



University EFL Students' Awareness of Negation as a Politeness Strategy in Requests (A Case Study of the Faculty of Education – Hantoub, University of Gezira, Sudan(2026)

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Abstract

Politeness is one of the communicative aspects of language. Various strategies can be used for demonstrating politeness in interpersonal interactions. One of the key linguistic strategies of politeness is negation. Due to the fact that negation can effectively serve politeness in requests, this research paper aimed at investigating university EFL students' awareness of negation as a politeness strategy in requests. The study followed the descriptive analytical method. The population included (54) students majoring in English, Batch (44), semester (6), Faculty of Education – Hantoub, University of Gezira, Sudan: (25) students out of (54) were chosen randomly as a sample of the study. A situation-based MCQ test was designed as a tool of data collection. The test was composed of (5) different everyday situations, each of which was accompanied with four responses representing requests with varying degrees of politeness: a polite request structured in a negative form (the required response) and three options structured in affirmative patterns of polite requests (demonstrating lesser degree of politeness). The students were required to identify the most polite response in each situation. The data was analyzed manually and then displayed in tables for discussion. The results obtained make it clear that more than (90%) of the respondents were unaware of the role of negation in forming polite requests. This research paper, therefore, recommends the necessity of raising university EFL students' awareness of the role of negation as a politeness strategy in requests through the inclusion of lessons designed for this purpose in university

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1.0 Introduction:

Politeness is an essential area of language learning. This resides in the fact that it is one of the language-in-use aspects. Different linguistic strategies can be used for conveying politeness, among which is negation. Based on the researchers' observations, there is a lack of awareness of negation as a politeness strategy in requests among university EFL students. This is due to the absence of that essential aspect in university EFL courses. This paper, therefore, is intended to find out the extent to which university EFL students are aware of the use of negation as a strategy for forming polite requests.

1.1 Background

In general, politeness is associated with the two forms of behavior, i.e. linguistic and non-linguistic behavior. From a linguistic point of view, politeness involves issues concerning the formation of polite linguistic forms and those about politeness principles which account for the social determinants underlying the language use in a particular setting (Eelen(2014:1)). Politeness strategies are, in fact, essential in facilitating smooth and respectful communication, particularly in speech acts involving imposition such as requests. One of the politeness strategies is mitigating the imposition of an expression. This strategy can be employed through expressions implying indirectness. As Leech(2014:11) demonstrates, negative politeness(in contrast to positive politeness) is exemplified through indirectness, and in this sense polite requests can be formulated. Negation has, therefore, an obvious role in forming polite requests due to its indirectness component. This point is emphasized by Ivenz et al.(2021:38) who state that '*Won't you come tomorrow?*' is more polite than '*Will you come tomorrow?*'.

1.2 Concept of Politeness

politeness can be approached from different perspectives which are centered around interpersonal interaction. To start with, politeness is a universal aspect of human interaction(Brown et al.(1978:xiii)), (Leech(2014:13)) and House (1998:54). According to Xie (2021:5), the concept can be approached in different terms and hence different types of politeness can be observed such as emotional politeness which arises out when emotion underlies one's politeness behavior; and social politeness which approaches the term in terms of human physical movement. Sachiko(2001:xii), furthermore, introduces linguistic politeness which is employed to establish 'smooth communication'. In its general sense, politeness can, therefore, be viewed as a sociocultural phenomenon associated with human communicative behavior (House(1998:54)).

As an interpersonal communication tool, House(1998:54) states that politeness is employed for performing the social or interpersonal function of language with politeness. This is further explained by Sifianou et al.(2001:3) who introduce the concept as a way of avoiding conflict in interactions. Pearce(2012:143), moreover, argues that politeness is the manifestation of '*...good manners or etiquette*'. A further explanation is provided by Eelen(2014:3) who views it as '*proper behavior*' and therefore politeness can be approached in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior.

1.3 Politeness from a Pragmatic Perspective

linguistic politeness belongs to pragmatics due to the fact that it is a context-based aspect of language: it is associated with language in use. It is worth noting that the classification of linguistic politeness under pragmatics is traced back to Lakoff(1973:296) who introduces it as an aspect of language in use (cited in Sachiko(2001:xi)). Diani(2015:6) also views politeness as a key topic in pragmatics. To Brown et al.(1978:47), politeness reflects a universal aspect of the social world. As Watts et al.(2008:10) demonstrate, linguistic politeness is associated with the manifestation of politeness in language use. The functional aspect of politeness is, hence, a main wide-open window to language-in-use examples(Rasmussen(2010:47)). Watts et al.(2008:11) justify this view explaining that politeness arises out of instances of social interaction: the manifestation of politeness depends on the nature of social interaction. In other words, politeness takes place during interpersonal interactions(Bargiela-Chiappini(2011:ix)). For instance, saying something polite in an inappropriate situation can be perceived as irony. It is, hence, the contextuality on which the manifestation of politeness depends. Jenny et al.(2008:22), furthermore, point out that politeness '*...is not a static logical concept, but a dynamic interpersonal activity*' in that it can be tackled in functional interactional terms. Accordingly, politeness is '*...a dynamic component of all speech acts*'(Rasmussen(2010:47)).

1.3.1 Pragmalinguistic Politeness vs Sociopragmatic Politeness

Pragmalinguistic politeness and sociopragmatic politeness represent the two components of politeness in use. It is, hence, essential for deeper understanding of 'politeness' to tackle the two components.

Linguistic politeness is the umbrella under which different issues of language in use are studied. These issues, according to Eelen(2014:1), are associated with the politeness principles underlying communication and the use of polite linguistic constructions. This is advocated by Watts(2008:58) who argues that linguistic politeness is a universal of language use in that it is demonstrated in every culture according to its linguistic system: it involves the study of linguistic-related expressions and the principles of socio-cultural context governing the use of the linguistic system. Leech(2014:13), moreover, makes a contrast between the two politeness components illustrating that pragma linguistic politeness is viewed as a linguistic strategy and hence it is studied in terms of how politeness is expressed linguistically whereas sociopragmatic politeness is concerned with the social determinants of politeness. Accordingly, alternative terms are provided for the two types of politeness: 'context-free politeness' and 'context-sensitive politeness', respectively(Leech(2014:12)).

1.3.2 Approaches to politeness

Different approaches to politeness are introduced aiming to understand the mechanism of the concept in interpersonal interaction. These approaches as House(1998:55) claims, explore the concept in one of two main ways, i.e. in terms of principles and maxims or as the management of face.

1.3.2.1 Grice's Cooperative Principle Approach

As the name suggests, the name of the principle reveals that the cooperation of both the speaker(coding participation) and addressee(decoding participation) is required in interpersonal interaction. The study of linguistic politeness was triggered by Grice (1975:45) cited in Watts et al.(2008:3). In his work, Grice(1975:45) cited in Trosborg(1995:24) introduces the maxims required in conversational exchanges and hence which underlie the cooperative principle: the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner. This

cooperational element, as Gomez et al.(2022:6) demonstrate, is very blatant in situations involving indirect speech acts where the speaker intends to be polite and the addressee in his/her turn gets the intended meaning(illocutionary act) from the conventional meaning of the utterance: *'Can you pass the salt?'*, for example, is most often understood as *'Pass the salt'*.

1.3.2.2 Lakoff's Politeness Approach

Lakoff's work(1973:296) cited in Watts et al.(2008:5)is considered the first to tackle politeness from the conversational-maxim point of view. It is worth noting that, Grice's Cooperative Principle(1975:45) represents the foundation on which Lakoff's approach(1973:296) is built. This is advocated by Gomez et al.(2022:6) who state that Lakoff's theory(1973:297-298) adopts two politeness rules, namely, 'be polite' and 'be 'clear'(the latter is originally Grice's maxim(1975:45)) which represent what he calls 'pragmatic competence': the maxim 'be polite' is subdivided into the three rules of politeness 'do not impose', 'give options' and ' make the other feel good, be friendly'.

1.3.2.3 Leech's Politeness Principle Approach

The politeness approach introduced by Leech(1983:81) is a more developed form of Grice's Cooperative Principle(1975:45). Brown et al.(1978:4) point out that Leech(1983:81) adds more maxims(e.g. tact and generosity) to Grice's Cooperative Principle. Trosborg(1995:24), therefore, state that Leech's work develops Gricean Cooperative Principle by making it more effective for capturing language- in -use aspects in that he adds the politeness principle which is composed of six sub-maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. It is worth noting that the tact maxim, as Ivenz et al's examples(2021:38) demonstrate, can be effectively expressed through the indirectness aspect of negation' because it mitigates the imposition put on the addressee:

'Won't you come tomorrow?' is more polite than *'Will you come tomorrow?'*

1.3.2.4 Brown and Levinson's Face-Saving Approach

This theory introduces politeness as the means of maintaining one's self-esteem in interpersonal communication. Marquez- Reiter(2000:11) claims that the first use of Politeness as a linguistic theory is traced back to Brown et al.(1978:xiii). According to Huang(2012:113), Brown et al's theory is the most influential approach to politeness. The basic components of face-saving politeness theory are illustrated by Marquez-Reiter(2000:12) who explains that it is based on both Goffman's concept of 'face'(1967:12) which indicates one's self- image manifested in the interaction and rationality which indicates that every interactant utilizes means which serve his/her goals of interaction.

Goffman's concept of face(1967:12) is developed from the expression 'to lose face' which implies 'being embarrassed or humiliated'(Zambrano-Paff(2021:127)). Brown et al.(1978:2) elaborate further on the term which indicates an 'individual's self-esteem' making it of two types depending on the interactants' wants: the positive face which indicates the desire of being liked and appreciated, whereas the negative face indicates the desire of not being imposed upon'. According to Brown et al. (1978) cited in Marquez-Reiter(2000:12) there are speech acts which make these two types of faces at risk and ,therefore, they are referred to as face-threatening acts (FTAs). Here, the task of 'rationality', the second component of face-saving view, comes into action. As Brown et al. (1978:2) illustrate, there are three strategies for saving face when performing speech

acts; that is, positive politeness('expression of solidarity'), negative politeness(expressions giving freedom to the addressee to perform an action) and 'off-record politeness(implying vagueness). It is worth noting, that the indirectness aspect manifested in negative politeness differs from that in off- record politeness in that it involves only the linguistic form; it is conventional indirectness. As Marquez-Reiter(2000:14) demonstrates, the illocutionary force of off- record politeness, also referred to as 'non-conventional indirectness' or 'hints' '*...is ambiguous, i.e. a hint and its interpretation is left to the addressee*'.

1.4 Polite Requests:

Polite requests are a type of directive speech acts. However, unlike commands, they employ softening language strategies which demonstrate respectfulness.

1.4.1 Requests as Speech Acts

As the term suggests, speech acts are actions performed through utterances. This is paraphrased in Maitra et al's definition(2025:316) that a speech act is an action performed by producing an utterance in a particular context. Moxam et al.(2026:163) also emphasize the fact that speech acts are actions performed via utterances. To Searle(1969:17), studying language without tackling speech acts is an 'incomplete' study. This is due to the fact that speech acts are '*...the basic ingredients of pragmatics*' (Rasmussen(2010:46)). All utterances are, hence, considered speech acts(Austin(1962:91)) cited in (Rasmussen(2010:46)).

The term 'speech act' is first introduced by Austin (1962:91) who highlights the fact that utterances are produced 'to do things'(as cited in Moxam et al.(2026:162)). To Moxam et al.(2026:163), Austin's categorization of speech acts(1962:101) represents a three-graded components of an utterance: locution which represents the literal meaning of an utterance; illocution which expresses the intention underlying the utterance; and perlocution which demonstrates the effect of an utterance on the hearer. As Searle et al.(1980:vii) demonstrate, the theory of speech acts is based on the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is the performance of certain kinds of acts. Austin's categories(1969:101) are then put into more detailed categories in Searle's five-element categorization(1969:69) as cited in Moxam et al.(2026:163-164):

- (a) Assertive speech acts whereby the speaker commits to the truth of what s/he says, e.g. statements of facts.
- (b) Directive speech acts whose function is to make the addressee take an action, e.g. requests.
- (c) Commissive speech acts which commit the speaker to a future action, e.g. promises.
- (d) Expressive speech acts used by the speaker when expressing attitudes and emotions, e.g. greetings.
- (e) Declarations which cause things to happen, e.g. pronouncing a couple husband and wife.

1.4.2 Direct Vs Indirect Requests

Requests are described as direct or indirect in terms of whether the intended message is directly expressed. This point is explained by Searle et al.(1980:vii) who distinguish direct speech acts from indirect ones showing that unlike indirect speech acts, direct ones express directly the intended meaning of the speaker, i.e. the intended meaning is expressed through the literal meaning of the utterance. This distinction is advocated by Ruytenbeek(2021:1) who states that direct requests demonstrate an obvious relationship between the intended

message and the linguistic construction; indirect requests imply different interpretations and hence the setting is the determinant of the intended message:

'Come tomorrow, John!' (a direct request)

'It's cold in here.' (an indirect request when meaning *'close the window'* (the structure manifests a statement about the weather).

Ruytenbeek (2021:2) attributes the pervasiveness of indirect speech acts in communication to their essential role in expressing politeness. Sifianou (1999:113) also stresses the importance of indirect speech acts demonstrating that the indirectness aspect they imply makes it possible for the speaker to be distant from the *'unfavourable message'* and, moreover, they mitigate the imposition put on the addressee. To Holtgraves(2008:45), conventional indirect expressions are the most commonly used negative politeness strategy. It is worth noting that Sifianou (1999:110) highlights the fact that although indirectness is closely connected with politeness, it does not necessarily indicate a polite aspect: it can be a manifestation of irony, for example, when it is used inappropriately. Ruytenbeek (2021:142-143) advocates the point adding that direct forms such as imperatives do not necessarily indicate impoliteness in that they can be accepted in situations as in emergencies. It is, therefore, the context which determines the polite aspect of indirectness.

1.5 Concept of Negation

Negation is a linguistic universal through which different language functions are performed. According to Bond (2023:516), negation is one of the basic aspects of human language. Horn(2010:1) illustrates the importance of negation in communication showing that it is *'...a sine qua non of every human language'* in that it serves as a means of conveying different messages such as irony, denial and contradiction. Accordingly, Blanco et al.(2012:106) assume that negation interacts with other linguistic phenomena. Deprez et al. (2020:1) also advocate the important role of negation in speech showing that the concept reflects how different language aspects interact together to convey various language functions such as denial, rejection, refusal and correction – the thing which provides a direct insight into how humans use language.

1.6 Illocutionary Acts Performed through Negation

Negation can be used to convey different meanings and the illocutionary act of an utterance is the basic determinant of the intended meaning. As Huang(2012:147) demonstrates, one of the main aspects which contribute to the well-understanding of a negative construction is identifying its illocutionary act: an illocutionary act (also called illocutionary force or illocutionary point) of an expression is the type of function which is intended to be fulfilled through the expression. It is worth mentioning that the pragmatic role of negation is highlighted by Lukyanenko et al.(2025:2) who explain that negation can be thought of as a way of expressing different illocutionary acts such as rejection. In this respect, Cowan (2008:88) illustrates two uses of negation: making assertions as in *'I won't be able to make the next meeting'* and refusals as in *'Would you like another cup of tea? No, thank you.'* An example of indirect refusal is introduced by Leech(2014:167):

A: *'Could you break down the profit of the FT Group between Les Echoaa and the FT in the UK?'*

B: *'I don't think we normally do that.'*

Negative constructions can also be utilized as a polite way for asking for information(Downing et al.(2002:183)):

'Bill hasn't said anything about the weekend?'

'You don't know anyone in the Defense Ministry...?'

Ripley (2010:47), moreover, states that denial is closely connected with negation, e.g. *'The accused was not in Berlin'*. An interesting use of 'not' is exemplified in exclamative sentences structured in interrogative patterns for conveying affirmative meaning. This use is illustrated in Quirk et al's (1985 :804) example *'Isn't Christine Clever!'*. Quirk et al. (1985 :805), furthermore, illustrate that the structure 'Why don't you...?' as in 'Why don't you take an aspirin?' can express a piece of advice or a suggestion. It is worth noting that,

Leech (2014:138) argues that the tactful structure 'Why don't you...?' is not only used for expressing suggestions and advice, but also for offering things:

'Why don't you just sit down and relax?' (a suggestion or a piece of advice)

'Why don't you let me pay the tip?' (an offer)

Negation can also be used in polite requests, e.g. *'Can't I have another drink?'* ((Leech (2014:155)). Another interesting use of negation is called metalinguistic negation. Crystal(2011:303) shows that this type of negation is formed when 'not' is not concerned with the non-truth value of the construction. According to Blanco et al. (2012:107), metalinguistic negation is widely used in speech(; not often used in writing) for reformulating statements: in *'Max hasn't got four children: he's got five'* negation is used for correction. Another example of metalinguistic negation is *'This is not a car. This is a Rolls-Royce'* where negation is not used to indicate that the object is not a car but to show the inappropriateness of calling it simply a car(Penka(2016:305)). More examples are *'I don't hate you, I detest you'* and *'Chris didn't manage to solve some of the problems – he managed to solve all of them'*((Moeschler(2020:43)). As regards the use of negation in polite criticism, *'That was a stupid thing to do'* can be rephrased in the polite patterns *'That wasn't a clever thing to do'*, *'That wasn't a very clever thing to do'* and *'That wasn't the cleverest thing to do'*((Leech(2014:193)).

1.7 Role of Negation in Forming Polite Requests

The power of negation in requests resides in the fact that it lessens their directness and hence it mitigates the imposition put upon the addressee. According to Brown et al. (1978:2), two strategies of negative politeness are exemplified in expressions demonstrating indirectness and negative expectations. these two features can, obviously, be demonstrated through negation. Notably, Leech(2014:155)) shows that negation is widely used in polite requests. Carter et al.(2011:219), in their turn, attribute the wide use of negation in face-to-face interaction to its indirectness feature. Moreover, Downing et al.(2002:182) indicate that negative questions imply negative expectations which serves an opportunity for the addressee to reply with 'No' without being embarrassed.

1.8 Polite Request Constructions Formed through Negation

For forming polite requests, different grammatical constructions are used including negative modals in interrogative structures; and negative declarative sentences with interrogative meaning, e.g.:

'Couldn't you bring it tomorrow?' ((Chejnova(2015:38))

'You won't sit down for a moment?' ((Downing et al.(2002:183))

In addition, Blum-Kulka et al.(1989:286) cited in Savic (2014:45) argue that the negation of the preparatory condition can be employed to soften orders as in *'You couldn't give me a lift, could you?'* and *'Shouldn't you perhaps tidy up the kitchen?'*. Leech(2014:167), furthermore, advocates that the construction 'negative statement + positive tag question' emphasizes negative expectations and hence 'negative statements as requests rarely occur with non-past modals such as 'can' or 'will' because of the clash between the more polite negation with the less polite non-hypothetical verbs':

'I don't suppose you could be persuaded to come up by train for a night or two, could you?'

Another negated construction which can be used in polite requests is 'You don't suppose...' (Downing et al.(2002:183)):

'You don't suppose I could borrow your lawn-mower?' (a request for a service to be done).

'You don't suppose anything has happened to him?' (a request for information or reassurance on the part of the hearer).

2.0 Methodology

The study followed the descriptive analytical method. An MCQ test was designed and used as a tool of data collection. It consisted of five everyday situations each of which was followed by four options representing different polite-request constructions: three affirmative structures and only one negative construction representing the appropriate response. The students were requested to choose the most polite request structure, i.e. the negative structure. The population included students in the sixth semester, Batch(44), Department of English, Faculty of Education-Hantoub, University of Gezira. Twenty-five students were randomly chosen as a sample of the study from among(54) students. The results obtained were analyzed manually in percentage and then displayed in tables.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This section is concerned with the analysis and discussion of the results of the test.

Table (3.1): Students' Responses to Polite Requests in Situation One

option	frequency	percentage
(a) Could you help me with putting this box in the car?	1	4%
(b) Couldn't you help me with putting this box in the car?	2	8%
(c) Would you help me with putting this box in the car?	1	4%
(d) Excuse me. Could you help me with putting this box in the car, please?	21	84%
Total	25	100%

Table (3.1) shows that only (8%) of the students selected the most polite response; that is, option (b). The majority of the responses(92%), however, were centered around the affirmative structures in spite of being of lesser degree of politeness in relation to option(b).

Table (3.2): Students' Responses to Polite Requests in Situation Two

Option	Frequency	Percentage
(a) You wouldn't stop your child from running around, would you?	2	8%
(b) Would you please stop your child from running around?	20	80%
(c) You would stop your child from running around, wouldn't you?	-	-
(d) Could you stop your child from running around?	3	12%
Total	25	100%

As it is demonstrated in table (3.2), only a minority of the students (8%) recognized the most polite response, i.e. option (a), whereas the majority(92%) selected options implying a lesser degree of politeness contrasted with option (a); the options are affirmative structures. None of the responses was given to the option 'affirmative statement + negative tag'; i.e. option (c).

Table (3.3): Students' Responses to Polite Requests in Situation Three

Option	Frequency	Percentage
(a) You don't suppose I could take tomorrow off?	1	4%
(b) Excuse me. Would you mind if I took tomorrow off?	14	56%
(c) Would you mind if I took tomorrow off?	7	28%
(d) Would it be possible to take tomorrow off?	3	12%
Total	25	100%

According to table(3.3), only (4%) of the responses were given to the most polite option which is option (a). This illustrates that most of the responses(96%) were given to the three affirmative structures which indicate a lesser degree of politeness contrasted with the option with negation, option(a).

Table (3.4): Students' Responses to Polite Requests in Situation Four

Option	Frequency	Percentage
(a) Would you mind if I borrowed your phone?	8	32%
(b) Would you mind borrowing your phone?	10	40%
(c) Would it be possible to borrow your phone?	6	24%
(d) Wouldn't it be possible to borrow your phone?	1	4%
Total	25	100%

Table (3.4) makes it clear that only(4%) of the students recognized option(d) as the most polite request. The majority(96%), however, selected affirmative responses which are of lesser degree of politeness contrasted with the option with negation, option(d).

Table (3.5): Students' Responses to Polite Requests in Situation Five

Option	Frequency	Percentage
(a) Where can I find pasta, please?	4	16%
(b) Will you tell me where I can find pasta?	6	24%
(c) Won't you tell me where pasta is?	1	4%
(d) Excuse me. Do you know where pasta is?	14	56%
Total	25	100%

Taking table (3.5) into consideration, it is obvious that only(4%) of the responses were given to option(c) which represents the most polite request in relation to the other three options. This indicates that (96%) of the responses were given to the affirmative options which imply a lesser degree of politeness.

Table (3.6): A Refined Summary of Students' Responses to Most Polite Requests in the Five Situations

Situation No.	Frequency	Percentage
1	2	8%
2	2	8%
3	1	4%
4	1	4%
5	1	4%

Table (3.6) summarizes the percentage of the students' responses to the option showing the most polite request in each of the five situations. According to the table, the responses in each situation represent a small minority(less than 10%) of the participants demonstrating awareness of negation as a politeness strategy in requests. In other words, more than (90%) of the participants demonstrated unawareness of the role of negation in forming polite requests.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper is an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which university EFL students are aware of negation as a strategy for forming polite requests. A five-everyday-situation test was designed to serve the purpose of the study. It was administered to (25) students majoring in English. They were randomly chosen from among(54) students who were in the sixth semester, Batch(44), Faculty of Education- Hantoub, University of Gezira. Relying on the results of the test, more than (90%) of the respondents were unaware of negation as a politeness strategy in requests(table(3.6)). This is indicated by the responses of the students in each situation. Most of the responses in each situation were centered around affirmative constructions in spite of being of lesser degree of politeness contrasted with the negative-construction option which represents the most polite request. In each of situations one and two, for instance, only(8%) of the students could recognize the most polite request, that is, a negative question and a negative statement with a positive tag (table(3.1) and table(3.2), respectively); accordingly, in each situation,(92%) of the students selected the less polite options; i.e, affirmative clauses. Only(4%) of the students, moreover, were aware that the negative options are of higher degree of politeness compared with the affirmative ones in each of situations three, four and five(tables(3.3), (3.4) and(3.5), respectively); therefore, (96%) of the students demonstrated unawareness of the role of negation in the field of polite requests. This research paper, accordingly, recommends the necessity of raising university EFL students' awareness of negation as a strategy of forming polite requests. This can be achieved through including lessons tackling this area in university EFL syllabuses.

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