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Factors influencing the linguistic development in the Øresund region

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Abstract

The paper summarizes post–World War II research on the understanding of Swedish by Danes and vice versa. Self-evaluation results as well as test results point to increased mutual comprehension. Preliminary results from ongoing investigations on both sides of the Øresund are given. They suggest a number of possible future scenarios, the most realistic prediction being that the well-known language problems may be overcome in enterprises employing both Danes and Swedes. With single speakers employed at predominantly monolingual work places various interlanguage varieties will develop. Whether such varieties will eventually crystallize into one accepted Swedo-Danish interlanguage variety is still an open question.

Introduction

The subject of this paper is the linguistic relation between two nation states and two regions, viz. Sweden and Denmark and Scania and the Copenhagen metropolitan region respectively. Historical research, Willerslev (1981a, 1981b), documents that despite some regional integration manifesting itself in a substantial immigration of poor Scanians to Copenhagen at the close of the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century neither the nation states nor the regions were integrated and the immigrants linguistically speaking left no trace at all.

The planning of a new region

Around the beginning of the 1990s the Danish authorities became aware of the fact that the city of Copenhagen was losing ground both measured in the number of taxpayers to the community and as a center for commerce

and industry (cf. Ekspertudvalget 1998). The growth rates were higher — sometimes much higher — in the Jutland region of Denmark. Copenhagen seemed to be trapped in a downgoing spiral: attractive taxpayers and industry moved out and made it hard to raise the funds needed for investments. To the planners one way out of this dilemma seemed to be the integration of Copenhagen and the southwestern part of Sweden, viz. Scania. When Sweden joined the EU the way was paved for the funding of projects by the EU interregional funds and soon the planning of a new region took off. The planning efforts focused on three areas:

- diagnosing the areas of strength of the region as a whole;
- predicting the future;
- discovering the problems.

Diagnosing the areas of strength of the region as a whole

Most planners have followed an empirical strategy, comparing the number of employees on a national basis with the number of employees in the region under construction. In this way one may construct a measure of regional specialization. This measure may be supplemented by various indicators of employment intensity, and by predictions on the need for specialized personnel and the relative weight of the various sectors in the near future. Following this line of reasoning the Danish authorities, for example, concentrate on industries of nutrition, energy and environment, health and mediotronics, building and construction, commerce and transport, and tourism and leisure as the most obvious points of strength, whereas the joint task force of the public employment agencies in addition point out that the paper industry, the metal industry, and oil and plastic industries also employ a sizeable number of workers and have substantial export figures (Øresundsregionen 1994; Arbejdsmarkedet 1996). Andersson and Wichmann Matthiessen (1993) have pointed to the relative strength of the region in the area of research and hold that this is the key to future development since the next generation of industries, particularly in the area of health and the life sciences, will all of them be dependent on prior research and development.

Several agencies have been set up in order to further collaboration between Danish and Swedish enterprises. One of them is Medicon Valley. Every year the Medicon Valley administration undertakes a survey of what the stakeholders think block future collaboration. In 2001 Niels Gerner Larsen (personal communication) asked his respondents, “Do you see the linguistic difference between Danes and Swedes as a significant

barrier to more communication and networking among the stakeholders in Medicon Valley?” Seven hundred and eighty persons received the questionnaire; 295 of them answered, viz. 181 Danes and 114 Swedes. The answers to this particular question were rather different since 95 percent of the Danes answered “no” and only 5 percent “yes,” whereas 87 percent of the Swedes answered “no” and 13 percent “yes” ($p < .03$). Apparently, more Swedes see the linguistic differences as creating problems, though it must be admitted that 13 percent is still a low number.

Predicting the future

Predicting the future and planning for the future tend to merge in this decade and planning the Øresund region is no exception. Much depends on the investment strategies in the public domain since, for example, traffic (i.e. the bridge and the prices for using it, the railway expansion), land allotment and housing development (e.g. the Ørestad, a housing, research, and commercial center planned for the south of the small island Amager, close to the international airport Kastrup and the bridge leading to Malmö), and the restrictions on, for example, the size of commercial centers, will all conspire to determine the future of the twin cities on both sides of the Øresund. There is no doubt that the planning efforts have been intensive and driven by mutual interests on the part of the regional partners. On the other hand, it is obvious that there is also a certain lopsidedness to the effort, the Danish government backing up the city of Copenhagen in its bid for the Scandinavian leadership in explicit competition with first and foremost Stockholm. For obvious reasons the Swedish government has relied more on the city of Malmö and the regional Swedish authorities, the Swedish interest being fuelled primarily by the massive unemployment in the region and the resulting state subsidies.

Discovering the problems

The problems encountered have been surprisingly widespread in that they have disclosed several divergences between the strategies of two neighboring and — at least as seen from abroad — very similar countries. To take but one example: the Swedish educational system, particularly higher education, is very different from the Danish, being more Anglo-Americanized. It features an integrated twelve-year high school system crowned by a three- or four-year-long university degree. This is optionally followed by a

long Ph.D. study period. Until recently Ph. D. studies were often financed by concurrent employment as a teacher, either at the university or in high schools. This is in contrast to the nine-year-long obligatory school period in Denmark, leaving up to 17 percent of a cohort without any vocational training at all. The significantly German-type university system in Denmark features traditional doctorates (dr. phil.) normally placed later in the career (i.e. after tenure) and an, overwhelmingly fully financed, three years of Ph.D. studies as the entrance ticket to a university career. It is probably fair to say that what has been discovered are the inevitable problems of fine tuning two regional systems without wanting to unify the national systems as a whole.

For a linguist the most conspicuous feature of this planning process is the almost total absence of any discussion of language problems at all. The exception to prove the rule are the questions posed by the Medicon Valley administration; see above. The predictions for the labor force are twofold: one is that the growth potential is concentrated in the areas that demand the highest qualifications, that is, the research-based, primarily medical, industries. But the available labor force in the region, particularly that in the Swedish part of the region, consists of many persons without any higher education. This means that there is a very real possibility of being forced to import researchers from abroad, which willy nilly may lead to more English-based communication and consequently less Interscandinavian being used. The other prediction is a demand for less highly educated persons in the area of public service in Denmark. This calls for integration efforts for the many unskilled persons who do not have either Danish or Swedish as their first language, particularly the development of courses targeted at these groups and tailored to their needs. Since it is rather obvious that understanding Danish or Swedish is more difficult when the Scandinavian language is a second language, the absence of any planning in this direction is glaring.

Swedish and Danish

The hidden presumption behind the discussion above is that Swedish and Danish are genetically close enough for mutual understanding to be possible but that the languages are still sufficiently different for this not to take place automatically. There have, however, been numerous investigations of the Scandinavian speech community, which all of them have concluded that within the Scandinavian speech community precisely Danes and Swedes have notable difficulties in understanding each other.

In 1950 Einar Haugen undertook a questionnaire study aiming to disclose by self-evaluation the mutual intelligibility of the Scandinavian languages. The results for Danish and Swedish are as follows:

Answers to the question *Do you understand Danish/Swedish without any difficulty?*

Percentage of yes answers:

Swedes understanding Danish: 44

Danes understanding Swedish: 40

(Haugen 1953, after Ohlsson 1979a)

These results were the basis for all speculations on the matter until the 1970s. A weakness is that the informants were culled from the membership lists of the Nordic society (*Foreningen Norden*), supplemented with persons selected from the telephone registry. This has probably yielded unrealistically high figures and thus we might guess that in the 1950s mutual intelligibility between Danish and Swedish would have been considerably lower had it been measured on a broader base.

In the 1970s national mass media had become a popular means of communication and the possibility for Danes to look at Swedish television and vice versa in the Copenhagen region and Scania became a factor influencing the comprehension of neighboring languages. This is at least one of the explanations given by Ohlsson (1978b) for the relatively high figures found in a representative questionnaire survey conducted by the professional agencies Gallup and SIFO in 1973:

Answers to the question *Do you understand spoken Danish/spoken Swedish?*

Percentages of yes answers:

Swedes understanding Danish: 47

Danes understanding Swedish: 78

(Gallup/SIFO 1973, after Ohlsson 1978b)

The asymmetry in the figures is remarkable, the Danes claiming to understand Swedish much more frequently than the other way around. This has been attributed to purely linguistic factors since Danish sound changes in the second half of the century have been considerable (Brink and Lund 1975). Since the rate of change—given that the two languages share the direction of change—is much higher for Danish, spoken Danish now diverges more from spoken Swedish. In particular lenition processes and the syncopation of unstressed vowels completing a long-term drift toward collecting all information in the stressed syllables are responsible for this divergence. The asymmetry could, however, also be due to a more sanguine attitude to self-evaluation in Denmark.

Maurud (1976) is a classical study of the actual ability to understand the neighboring languages. Maurud tested an equal number of army recruits (i.e. males only) from each of the three Scandinavian countries, in total 504 persons. The subjects were tested for their understanding of written material (operationalized as the ability to supply the correct answer in a multiple-choice test on the content of the texts as well as a cloze test) and their understanding of spoken material (operationalized as translation of specific words taken from the texts listened to). Some of the participants were asked to take the test in their native language while others were subjected to the test in the two neighboring ones respectively. According to the critical assessment in Ohlsson (1979b) the sample selection was biased in favor of Norwegian and Danish. The recruits tested were from the Stockholm, Oslo, and Copenhagen regions, respectively. Since Stockholm is quite far from Denmark, whereas both Copenhagen and Oslo are close to the other countries, the Swedish figures could be expected to be low. This is begging the question in that the results might be taken as an indication of what the average male inhabitant of the country capitals was able to understand in 1975. It is a fair guess (Ohlsson 1979b), that contact leads to higher scores in comprehension tests. We shall come back to this.

Maurud not only tested his subjects for their comprehension of spoken and written language but also asked them to evaluate their own skills. This makes it possible to compare with the earlier results; see Table 1.

If we collapse the two first columns and the three later ones we get Swedes understanding spoken Danish "a great deal" or better: 27 percent, Danes understanding spoken Swedish "a great deal" or better: 55 percent. The figures correspond to the Gallup/SIFO study in that they are asymmetrical but the figures are dramatically (realistically!) lower, probably because the respondents have just been subjected to testing. Maurud has also tested the correlation between self-evaluated and tested comprehension (1976: 134, table 13.8) and in general the correlations are good.

Table 1. *Self-evaluation of the ability to understand, after Maurud (1976: 133)*

	Nothing	Very little	A great deal	Everything except single words	Everything
Swedes understanding Danish	13.1	60.1	22.6	3.6	0.6
Danes understanding Swedish	4.3	40.9	39.0	14.0	1.8

Börestam (1987) hypothesized that the changes in spoken Danish documented by Brink and Lund (1975) were responsible for the asymmetry in the figures for comprehension. Assisted by Jørn Lund she prepared two versions of the same text, one recorded by Lund as it would have been spoken by a person born around 1880 and one, also recorded by Lund, manifesting the changes that have occurred since then. One might question the strategy since it will not lead to equally authentic texts but the results are suggestive. Of the three groups participating in the test, one is from Växjö in the south (but not immediately bordering Denmark), one is from Norrtälje (Central Sweden), and the third from Kramfors in the North of Sweden; see Table 2.

Table 2. *Mean percentages of correct answers to both cloze and questions test, after Börestam (1987: 37, table 6)*

	Växjö	Norrtälje	Kramfors	Total
Older version	61.3	56.1	56.2	57.9
Young version	40.6	37.4	32.1	36.7

Both geographical distance, which may very well be a cover term for (possibility of) communicative contact, and older vs. younger versions of Danish are significant factors. The younger version and increased geographical distance lead to greater difficulties of understanding than proximity and the older version. Note that even in the worst case, the Kramfors group trying to understand the young version, the figures are not as low as in Maurud's tests.

Börestam (1991) reports on a questionnaire study about language use at Internordic meetings. The answers revealed that among persons participating in meetings arranged by the Nordic organizations the young ones (below the age of 26) rate themselves as better at understanding the neighboring languages than does any other age group (1991: 30, table 14). Further, the Danes and the Swedes overwhelmingly rate themselves as good at or having a satisfactory understanding of the neighboring languages (note that this questionnaire included Finnish, Faroese, and Icelandic as well as the Scandinavian languages). Finally, 20 percent of the Swedish participants rate themselves as understanding Danish poorly (1991: 35, table 17), whereas only 2.4 percent of the Danes rate themselves as poor at understanding Swedish (1991: 37, table 19).

As a novelty, Börestam asked her informants how often they change to English in order to make themselves understood and how they evaluate their own understanding of English. Twenty-six of all the respondents report that they use English (1991:58f.) but they seem to do so as a sort of last resort strategy. The Finns use English significantly more than any other group, Danes and Swedes being equally prone to do so (1991: 59,

table 27). The self-evaluation of the understanding of the neighboring languages and English reveal that the Danes rate their understanding of Swedish to be only slightly better than that of English (1.9 vs. 2.0 with 1 representing “very good”) whereas the Swedes rate their understanding of English as being equal to that of the Danes (2.0) while their evaluation of their capacity to understand Danish was as low as 2.6 (1991: 58, table 26).

Summarizing the available research, we have found that (1) Swedes have more difficulty in understanding Danish than vice versa, (2) the difficulty varies with the mode, spoken Danish being more difficult than written Danish, and (3) the difficulty depends on (possibilities of) contact, regions of Sweden closer to Denmark and regions of Denmark closer to Sweden favoring understanding. The results are typical for the theoretical stance of the period. All of them are based on self-evaluation (introspective evidence) or quasi-natural tests (experimental evidence). The break in research occurred when observational evidence from realistic situations was introduced.

Börestam (1994) video-recorded fourteen women and four men in six triads involving all three Scandinavian languages. Two conversations were recorded in each of the capitals of Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen. In addition, she recorded dyads with all the possible linguistic combinations including those where two Danes converse, two Swedes, etc. There were 29 Interscandinavian conversations and nine same-language dyads. One result was that lively gesturing was much more frequent in the Interscandinavian conversations than in the same-language conversations (Börestam 1994: 193). In contrast to a previous study by Haastrup and Teleman (1978) (cf. below) Börestam deliberately used informants who were unknown to each other and most of whom had little experience with speaking or understanding the neighboring languages. They were, however, enlisted as willing to participate in or actually active in the Nordic Society’s job swap arrangements so that they were eager to learn the other language(s). In other words, what is portrayed here is what could happen linguistically at an occasional meeting between young people from the three Nordic countries. The interlocutors treat Internordic conversations as “problematic.” They are aware of possible sources of misunderstanding and orient themselves to preventing it, for example by asking for information in advance so that common ground may be established or any problematic terms explained in advance. And if need arises they check for understanding and repair misunderstandings. They do not in general try to speak the neighboring language, neither do they very often switch to English. They simply strive eagerly to bridge the gap and they succeed remarkably well. The Nordic languages are indeed so close that mutual comprehension is possible and yet so far from each other that it requires the full attention and a considerable measure of effort at cooperating to succeed in pulling it off.

In 2000 a bridge between the two countries was opened and two studies, both of them including both sides of the Øresund, were initiated by the Øresund University, a collaborative agency formed primarily by the universities of Lund and Copenhagen. The Danish project has collected a number of sociolinguistic interviews including comprehension tests, distributed a questionnaire on attitudes, and recorded four group conversations where two Danes (one male, one female) interact with two Swedes (one male, one female) in a problem-solving situation. The hypothesis is that prior contact and recently formed attitudes interact in determining levels of understanding. Sustained contact and positive attitudes toward the neighboring nation and its language are supposed to further mutual understanding, whereas little contact and negative attitudes to the neighboring state or its language will supposedly lead to difficulties in understanding. In the latter case accommodation might occur.

So far the accommodation found is next to nothing, even in the group conversation between workers from post offices in Copenhagen and Malmö who have not had any Swedish or Danish colleagues. This corroborates Börestam's results for meetings between unacquainted persons. Though the test results from the comprehension tests have not yet been finalized, preliminary results from the close-contact workplace where Danes and Swedes actually work together are suggestive. It turned out that in general the level of understanding was remarkably high. Close and sustained contact may indeed lead to perfect or very high levels of understanding. Preliminary analyses by the Swedish project have suggested that Swedes who do not have Swedish as their first language are significantly less able to understand Danish than mother-tongue speakers of Swedish. This is a fact not taken into account by previous researchers, partly because the number of such speakers was negligible at the time. Not so anymore.

Four models of development

Ulf Teleman has recently (Teleman 2001) proposed four models for the linguistic development of the region. The four models may be summarized in four different scenarios:

Scenario 1. Language change: either Scania switches to Danish or Copenhagen switches to Swedish

The two sides meeting in the Øresund region are the strongest part of a (relatively) weaker nation state, that is, Copenhagen, and the weaker part

of a (at least until recently, relatively) stronger nation state, that is, the Malmö–Lund region. The outcome may therefore be a little less certain than if the partners had been more unequal. As it is, Teleman holds that it is unlikely that either side will shift. For one thing a shift would detach the region from the rest of the nation state. In the case of Copenhagen going Swedish, this would be tantamount to isolating the capital from the rest of the nation state. As to the Malmö–Lund region going Danish, there are some similarities between the regional Scanian dialect and Danish, particularly with respect to intonation (Ohlsson 1979a: 99). Still a shift would be a reversal of a historical trend to integrate the Scania region with the Stockholm region. It would furthermore mean that the region would change to a language that is hard to understand precisely for Stockholm people unless modified considerably in the Swedish direction. In general for a population to go through a massive language shift there has to be considerable advantages in speaking the new language and a slim price on language loyalty. This does not easily happen in a region that is and will continue to be a part of a nation state that puts a price on its language, and both the Swedish and the Danish nation states in these years are intensifying and partly developing new language policies in order to counter the influence from English.

Scenario 2. The development of a regional standard

The positing of a regional spoken standard placed somewhere in between the two national standard languages and used for intercommunication in the twin cities of Copenhagen and Malmö–Lund calls for an international or a historical equivalent. Cases in point might include the seasonal speech community at, for example, the former Skanör market, the language of the regions of Portugal bordering on Spain, or regions where two Slavic languages meet and have economic or other reasons to merge. I am not aware of any such intermediate varieties.

Scenario 3. Modification of receptive and productive competence on both sides

The most likely outcome is that of a widening receptive competence on both sides. Both populations may expect to be understood when speaking their own language and conversely be able to understand that of the other, if not perfectly then at least well enough to work together. This would mean that among the various productive and receptive regional differences

within the two nation states we would find the ability to understand the neighboring language. Intelligibility is avowedly a tricky notion, but *if* two interlocutors may speak what they themselves take to be their own languages and any observing linguist cannot tell otherwise, and *if* they are in fact able to understand each other as well as two people speaking the same language, *then* there is no way to distinguish between the two varieties as “languages” versus treating them as two “dialects.” In other words this development might lead to establishing a missing link between Danish and Swedish, making it even harder for linguists (though not for sociolinguists) to define them as two different languages. A crucial testing ground for this scenario would be the area of public service. For instance Swedish nurses not only would be able to understand Danish patients but they would also be understood by them. However, very few enterprises are predicted to employ equal numbers of Swedes and Danes, hence the average Dane or Swede would not necessarily feel the need for such an increased receptive competence. Given the fact that the public sector in Denmark might have to import more Swedes than vice versa, this might instead lead to pressure to develop an accommodated interlanguage variety on the part of, for example, Swedish nurses.

Scenario 4. Accommodation

For a Dane who wants to be understood by a Swede it makes sense to employ a strategy well known by anyone speaking to a foreigner: to speak slowly and somewhat more distinctly than usual. This is true because some of the sound changes that actually moved Danish away from Swedish are typical of fast speech. Lenition processes typically affect consonants, so that stops turn into fricatives, which in turn develop to glides, and eventually nothing. Such a process has for example led to pairs like Swedish *haka* ‘chin’, Danish *hage* [ha:] or Swedish *sak* ‘matter’, ‘case’ Danish *sag* [sa:]. Börestam (1996: 81) mentions that one of her Danish informants used the verb *bruge* ‘use’ and was misunderstood and thought to be saying *bo* ‘live (somewhere)’, pronounced in Swedish as [bu:]. She simply pronounced the Danish word the way most Danes do in ordinary casual speaking style, that is, [bru:]. There is nothing left after the vowel in modern Standard Danish pronunciations of this and other words structured like it. Obviously, there once was a velar stop, witness the written form. Now, turning a lenition process around might lead precisely to pronunciations that have a closer correspondence to orthography, and this could lead to better understanding. As demonstrated in the examples above, Danish

orthography is actually closer to the spoken Swedish standard. Much hinges on the possibility to retrieve word forms. Teleman (1987) suggests that Danes should concentrate on signalling word boundaries more clearly in order to make themselves understood by Swedes.

Another strategy might focus on the limited number of lexical items that have related but different meanings in Danish and Swedish. This area has been talked about a great deal since it easily lends itself to dictionary treatment, viz. lists of so-called false friends. Börestam (1996) took all of her conversations and focused on those instances of miscommunication where one of the interlocutors started repair work by asking about the meaning of a lexical item. In the 156 cases where repair was initiated by the Swedish participants, only four cases (3%) involved false friends. The lesson is either that the traditional focus on false friends has led to avoidance strategies or that they are a minor problem in face-to-face interaction anyway.

In a sense the result of this scenario depends on how you look at the two languages involved. If we take them to be separate languages, the result of the learning process is an interlanguage, unstable as any other interlanguage. If, however, we focus on the fact that the languages involved are related and thus placed at the ends of a dialect continuum, we might see the accommodation process as creating a new dialect, unstable as any other dialect until it is focused and connected to a publicly recognized and frequently publicized identity, such as that of a Swede working in Denmark.

Haastrup and Teleman (1978) studied what happened with the Swedish of the several university professors employed at the then new Danish university at Roskilde. Apparently, the burden was on the Swedes to make themselves understood. Importantly, they were immigrants to a neighboring country, most of them only temporarily, but they had to reach some kind of fixed interlanguage stage rather quickly in order for them not to spend too much effort inventing a new interlanguage each time they had to communicate. Most of them chose not to try to switch language completely, but they were apparently forced to accommodate. Certain words typical of life at the university (e.g. *vejleder* 'supervisor') had to be acquired as part of their Roskilde identity, and since these words were acquired on location they were Danish words. Obviously, if a Dane had been employed at Lund university he or she would have had to acquire the equivalent Swedish lexical items. Note that some of these terms were new by any standard, Danish or Swedish, because Roskilde was a new and experimenting university. One might speculate that the private nature of the accommodation process contributed precisely to the difficulties in establishing a possible interlanguage standard. Haastrup and Teleman (1978: 22) mention that one of the Swedish teachers at Roskilde University suppressed parts

of his native intonation patterns when speaking to Danes, but most of the respondents were aware only of lexical problems, and the typical interlanguage was consequently replete with Danish university words pronounced more or less perfectly within the rules of Swedish phonology. Interestingly, the Swedes mostly felt ill at ease talking this interlanguage, and Teleman (1987: 78) gives a very revealing quotation from one of the interviews reporting the relief felt by the Swedish professor once he could participate in a discussion *in his own language*. In short, the interlanguage was adopted as a “foreign” identity and consequently never integrated as a natural part of the Swedish teacher’s professional identity.

Conclusion

We have followed half a century of research on mutual intelligibility. Both Börestam’s results and preliminary results from two ongoing studies suggest that unacquainted persons from Denmark and Sweden in face-to-face encounters treat communication as problematic but possible. Where necessary they simplify and based on their knowledge of the neighboring language they try to forestall any expected misunderstanding. The necessity of doing so has apparently diminished over the years and will probably continue to do so with increased sustained contact. The end result may very well depend on whether the workplace is effectively bilingual, using both languages interchangeably as two dialects of the same language, or whether it will be necessary for the emigrant to adopt an interlanguage. It follows from the information given above on the composition of the labor force in the region that the second situation will be relevant mostly for Swedes coming to the Copenhagen area. Danes moving to Sweden in order to benefit from the lower expenses and taxation may, however, be in the same situation.

The conditions for any interlanguage to become a focused, more or less uniform, spoken variety of the region depend on which of a number of possible accommodation strategies win out. If a lexical strategy succeeds, attitudes on both sides of the Øresund may very well favor the use of this variety in a precisely delimited number of situations. The success further hinges on how the resulting variety becomes tied to a possible identity as a Swede in Denmark (or—less likely—vice versa), on how the variety becomes publicly known, and finally on what supporting societal circumstances may emerge in the shape of newspaper sections, advertisements, regional broadcasting, etc. This could create the basis for a *new Swedish regional variety to be used when speaking to Danes and audiences including*

Danes, but *not* for a common *Oresound* standard for all the inhabitants of the new region.

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