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## Registers as a translational problem

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Anna Leszczyńska

## Registers as a translational problem

Translation of a written text from English into Polish is an elaborate task. A translator encounters various difficulties while transforming a source text into a target one. For instance, the appropriate employment of idioms, neologisms and registers is perceived to be troublesome. In the article I am going to focus on registers. My intention is to demonstrate that they are frequently neglected in the process of translation, which significantly changes the exceptionality of the original text. My research is based on *The Shining* by Stephen King and its Polish translation, *Lśnienie* by Zofia Zinserling. The question arises if the Polish version has the same charm as the original masterpiece and if the unsuccessful translation of registers contributes to the negative perception of the original text? The article gives the answers to these questions.

### Register analysis

Registers are usually discussed in terms of three features of context. These are tenor, mode and field.

According to Bell<sup>1</sup> “the tenor consists of a number of overlapping and interacting scales of levels: formality, politeness, impersonality and accessibility”.

Mode, as the second general category considered by Bell, includes four scales: channel limitation, spontaneity, participation and privateness.

The last parameter is field, also called ‘domain’ or ‘province’. This one is not easy to define, although certain definitions were formulated. Hatim and Mason<sup>2</sup> say that “field is

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<sup>1</sup> R. Bell, *Translation and translating: Theory and practice*, London and New York 1991, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Hatim and Mason (2001: 48)

not the same as subject matter”, but Bell<sup>3</sup> says that “in a very much broader sense, domain can refer to... family, friendship, education and so forth”. It was also defined as “an abstract term for ‘what is going on’ that is relevant to the speaker’s choice of linguistic items”<sup>4</sup>. Linguistic choices depend on whether the speaker is taking part in a football match or discussing football, or whether he is making a political speech or discussing politics.

The range of formality is not sometimes caused by tenor (there is a distance between the reader and the writer), mode (spoken language tends to be more colloquial than written language) or province (subject of nuclear physics is not usually written in slang). Authors are willing to try to make the receiver of their texts more involved because they want to get closer to them, show friendliness (tenor), or “the textual conventions” require it (province).

In another model, Joos<sup>5</sup> describes five registers in the English language. According to his division, there is a ‘frozen’ register, which is placed on the highest level of formality scale. It became “the style of creativity, declamation and printed expression”<sup>6</sup>, which corresponds to printed unchanging language such as Bible quotations with some archaisms.

Secondly, ‘formal’ register is about one-way participation with no interruption. The presence of technical vocabulary, “fussy semantics” or exact definitions is important. The issues are presented in an informative and elaborate manner. Introductions between strangers are included.

Next, there is a ‘consultative’ register, which is the most neutral. It is used with strangers and unfamiliar interlocutors; its main function is to communicate and provide as much information as possible. “Backchannel behavior” such as “uh huh”, “I see”, etc. is frequently used. What is more, interruptions are permitted.

The ‘casual’ register is typical for well known friends and acquaintances who share the same communicative norms and mechanisms. Additional information is not given. What is common, are the ellipsis and slang. In this case the interruptions are rather frequent.

Finally, the ‘intimate’ register is defined as non-public and therefore used inside particular groups of speakers who have private or personal bonds and do not need to refer to any general public information since they use the vocabulary in private manner. More important than strict grammatical rules are intonation and the choice of words.

Although this division of registers dates back to the 60s, it is still useful in the current practice. In this article I classify the extracts taken from the King’s novel into Joos’s five registers, such as frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate one. Taking into consideration that *The Shining* contains a lot of swear words I added one more register to embrace the whole range of formality scale, i.e., the vulgar register which is crucial here. It is thought as socially unacceptable and profane, which is the reason why it is placed on the lowest level of formality scale.

<sup>3</sup> R. Bell, op. cit., p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> M. Baker, *In other words*, New York 1992, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> M. Joos, *The Five Clocks*, New York 1961.

<sup>6</sup> G. Moreno, *A new approach to register variation: The missing ling*, Spain: The University of Valencia, 2006, p. 93.

## Main issues in translation

All translators face the necessity of conducting register analysis in order to understand the text they are translating. It allows them to choose between registers appropriate in the target language. This is particularly important as inexperienced translators sometimes shift the registers aimlessly. Of course, registers suitable in a given situation will vary between languages. This is the reason why register shifts would have to take place in the process of translation.

Translation has been widely discussed by many scholars, which reveals its complex nature. According to Newmark<sup>7</sup>, translation is “a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language”. But this is just one of many definitions of translation.

Bednarczyk<sup>8</sup> perceives translation quite differently. According to her, the word ‘translation’ implies not only the process but also the result. The ‘process’ is a special form of communication, where all signs, senses or messages undergoing certain changes from source into target language. The ‘result’ is the final effect of this process – a translated text which is described and evaluated in terms of its role in the target culture.

Studies of existing translations are very beneficial in terms of teaching us “the process of acculturation as it takes place in translation and about the strategies used by our predecessors with varying degrees of success”<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, translation itself “can refer to the general subject field, the product (the text that has been translated) or the process (the act of producing the translation, otherwise known as translating). The process of translation between two different written languages involves the translator changing an original written text (the source text or SL) in the original verbal language (the source language or SL) into a written text (the target text or TT) in a different verbal language (the target language or TL)”<sup>10</sup>.

“Translation is concerned with moral and with factual truth. This truth can be effectively rendered only if it is gasped by the reader, and this is the purpose and the end of translation”<sup>11</sup>. Two purposes of translation are often defined. One as “accuracy and economy, begging the obvious question of whether accuracy refers to the content of the source language text or the true facts of the matter, or even the sub-text, the intended effect on the reader.” The other purpose is “to transmit knowledge in plain, appropriate and accessible language, in particular in relation to technology transfer – defining technology [...] as all the means and knowledge used to provide objects necessary for human sustenance and comfort”<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> P. Newmark, *Approaches to translation*, Oxford – New York – Toronto – Sydney – Paris – Frankfurt 1981, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> A. Bednarczyk, *Kulturowe aspekty przekładu literackiego*, Katowice 2002.

<sup>9</sup> A. Lefevere, *Translating literature: Practice and theory in a comparative literature context*, New York 1992, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> J. Munday, *Introducing translation studies: Theories and applications*, London and New York 2001, p. 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> P. Newmark, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

A different approach is presented by Grucza<sup>13</sup>, who divides the discipline of translation studies according to two other purposes. The first one is to provide description and explanation concerning objects functioning in the translation system. The second aim is to find the answers how to improve functioning of the translation system, especially its central element – the translator.

Numerous theories have been elaborated to understand the translation as a discipline more profoundly. However, the best translators have little or no use for these various theories. A Chinese translator, Yan Fu advocated triple principle of translation, namely, faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. These three principles are not the key to translation theory or practice but they serve as additive factors: “first, faithful equivalence in meaning, second, expressive clarity of form, and third, attractive elegance that makes a text a pleasure to read”<sup>14</sup>. Unfortunately, too much attention was paid to elegance and as a result, most present-day theories of translation still focus on stylistics rather than on content.

Nowadays, translation as a discipline is practised by professional translators. However, they do not just translate words; they also translate “a universe of discourse, a poetics, and an ideology. [They are] voracious, omnivorous readers, people who are typically in the middle of four books at once, in several languages, fiction and nonfiction, technical and humanistic subjects, anything and everything. They are hungry for real-world experience [...] and above all paying attention to how people use language all around them [...]”<sup>15</sup>.

Bilingual translators have a clear understanding of both source and target texts, thus they do not need to instruct their brains about the proper employment of grammatical rules. In this case, “translators do not translate languages but texts”. However, if a translator is not bilingual, “the focus of attention shifts to the linguistic features of the translation, including the proper arrangement of words, sensitivity to the style and the relevance of the translation for receptors”<sup>16</sup>.

Translators tend to reach decisions on the translatability of a given word on a level that is more universal. ‘Translatable’ does not always mean ‘worth translating’. Texts that are worth translating are not necessarily all translated for a variety of reasons, usually ideological as well as poetological.

## Problems with translating registers

All translators should analyze registers for two reasons. One of them is connected with total understanding of the source text in order to choose the appropriate register in the target text. Secondly, if a translator is about to deal with a new subject matter, he usually

<sup>13</sup> F. Grucza, *Zagadnienia translatorsyki*, [in:] F. Grucza (ed), *Glottodydaktyka a translatorsyka*, Warszawa 1981.

<sup>14</sup> E.A. Nida, *Contexts in Translating*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2001, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> D. Robinson, *Becoming a translator*, London and New York 1997, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> E.A. Nida, op. cit., p. 3.

employs his own register analysis available for this subject in both the source and target languages.

The registers differ from one another. This is the reason why it is crucial for a translator to reproduce the particular flavor of the original. First of all, translators have to judge whether it is possible or worthwhile to preserve the exceptionality of a source text. Certain variants of the target text sound artificial or even make the translation silly. It is evidential, especially if Scots language is taken into consideration.

What is more, a translator must be very careful when dealing with ‘false friends’ which are defined as pairs of words in two languages that look and/or sound similar but differ in meaning. Certain registers of language appear specialized and so it is possible for common readers to interpret a register as a nonspecialized one, which results in their misunderstanding what the author really meant.

Another translational problem is connected with jargon. It is extremely difficult to translate legal terms, especially if the source text includes a code of law based on the old *Code Napoleon*. This creates a huge gap as the code of law in England is rather different, thus accurate translation is almost impossible.

Moreover, translating dramatic literature, advertisements and class or regional dialect require special skills. Translator sounds artificial if he is antiquating his writing to translate a classic or imitating unfamiliar to him dialect. It is easy to recognize certain dialects or at least it is not difficult to mark the difference between regional pronunciations. The elaborate task appears when a translator is supposed to imitate them.

Further problems are connected with the formality of an utterance. First of all, a translator has to mark a correct register. It is not so obvious due to the fact that in Polish there is an official way of addressing a person, ‘Pan/ Pani’, which the English language lacks. The only word that is used in English, is ‘you’, which does not imply the same formality and politeness.

Apart from this, there are no elisions in Polish as they actually do exist in English. For instance, in Polish translation, it is impossible to successfully reflect the original ‘ain’t’, ‘gonna’ or ‘wanna’, which contribute to the informal register.

The one who is responsible for the correctness of a translated text is the translator himself. He is to be blamed for the wrong use of registers, which changes the exceptionality of a whole book. Therefore, the language needs to be appropriate to the given situations.

## ***The Shining* and its Polish translation *Lśnienie* - comparison of registers**

*The Shining* by Stephen King is a very good example of the diversity of registers. The characters taking part in this horror book are not very much alike which only adds the spiciness to the dialogues and monologues. The age, social status and cultural background of the main characters are the reason why the differentiating between registers is possible.

This fascinating book is easy to read for everybody since the language is not that elaborate and the characters are distinctive. The style of characters’ language also varies,

which serves as an example of different registers. However, the Polish translation by Zofia Zinserling leaves something to be desired in terms of appropriate use of registers. The quotations presented below are about to demonstrate it.

Since King's language does not involve archaisms and highly sophisticated language commonly used in the Bible, it is very hard to identify the register which is placed on the top of the formality scale. Precisely speaking, the frozen register cannot be distinguished neither in the original text nor in the Polish translation.

To begin with the formal register, it is quite easy to ascribe certain part of the text to this particular type of utterance. Some of the dialogues, monologues together with the narration are specific for this register. However, in Zinserling's book some extracts taken from the text sound less official than the ones which were originally written by King. For instance,

you appear to have been locked in (King, 1978: 381)

and its translation

wygląda na to, że został pan zamknięty (King, 1990: 306).

You appear [ . . . ]

and

wygląda na to [ . . . ]

do not carry the same formality, though the translation allows the reader to sense the official tone. The Polish sentence would be more successful if King wrote in his novel 'seem' instead of 'appear'. Moreover,

He hasn't enlightened you (1978: 349),

which is found in *The Shining*, has its Polish equivalent

[on] pana nie objaśnił (1990: 280 ).

This translation seems to be outdated since now nobody uses words of this kind, though the formal register is undeniably visible. Apart from this, the quotation

it isn't a matter that concerns you (1978: 343)

was translated into Polish as

to nie pańska sprawa (1990: 275)

which is slightly devoid of the formality and politeness. Another example, which sounds definitely better in English, was written as follows

always a pleasure to serve you, Mr. Torrance (1978: 344).

The problem with translating the word "serve" appeared to be tremendous since the Polish quotation,

zawsze z przyjemnością panu podaję, (1990: 276)

lost partially the charm of the original and is to be considered as artificial. The sentence  
why, thank you, sir (1978: 344)

corresponds to the Polish

dziękuję panu (1990: 276).

Both of them are formal but the difficulty in translating “why” in this phrase contributed to the fact that the English sentence just sounds better. In another fragment one reads,

plynęły tygodnie, a nie wypowiedziane słowo, które zawisło na jej wargach, cofnęło się gdzieś w głąb. Jack to wyczuwał, wiedział jednak, że nigdy nie wycofa się zupełnie (1990: 40).

The English quotation is slightly different.

Weeks passed and the unspoken word retreated further from the back of her lips. Jack sensed its retirement but knew it would never retire completely (1978: 42).

Again the Polish translation sounds less poetical. The “retirement [of a word]” and “wycofanie się” do not carry the same meaning. Analogically, the word “cofnęło się” could be translated as “went back” and not as in the original line “retreated further” which is definitely more formal. The main point of this translation is preserved but the degree of formality leaves something to be desired.

The next register from the Joos’s list, the consultative one, is visible especially if dialogues between unfamiliar interlocutors are taken into consideration. In the King’s novel, a phrase

seriously contemplated (1978: 145)

found its less formal translation

na serio braliście pod uwagę (1990: 120).

Despite this, both quotations find their proper place on the formality scale. Another fragment,

proszę mówić (1990: 40)

sounds more formal than in the original, due to the fact that it was expressed using the phrasal verb

go ahead (1978: 42),

thus the Polish translation preserves the consultative register in this extract as well.

The casual register is even more informal than the previous one. Certain conversations between well known friends are typical. If the setting allows casual language, the way of addressing other person definitely reveals that. The example sounds as follows,

Jego włożyłem tu specjalnie – objaśnił Hallorann. – Mam nadzieję, że wam będzie smakował (1990: 63).

In the King’s novel one reads,

’And this here I put in special,’ Hallorann said. ‘Hope you folks enjoy it’ (1978: 75).



Unfortunately, the original sentence has the friendly word “folks” which the Polish example lacks. Instead of this, Zinserling writes “wam” which is undoubtedly not the same. It does not show the informal and simultaneously very friendly attitude of the interlocutor. The register, which is free of formality is marked, although there is something missing here. It is probably the feature of evidently casual register. Zinserling’s sentence could be also ascribed to consultative register, which was not King’s intention. Moreover, one of the characters uses the word

ma’am (1978: 72),

which did not find its reflection in the Polish text,

Czy panią wołają Winnie, czy Fredzie? (1990: 60).

As it is shown, “ma’am” is far less formal than “pani” which was not distinguished here. Moreover, different case is with the word

pants (1978: 403)

which is less formal than

spodnie (1990: 322).

This time Zinserling’s sentence does not suggest it unless “portki” had been used. In the Kong’s novel there is also a song which is ascribed to the casual register. It sounds as follows:

Lovin’ you baby, is just like rollin’ off a log,  
But if I can’t be your woman, I sure ain’t goin’ to be your dog. (1978: 45)

The Polish equivalent differs at first sight:

Kochać cię znaczy toczyć bój przed snem,  
Lecz jeśli twoją być nie mogę, to nie chcę też być twoim psem... (1990: 41)

In the English text, there are certain omissions, e.g. ‘g’ or the short ‘ain’t’. There is also a tender expression “baby” which contributes to the casual tone. All of these, did not find their equivalents in the Polish translation thus the register was employed in a wrong way.

Another Polish extract also proves that the issue connected with the registers was neglected.

Holy shit (1978: 21)

was translated as

jak rany (1990: 23).

Zinserling’s text sounds obsolete since nowadays nobody speaks in this way unlike it was presented in King’s fragment. “Holy shit” is still widely employed in the casual conversations. In the next fragment,

no, you’re gonna come down to St. Pete’s with me and learn to cook (1978: 71).

Here, instead of using ‘going to’ the author chooses more colloquial word, which is “gonna”. It does not find its reflection in the Polish translation.

– Nie, pojedziesz ze mną do St. Pete, będziesz się uczył gotowania [...] (1990: 60).

Polish language is devoid of abbreviations of this kind. Zinserling’s language is far from being formal. Instead of the casual register, the consultative one is shown in the translation. Such vague register grouping is not supposed to take place. Additionally, there are more short words which are impossible to translate keeping the same form, e.g.

Wypuście mnie stąd? Wypuście mnie stąd! (1990: 168).

Lemme outta here! (1978: 206)

sounds more casual. The same situation is with

Mam cię! (1990: 295)

instead of

Gotcha! (1978: 367)

or

Spali cię, zastanów się! (1990: 329)

which is supposed to replace

Gonna burn you, baby! Dig on it awhile! (1978: 412).

The word “baby” is not reflected in the Polish sentence. Nevertheless, all of these phrases can be counted as casual register due to the lack of formal vocabulary and the fact that the sentences are built in a simple way. A lot of exclamative sentences also contribute to this fact.

The last but one register is called intimate. Since the bonds between people are very significant here, the language should be specific and deprived of any formality or sublimity. Zinserling is trying to employ these characteristics into her translation, although not always successfully.

The word

doc (1978: 12)

was translated as

stary (1990: 16).

It might sound strange as “doc” was taken from the cartoon Bugs Bunny which was translated as “doktoru.” “Doktorek” seems to be more suitable for addressing a little boy not to mention the fact that it expresses certain tenderness. Another fragment also proves that it is more pleasant to read the original book. Zinserling writes

ten galant wie, jak zarabiać pieniądze (1990: 56).

King’s line sounds different in terms of register,

there’s a dude who earns his money (1978: 67).

The casual style is marked by “dude”, which is quite a modern slang word, used by many people till present times. “Galant” in the translation is nowadays getting out of use.

In this article, the vulgar register was added to embrace the issue concerning registers as thoroughly as possible. It is placed on the lowest level of the formality scale since there are a lot of swearwords and inappropriate colloquial expressions. One will notice many curses while reading King’s novel, which were also reflected in the Polish translation to a certain degree.

The original

what the fuck (1978: 18)

was translated as

co za diabeł (1990: 21).

It is not as strong as in the American novel and could be assigned to the casual register, which was not the King’s intention. More accurate translation could sound “co to kurwa ma być!” and undoubtedly fall into a category of vulgarity. There is also a fragment

you can bet your ass he did (1978: 22)

whose translation is not correct as it sounds

może mi pan wierzyć (1990: 24).

The original sentence, which stands in between the casual and the vulgar register, is read as a consultative one in the Zinserling’s extract. Consequently, such mistake causes certain confusion in terms of a reader’s perception. Additionally, in the King’s novel there is an extract

sixty fuckin years old (1978: 22),

which found its less vulgar translation,

sześćdziesiątka jak nic (1990: 24).

While reading the Polish version, one will assume that the utterance is kept in the consultative or casual register whereas it was meant to be vulgar. Moreover, another fragment,

nadgorliwy kutasina (1990: 10),

which in the original was written as

officious little prick (1978: 4),

is a bit out-of-date. Nowadays, nobody uses word like “kutasina”, which sounds rather funny than offensive. A different situation is with the word “prick” which is more universal and did not come out of use. The English word is still vulgar and there is nothing amusing about it. Although, when the Polish translation was created, the word “kutasina” carried its vulgar meaning unlike currently. This is the reason why the King’s novel is more universal. Apart from this, there is another example of a case when the vulgar register was translated into the casual one. For instance, the original

Now I’ve got you, you fuck! (1978: 305)

is definitely foul-mouthed. However, a reader can find its equivalence,

Teraz cię mam, ty draniu! (1990: 245),

which is undoubtedly less strong. “Fuck” and “drań” do not imply the same, thus they cannot be placed on the same level of the formality scale as “fuck” occupies the lowest level whereas “drań” should be located one step higher. There are more hostile utterances in King’s novel. From the original,

bitch-bastard (1978: 334)

was translated as

kurewski sukinsyn (1990: 267).

More vulgar words are hardly possible to imagine. Although, this time the American curse sounds less strong than the Polish one. To match Zinserling’s version, there would need to be ‘son of a bitch’ instead of “bitch-bastard”. Nevertheless, the register in both cases is classified as the vulgar one. Moreover,

grownup ass (1978: 205)

totally lost its original charm while undergoing the process of translation. Instead of the vulgarism, a reader encounters

dorośli mężczyzna (1990: 169)

which is classified as the consultative register. Less strong vulgarism was presented by Zinserling when she wrote

zrobię z ciebie miazgę (1990: 302),

which has a different choice of words in King’s

I’ll brash your fucking brains in! (1978: 374).

The Polish version is more casual and to some extent, it does not carry the same dramatic and scary atmosphere.

On the whole, there are six registers, although Stephen King and Zofia Zinserling use five of them, precisely, the formal, consultative, casual, intimate and vulgar one. In *The Shining*, all of them are used deliberately to create a special atmosphere and show the variety of characters. Since every person is different, thus s/he employs different vocabulary. The crucial issue is whether the registers were translated according to the original intention or the translator neglected them.

As demonstrated in this article, Zofia Zinserling did not pay proper attention to the correct employment of registers if a reader considers the fragments which underwent the process of analysis in the text above. The misuse of registers considers all five levels of the formality scale. Such imperfect translation leads to the wrong perception of the whole original text. Since the author intentions were in a lot of cases misunderstood, the exceptionality of King’s novel was partially lost. In Polish translation, the obsolete language and the lack of spiciness in the utterances will profoundly discourage some young people from reading.

Despite the fact that the original book is considered, by a significant number of people, as a masterpiece, the bad translation will make it less attractive. That is why a good translation is a key to success.

## Streszczenie

### Rejestry językowe jako problem translatorski

W artykule tym poruszona została kwestia rejestrów, które to odgrywają istotną rolę w całym procesie translacji. Prawidłowo przetłumaczone przyczyniają się w dużym stopniu do końcowego odbioru dzieła przez czytelnika.

Wielu autorów stosuje różne podziały rejestrów, jednakże w artykule tym analizie zostaje poddany tekst na podstawie podziału wyróżnionego przez Joosa. Podzielił on rejestry na 5 zasadniczych rodzajów, począwszy od bardzo formalnego języka, skończywszy na wypowiedziach kolokwialnych. W celu przeprowadzenia dokładniejszej analizy, do 5 rejestrów Joosa dodałam jeszcze wulgaryzmy, które zajmują najniższy poziom w całej skali formalności języka. Wnikliwym badaniom poddana została powieść Stephen Kinga *The Shining* oraz jej polskie tłumaczenie Zofii Zinserling *Lśnienie*.

Analiza tych dwóch powieści pozwoliła na wysnucie wniosków, iż oryginalne zróżnicowanie rejestrów w większości przypadków nie znalazło odzwierciedlenia w analizowanych przeze mnie fragmentach polskiego tłumaczenia. Język Kinga jest bogaty w wulgaryzmy, które również współcześnie znajdują użycie w języku. Natomiast Zinserling dokonała pewnych „uników”, co dało efekt jedynie zwrotów kolokwialnych, nie zaś wulgaryzmów. Wulgaryzmy przez nią użyte w wielu przypadkach wyszły już z użycia i dlatego dla współczesnego czytelnika mogą wydawać się sztuczne i niewłaściwe do danej sytuacji. Następstwem tego może być negatywne postrzeżenie przez czytelnika nie tylko polskiego „Lśnienia”, lecz również oryginalnego dzieła Stephen Kinga. Nie sięgnąwszy do źródła, czyli do powieści *The Shining*, czytelnik nigdy nie pozna jego bogactwa i zróżnicowania stylistycznego, które to sprawiają, że pomimo upływu lat język Stephen Kinga znajdzie swoich miłośników zarówno wśród osób starszych jak i przedstawicieli młodszego pokolenia.

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