MEANS OF EXPRESSING NEGATIVE INTENSIFICATION IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: There are various means of expressing negative intensification, from the mere insertion of specific intensifiers to the more controversial instances of double and multiple negation. We aim at illustrating the combinatorial properties of the negation intensifiers, followed by the issue of using more than one negation in a sentence. We will distinguish between the use of double negation in standard English vs. nonstandard English, both in terms of grammatical status of (non)acceptability, as well as in point of its main semantic functions.
Key words: *intensification, negation, denial*

Briefly mentioned by some grammarians (Quirk, Greenbaum, 1973: 185), the emphatic negation has been discussed in detail by a number of other authors who described it in terms of *emotive intensification* by means of intonation (Eastwood, 1994: 19; Vlădoiu, 2005: 245), of *non-assertive expressions* (Collins, 2006:216-217; Croitoru, 2002: 225-229), of *idiomatic expressions* (Leech, 2006: 321; Givon, 1993:207), of *phrasal negation* (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972: 382) and of *restrictive and negative adverbs* placed in initial position, triggering inversion (Cornilescu, 1982: 28-29; Graver, 1997: 169; Alexander, 2005: 254; Gălăţeanu, 1998: 223).

Emphatic Denial

To begin with, negation becomes emphatic when the speaker chooses to place the stress on the *not* particle itself, as in: *You must understand that I did not go there last night.* (Vlădoiu, 2005:245) with the observation that in the case of contracted negation, it is the auxiliary the one which receives the stress: *You must understand that I didn't go there last night.*

Many grammarians speak about the usage of the *at all* intensifier in order to emphasize a negation. There have been pointed out three combinatorial properties of *at all*, as follows:

a) with any negative word: *I'm not at all busy at the moment. (* Leech, *op.cit.*: 321)
She had no writing ability at all. (Collins, *op.cit.*: 216)
There was nowhere at all to park. (Eastwood, *op.cit.*:19)

b) with the preposition *without**:** He did it without any help at all.* (Collins, *op.cit.*: 216)

c) with a so-called "broad negative of the type*: barely, hardly, scarcely, rarely, seldom: Jane was hardly scared at all. (* Vlădoiu 2005:245)

Informal alternatives to *at all* are *by any / no means* and *(not) a bit*, which function as non-assertive expressions of extent. They display a similar meaning with the intensifier ***at all*** and a wide range of usage.

The operation was not a success by any means. (Eastwood, 1994:19)
It is by no means certain that this is what he wanted. (Vlădoiu, 2005:245)
They're not a bit interested. (Collins, 2006:217)

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Ever is another intensifier used after negative words in order to emphasize the negative aspect of a sentence. For example, one may encounter: *No one ever takes any notice of these memos.* (Eastwood, 1994:19)

I can't say I ever had much interest in fishing. (Collins, 2006:216)

Its negative counterpart *never* brings about emphatic negation in the following situations:

a) when repeated: *I'll never, never go there again.* (Quirk, Greenbaum, 1973:185);

b) when associated with *ever: I'll never ever deal with his suppliers.* (Croitoru, 2002:228);

c) when combined with an intensifier phrase such as *in (all) his/ her life*, etc. *I've never in all my life seen such a crowd.* (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:387)

d) when followed by the so-called "emphatic *do*": *I never do see her now. They never did get their money back.* (Collins, 2006:211)

In as far as the negative determiners and pronouns are concerned, emphasis is given by the use of *whatever* and *whatsoever*, under the following conditions:

a) after *nothing* and *none: There's nothing whatsoever we can do about it.* (Eastwood, 1994:19)

There is absolutely no enjoyment in that, none whatsoever. (Collins, 2006:216)

b) after *no* used as determiner in a noun group: *You have no excuse whatsoever.*

(Quirk, Greenbaum, 1973:185)

The people seem to have no hope whatsoever. (Eastwood, 1994:19)

c) after *any* and his compounds: *He was devoid of any talent whatsoever. I knew I wasn't learning anything whatsoever.* (Collins, 2006:216).

In its determiner function, *no* is frequently used in spoken English to emphasize the negation and to express modality, as in: *There's no time to waste. I had no money on me.* (Croitoru, 2002:225)

An emphatic alternative to *no* as a countable determiner is the combination *not one / not a (single)*, with a corresponding emphatic denial effect.

Not a goal did their goalkeeper miss. (Gălăţeanu, 1998:223)

Not one bottle was left. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:378)

Not a single word could be said in such a situation. (Croitoru, 2002:228)

There is a number of expressions which can be used to emphasize a negative statement containing *not*. They include *in the least, in the slightest* and *a **bit*** and their usage depends on the nature of the part of speech they refer to. Thus, when used with verbs, they are placed immediately after the verb or after the object, if there is one.

I'm not a bit surprised that they refused the offer. (Leech, 2006:321)

She did not worry Billy in the least. (Collins, 2006:216)

On the other hand, when used with an adjective, the expression *in the least* precedes the respective adjective, as in: *The exercise is not in the least difficult.* (Vlădoiu, 2005:245), while *in the slightest* is to be placed usually after the adjective: *She wasn't worried in the slightest.*(Collins, 2006:217)

Emphatic negation can be achieved also by placing a phrase with *not* in front position. For example, the neutral negation from: *Jeff had not been back to the village since his childhood* (Eastwood, 1994:20) becomes an emphatic denial by change of normal word order, into: *Not since his childhood had Jeff been back to the village.*

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The resulting inversions governed by a set of three main rules pointed out by A. Cornilescu (1982:29), as follows:

1) the optional movement of the adverb in sentence initial position

One should on no account drink and drive.

On no account should one drink and drive. (Graver, 1997:169)

2) the incorporation of the negative in the adverb

Seldom has society offered so wide a range of leisure time activities.

Hardly had he settled into his seat when Adam charged in. (Collins, 2006:215)

3) the subject-auxiliary inversion

Never will I make that mistake again.

Not until yesterday did he change his mind. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:378)

The sentences which include such negative or restrictive adverbs as *never, seldom, rarely, hardly ever, scarcely ever* (in their frequency meaning) and *barely, hardly, scarcely* (equivalent to "only just") carry emphatic meaning also in their usual position in the sentence. Thus, a sentence which includes such a negative adverb: *We never see them nowadays* (Alexander, 2005:253) is more emphatic than *We don't see them nowadays* and less emphatic than *Never do we see them nowadays.*

A more comprehensive list of negative and restrictive constituents which trigger the subject-auxiliary inversion is provided by D. Biber (2000:915) and comprises such items as: *neither, nor, never, nowhere, on no condition, not only, hardly, no sooner, rarely, scarcely, seldom, little, less* and *only*. Eastwood, (1994:20) adds to these a number of phrases containing negative elements and bringing about inversion when placed in front position, such as *at no time, under no circumstances, only in…, no way.*

In general, the subject-auxiliary inversion after most initial negative/restrictive elements has a rhetorical effect and is mainly encountered in writing. Due to its prominent placement, there is an intensification of the force of the negative/restrictive element. However, the use of *no way* is informal and expresses strong negation, both in conversation:

No way am I going to let this happen. (Eastwood, 1994:20)

as well as in fiction:

And if the case went to trial, there wasn't a damn thing Katheryn could do to stop them. And no way could she get Sarah to understand that. (Biber, 2000:916)

Inversion occurs only if the negative restrictive adverb placed in initial position refers to the entire sentence. When the negation does not affect the whole of the clause, there is no inversion between the subject and the auxiliary. Grammarians treat these instances as:

a) phrasal negation: *Not five men survived the journey.* (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:382)

b) negative comment: *Not surprisingly, the Council rejected the suggestion.* (Collins, 1992:441)

There are cases when the same adverbial form is found in normal word order as well as triggering inversion. For example, *rarely* is followed by subject-auxiliary inversion in most cases when placed in initial position: *Rarely did the church bells in our village ring out for something like a wedding.* (Foley, Hall 2006:91)

The same ***rarely*** can be used in front position meaning "occasionally, sometimes" rather than "not very often" and without requiring an inversion.

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In the winter, sometimes, rarely, you can hear the thunder of a siren but it is another country. (Biber, 2000:916)

with the following comma indicating a looser connection with the rest of the sentence.

When dwelling on the various degrees of emphasis which may be encountered with the English negation, T. Givon (1993:206) suggests that there is a continuum of negation patterns between clausal negation and sub-clausal negation, which allows for a graded escalation of emphatic denial. In his view, comparisons between the various possible patterns with a non-human direct object **(A.)** and those with a human direct object **(B.)** point out a natural gradation.

A. *The woman didn't read the book.*
The woman didn't read any book.
The woman didn't read anything.
The woman read no book.
The woman read nothing.

B. *She didn't see the boy.*
She didn't see any boy.
She didn't see anybody.
She saw no boy.
She saw no one.

Emphatic negation in English can be also achieved by means of idiomatic expressions, specific to the informal and familiar register of the language. Such emotively charged expressions include, among others, the following ones:

I didn't sleep a wink.

I don't care a damn whether we win or lose. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:378)

She wouldn't give me a thing whenever I asked for something.

I don't care a fig about what's going to happen. (Croitoru, 2002:229)

Double Negation

There is little consensus of opinion among grammarians in as far as the issue of double negation is concerned. However, the majority of them distinguish between double negation in standard English, on the one hand, and double negation in nonstandard English on the other hand (Eastwood, 1994:19; Davidson, 1998:80-81; Huddleston, Pullum, 2005:156; Gălăţeanu, 1998:220; Vlădoiu, 2005:250). According to them, in standard English a double negative is used with a positive meaning, while in nonstandard English it functions as a single negative.

Thus, the double negative from the sentence: *I didn't see no one.* (Eastwood, 1994:19) may be interpreted either as a nonstandard English construction in which a negative word is used instead of a non-assertive form after a negation, with the meaning "I didn't see anyone / I saw no one", or as a standard English structure in which both negations carry their full meaning and render the sentence positive: "I saw someone".

The construction with two negative words which together are equivalent to a single negative is considered not acceptable in modern standard English and prescriptive grammar books (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:379; Bădescu, 1984:618; Leviţchi 2006:198) insist that it should be avoided in all formal speech and writing. However, such double negatives are common in nonstandard and dialectal English:

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Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it. But I never said so, because it would only make trouble, and wouldn't do no good. (Twain, Huckleberry Finn)

In standard English, the equivalents of the underlined phrases would be "couldn't see any advantage" and "wouldn't do any good".

When more than one negative occurs in a sentence in standard English, each negator keeps its separate value, leaving the entire construction positive. A cursory study of several grammar books which considered the topic of double negation in English enables one to identify an extensive number of cases in which two negations legitimately co-occur in the standard register of the language.

Firstly, a double negative can be used to express an affirmative with the observation that this usage is rather infrequent or sometimes heard in joking. *Nobody did nothing.* (=Everybody did something.) (Alexander, 2005:254)

I don't want no fun. (=I want fun.) (Vereş, 1998:133)

More than one negative is accepted also when there is coordination between two or more clauses.

I've never had and never wanted a television set. (Alexander, 2005:254)

I saw neither Kim not Pat. (Huddleston, Pullum, 2005:156)

When they belong to different clauses, two or more negations are also possible, such as in:

I can never get in touch with Thomas, as he has no telephone. (Alexander, 2005:254)

I didn't tell him not to phone. (Gălăţeanu, 1998:220)

Furthermore, two negations can occur in the same sentence when they do not apply to the same verb.

We can't not go. (=We can't avoid going.) (Alexander, 2005:254)

I can't not obey. (=I have to obey.) (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:379)

Double negation is found in standard English also in imperatives with both negative words keeping their full meaning. *Don't just say nothing. Tell us what the problem is.* (Swan, 1997:357)

Opinions diverge in as far as the acceptability of double negative constructions in statements of surprise or wonder is concerned. For example, the meaning of the following sentence: *I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't rain.* (Eastwood, 1994:19) is that the speaker expects it will rain. The construction arises from confusion between two similar patterns, each containing a single negative word: *I wouldn't be surprised if it rained.*

I would be surprised if it didn't rain.

In informal standard spoken English, an extra negative can be used sometimes after expressions of doubt and uncertainty. The negative verb is devoid of negative meaning, such as in: *I shouldn't be surprised if they didn't get married soon.* (=…if they got married soon) (Swan, 1997:357)

I wonder whether I ought not to go and see a doctor, I'm feeling a bit funny. (=…whether I ought to…) (Vlădoiu, 2005:251)

In informal speech, expressions like "I don't think" or "I don't suppose" often follow negative statements. These extra negatives attached make no difference to the meaning of the sentence.

We won't be back before midnight, I don't suppose. (Swan 1997:357)

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She hasn't got much chance of passing her exam, I don't think. (Vlădoiu, 2005:251)

There are also other colloquial standard English constructions in which the negation is marked twice. For example, *"Pick up some cement? Not in my car you won't!"*
(Huddleston, Pullum, 2005:156) means "You won't pick up cement in my car", but it expresses the negation twice. In spite of the fact that it is informal in style, this construction is not nonstandard and discharges emphatic character.

When a standard English sentence contains more than one negation, by definition these negations cancel each other out and the resulting construction is either

a) an entirely positive sentence:

Not many people have nowhere to live. (=Most people have somewhere to live.)

No one has nothing to offer to society. (=Everyone has something to offer to society.) (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:379) or an emphatic negation:

At no season of the year was there not at least one flower in a vase.

And don't none of you never come back no more. (Bădescu, 1984:619-620)

Negative sentences including words such as *hardly, scarcely* and *without* require particular attention. They make up a sort of double negative construction somewhat more difficult to trace.

He hadn't scarcely a penny in the bank. (=He had scarcely a penny in the bank.)

I don't believe hardly anything he tells me.(=I believe hardly anything he tells me.) (G. Davidson 1998:81)

In contemporary English, there are two main functions of the double negative construction (Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 2002:276):

A. *as an emphatic negative;*

B. *as an unemphatic positive.*

A. The use of two or even more than two negations in order to emphasize or reinforce the negative idea of a sentence dates back to Old English (Iarovici, 1973:76) and was common in Shakespeare's time:

"That cannot be so neither." (The Two Gentlemen of Verona)

"Yet, 'twas not a crown neither" (Julius Caesar)

"And that no woman has; nor never none
Shall mistress be of it." (Twelfth Night)

"Nor take no shape nor project of affection." (Much Ado About Nothing)

Due to the fact that old forms persist the longest among the least educated, the double negative became generally associated with the speech of the unlettered and, consequently, attributed to similar characters in fiction: *"(…) and then there warn't no raft in sight."* (Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn)

"I won't have nothing to do with those people', Houdini told his manager.' (Doctorow, Ragtime)

Nevertheless, double negation still occurs in the casual speech and writing of better educated and more sophisticated people.

"There's one more volume which I hope will be the last but I haven't no assurance that it will be." (William Faulkner in Faulkner in the University, 1959)

"You can't do nothing with nobody that doesn't want to win." (Robert Frost, letter, 20 Sept. 1962)

T. Givon (1993:207) makes the observation that hybrid emphatic negation forms close in spirit to the double negation are still to be encountered even in more

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standard usage. He quotes such instances of double negation, commonly found in the spoken register, as:

I didn't see nothing.
I didn't love nobody.
I didn't go nowhere.
I don't never drink.

And argues that they represent the colloquial equivalents of emphatic negation from the written register:

I didn't see anything.
I didn't love anybody.
I didn't go anywhere.
I don't ever drink.

The combination of these two types of constructions has given rise to such constructions as:

She saw nothing, not a thing.
She loves nobody, not a soul.
She didn't eat a thing.
She doesn't love a soul.

B. The second main function of the English double negation is the opposite of emphasizing. As a weak affirmative, the double negative acts as a rhetorical device (i.e. litotes) and is meant as an understatement (T. van der Woulden 1997:215), the double negated expression being somewhat milder than the straightforward positive one.

"Fanny looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all." (Jane Austen, Mansfield Park)

"I do not pretend to be a "pure" bachelor, I was married for five years, and it was, to use a cowardly double negative, ***not*** *an* ***un****happy experience."* (Philip Lopate, Bachelorhood)

"(…) had what Opera News ***not un****fairly called "the kind of performance that gives the composer a bad reputation"* (Andrew Porter, *New Yorker*, July 1985).

This kind of double negation tends to convey one of the three associated meanings identified by L. Horn (1989:306), namely:

a) to indicate *uncertainty***:**
It is not unlikely that they could change again. (Collins, 1992:440)
b) to signal *diffidence***:**
I was not disinclined to go. (Davidson, 1998:81)
c) to express *irony***:**
It is not unwise to take precautions. (T. van der Woulden, 1997:217)

As a final remark, one must note the fact that the proper negation pattern of contemporary written English originates in the earlier pattern of emphatic double negation in Old English. This gradual transition involved two consecutive series of de-emphasizing an emphatic negation pattern (Iarovici, 1973:138), as follows:

1) emphatic verbal phrase negation
I ne see ne-ought (ought="thing") ("I don't see no-thing")
2) emphatic noun phrase negation
I see nought (ne-ought="nothing") ("I see nothing")
3) de-emphasized verbal phrase negation
I see not (=I don't see")
4) new emphatic verbal phrase negation
I do not see (introduction of the auxiliary "do") (=I do not see!")

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5) de-emphasized verbal phrase negation
I don't see (contraction).

The introduction of the auxiliary "do" initially signaled a new cycle of emphatic negation. It was later on that this pattern de-emphasized and assumed the current status of standard negation. The former emphatic use of "do" still survives in the affirmative.

Multiple Negation

The possibility of two or more negative forms to occur in the same clause has determined grammarians to speak about "double" and respectively "multiple" negation in English. The latter situation has been discussed by several grammarians (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:379; Swan, 1997:357; Biber, 2000:177-179) whose approaches are similar in point of definition and illustration.

Despite the somewhat simplified rule according to which it is not possible to have two negations in the same sentence, it is however possible to encounter subclausal instances of negation within a negative sentence. This occurrence does not render the utterance ungrammatical and proves once more that negation in English is a rather flexible pattern. Therefore, it is possible to have a lexical with a phrasal negation, as well as a phrasal or lexical negative within a negative sentence.

Unable not to go on, she was then confronted with the necessity of accomplishing a series of initially impossible tasks.

(National Football League cornerback) Darrien Gordon said, "The one thing you don't want to feel is not respected". (M. Celce, D. Larsen, 1999:194)

Most grammarians agree that it is only in nonstandard English that double or multiple negations can be used. This particular variety of the language allows for more than one negative to be employed, with the meaning of a single negative. More precisely, such constructions are possible due to the fact that nonstandard English permits the usage of a negative word wherever standard English would require a non-assertive form after a negative. For example, what the standard register of the language accepts as

He was surprised that no one ever asked anything about anybody.

is to be met in the nonstandard variety of the language under the form of multiple negation:

It surprised him that no one never asked nothing about nobody. (Croitoru, 2002:229)

In D. Biber's opinion, the multiple negation in English can be divided into two basically different types, as follows:

A. *dependent multiple negation*, in which the co-occurring negative forms express a single negative meaning;
B. *independent multiple negation*, in which the negative forms have independent negative force.

Within dependent multiple negation two or more negative forms may co-occur in the same clause and convey the effect of a single negation. Although usually stigmatized, this represents a pattern frequently found in casual speech:

You've never seen nothing like it.
There ain't nothing we can do. (Biber, 2000:178)
No one never said nothing. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1972:379)

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In the above examples, negative forms are employed where non-assertive forms would occur in writing and careful speech:

You've never seen anything like it

There isn't anything we can do.

No one ever said anything.

The dependent multiple negation appears to have a strengthening effect due to the repetition of the negative forms. However, such multiple negatives are sometimes used instead of simple positive structures for special stylistic effects. This usage is rather literary and seems unnatural or old fashioned in spoken English.

Not a day passes when I don't regret not having studied music in my youth. (Swan, 1997:357)

The same sentence would seem more neutral when rephrased as *Everyday I regret not having studied music when I was younger.*
or as *I wish I had studied music when I was younger.*

On the other hand, multiple negations with a strengthening effect are rather rare and generally restricted to conversation and fictional dialogue.

And now they just don't know what to do, there's no jobs, there's no nothing.

But without that heater they've no hot water, no nothing! (Biber, 2000:178)

In such instances, *no nothing* stands for the standard neutral in register *not anything*. Although this pattern of negation is very old, its present day distribution is limited as a result of the prescriptive grammar influence.

It is to be noted that a special type of dependent multiple negation occurs in the case of *no* and *not* repetition, accepted in the more educated usage of English. This type of negation appears mainly in conversation, but is to be met extensively also in fiction.

"No, no, don't worry dear."

"No, I suppose not." (Graham Greene, The Human Factor)

"Can I speak to Peter Holmes?"

"Not here, you can't."(Biber, *ibidem*)

In these examples, the most prominent positions in the clause are marked by negation, namely the beginning and the end. The placing of a negative element in initial position emphasizes the negation, with the observation that the respective fronting negative element lies within the scope of negation of the verbal phrase negating constituent.

When two or more negative forms co-occur in cases of repetition or reformulation, they do not belong to the same clause. Since none of them can be replaced by non-assertive forms, these negative forms are independent and this type of multiple negation can be labeled as "independent multiple negation".

No, not tomorrow, she said.

There's no one to blame, not really. (Biber, *op.cit.*:179)

I ain't never done nothing to nobody, and I ain't never got nothing from nobody no time. (Swan, 1997:357)

Not can be found in repetitions within the same clause, each negator carrying its own negative force. Examples of such repeated occurrences of *not* illustrate the rule according to which two negatives can make a positive meaning.

Oh, well you sleep on sherry though-it makes you sleepy, you can't not sleep.

As it did turn out, I never did not smoke in the end. I lit a cigarette and kept them coming. The frizzy-rugged beaner at the wheel shouted something and threw himself around for a while, but I kept on not not smoking quietly in the back, and nothing happened. (Biber, *ibidem*)

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Independent multiple negation is to be found also in academic speech, despite the general opinion that it can only appear in the nonstandard variety of English. Such cases of usage are illustrated in:

No rival is too small to be overlooked, no device is too infamous not to be practiced.(Fowler, 1994:875)

Do we not in fact have no decent idea of a set of things if we have no settled rule as to counting them, whether or not we are able to act effectively on the rule? (Biber, 2000:179)

It is noteworthy to mention the fact that both dependent and independent multiple negation may appear within the same clause. D. Biber (2000:179) interprets the following example: *They don't do nothing for nothing* as an illustration of this possible combination. Thus, the first occurrence of *nothing* stands for a non-assertive form, whereas the second has independent negative force. The whole sentence can be restated as: *They don't do anything for nothing.*

As a final remark, the distribution of the two different types of multiple negation is a matter of register appropriacy. While dependent multiple negation is characteristic of and restricted to conversation, independent multiple negation is a complex choice which supposes deliberate planning. Nevertheless, dependent multiple negation can be found particularly in writing. Moreover, unlike the dependent variety, independent multiple negation is not stigmatized and its usage is not necessarily restricted to any of the spoken or written registers of English.

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