



## An Investigation into the Socio-Cultural Factors Causing EFL Classroom Speaking Anxiety at the Selected Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan

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### Abstract

In Pakistan, language anxiety research is mostly focused on psychological, personal or classroom related factors that may cause language anxiety, thus neglecting socio-cultural and contextual factors that may enhance Foreign Language Classroom Speaking Anxiety (FLCSA). It presupposes that the immediate sociocultural surroundings of students regarding FLA have received very little consideration to this point (Lo, 2017). Therefore, this study aims to address the research gap by investigating the sociocultural factors causing EFL classroom speaking anxiety at university level in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. To achieve the objective, this study utilizes a mixed method approach by following an Explanatory Sequential Research Design. Consequently, a questionnaire based on FLCA scale, (Horwitz et. al. 1986) was administered among 140 participants in two major public sector universities of KP, Pakistan. Based on the statistics obtained from the questionnaires, a total of 10 participants who had comparatively higher mean values at FLCSA scale were selected for semi-structured interviews. The quantitative data were analysed through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), while semi structured interviews were analysed through Qualitative Content Analysis. The findings of the study suggest a variety of sociocultural-related causes of SA that stem from geographical and educational divide in Pakistan. In addition, this study also pinpoints certain other social factors and their relation to learners' SA including parents-child rearing practices, parental attitude and their social background. Likely, social construction of gender, identity related issues and factors related to social capital were also identified. This study is hoped to serve as an index for future FLA research in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Speaking Anxiety (SA), Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Foreign Language Classroom Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLCSA), ELT research (English language teaching)

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

There are reasons to believe that English is playing a global role in today's multilingual world. It has not only gained the position of a lingua franca of the world but also acquired an immense importance over time in every walk of our lives (Nishanthi, 2018). Learning English has become imperative for those who want to achieve academic and professional success. (Dutta, 2020). Considering the status of English in Pakistan, it is regarded as "the language for development at both the individual and national levels." (Shamim, 2011, p. 293). Many researchers in Pakistan consider English language proficiency essential for seeking better job opportunities thus hailing it as an urgent public requirement. (Amna et al. 2018)

Despite all the efforts and motivation for English language learning, most of the Pakistani university students are found less proficient in English. (Shahbaz, 2012). Among all other factors, foreign language anxiety is one of the potential causes of impeding successful English language learning. (Samad et al. 2021).

Anxiety in the context of foreign language has been defined by MacIntyre (1998) as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 27). In simple words. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) refers to the state of apprehension, un-easiness and nervousness while interacting in foreign language. In addition, the concept of FLA has widely been explored in classroom context known as Foreign Language Classroom anxiety (FLCA) as defined by Horwitz, et al. (1991) as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 31).

Among the language skills, it is believed that speaking generates most of the language related anxieties. (Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert, 1999). Therefore, this proposed study takes into account foreign language speaking anxiety in Pakistani EFL context.

### 1.2. Statement of the Problem

In Pakistan, language anxiety research is mostly focused on psychological, personal or classroom related factors that may cause language anxiety, thus neglecting socio-cultural and contextual factors that may cause FLA. It is assumed that social aspects of L2 anxiety are under-represented and under-theorized in FLA research. There lies a strong evidence that sociocultural factors can cause FLA and can affect various levels of anxiety experienced by EFL learners. (Lo, 2017). Therefore, this study takes into account sociocultural factors as a potential cause provoking FLA.

### 1.3. Rationale of the Research Work

Numerous researchers have conducted studies on FLA and FLA in Pakistani EFL context i.e. Awan et.al (2010), Adeel, (2011), Samad,(2014), Gopang et.al,(2017), Amna et.al, (2018), but primarily its focus remained on personal or classroom related factors that may cause language anxiety, consequently impeding target language achievement. Therefore, this study could be of a significant importance in Pakistan since there is a lack of research in this area. This study seems to be the first study to explore socio-cultural factors as a potential cause of enhancing FLA.

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Moreover, this study is aligned with the recent trends in the field of language anxiety as new trends have emerged in the domain of FLA with the passage of time. The trends have shifted from learners' psychological traits influencing FLA, into socio-cultural and contextual factors that can affect the level of anxiety which a learner may experience. (Lo, 2017). Hence, this research paper would possibly be a maiden effort to investigate socio-cultural factors, in the context of KP, as a cause provoking EFL classroom speaking anxiety at university level in Pakistan.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Foreign Language Learning Anxiety

Literature in general psychology has linked anxiety to many types of learning, thus the language acquisition process, which is strongly influenced by affective filters, may not be an exception. Long-standing interest in the association between anxiety and foreign language learning has led to the coinage of the term 'Foreign Language Anxiety' (FLA). MacIntyre (1998) defines anxiety in the context of foreign language learning as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 27). FLA as a multidimensional and complex phenomenon has been defined as "the subjective feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning" (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1993, p. 284). FLA was first treated as separate subject from general psychology by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), who coined the definition of FLA, as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p.127).

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is, in plain terms, the state of discomfort and nervousness when communicating in a foreign language. Many language learners, according to Horwitz (2017), suffer from anxiety when engaging in a foreign language. According to Aydin (2016), most language students exhibit significant levels of FLA in class. Therefore, he suggested that teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) be cautious about their methods of instruction and find ways to simplify their language pedagogy in order to reduce their students' anxiety levels.

### 2.2. Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

Horwitz et al. (1986) also made a significant contribution to the field of applied linguistics research by designing a Scale to measure the anxiety of language learners regarding "communication apprehension (CA), fear of negative evaluation (FNE), and test anxiety (TA)". (Horwitz, 2010, p.2) This 33-item scale is commonly known as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). This construct illustrates that communication anxiety (CA), fear of negative evaluation (FNE), and test anxiety (TA) are "useful conceptual building blocks for describing foreign language anxiety" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.128). Following are the specifics of every construct.

### 2.3. Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA)

In today's language classrooms, students are primarily focused on improving their productive ability, i.e. speaking. During classroom activities, students are required to speak with their peers or present themselves in the target language. As a result, students appear to be more immersed in oral activities designed to improve their performance in the target language. Such tasks appear difficult, particularly for inexperienced students, and may occasionally result in provoking anxiety. (Tanveer, 2007)

Speaking English as a TL causes the most anxiety for EFL students, which they would avoid if they could, according to the majority of their assessments. This assertion is also consistent with the belief that, among other language abilities, speaking creates the most of classroom anxiety. (Horwitz et al. 1986; Samad 2014; Milan, 2019).

To argue, it is asserted that speaking activities requiring oral performance in front of the entire class induce anxiety, worry, and unease.

### 2.4. New Trends / Paradigm Shift in FLA Research

Recently, new trends have emerged in the research field of FLA. The trends have shifted from learners psychological traits influencing FLA, into social and contextual factors that can affect the level of anxiety which a learner may experience. (Lo, 2017).

Lo, (2017), while investigating "Effects of Social Context on Foreign Language Anxiety among University English Learners in Hong Kong." confirmed that sufficient evidence were found that showed how socio-cultural factors, among other factors, might lead to students' speaking anxiety in EFL context. He further suggested that there was a need for thorough investigation to analyze the influence of socio-cultural context at many levels in a variety of contexts.

Furthermore, Dewaele et al. (2008), while analyzing the effect of social factors on FLA among multilingual speakers found theorized, "higher levels of anxiety could be linked to such social factors as inadequate socialization in the target language and a small network of interlocutors." (Cited in Lu, 2017) Samad (2014), also urged the need to investigate socio-cultural factors that arouse EFL anxiety thus impeding successful language learning.

In addition, Amiri and Putesh (2018) highlighted a handful of characteristics that contribute to SA while conducting study on doctoral candidates in Malaysian universities. During the yearly academic presentation event, they gathered their research data through observations and interviews. They discovered a strong correlation between learner SA and socioeconomic status.

## 3. Research Methodology of the Study

This study utilized a mixed method approach as it aims to explore, find out and analyze the possible role of socio-cultural factors causing SA amongst Pakistani EFL university learners. Keeping into account the nature of the research questions, mixed methods are being utilized, as using mixed methods in the area of social sciences in general and

applied linguistics in particular is preferred by many researchers in the field (e.g. Dornyei, 2007; Creswell, 2015). Likely, the ontological view of this study is relativist, which implies that realities are subjective and depend upon individuals as how they perceive it. According to relativist approach, “realities are social construction of the mind and there exist as many constructions as there are individuals” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.43). In line with this view, the research paradigm is interpretive as conclusions are drawn on the basis of the responses obtained from the sample. This proposed study was conducted in 2 major public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Data collection follows an explanatory sequential design, in which, “the quantitative data are collected first; the collection of qualitative data follows, generally with the purpose of explaining the result or a particular part of the findings in more depth” (Creswell, 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015 p. 47). Hence, first, a questionnaire based on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Hurwitz et al. 1986) was administered randomly among the study population to identify the potential participants. The sample of the questionnaire consists of 140 students (70 each institution). Consequently, on the basis of the statistics obtained from the questionnaire, a total of 10 students; those who had a relatively higher mean values at FLCSA scale, were then selected for semi structured interviews to carry out in-depth investigation of the problem.

Data obtained through questionnaires were coded through SPSS (statistical package for social sciences) to find out relative mean values. Likewise, interviews were recorded and then transcribed for exploratory content analysis.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. Findings of the Quantitative Data

The objective of the numerical data was to identify potential participants with higher FLCAS mean values in order to choose them for interviews. The following table identifies the appropriate participants required for interviews based on their higher mean values, as determined by the quantitative data analysis-derived statistics.

**Table 1: Mean values of the responses of the participants selected for interviews**

Sr. no	Code names of the participants	Mean value
1	Participant A	4.16
2	Participant B	4.11
3	Participant C	4.11
4	Participant D	4.11
5	Participant E	4.11
6	Participant F	4.11
7	Participant G	4.11
8	Participant H	4.05
9	Participant I	3.94
10	Participant J	3.94

##### 4.2. Findings of the Qualitative Data

A qualitative content analysis of the interviews with EFL learners revealed many recurring categories, some already reported in previous literature that may be classified as the study's themes. However, new subcategories and themes emerge as the analysis continues. Following sections of the current chapter pinpoints the related findings in correspond to the framed research question.

###### 4.2.1. Geographical Divide and SA

Pakistan is geographically cum socially divided into rural and urban areas, with rural population constituting 62.83 percent and urban population accounts for 37.17 percent of the total population of Pakistan. (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Generally, a great divide could be seen in the performance of the EFL learners carrying rural background as compared to the learners exhibiting urban background. In the current study, participants carrying rural background were found more anxious than their urban counterparts. Some students reveal during their interviews that due to lack of educational resources, facilities and inadequate English language training in their respective villages, they often feel hesitant to speak in English during their classes.

Participant B, hailing from rural background commented: *“My family belong to a small village. Where, basics needs like access to quality water, health and alike are hard to find. And here we are talking about access to quality English education.”*

*“As far as my university experience is concerned, I came here straight away from my village. In my very first semester, I could barely speak a single sentence in English confidently ... B*

To second, Islam (2013) argues that majority of Pakistan's rural areas lack access to quality English education, such as competent instructors, decent institutes, viable classroom facilities, and English language centers. Cities, on the other hand, provide excellent prospects and opportunities to affordable and quality English education.

###### 4.2.2. Class Based Educational Divide in Pakistan and Its Impact on Learners' SA

Vandal (2004) found two variations in medium of instruction in Pakistan, based on social dichotomy and class structure, which is Urdu and English. Most of the government run educational institutes in Pakistan use Urdu at primary and secondary level, as a medium of instruction, to have a better understanding of a particular subject.

Regarding EFL learners' pre-university education, data shows that those university students who had previously studied in government Urdu medium schools can't perform well during oral exercises as they believe; Interviewee E *"My foundation is very weak, because I came from the Urdu-Medium background"* As a result, students struggle in their university class, especially when they are asked to participate in activities that require speech production. In addition, EFL learners also experience high levels of stress which consequently generates SA.

The participants expressed this fear during their interviews. For example, the following excerpts from the interviewee A reads;

*"Back in secondary school, our teacher's medium of instruction was Urdu. Sometimes, she would switch to Pashto as well. We were hardly involve in any oral activities that would involve speaking in English."*

*"This haunted me in multiple ways later when I chosen to study BS in English ..."* A

*"I wish I had gone to an English-medium school to study English."* (C)

To sum up, it could be concluded that those EFL learners that hail from an English medium background were found less anxious as compared to those who got their early education from government based urdu-medium institutes. Most probably, English-medium institutions in Pakistan provide more options for English study than Urdu-medium ones (Shamim, 2008). Similarly, Islam's (2013) argues that Urdu-medium institutes do not give any proper English education, and as a result, their pupils are generally weak in English. (Cited in Samad et al. 2021)

#### 4.2.3. Child Rearing Practices / Parental Role and Learners' SA

In Pakistani society these exists a culture of child dependency over their parents. Participants shared interesting data when asked if their parental attitude (permissiveness), social status, occupation, expectations, parent-child relations, and family structure and size have any impact over EFL learners' linguistic development. The focus of the questions asked in this regard remain to know whether these specific socio-cultural relationships had any significant deliberating or facilitating role in either producing or reducing SA during EFL classrooms.

Data reveal that the relationship between parents and children has a significant impact over the students' acquisition of language. Consider;

*"It has always been difficult for my father to give equal attention to all his children. He always kept us at certain distance.... This indulged in me a sense of alienation and lack of self-confidence."* (Interviewee F)

According to some participants, their English speaking abilities were not up to the mark because their parents were not aware of the importance of English in today's world.

*"My father is religious man ... Once I had a discussion with my father regarding a sensitive religious issue. After hearing my arguments he called my BS English degree into question and termed it, if I may quote in Pashto, 'de lard mechauley degree' {the degree of Lord McCauley}*

*"... Tell me how such naming and attitude could bring fruitful results and can enhance my skills in English. My father attitude toward my English education can sometimes make me hung between the devil and the Dead Sea ..."* (G)

Thus, the role of parents were found to be of prime significance as either encouraging or discouraging factor in enhancing speaking skills of EFL learners.

On the other hand, consider the statement from an interviewee;

*"My whole family is highly educated. Two of my elder sisters are doctors. My father is serving in a reputed government organization. He is a gifted man. Our father always encourages us to learn new things. He is an inspiration for us."*

When asked how all this helped her to develop acumen for English language and lower her stress levels when participating in oral activities during her class. She replied,

*"Well, honestly, when you have a supportive and well educated family, half of your worries are already gone. Second, my father and elder sisters always motivate me to speak English language even at home which always had a positive role in enhancing my English speaking skills during class"* (D)

The above statements demonstrates that intellectually and socially well-equipped households place a high value on their children's English language learning, especially speaking.

According to the interviews, learners' language learning and speaking skills are influenced by their parents' occupation.

Interviewee E: *"My father is a driver. We can hardly meet day to day expensive. We have always lived hand to mouth. How could someone expect that he could have sent us to good schools?"*

Thus, It's possible that, due to their occupation, the parents aren't privileged enough to send their children to prestigious English schools during their early education which has resulted in their poor oral performance in English during university classes.

It is noteworthy that parents' over-involvement in students learning activities and expectations of them can also make English language learners anxious. It is previously reported that parents' expectations of their children's, achievement can exert pressure on them. This can either result in making students' performance better as they become conscious of their learning process better or such expectations may result in frustration and SA, especially when learners do not perform well.

*"My father is very much impressed by and proud my elder brother who has done MPhil in English from XYZ University. Abu keep pushing me to following the footsteps of my brother if I want to be successful. Hence, my father's expectations of me sometimes make me stressful as what would he think of me if I did not fulfil his expectations"*

To sum up, one may argue, on the basis of the above mentioned findings, that parents-children relations, parents' attitude towards child educational achievements, parental education, their occupation and expectations of children

achievement can play a significant role in either accelerating or reducing SA of EFL learners. However, it is cautioned that these findings are particular to Pakistani context where children are dependent on parents for their survival. Other contexts might pour different results.

#### 4.2.4. Identity Related Issues and Learners' SA

Identity is an important social factor. According to Schmitt (2010), most of the people often show awareness to "their personal, ethnic, political, religious and family identities and this is often a factor in their language use". (p.151) likely, people pledge their loyalty to their family or to a particular social group or organization. Such loyalties can be seen in their linguistic patterns and usage. Moreover, these identity related issues can disrupt learners acquisition of a certain language by creating psychological barriers i.e. anxiety etc. that could hinder successful learning of a certain language.

Following, the current data reveal mixed results regarding these identity related barriers in causing EFL speaking anxieties. The themes that emerged during the interviews include religious and national identities.

1 out of 10 students perceived English as threat to his religious identity. Interviewee I expressed his views in the following words.

*"English is the language of non-Muslims. Learning a language means acquiring culture of those who speak that language."*

When inquired how this interact with SA, he commented, *"Whenever I am asked to speak in English I feel frustrated because I believe that English is still a colonial and imperialist language. It's all in mind. My mind does not accept the superiority of English language. Therefore, even whenever I am asked to present myself in English, my mind struck."* (I)

2 out of 10 students describe English as a threat to their national identity;

The interviewee I reflects his strong views about the impact of English language over his national identity; he stated, *"This English mentality is totally erasing our own national identity by killing our history and cultural and religious norms."* (I)

On the other hand 8 out of 10 students consider English not as threat to religious and national identities but as an important global language that has got a status of a lingua franca. In their views, the international status and role of English could be used as a tool by university teachers to lower the SA of the students.

*"...I think English is a progressive language, it has nothing to do with your identity...you are what you are."* (Participant H)

In a nutshell, it was noted that most of the participants deny the old-school view of English language as threat to their personal, religious or national identities. Rather they pose an overall liberal and open minded view of English language that could be used as a tool to convey their religious and national identities to the world in an acceptable manner. Furthermore they also asserted that the global status of English language could be utilized outside the classrooms to secure national and religious interests.

#### 4.2.5. The Notion of 'Gender' In EFL Classrooms and Its Contribution to SA

Men and women in Pakistani society are rarely seen sitting together in an educational context. According to the findings of this study, mixed-gender classrooms might cause stress and uneasiness in some pupils.

Following response from an interviewee B shows how SA operates in mixed-gendered classrooms.

*"I feel a lot of stress when presenting myself in a class where females are present. The flow of words from my mouth stop."*

When asked about the reason(s), another participant E seems to agree and adds; *"I feel uncomfortable speaking in front of my female classmates ... probably, we have never studied in mixed gendered classes before. I came to the university straight away from a boys' college."*

Interviewee G also shed light on the same concern; *"When speaking with female students I can literally hear the beats of my hearts."*

Similarly, a careful analysis of the data reveal that female students have the same feelings of stress and anxiety when speaking in front of their male classmates. Interviewee A responded in the following words.

*"It is my first time studying with boys. Back in the village, I used to study in a school where only females were present. I have also got my F.Sc certificate from a government girl's college..."*

#### 4.2.6. SA and Socio-Economic Deprivation

Data analysis reveal that students from superior socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to achieve academic success and may enroll themselves in elite universities as compared to their relatively low income counterparts. As can be seen by general observation, people with good salaries can afford to pay for their own and their children's education. Arikian (2011)

Data analysis suggests that the socioeconomic status of learners' parents can impact their children's language proficiency and speaking abilities. The parents may not be wealthy enough to send their children to expensive English institutions during their early education. Hence, the children may not be as proficient in English as their foundation may remain weak. Therefore, it may be difficult for them to succeed in speaking activities at university.

These assumptions can be elicited from the comments of Interviewee B;

*"My father is a laborer, he could barely arrange food for us ... he did not have time to think about our education. We were sent to a government school where there were two teachers to attend five classes. Just like our father, our teacher never cared about our English education, or education at all."*

While commenting on the elite schools he said; *“Some people have lots of money therefore they get the opportunity to study in good schools and are very fluent in English.”* (B)

When inquired as how economic status could interact with SA during the class, he added;

*“It is self-evident that if you have studied at an outstanding institution that places a high value on your English language development, you will be confident and worry-free...”* (B)

*“{recalling upon a personal experience} once my instructor asked me to do a presentation, which I immediately refused to deliver because I was wearing plastic chapels that day and was embarrassed to speak in front of my classmates ...”* (B)

A recent study by Arikan (2011) shows that students from privileged backgrounds outperform their lower-income counterparts academically and are more likely to attend good institutions. People that make a lot of money are able to pay for their own and their children's education. Arikan (2011) found that socioeconomic class, housing, and access to resources have a significant impact on the development of values as much as academic accomplishment.

## 5. Study Implications

There are clear theoretical, pedagogical and research implications to be drawn from this study. To enhance language teaching-learning process, ELT teachers need to adopt such teaching strategies and teaching attitudes that can result in creating low anxiety, enhance high motivation and enable the learners to participate productively in oral activities. Therefore, the current study may provide an insight to English language teachers to enhance their EFL learners' speaking skills by creating comfortable, facilitating, learner-centered, low anxiety, and culturally sensitive classroom environment. Similarly, ELT teachers might, unintentionally, be adopting such oral activities that may perceive by learners as culturally sensitive thus provoking distress and uneasiness. This study aims to inform teachers regarding such culturally sensitive practices that could possibly lead to anxiety in EFL classrooms. Moreover, it will also provide English language policy makers, curriculum developers and other stake-holders in Pakistan to design, plan, execute and assess English language teaching policies, programs and teaching materials devoid of all socio-cultural sensitivities. ELT studies in Pakistan mostly seem to utilize quantitative methods and “they tend to neglect the use of interpretive-constructivist research frameworks.” (Samad, 2014, p. 20). The potential significance of this study lies in its use of interpretive-constructivist research framework aiming to enrich the worth of educational research. In a nutshell, this study is hoped to serve as an index for future FLA researchers to explore FLA from novel perspectives in Pakistan.

## 6. Limitations of the Study

Following are the limitations of the study.

- Given the current situation of post covid-19 era, and other restrains in terms of time, finances and resources, it is stated that the data obtained for this study is limited only to two major public sectors universities of KP. Thus, it would be productive to replicate this study with a larger strata of study population engaging participants from the universities of other provinces including capital territory and the state of AJK.
- The context dependent nature of the research questions also necessitates the aforementioned suggestion to explore the issue from a broader perspective.
- Moreover, the findings of this study are based on the perceptions of the learners only, thus limiting the scope of the study. Future studies, therefore, should analyze the issue from the perspectives of the other stake-holders involved in ELT pedagogy i.e. teachers, parents, policy makers etc.

## 7. Conclusion

This study aims to explore, find out and analyze the possible role of socio-cultural factors causing SA amongst Pakistani EFL university learners. Multiple cultural influences may lead to anxiety, and it is a prevalent issue in language classrooms, according to this study. Many participants perceive sociocultural factors as a potential cause provoking EFL classroom speaking anxiety and, as a result, affect speaking skills in EFL class. In order to provide a solution. Furthermore, the many motifs obtained from Pakistani participants' interviews can provide a conceptual framework for additional investigation with the purpose to dive deep down into the societal constrains that hamper a student achievement by boosting FLA levels. The content analysis of the data demonstrates that if, at one hand, Pakistani EFL learners are worried and have communicative apprehension in EFL class, on the other hand, they have devotion and positive attitude too to learn and speak English Language fluently.

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