993:1) between 1950s and 1960s learning of language structures has moved from memorizing correct models through the acknowledgement of the influence of psychology on the theories of language acquisition to the application of the communicative approach to language learning. This trend has aroused the interest of scholars in identifying, analyzing and treating errors through error analysis in order to create techniques of effective ESL learning.

There is a kind of agreement that errors are significant in three different ways: *First, they tell the teacher when he undertakes a systematic analysis how far toward the goals the learner have progressed and what remains for him to learn. Second, they give researchers evidences of how language is learned and what strategies and procedures the learners are employing in their discovery of the language. Third, they are unavoidable to the learner himself, because we can consider the process of making of errors as a devise the learner uses in order to learn. In other words, it is a way of testing the learners' hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning. (Zawahreh, 2012:281).*

Error analysis (EA) became a preferred tool of studying second language analysis.

2.1 ERROR ANALYSIS (EA)

Corder (1967) who is considered the father of EA contended that errors are “important in and of themselves”. Thus, it can be said that errors made by language learners make it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching. He added that EA has two objects: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical object is to understand what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language (L2). The applied object is to enable the learner to learn more efficiently by using the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes. At the same time, the investigation of errors can serve two purposes, diagnostic (to in-point the problem) and prognostic (to make plans to solve a problem). In addition, he said that it is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's grasp of a language at any given point during the learning process. It is also prognostic because it can tell the teacher to modify learning material to meet the learner's problems.

Errors analysis is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition. According to James (as cited in Sawalmeh, 2013:3), ‘it is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors. For Crystal (1999:108) ‘error analysis in

language teaching and learning is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language. According to Brown (as cited in Ridha, 2012:26), error analysis 'is the process to observe, analyze and classify the deviations of the rules of the second languages and then to reveal the systems operated by learner'.

2.1.1 SOURCES OF ERRORS

Brown (2000:224) states that there are two main sources of errors, namely, interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual (interference) errors are those errors that are traceable to first language interference. These errors are attributable to negative interlingual transfer. The term 'interlingual' was first-introduced by Selinker (1972). He used this term to refer to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both learner's L1 and the target language (AbiSamra, 2003:5). According to Kavaliauskiene (2009:4), transfer of errors may occur because the learners lack the necessary information in the second language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate second language routine.

Transfer is of two kinds: positive and negative. The transfer may prove to be justified because the structures of the two languages are similar- this case is called 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation', or it may prove unjustified because the structures of the two languages are different- that case is called 'negative transfer' or 'interference' (Wilkin, 1972:199). As far as the intralingual errors are concerned, they result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer (Keshavarz, 2003:62; Fang and Jiang, 2007:11). Richards (1972) cites four main types of intralingual errors, namely: (1) overgeneralization, (2) ignorance of rules restrictions, (3) incomplete application of rules, and (4) false concepts hypothesized. Later he identifies six sources of errors: (1) interference, (2) overgeneralization, (3) performance errors, (4) markers of transitional competence, (5) strategies of communication and assimilation, and (6) teacher-induced errors.

Hazaymeh (1996) made a study that aimed at investigating the second secondary students' errors in learning English verb tenses. The sample was of 587 students from public schools and 172 students from private schools. The researcher attributed the errors made by the students to group of reasons such as (a) mother tongue interference (b) overgeneralization (c) the complexity of the structures of the English verb tense, (d) a strategy of parallel structure and (e) the ignorance of grammatical rules.

Sarfraz (2011) examined the errors made by 50 undergraduate Pakistani students in written essays; he found that the majority of errors the students made resulted from learners' interlanguage process and mother tongue interference. Darus and Subramaniam (2009), examined errors in a corpus of 72 essays written by 72 Malay students. They found that students' errors were of six types, viz; in singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order.

AbiSamra (2003), in his article entitled 'An analysis of errors in Arabic speakers' English writing', collected samples of written work from 10 students in 9th grade. He classified the errors into five categories, namely, grammatical (prepositions, articles, adjectives, e.t.c.); syntactic (coordination, sentence structure, word order, e.t.c.); lexical (word choice); semantic and substance (punctuation, capitalization, and spelling); and discourse errors. The results revealed that one third of the students' errors were transfer errors from the native language, and the highest numbers of errors were in the categories of semantics and vocabulary. The rest of the errors (64.1%) were errors of over-application of the target language, the highest numbers of errors being found in substance (mainly spelling), syntax and grammar.

In addition, Ridha (2012) examined English writing samples of 80 English as Foreign Language (EFL) college students and then categorized the errors according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical/semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The results showed that most of the students' errors can be due to L1 transfer. Furthermore, she found that most of the learners rely on their mother tongue in expressing their idea. She added that although the rating processes showed that the participants' essays included different types of errors, the grammatical errors and the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones.

2.1.2. STAGES/ STEPS INVOLVED IN THE ANALYSIS OF ERRORS

Corder (as cited in Oyedokun-Alli, 2014:4) identifies three stages involved in error analysis and they are logically dependent upon one another. These are: recognition, description, and explanation. The process of recognizing and identifying errors is one of comparing original utterances with their plausible reconstruction and authoritative reconstruction (that is an interpretation/ reconstruction of the utterance derived from the learner himself) and identifying the difference. Recognition of errors is thus crucially dependent upon correct interpretation of the learner's intention. Description only begins when recognition has taken place. In the same vein, explanation of error can be regarded as a linguistic activity, concerned with accounting for why and how errors come about (Uboh, 2004). It is thus from the explanation of errors that theories such as transfer, facilitation, interference, overgeneralization, conflict, ambiguity, equivocation, vagueness and misdirection emerge (Oyedokun-Alli, 2014:4).

Corder (1973:260) provides a model for identifying erroneous utterances/expressions in a second language. According to Corder's model, any sentence uttered and subsequently transcribed can be analysed for error. Corder (1973:260) makes a major distinction between 'overt' and 'covert' errors. Overt erroneous expressions are unquestionably ungrammatical at the sentence level. Covert erroneous utterances/expressions are grammatically well-formed at the sentence level but are not interpretable within the context of communication. Covert errors, in other words, are not really covert at all if the surrounding discourse before and after the utterance is attended to. For example, *I have been around since morning* is grammatically correct at the sentence level but as a response to: *When did you come?* it is obviously an error (Oyetunde, 2013:257).

A simpler and more straightforward set of items than would be sentence level and discourse level errors rather than overt and covert errors. On a local level, errors can be described as errors of addition, omission, substitution and ordering. Jibowo, Iteogu, Odizua and Abayomi (2005:12) suggest that the teacher should conduct diagnostic error analysis during the initial contact of a given semester/term in order to find out which items of the language have not been fully learnt and remedy them first.

Brown (2000:86) states that cognitive feedback in error correction must be minimal in order to be effective. Too much of cognitive feedback e.g. barrage of interruptions, errors underlined/over corrections and overt attention to malformation, often lead to learners' shutting off their attempt at communication. Choon (1993:21) submitting to this view, says:

Teachers also should not mark every error just because it is expected of them or because they believe it is an indication of dedication. This is because over-correction can be a very tedious experience for the teacher (resulting in a demoralizing experience for the student).

It should however be noted that too much positive cognitive feedback (willingness of the teacher to let error go uncorrected) serves to reinforce the errors of the learner. The result is

persistence and perhaps, the eventual fossilization, of such errors. The task of the teachers of English could, therefore be to ensure that learners are given enough encouragement for continued communication but not so many that crucial errors go unnoticed and they should not be discouraged for attempting to use the language. It is, from this point of view, that the present study sees errors.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study consisted of essays written by forty junior secondary school two (JSS2) students of Comprehensive Secondary School, Amakohia in Owerri North, selected using a simple random sampling method. The participants were chosen because they are still at the primary stage of the second language learning and also, because Igbo is their first language as well as their mother tongue. Thus, analyzing the errors made by these students will help their English language teacher(s) know the areas to pay more attention to while teaching them. The participants were asked to write an essay on any of the following topics:

1. My School
2. How I Spent My Last Vacation
3. How to Prepare My Favourite Dish

Fourteen students (35%) each wrote on *My School* and *How I Spent My Last Vacation* while the remaining twelve (30%) wrote on *How to Prepare My Favourite Dish*.

3.1 DATA ANALYSIS

In analyzing the data got, the researcher asked two teachers of English language to help her in identifying and classifying the errors. The identified errors were counted based on their frequencies. In the classification level, the errors were tabulated and classified into the following categories: punctuation, spellings, tense, word choice, syntax (sentence structure), number (singular/plural), prepositions, subject/verb agreement, articles, wrong syllabification/ splitting of words and wrong amalgamation of words.

4.1 PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

In this section, the researcher presents the findings of the study. The errors made by the students are identified, classified and finally, these errors made by the learners are corrected. Tables are used for easy interpretation of results. Table 1 shows the types/classification, frequency and percentage of errors committed by the participants in their written work.

TABLE 1

TYPES OF ERRORS	FREQUENCY OF ERRORS	PERCENTAGE
1. Punctuation	196	33.4
2. Spellings	112	19.1
3. Tense	68	11.6
4. Word choice	54	9.2
5. Syntax (sentence Structure)	33	5.6
6. Number (singular/ plural)	29	4.9
7. Prepositions	27	4.6
8. Subject/ Verb Agreement	23	3.9
9. Articles	19	3.2
10. Wrong syllabification/ splitting	19	3.2

of words		
11. Wrong amalgamation of words	7	1.2
TOTAL	587	100%

4.2 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The table above shows that the most committed errors are punctuation errors which have the frequency of 196 (33.4%). Under punctuation errors, omission and wrong use of capitalization have the frequency of 124 (21.1%), other punctuation errors make up the remaining 72 (12.3%) or errors on punctuation. The researcher made inquiries as regards why punctuation errors have the highest frequency and discovered that a new curriculum on English Studies for junior secondary 1-3 was introduced two years ago and punctuation is not included in JSS One and JSS Two scheme of works. Teachers teaching these classes now make reference to punctuation when teaching proper nouns and essays but punctuation is no longer taught as a topic in these classes. Hence, the major cause of punctuation errors in the essays of the participants is partial learning of the appropriate use of punctuation (marks) in English Language. The researcher will present some examples of punctuation errors made in the participants' essays in Table 2.

TABLE 2: PUNCTUATION ERRORS (OMISSION AND WRONG USE)

ERROR IDENTIFICATION	ERROR CORRECTION
1. There are many Teachers in my School.	There are many teachers in my school.
2. The Colour of my School UniForm is white and navy blue.	The colour of my school uniform is white and navy blue.
3. i went to my uncles house at onitsha.	I went to my uncle's house at Onitsha.
4. The name of my best food is rice,	The name of my best food is rice.
5. Some bad students who disobey the school rules are punished/disciplined by sir okoroji sir chisom, or sir izuchukwu.	Some bad students who disobey the school rules are punished/disciplined by either Sir Okoroji, Sir Chisom or Sir Izuchukwu.
6. rice give's me energy and also make's me strong.	Rice gives me energy and also makes me strong.

TABLE 3: SPELLING ERRORS

ERROR IDENTIFICATION	ERROR CORRECTION
1. I also thank the <i>principle</i> of our school.	I also thank the principal of our school.
2. <i>The</i> house was so beautiful....	The house was so beautiful....
3. I also got to meet some of my <i>cousines</i> .	I also got to meet some of my cousins.
4. we will <i>live</i> it to boil for some <i>minits</i> .	We will leave it to boil for some minutes.
5. So when we <i>rich</i> to aba....	So when we reached Aba....
6. we have <i>qulified</i> teachers who teaches well.	We have qualified teachers who teach well.

As shown in Table 2 above, spelling is another area where students made significant errors. English spelling is difficult for the learners because of its irregularity and some sounds are represented by several different orthographic symbols. Some of these errors seemed to arise from students' carelessness in writing. This may result in the omission of a letter as in (*qulified,

*government, *environment e.t.c.). Another category is caused by the intention of the writer to write the words based on phonetic analogy (*wensday, *pathon, *minits). Thus, lack of awareness of spelling rules and irregular spelling patterns strongly contribute to spelling errors in the participants' essays.

TABLE 4: ERRORS OF TENSE

ERROR IDENTIFICATION	ERROR CORRECTION
1. It was <i>establish</i> in the year 1995.	It was established in the year 1995.
2. I went with my Anty to Enugu to <i>spent</i> my holidays.	I went with my aunty to Enugu to spend my holidays.
3. You follow them to <i>went</i> to the farm.	We followed them to go to the farm.
4. When I <i>enter</i> the lifter it went up....	When I entered the lift it went up....
5. We <i>live</i> there up to one month before <i>we return</i> .	We lived there up to one month before we returned.
6. I <i>wash</i> the pot which <i>will be use</i> for cooking	I washed the pot which would be used for cooking.

The above table shows that the participants use present instead of past tense and past instead of present tense. These errors show incomplete knowledge of the rules, that is, intralingual factor stemming from the target language itself. This means that the students have not yet mastered when and how to use each tense.

TABLE 5: ERRORS OF WORD CHOICE

ERROR IDENTIFICATION	ERROR CORRECTION
1. We have <i>good classes</i> .	We have conducive classrooms.
2. We have the <i>junior block</i> and the <i>senior block</i> .	We have the junior section and the senior sections.
3. We have two principals <i>governing</i> the both section.	We have two principals heading both sections.
4. I <i>washed</i> the rooms....	I scrubbed the rooms....
6. It is a <i>mixed school of boy and girl</i> .	It is a co-educational school.
7. It also <i>brush me up and made me</i> to see many things....	It also exposed me to see many things....

The errors of choice of words show the students' lack of proper words, but these did not appear to cause problems with comprehension. The errors of word choice are attributed to mother tongue interference (in the sense that, the participants engage in literal translation of Igbo expressions to English language) and intralingual factor, that is, incomplete mastery of the target language by the students.

TABLE 6: ERRORS OF SYNTAX (SENTENCE STRUCTURE)

ERROR IDENTIFICATION	ERROR CORRECTION
1. If you see our student on the road that will show you the sign of comprehensive.	If you see our students on the road, their Comportment will show you that they are from Comprehensive Sec. Sch. Amakohia.
2. My school was renovated last term and is still renovating.	The government started renovating my school buildings last term and renovation work is still going on.

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|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Add the washed smoked fish and stock it to the pot of boiling meats and stock it for 10 minutes. 4. It is a school were different language were their. 5. My school teaches fifteen subjects. 6. In my school all the class, both junior and senior are functioning with two fans each. | <p>Add the washed smoked fish to the pot of boiling meat and allow to boil for 10 minutes.</p> <p>It is a school where people speaking different languages are.</p> <p>We study fifteen subjects in my school.</p> <p>In my school there are two ceiling fans in every class, for both junior and senior sections.</p> |
|---|--|

These errors are attributed to L1 interference and intralingual factor.

TABLE 7: ERRORS OF NUMBER (SINGULAR/PLURAL AGREEMENT)

<u>ERROR IDENTIFICATION</u>	<u>ERROR CORRECTION</u>
1. I visited many <i>place</i> like zoon.	I visited many places like the zoo.
2. Nigerian Flour Mill happens to be one of the biggest <i>company</i>	The Nigerian Flour Mill happens to be one of the biggest companies.
3. We have about one thousand to two thousand <i>student</i> in my school.	We have about one thousand to two thousand students in my school.
4. The school has so many <i>flower</i> .	The school has so many flowers.
5. We bought <i>provisions</i> like <i>milks</i> and milo.	We bought provision like milk and milo.
6. My school is divided into two section.	My school is divided into two sections.

Most of the errors on number are the omission of plural markers from nouns. These errors are attributable to the different system of plurality between Igbo and English. English language has plural markers but Igbo is a language that lacks plural markers. In Igbo language, the context shows whether a word denotes plural or singular.

TABLE 8: PREPOSITIONS

<u>ERROR IDENTIFICATION</u>	<u>ERROR CORRECTION</u>
1. I began my long vacation <i>on</i> July and ended it <i>on</i> September.	I began my long vacation in July and ended it in September.
2. I put my pot <i>in</i> the fire.	I put my pot on the cooker/stove.
3. My school comprises <i>of</i> junior secondary and senior secondary.	My school comprises junior and senior secondary.
4. It has been renovated by the government of my state <i>into</i> a very beautiful school.	It has been renovated by the government of my state to a very beautiful school.
5. It is located <i>at</i> along Rapour road.	It is located along Rapour road.
6. I stayed there three day....	I stayed there for three days....

The errors of preposition arise mostly from the confusion of the selection of appropriate preposition and the irregularity of uses. This category comprised the omission, insertion and the wrong choice of preposition. The errors are dominated by the wrong selection of preposition. These errors are attributed to mother tongue interference and wrong analogy of the target language rules.

TABLE 9: SUBJECT/ VERB AGREEMENT

<u>ERROR IDENTIFICATION</u>	<u>ERROR CORRECTION</u>
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1. In my school the <i>student are</i> always neat in appearance.	In my school the students are always neat.
2. The <i>girls wears</i> blue gown.	The girls wear blue gown.
3. Our <i>teachers teaches</i> us well.	Our teachers teach us well.
4. <i>I doesn't</i> like to travel.	I do not like to travel.
5. <i>Rice and beans contain</i> carbohydrate protein.	Rice and beans contains carbohydrate and protein.
6. <i>My school have</i> pipe borne water.	My school has pipe borne water.

The subject-verb agreement errors were not caused by L1 interference. For those who made this type of error, it may be possible to explain the errors as a result of carelessness or that the learners have not yet mastered the rules of subject/ verb agreement in English language.

TABLE 10: ARTICLES (OMISSION AND WRONG USE)

<u>ERROR IDENTIFICATION</u>	<u>ERROR CORRECTION</u>
1. On 8th of August 2014, I went with....	On the 8th of August 2014, I went with....
2. She made <i>a</i> cake.	She made/baked cake.
3. I saw snake....	I saw a snake....
4. I also went to beach.	I also went to the beach.
5. My favourite food doesn't have <i>a</i> rival.	My favourite food doesn't have rival.
6. ...you put empty pot on the fire.	...you put an empty pot on the cooker/stove.

The use of article is very confusing for the Igbo learners of English language. This is due to the fact that Igbo does not have articles (definite and indefinite). The errors on articles are classified into the errors arising from the omission of articles when needed and insertion of articles where they are not needed. From the data analysis, it is found that the omission of article dominates the errors in this category.

TABLE 11: WRONG SYLLABIFICATION/SPLITTING AND AMALGAMATION OF WORDS

<u>ERROR IDENTIFICATION</u>	<u>ERROR CORRECTION</u>
1. Comprehensi- ve	comprehensive (com-pre-hen-sive)
2. cond- iment	condiment (con-di-ment)
3. tea- chers	teachers (teach-er-s)
4. Riceisagoodsource....	Rice is a good source....
5. infact	in fact
6. Theplantainand....	The plantain and....

The error of wrong syllabification/splitting and amalgamation of words are the least committed errors by the participants. These errors could be attributed to the carelessness of the learners or that they have not fully mastered the rules of word formation of the target language. Morphological-related topics are not taught in the junior secondary and most textbooks that are being used deemphasize the teaching of English morphology. The topics in most English textbooks normally reflect the syllabus to be covered by students.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has given an account of the errors made by a group of Igbo ESL learners at the junior secondary school level in their essays. Based on the discussion of the findings and the examples given, it could be concluded that the participants committed eleven common errors, viz., punctuation, spellings, tense, word choice, number, prepositions, subject/verb agreement, articles, wrong syllabification and wrong amalgamation of words. It goes without saying that most of the participants' errors are due to L1 transfer, intralingual factor and the carelessness of the students.

The findings of this study have gone some way towards enhancing the understanding of categorizing and diagnosing of errors in English essays of the ESL Igbo junior secondary school students. The present study, like all studies, has a number of limitations that need to be considered. First, the participants of this study were junior secondary school students (JSS2) of Comprehensive Secondary School, Amakohia. Thus, the results in this investigation may not be generalized to other groups of Igbo ESL learners. Last, a limitation of this study is that the number of subjects involved was relatively small.

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the results of this study, the researcher recommends that:

1. The curriculum planners should review the curriculum for junior secondary students and punctuation should be given its rightful place in the scheme. Also, curriculum planners should work hand in hand with the teachers who teach English Studies.
2. English Studies should be taught by specialists in English who are capable of doing the job effectively. Apart from having a minimum of Bachelor's degree in English or in a related discipline, they should always be made, with the assistance of the government, to attend seminars or conferences on the teaching of English Language. It is through this that they can improve in their teaching. Moreover, teachers should be equipped with discovering new ways of creative teaching and designing interesting grammar games to make students familiar with the rules subconsciously in the primary stage of second language learning.
3. Teachers should pay attention to the occurrence of those errors in order to provide relevant remedies as attempts to prevent the students from fossilizing the wrong concepts of language usage. Further, to enable students to write more accurately, they need more practice on reading and thinking in English.

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