Overcoming Intercultural Obstacles in Translation

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Abstract

One major obstacle in the process of translation is the transfer of culture from the source text to the translated one. The source text's language naturally carries the culture where it is used both in life and writing. So is the case of the language used in the translated text. Here lies the problem of cultural transfer from the source to the translated text. This article deals with the same problem in general and the transfer of Nepali text into English in particular. Currently, available theories of translation and their focus in regard to the obstacles of transferring the culture through translation and their possible solutions have been reviewed as the theoretical support for the discussion. The examples have been supplied from different languages and their translation with a major focus on the translation of Nepali text into English and viceversa. This article will be useful for the researchers of Nepali translation into English and other languages.

Keywords: culture, obstacle, solution, source text, target text, translation

Introduction

How can the concept of 'Ram' and 'Ramarajya' in Nepali be translated into English? This question frequently surfaces in translation discourse in Nepal. Does the concept of 'Ram' simply relate to Lord Vishnu's incarnation or that of a king? Do people of other languages and religions grasp the idea once they encounter it in a text? Does the replacement of 'Ram' with 'Christ' carry on the same meaning? Is it appropriate to translate 'Ramarajya' simply into 'Ram's kingdom' or 'Ram's empire'? All these questions are related to the problem of translating culture concerning particular myths and beliefs.

'Ram' and 'Ramarajya' are not mere words. They do not merely carry the reference to a king or his kingdom. They, instead, carry on the ideas and life related to a certain historical period of the Himalayan civilization, specially the Aryan one. They

further carry on the ideology, imagination, dream and cultural standard of the time. So, the mere change of the words from one language to the next cannot translate all these to the text that is in the language of the different cultures and civilizations. It is necessary to understand the total society, civilization, culture and myth to understand the ideas of 'Ram' and 'Ramarajya'. The readers who do not have these basics may not be able to understand the text in which these ideas are used. Here is the place/condition to see the intercultural obstacles created because of the gaps between the cultures of the source and the target language texts.

Translation is a job full of problems. Bhattarai (2000) observes that "the term 'translation' automatically evokes problems and difficulties". It is because there are "[m]ultidimensional forces" that "interact during the decision making process." When a translator tries to make the translation natural, easy and target reader friendly, Bhattarai argues, the problem becomes more intensive (p. 44). The job of translation is very difficult because it has the possibility of diluting, distorting and defeating all the "qualities of the original" (Rao, 2003, p. 138). It is so because of the "concepts and discursive practices of translation, in languages a problem of hermeneutics, of understanding cross-lingual and cross-cultural including concept and practices of operation" (Hermans, 2003, p. 384). The problems are intensive because two languages do not and cannot express the same idea in exactly the same way. Sometimes, when the translator believes that it is said exactly in the same way, the readers may not understand the same because of their basic conceptual diversities. In a situation "where two or more languages and cultures are in contact, there is bound linguistic and cultural interference" (Kehinde, 2009, p. 75). This issue needs detailed discussion.

The discussion above shows that language and culture are tightly interconnected. As a result, a mere change of words from one language to the next does not complete the job of a translator /translation. The cultural traits of the source language must be reflected in the target (translated) text for the success of translation work. But it is not so easy a job. The following section of this article deals with the types of such obstacles before their practical solutions are discussed in the section that follows it.

Methods and Materials

This is qualitative research and a review article that deals with different practices of translation and the theories developed in those regards. The materials for

this research were the writings of different scholars in the field of translation. I have even used examples from my experience as a translator of Nepali poetry into English and vice versa.

Results and Discussion

Intercultural Obstacles

There are many obstacles created because of the gap between the cultures a translated text travel from and to. Translation theorists discuss the roles of cultural distance and the lack of synonymous words in the two languages. Such a distance can be caused by the class, age and sex of the speakers and the characters in the two languages. Similarly, the roles of idioms, humorous expressions, puns, kinship terms and the contextual meaning of the phrases are also counted in these discussions. Some words have different secondary/connotative meanings though they seem to mean the same on the surface. There is the role of the cultural base in the formation of images, symbols and their meaning in each language and context. So is the case of superstition, folk beliefs and myths. Languages also have their different psychological bases along with cultural references and traditions. Moreover, culture exerts an effect on the formation of the writer's and readers' psychology related to the text and its perusal. The translator's leaning to a certain culture (source or target) and the choice of the text for translation are also the matters of importance in this regard.

The first obstacle among those mentioned above is the distance between the cultures of the source language and that of the target one. The possibility of the level of success in translation is determined by the level of the distance between the cultural bases of these two languages. For example, in the translation of a text from Nepali into Hindi or vice versa, almost every sense of the words/phrases can be transferred as they are in the source text. It is because the cultural base of both of these languages is almost the same. Both of their mother language is the Sanskrit that is the refined product of the Aryan civilization. As a result, even the culture and thought pattern of their speakers are almost similar. In such a situation, there is not a large cultural gap.

But if the same text in Nepali or Hindi is to be translated into English, the level of cultural gap will be wider than that of the case between Nepali and Hindi. When a translation of a Nepali text is done into any of the non-Indo-European languages, the cultural gap as well as the difficulty level increases. As both the English and the Nepali are the languages of the same Indo-European family, though on the surface there seems

to be a large gap, in-depth many cultural currents may be similar. But when the language family is different, the gap is sure to be larger. In this case, sometimes translation seems to be an impossible act.

Sometimes, when there is a lack of ideas about the two cultural practices, the effect can even be negative. Bhattarai, Adhikari and Phyak (2011) exemplify it with the attitudes towards the dog in the American and Chinese cultures. An American takes a dog as a friend to humans, but in China, a dog is taken for granted as a dirty and dangerous animal (p. 45). So, when an American text is translated into Chinese, this cultural difference/gap causes not only difficulties for the translator, but also there is the possibility of cultural hatred. So is the case of translating the idea of 'cow' from a Hindu culture-based text into a Christian culture-based language, and vice versa. The Hindus equal a cow to their mother, but for the Christians, it is merely a source of milk and meat. So, when a Hindu reader reads a Christian culture-based text related to a cow, it is very natural for him/her to inculcate a very negative feeling towards the Christian world. Here, a translator needs to be careful to handle the text in translation. These examples show that cultural proximity creates ease and distance a difficulty in translation.

The effect of cultural proximity and distance in translation can be seen even in the language of the same nation. If a text from a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Nepal is to be translated into Nepali, the cultural practices and rituals may seem strange and sometimes even odd for the readers of the next culture. Some settlements in the Himalayan region of Nepal still have the tradition of a multi-husband system. If the text with such practices is translated into the languages of other cultures in Nepal itself, it will be odd for the readers. The culture may be the cause of hatred of the people related, too.

Nabokov (2004) supplied an example of how the environment and culture related to a single word make a difference in the understanding of the meaning of a text. The word 'derevya' in Russian is translated as 'village' in English by many translators. But, Nabokov argues that it does not give the idea that the English word 'village' carries. Instead, it means a specific point in a Russian village where people gather for certain cultural performances (p. 122). So, Nida (2004) argues that a translator must be carefully sensitive to understand the real sense and practice of the culture and civilization of the societies where the text under translation is related to. The proximity and distance of the two cultures of the source and the target texts make a

significant difference (p. 157). Thus, cultural distance is a powerful obstacle in translation.

These cultural gaps also cause difficulties in the process of translation. One of them is the psychology engraved in a text. For example, when a non-Mangolian Nepali translator tries to translate a text created by a Mangolian in Nepali itself, the gravity of the cultural terms used in the text is rarely understood by the translator. Similarly, the culture of the grandparents' writing cannot be understood by the grandchildren in the same level. So is the case of a man translating the integral aspect of culture in women's writings. How is it possible to translate the ecstatic experience of a poet while at the height of poetic creation? These are the reasons why scholars claim that it is impossible to translate a poem. Even when a poem is translated, only the poet who created it can do the job of its translation. These all, though seen as not directly related, are connected with the effect of culture in translation.

Language is the major reason for these cultural obstacles. As culture is expressed and carried on through language, and the time when the language changes, the culture is not carried through. Basically, translation is the job of transferring the same meaning of a text in one language to a text written in another language. Here lies the problem. In this regard, Muller (2007) argues that the hidden meaning of a word in a language cannot be captured by any word of any other language. It is because every language is the carrier of certain concepts, emotions and values. Only those people who are habituated to use it for long can internalize it, and the rest are not able to do so. Here lies the great challenge for translators. This makes every translation incomplete (p. 207). Das (2008) takes such culture-specific words as the carrier of racial, historical and sociological realities. He argues that such words make dimension and success of translation contracted. The next instance is the difficulty or impossibility of translating the slang of a certain language and society into the next. Similarly, the rustic tone and tune of the words also cannot be translated in exact terms (p. 179). Every translator tries to find the words and expressions in the target language that can best represent the sense of the terms used in the source language text. But it is not so easy a goal.

Bassnett (2002) uses the findings of Eugene Nida's studies on translation to establish her point in this regard. There is a language called Guaica that is used in southern Venezuela. It is easy to translate the ideas of murder, theft and lies into English from the Guaica. But, it is very difficult to translate the ideas related to good, bad, beautiful and ugly because these senses are not carried on by these English words.

There is no binary-based concept of good and bad or beautiful and ugly in this language. Their good refers to getting a desired goal, the act of killing an enemy, burning the wife to teach her necessary manners and stealing things from the people who do not belong to their own band. There is no other culture and language that has the equivalent belief in the goodness of these ideas. Similarly, in Guaica, the idea of 'bad' refers to rotten fruits, objects with a blemish, murdering a member of one's own band, stealing from a member of the extended family and lying to anyone. Even the act of murder is both good and bad based upon whose murder it is. Similarly, violating taboos includes "incest, being too close to one's mother-in-law, a married woman's eating tapir before the birth of the first child, and a child's eating rodents" (pp. 36-37). It is very difficult to find the terms that represent the idea and concern of social psychology in other languages. As a result, these practices create cultural obstacles in translation.

The obstacles are also created by the words whose meanings cover the sense of many words in the next language. In this case, the single word covers only a general idea, whereas the many words cover specific meanings. Here, the real meaning cannot be transferred through translation. Bassnett (2002) discussed this difficulty in regard to different words used for different conditions of snow in Finnish, for light and water in English, for different behaviours and use of camel in Arabic and for different types of bread in French. She also discussed the difficulty of translating the idea of the trinity from the Bible to other cultures where the concept of God is only single (p. 37). She further argued that there was no possibility of finding the words that exactly represented the senses related to class, social status, age and sex of the source language in the target language (p. 29). It is because of the fact that every language has its own psycho-social conditionality of origin, development and meaning generation. So, the exact equivalence of the sense is not possible.

The translation of the idioms and other culture-specific expressions shows how culture is integral in a language and its consequent obstacle in the process of translation. For example, the idiom "naachna najaanne aangan tedho [Those who do not know how to dance argue that the yard is shapeless]" shows more than what is expressed in words. The Nepali cultural background of different folk dances, their related cultural aspects and social psychology is responsible to generate and give meaning to such expressions. It refers to the common psychology of people who do not know how to work and so blame others to hide their own faults. So, just translating it

into "Those who do not know how to dance argue that the yard is shapeless" is not enough to express the same idea because this English expression is not an idiom, but just a general expression. It cannot carry on the beauty, linguistic taste and power of this particular Nepali expression in English. That's why; the translation experts do not take it as the correct translation.

Das (2008) argued that "[i]n case of cultural expressions, the limitation of translation becomes clear and glaring, cultural idioms are hard to translate and restrict translatability" (p. 176). It is seen appropriate argument when we look at Nepali idioms. There are many idioms in Nepali in which the women and subalterns are humiliated and made fun of. While translating them, a translator cannot create the same level of fun for the next cultural condition. At the same time, it will be humiliating and culturally unacceptable to the cultures where such humiliation and fun of the human being is treated as inhuman practices. It demands a lot of carefulness on the part of a translator.

In the translation of puns, the problem of cultural aspects becomes even more intense. The meaning and effect of pun is phonological, contextual and cultural. Once the language is different, the phonological effect fades away. Similarly, the cultural and contextual differences decrease its semantic effect. The word *saalaa* in both Hindi and Nepali is a usual expression for abusing males. '*Saalo*' and its plural form '*saalaa*' are also expressions to refer to the junior brother of one's wife. In the societies where wife is considered low-graded in comparison with the husband, there are tendencies to humiliate the people of the wife's natal family. And her junior brother is the most humiliated person in front of his senior brother-in-law. This cultural conditionality causes both the humour and effect in the use of this pun to mean somebody of low status. But once it is put into English as 'junior brother-in-law' there is no such effect at all. Both multi-meaningfulness and humour are absent in its English equivalent.

The same is the case when the pun on the word 'sun' from English is translated into Nepali or Hindi. Many English poets have used the word 'sun' to mean the 'son'. As both the words 'sun' and 'son' have a similar pronunciation, one can replace the other in the oral presentation. When it comes to written presentation, the effect is clear. The idea of 'making the sun' is used to mean the process of 'making a son' i.e. the sexual act of copulation. But, when such a use is translated into Nepali or Hindi, there is no connection of that sort between <code>ghaam/surya</code> and the <code>chhoraa/beta</code> even in a great distance. Here translation kills both the meaning and effect of the original.

The translation of kinship terms also creates problems. Two languages may not have culturally and practically equivalent terms to indicate the same type of relations. The term 'uncle' in English does not have the equivalent in Nepali. People make use of the word 'kaakaa', but it is not culturally appropriate. It is because the word kaakaa in Nepali refers only to the junior brother of one's father; whereas the word 'uncle' in English refers to all sorts of brothers of one's father and mother. In Nepali, father's senior brother is called 'thulo bubaa' and the mother's brothers are called 'maamaa'. So, it is difficult to find the exact equivalents for 'thulo bubaa' and 'maamaa' in English. This is not only a matter of words, but that of a culture and the consequent social psychology. So is the case of contextual use and cultural significance of the phrases used in the source text to be translated into the target one (Bassnett, 2002, p. 29). In such cases, translators find themselves trapped in the trans-lingual riddle.

The condition far more difficult than that of the language is the situation of non-translatability. Many words are not translatable. It is not because there is a lack of words in the target language, but because of the cultural conditionality they are created and used for (Bassnett, 2002, p. 38). In some cases, the words used for the same object in the source and the target languages do not have the same underlying meaning. The case of the words 'gaai' in Nepali and its surface equivalent 'cow' in English is one such a striking example. The reason has already been discussed above.

The effect of the underlying meaning of words is also seen in the creation and meaning-formation of trans-lingual images and symbols. A nice example is the translation of seasons used in Shakespeare's creations into Arabian, African and South-Asian languages and contexts. Shakespeare's sonnets have uses the image of the summer season as a symbol to refer to the beauty, pleasure and motivating quality of a beloved. This is the result of the pleasant and beautiful summer in England. People of England wait for the summer and its pleasant sunshine throughout the year because they are tired of the icy cold winter and constant rainfall and stormy air throughout the year. Summer is the best season for them. That's why Shakespeare compares it with his beloved. But this image cum symbol is not appropriate in the Arabian, African and South-Asian contexts because in these areas summer is a torturous season. Its unbearable heat is what the people of these parts of the word do not like. So, to compare a beloved with the summer sun is a wrong approach there: it is to criticize the beloved as a very angry, unbearable and torturous person. It shows how even a

geographical image is replete with socio-cultural psychology and how it creates obstacles in translation.

In the same way, the superstitions, folk beliefs and myths that a society cherishes also have their direct or indirect effects in language and then in translation. In Nepal, for the people who follow Hindu cultures, the numbers 8 and 12 are ominous. They refer to the destruction of a great number of people in the Mahabharat War with the incarnation of the Lord Vishnu in the form of the Krishna and the final destruction of the world and the total humanity at the end of every circle of the world with his twelfth incarnation in the form of the Kalki respectively. The Krishna is the eighth and the Kalki is the twelfth incarnations respectively. But for the people who follow Christianity, these numbers (8 and 12) do not have any such cultural and psychological connections. But for them the number 13 has ominous significance. So, while translating the texts with these numerical symbols, their meanings cannot be transferred.

Translation theorists and researchers such as Gyasi and Bassnett observe that the effect of psychological make-up of a language spreads up to the level of culture and then to the difficulty in translation. Gyasi (1999) argued that English is more concrete a language than French. So ideas expressed in English are more concrete than those expressed through the French. So, when a text written in English is translated into French, the text naturally becomes more abstract and so the concreteness that is found in the original is lost. And consequently, the translation is not very successful (p. 82). Such a social psychology has the effect on the structure of a language, too. So, when the psychological conditionality of the language is different in that of the source and the target text, the effect of translated text is diminished. Bassnett (2002) discussed how the concept of time in the Indo-European language cannot be translated into languages that have different concept of time and its consequent linguistic structures (p. 37). These are some hidden cultural obstacles in translation.

The effect of language, culture and context is also seen in the reader's psychology; and consequently, it affects the effectiveness of the comprehension of a text. A translator always wants to create the same effect that the source text exerts on its immediate readers to the readers' of the translated text. But because of the difference of the readers' psychology, it is not easily possible. This raises the question as to which language, culture and psychology the translator leans to; the source or the target. This is related to the translator's choice: whether to globalize the source culture along with the

text or only its humane subject matter. For the first choice, the focus is on the reproduction of source culture in the target text; it creates problems for the target readers. But for the second choice, the message of the text is put with the help of the target culture so that the target readers feel it easy to understand the text and its message. This is a difficult choice. Garcia (2004) restated Benjamin's idea in this connection:

the fragmentary words of the translated text do not compose an object identical to the original vessel. . . . The source and target texts can in this way enter into a dialectics in which they reorganize themselves and each other as fragments of an ungraspable, almost ineffable higher language, the prototype of which is the Holy Writ. (p. 4)

This shows how a complete translation of culture is the matter nearly impossible.

The next problem related to a translator's leaning to the source or the target culture is reflected in the choice of a text for translation. This is also connected with the translator's purpose and psychology. When a Nepali translator has to choose a text for translation, there is a problem: which text to pick up. If the translator is from mainstream Nepali society, there is little chance that s/he will choose the text from the margin. Even when one does it, it is difficult for him/her to do justice to the culture and psychology it has in the translation process. This reality also compels the translator to deter from choosing a text from a culture other than his/hers.

In addition to the problems discussed above, the new problem in translation is caused by the growing tendency of transnational life and the writings related to such a life. Transnational life does not have a pure culture either that of the homeland or that of the host land. Once people have to live away from the atmosphere and culture of the society of their birth or their parent's birth, they gradually develop a mix-up of their culture with the culture of the new place of dwelling. It results in the development of a third-type culture that is neither like the homeland nor the host land culture. This cultural hybridity is expressed in their creative writings, too. Lahiri (2010) argued that the transnationals are themselves the translated people, and their writing itself is a form of translation of their selves (p. 96). So, the translation of such a text is the translation of the translation.

Their language is also a hybrid one. Lahiri (2010) further argued that even when they write in the language of their origin, they unconsciously use a hybrid language and culture. So, it is necessary to have translation conscience to read their original texts. The case is the same even when they write in the target language. She thinks that all her writings in English read like the translation of the Bengali-Indian culture though she lives in the USA (p. 99). The translation of such texts should have the expressions neither that of the source text nor that of the target one: it should be that of the third space hybrid life and culture. The readers of the translated text need to feel that the text belongs to the third space culture, thought and ideas. This is a tough task.

These are the major cultural problems in translation though many more may surface in the process. If a translator is careful enough about these obstacles, s/he can prepare himself/herself to be a successful translator to some extent.

Overcoming the Obstacles

The main purpose of translation is to transfer a text from one language to the next keeping the idea, emotion and beauty intact. For this, it is necessary to transfer almost every aspect of the source text. Though it is not possible to transfer the beauty of language as it is in the original text, a translator should try his/her best for this. This section deals with the same possibilities of overcoming the related obstacles discussed in the previous section.

The first need for translating texts related to culture is the bilingual and bicultural consciousness of the translators. They must be aware of the basics of both of the culture's values and the intricacies of them. At the same time, the translator needs to be equally respectful to both of cultures so that the biases may not work during the process. Rao (2003) argued:

No one can dispute that in a decolonized world, translation has been a very creative medium for transmitting cultures. It is now recognized that when you translate a text you translate a culture also. To believe in translation is to believe in the translatability of culture, too. Instead of aspiring to melt two texts into sameness, a translator now should resort to the principle of alterity, that is, to recognize both the one and the other, and different as they are, try to forge the two into one in a new space. Hybridity, rather than purity is the organizing principle . . . the resulting translated text will be a product of mixed cultures—of the source language as well as the target language. (p. 141)

This acceptance of the third space taste makes the translation a creative job. For this, the culturally unavailable things in the target language to equate the source text need not be translated, but simply transported in such a way that the readers of the target text may understand the context of the use of these things (Hermans, 2003, p. 386). 'Thick translation' is one of the techniques of doing this. Appiah (1993) terms this process as 'academic translation' in which different techniques are used to make the untranslatable things understandable to the target audience. Some of these techniques are: annotation, glossing and footnote (p. 399). These techniques are used a lot in the translation of Nepali poetry into English.

Subba (2016) used footnotes in the English translation of the following words from his own poems: *kaakaakul, madhumaalatee, meeraa, ekataare, sekmuree, lungdar, jebunissaa, manila* [Manila Sotang], *karnakavach, nettiphung, pakkandee, paalaam, yupparung, mimjimaa, saarangi and diyo.* He has put these words in English so that the pronunciation in both languages can be understood. Newmark (1998) termed such a process as naturalization. This technique is highly used these days. In the book entitled *Poems of the Nepali Diaspora*, many examples of this technique are found. As they are poems from the Nepali Diaspora, it is necessary to clarify even the words used in the Nepali version when they refer to the transnational third space reality. So, even in the Nepali version of the poems many footnotes are used. Some words like *sarkibari, sajhebari* and *seemal* are just naturalized in translation because the contexts used in the poems make the ideas clear.

The next means of overcoming the cultural obstacles in translation is the use of target language idioms in place of the idioms from the source language. For example, the Nepali idiom "naachna najaanne aangan tedho [Those who do not know how to dance argue that the yard is shapeless]" is translated as "A bad workman quarrels with his tools". Though this cannot give the exact sense of the Nepali idiom, the people of English culture understand its sense in their context. Though the effect is not equivalent, it is the best possible management of the problem.

Sometimes, the use of only one technique may not be able to overcome the obstacle. In such a case, two, three or more techniques are simultaneously used. Newmark (1998) suggests even to go for sense translation where necessary. It is called the process of neutralization. Similarly, sometimes the compensation technique is also used. For this, the use of the place of the cultural term or reference is changed so that the sense is carried on and the effect is preserved in the total text. In other times,

cultural borrowing and cultural filters are used. In the use of the cultural filter, many terms related to the source cultures are not put into the target text. The text is modeled on the cultural ease and acceptability of the target audience.

The final weapon of cultural transportation is cultural transplantation. In this technique, the source text is rewritten in the target language in such a way that the target audience takes it normally. In this process, the sense of the source text is transferred, but the other aspects are forgotten. The beauty of language and other specific effects of the source text are lost. This is an extremist approach to translation. In the past, when cultures were taken to be superior and inferior, this technique was in high use. *The Bible* was translated in this way as the Christians thought themselves to be from the high culture and the rest of the cultures as non-cultures for them. But these days both of these techniques and tendencies are not favoured. So, other techniques discussed above are used in the translation process.

Conclusion

One of the major problems of translation is the transfer of culture-related aspects of the source text into the target text. The indirect presence of a certain culture in a language causes it at the primary level. The cultural proximity and distance between two languages involved in translation decide the level of these difficulties. The major of these problems are: the role of class, age and sex of the speakers and the characters in the two languages; the roles of idioms, humorous expressions, puns, kinship terms and the contextual meaning of the phrases; different secondary/connotative meanings of the words; the role of the cultural base in the formation of images, symbols and their meaning in each language and context; superstition, folk beliefs and myths. At the same time, languages have their different psychological bases along with cultural references and traditions; and cultures exert effects on the formation of the writer's and readers' psychology related to the text and its perusal. At the same time, the translator's leaning toward a certain culture (source or target) and the choice of the text for translation also cause some problems.

Translators use different techniques to overcome these obstacles. The translators with bicultural sense and bilingual competence can do it better than the rest. They use the techniques such as annotation, glossing, footnotes, neutralization, compensation, cultural filter and cultural transplantation as per the need and context of translation. In case one technique is not enough for justifiable transfer, they may mix many. The idioms of the source text are generally replaced by the idioms of the target text.

Besides, there are many other techniques for overcoming the cultural obstacles in translation such as literal translation, replacement, omission, and new word formation. Detailed researches and writings are necessary to deal with all these aspects and solutions.

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