

Language of Instruction and Learning Outcomes: Examining the Use of Kiswahili in English Language-facilitated Courses at Tanzania Public Service College

Juslina Mussa Tuzza¹

Abstract

This study examines the complex relationship between the language of instruction and learning outcomes in English language-taught courses offered by public service institutions in Tanzania, with a specific focus on the strategic use of Kiswahili. Guided by Translanguaging theory, the study adopted a qualitative research approach and selected Tanzania Public Service College (TPSC) - Mtwara Campus as its case study. Data were precisely gathered through in-depth interviews with students and instructors, systematic classroom observations, and comprehensive documentary analysis. Findings reveal that despite official English-only policies, translanguaging practices, particularly the use of Kiswahili, are prevalent and deliberately employed by both instructors and students. Participants reported that Kiswahili facilitated comprehension of complex concepts, reduced anxiety, and enhanced students' participation, acting as a crucial scaffolding mechanism. However, some concerns were raised about potential over-reliance, which could hinder the development of advanced English proficiency. The study concludes that careful and principled translanguaging serves as a pedagogical tool, optimising English language acquisition by leveraging students' full linguistic repertoires. These insights carry significant implications for re-evaluating language education policies, informing teacher training programmes, and designing curricula that better embrace multilingual realities in Tanzanian colleges.

Keywords: *Language of instruction, language learning outcomes, Kiswahili language, English language, English language-facilitated courses.*

1.0 Introduction

The language of instruction plays a significant role in shaping educational outcomes, particularly in multilingual societies where students often navigate between home languages, national languages, and global lingua franca (Mapunda et al, 2024). In Tanzania, English is the official language of instruction in college education. At the same time, Kiswahili remains the national language and the dominant medium of communication in daily life and at earlier levels of schooling. This linguistic duality has posed significant challenges to teaching and learning, especially in English courses where students are expected to master English, which is not their first or most proficient language (Mashamba, 2020). Research has shown that mismatches between the language of instruction and students' linguistic competence result in superficial learning, limited participation, and

¹ Tanzania Public Service College juslina.tuzza@tpsc.go.tz

poor academic outcomes (Mulei, 2022; Mwisongo, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2025). In Tanzania, the problem is particularly severe in English-language courses at public service colleges, where students with a Kiswahili-dominant background often struggle to understand and engage with material presented entirely in English. As a result, a growing body of writings calls for a re-examination of language policies in college education (Ngaai, 2024; Liu, 2025). This study examines the use of Kiswahili in English-language-facilitated courses in Tanzanian college education and its impact on learning outcomes. Specifically, it evaluates how the strategic use of Kiswahili undermines the goal of English proficiency. By drawing on empirical studies, policy analysis, and classroom observation, the study aims to contribute to the broader debates on language policy and pedagogical effectiveness. This study is principally concerned with examining the pedagogical implications of strategically incorporating Kiswahili within English-medium instruction in Tanzanian college education. Specifically, it interrogates how such bilingual practices influence students' linguistic competence, academic performance, and overall proficiency in English. In pursuit of this overarching inquiry, the research critically engages with the perceptions of both students and instructors regarding the functional role and pedagogical necessity of Kiswahili in facilitating comprehension within English-taught courses. Furthermore, it examines the extent to which the design and delivery of course materials impact learners' mastery of English and their cognitive engagement with course content. Through this dual lens, the study aims to illuminate the relationship between language policy, instructional practice, and educational outcomes in a multilingual academic context.

2.0 Literature Review

The landscape of college education globally is increasingly shaped by multilingual dynamics, in which students frequently move between their home languages, national languages, and an emerging global lingua franca. The pervasive issue of language of instruction in multilingual and post-colonial societies, particularly in college education, forms a critical backdrop for this study. In many African contexts, a linguistic duality exists in which an ex-colonial language (often English or French) serves as a medium of instruction in higher education, while national or indigenous languages dominate daily communication and earlier levels of schooling (Aloo & co-editors, 2025; Brock-Utne, 2022). Existing research frequently points to a mismatch between students' linguistic competence and the language of instruction, which often leads to superficial learning, limited participation, and compromised academic outcomes (Nnko & Kalokola, 2023).

2.1 Students and Instructors' Perceived Role of Kiswahili in Courses Taught in English Language: Causes and Impacts

In Tanzania, Kiswahili holds a unique position as a widely spoken national language and a symbol of national identity and unity. Its use as the language of instruction in primary schools (and increasingly in secondary education in some contexts) means that students arrive at colleges with strong Kiswahili proficiency but often with insufficient English skills (Kabuje, 2021; ESDP, 2025). This situation obliges both students and instructors to resort informally to Kiswahili to clarify complex concepts, discuss assignments, and facilitate classroom interactions, even in English-medium courses (The Citizen, 2022). However, this

strategic use of Kiswahili in English language-facilitated courses raises a critical question: "Does it genuinely facilitate learning by bridging the linguistic gap, or does it unintentionally undermine the development of robust English proficiency, thus perpetuating the very problem it seeks to solve?"

2.2 English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement in Tanzania's Public Service Colleges

Substantial findings underscore the critical correlation between English language proficiency and academic success in college education, particularly in contexts where English is a second or foreign language (Mutai et al., 2024; Kinyero et al., 2024). Students' ability to comprehend tutorial sessions, engage with academic texts, participate in discussions, and produce written assignments is directly tied to the command of English vocabulary, grammar, and academic discourse conversations (Mapunda, 2024). In Tanzania, the challenge is particularly severe for college students who have received their prior extensive schooling in Kiswahili. Research shows that many students enrol in public service colleges without the requisite academic English proficiency to thrive in English-medium courses, leading to struggles with conceptual understanding and active participation (Msigala, 2023).

The impact of a Kiswahili-dominant linguistic background on English acquisition and academic performance remains a recurring theme in Tanzanian education discourse. Recent studies continue to document the phenomenon of linguistic interference, in which Kiswahili grammatical structures and lexical patterns unintentionally transfer to English, affecting accuracy and fluency (Otieno & Saiteu, 2023). Beyond mere grammatical errors, a more profound concern lies in the potential for conceptual misinterpretation. Students may struggle to differentiate nuanced meanings in English or may resort to direct translation from Kiswahili, which can distort academic concepts (Mashamba, 2020). This creates a situation in which, despite their intellectual capacity, students' academic outcomes are constrained by their linguistic limitations, as they struggle to engage with and articulate complex ideas entirely in English.

2.3 Policy, Pedagogy, and Learning Outcome: Consistent Debates

The identified mismatch between language policy and linguistic realities in Tanzanian college education calls for a critical re-examination of current approaches. International scholars increasingly advocate for more flexible, context-sensitive language policies that acknowledge learners' multilingual identities and the pedagogical benefits of leveraging their full linguistic repertoire (UNESCO, 2025; Gurney & Wedikkarage, 2023). The re-examination extends beyond mere policy announcements to the practicalities of pedagogical effectiveness in multilingual classrooms.

Research on effective teaching strategies highlights the importance of scaffolding, explicit instruction in academic language, and the creation of supportive learning environments that reduce linguistic anxiety (Piper et al., 2023). For courses taught in English in Tanzania, this implies exploring pedagogical innovations to bridge the gap between students' Kiswahili-dominant backgrounds and the demand for English proficiency. Questions arise regarding teacher training: are educators equipped with the skills and confidence to

strategically integrate Kiswahili when necessary, or to employ trans-language pedagogies? Furthermore, the design of teaching materials and assessment methods needs to be scrutinised to ensure they are linguistically accessible while simultaneously promoting advanced English proficiency (Rodriguez-Segura & Mbiti, 2022). Ultimately, the quality of learning outcome, encompassing not just grammatical accuracy but genuine conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and effective communication, is directly dependent on how language policies are enacted in classroom practices.

Therefore, the existing body of literature provides a strong foundation regarding the challenges of English as a medium of instruction in a multilingual context, particularly in Tanzania, and the pervasive issue of students' insufficient English proficiency impacting academic outcomes. Influential works such as those by Komba et al. (2024) and REPOA (2023) powerfully articulate the problem. While there is a general discussion of language policy and pedagogical effectiveness in similar settings, a critical gap persists in the empirical investigation of the strategic use of Kiswahili in courses taught in English at public service colleges in Tanzania. Little systematic research has examined how Kiswahili is used (formally and informally) in these specific courses, the perceptions of its role by both students and educators, or its direct impacts on different dimensions of learning outcomes, such as comprehension, participation, and English proficiency.

This study directly addresses the identified gaps. By focusing specifically on the use of Kiswahili in courses taught in English in Tanzania's colleges through practical study (classroom observation, interviews, and surveys), the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of this critical issue. The findings of this study will not only shed light on the complex interplay between linguistic realities and pedagogical practices but will also inform pedagogical practice. However, they will also contribute meaningfully to the broader debates on language policy and pedagogical effectiveness in multilingual college education in Tanzania, ultimately informing strategies to enhance learning outcomes for Tanzanian students.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Translanguaging Theory, a framework that explores how multilingual individuals fluidly use their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning. The term translanguaging, historically rooted in Welsh-English bilingual pedagogy, has evolved significantly in recent years. Contemporary scholars have reframed it as a dynamic and socially situated practice that challenges traditional views of language separation in bilingual education (García, Flores, & Seltzer, 2021; Zhang & Fang, 2022). Their work has been instrumental in positioning translanguaging as a lens for understanding multilingualism, identity, and power in educational contexts. In contrast to code-switching, which assumes separate linguistic systems corresponding to each language, translanguaging refers to the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire, unconstrained by the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages (Treffers-Daller, 2025). Translanguaging moves beyond traditional views of bilingualism, viewing the multilingual individual's linguistic repertoire as a single, integrated system. In pedagogical contexts, it means consciously and strategically using elements of all languages in the classroom for teaching, learning, and communication, aiming to enhance understanding and meaning-

making, rather than merely alternating between distinct languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2025). Relevant to this study, this theory directly supports the idea of strategic use of Kiswahili. It provides a framework for analysing how students and teachers fluidly draw upon both Kiswahili and English as resources to achieve communicative and learning goals. This is particularly relevant in Tanzania, where bilingualism is prevalent. It emphasises that translanguaging practices can enhance cognitive processing, deepen understanding of concepts, and foster metalinguistic awareness (awareness of how language works) in both languages. This directly affects linguistic competence by encouraging learners to connect the two languages. Additionally, it examines how teachers in the classroom explain concepts in Kiswahili and ask students to respond in English. This approach enables students to discuss a topic in Kiswahili before formulating an English response, facilitating comprehension of complex English academic content and improving the quality of English output. This directly addresses the learning outcome and overall English proficiency. Translanguaging is arguably the most direct and modern framework for understanding the impact of using L1 in L2 contexts. It moves from seeing L1 use as a crutch to seeing it as a dynamic linguistic resource that actively contributes to the development of L2 competence and overall proficiency.

The utility of translanguaging has been increasingly demonstrated in several recent studies worldwide. Contemporary works by García, Flores, and Seltzer (2021) and Gurney and Wedikkarage (2023) have been instrumental in popularising the theory as both a pedagogical and analytical framework. García's recent contributions emphasise how bilingual individuals utilise their full linguistic repertoire flexibly and integratively, challenging the notion of separate language systems. In Africa, a study by Banda and Mwanza (2022) on multilingual classrooms in Zambia found that translanguaging practices can effectively bridge the gap between students' home languages and the language of instruction, leading to deeper conceptual understanding and improved academic performance.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research method to explore the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Using a case-study design, the study examined language policies, pedagogical practices, and the experiences of tutors and students at the Tanzania Public Service College-Mtwara campus, where English is the medium of instruction. A total of 36 participants, 6 instructors, and 30 students were purposively selected based on their active use of Kiswahili in English-taught courses and their willingness to participate in the study (Yin, 2023; Mtenzi & Mwakapina, 2021). To ensure credibility and depth of information, the study employed semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis, which helped to capture participants' perceptions, their actual linguistic practices, and institutional language policies. Data were analysed thematically, involving iterative reading of transcripts, notes, and documents to identify relevant patterns and grouping them into broader themes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Ethical standards were observed through informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

4.0 Presentation of Findings

The findings revealed a nuanced picture of the use of Kiswahili in English-language facilitated courses, with both perceived benefits and challenges. While the official policy at Tanzania Public Service College generally promotes English as the sole language of instruction for English-language facilitated courses, participants widely observed and acknowledged translanguaging practices.

4.1 Prevalence and Rationale for Using Kiswahili in Courses Taught in English Language

Despite official policies, Kiswahili was frequently used by both instructors and students, particularly to clarify complex concepts and foster a comfortable learning environment. Many instructors articulated a pragmatic rationale for incorporating Kiswahili. One of the tutors from TPSC - Mtwara stated:

"Sometimes, if I see students struggling to grasp a difficult grammar point in English, I will explain it in Kiswahili. It is not about abandoning English, but ensuring comprehension. My goal is for them to understand, and if Kiswahili helps achieve that, then I will use it. Another instructor echoed this sentiment: "When we are discussing abstract concepts or particular cultural nuances, using Kiswahili helps bridge the understanding gap much faster. It is about making the learning accessible." (Tutor, TPSC-Mtwara, June 2025)

On the other hand, students overwhelmingly preferred the occasional use of Kiswahili, particularly for challenging topics. A first-year student pursuing a Certificate of Public Administration (PA) at TPSC - Mtwara commented:

"When the tutor explains something in Kiswahili, it clicks immediately. Sometimes in English, even if you know the words, the full meaning does not sink in. Kiswahili makes it clear." (Student, TPSC-Mtwara, June 2025)

A Student studying Human Resource Management (HRM) elaborated:

"Especially in the first year, when our English was not strong, if the instructor only spoke English, it was very hard. Kiswahili helped us to follow, and then we could try to express ourselves in English." (Student, TPSC-Mtwara, June 2025)

4.2 Perceived Impact on Learning Outcomes

Participants held diverse views on how the use of Kiswahili affected mastery of English. A significant number of participants, both students and instructors/tutors, believed that the use of Kiswahili enhanced comprehension, reduced anxiety, and encouraged greater student participation. One of the instructors observed:

"When students feel they can ask questions in Kiswahili if they are stuck, they are more likely to participate. It reduces the fear of making mistakes in English." (Instructor, TPSC-Mtwara, May 2025).

Classroom observations also supported this, showing increased student engagement and fewer blank stares when Kiswahili was strategically used to explain.

4.3 Concerns about Limitations to English Proficiency

Conversely, some instructors and a few students expressed concerns that over-reliance on Kiswahili could hinder the development of English proficiency, particularly in speaking and writing. A tutor from TPSC, Mtwara campus, cautioned:

"While I see the immediate benefit of using Kiswahili for understanding, I worry that students become too comfortable and do not push themselves to think and express themselves entirely in English. They need to be immersed." (Tutor, TPSC-Mtwara, June 2025)

A student studying Ordinary Diploma in Records, Archives and Information Management at TPSC – Mtwara campus also noted: *"Sometimes, if the tutor uses too much Kiswahili, we also get used to answering questions in Kiswahili; as a result, our English does not improve eloquently." (Student, TPSC-Mtwara, June 2025)*

4.4 Contextual and Instructor-Dependent Translanguaging Practices

The study found that the extent and nature of translanguaging varied significantly across courses, with instructors in concept-heavy subjects often noting that *"switching languages helped students grasp abstract ideas more easily." (Instructor, TPSC-Mtwara, May 2025)* Several interviewees emphasised that their pedagogical approach was guided by responsiveness to learners, with one instructor explaining that *"I adjust my language depending on how students are following the discussion." (Instructor, TPSC-Mtwara, June 2025)* A documentary analysis of course outlines and examination papers confirmed that English was the primary medium of formal instruction and assessment. However, classroom observations revealed a more fluid practice, where instructors frequently alternated between English and Kiswahili to encourage participation. For example, in one observed session, an instructor shifted into Kiswahili during group work, later reflecting that *"students open up more when they can express themselves in both languages." (Instructor, TPSC-Mtwara, May 2025)*. These accounts highlight the informal and dynamic character of translanguaging in practice, shaped by instructors' perceptions of student needs and lesson objectives.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal the complex dynamics of Kiswahili use in English-language-facilitated courses at the Tanzania Public Service College (TPSC). While English is officially promoted as the language of instruction, translanguaging practices in which both Kiswahili and English are strategically combined have emerged as a prevalent and pragmatic approach among instructors and students.

5.1 Enhancing Comprehension and Reducing Anxiety through Translanguaging

The study revealed that Kiswahili was frequently employed to clarify complex concepts, simplify grammatical structures, and contextualise examples culturally, particularly in English-medium instruction. These practices are consistent with Translanguaging Theory, which advocates for the strategic use of learners' entire linguistic repertoire to construct meaning and enhance learning (García, Flores, & Seltzer, 2021; Cenoz & Gorter, 2025).

Rather than viewing Kiswahili as a hindrance to English acquisition, its use emerged as a pedagogical asset, supporting comprehension and reducing cognitive load. This aligns with recent findings by Banda and Mwanza (2022), who argue that first-language support scaffolds second-language learning by fostering deeper engagement and understanding in African multilingual classrooms. In African contexts, Brock-Utne (2021) and Mutai et al. (2024) similarly emphasise that code-switching in English-medium classrooms can lower anxiety and promote participation. These findings resonate with this study's ideas, suggesting that translanguaging is not merely a coping mechanism but a deliberate instructional strategy. In Tanzania, Mapunda (2024) and Ngaai (2024) report that Kiswahili facilitates access to abstract and technical content, reinforcing the study's conclusion that translanguaging enhances academic rigour. Therefore, the study not only confirms the relevance of Translanguaging Theory but also extends its applicability to Tanzanian public service education, where bilingual practices are both necessary and pedagogically sound.

5.2 Perceived Risks to English Proficiency and the Need for Balanced Practice

While the study affirmed the pedagogical value of Kiswahili in English-medium instruction, several participants expressed concern that excessive reliance on Kiswahili could impede English proficiency, particularly in writing and oral communication. This apprehension reflects broader debates in EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) contexts. Piper et al. (2023) caution that overuse of the mother tongue may limit immersion and reduce opportunities for authentic English language practice, potentially stalling fluency development.

However, Translanguaging Theory, as articulated in recent scholarship, does not advocate for unrestricted code-switching or the replacement of the target language. Instead, it promotes intentional and strategic use of multiple languages to enhance meaning-making while maintaining the integrity of the target language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2025; Treffers-Daller, 2025). From this perspective, the participants' concerns are valid but not incompatible with translanguaging pedagogy. The key lies in a structured implementation that ensures Kiswahili is used to scaffold understanding without displacing English as the primary medium of academic discourse.

This approach is echoed in Tanzanian studies. Mgoge et al. (2025) found that while Kiswahili aids comprehension, its unchecked use can dilute exposure to English, especially during exam preparation. Similarly, Brock-Utne (2022) observed that, in rural Tanzanian classrooms, limited English practice due to the dominant use of the local language contributed to poor communicative competence. These findings reinforce the need for clear pedagogical guidelines that balance linguistic accessibility with sustained engagement in English.

5.3 Contextual and Instructor-Dependent Practices

The study revealed that translanguaging practices varied significantly depending on course complexity, learner proficiency, and individual instructor style. This variability underscores the context-sensitive and adaptive nature of translanguaging, as emphasised by García, Flores, and Seltzer (2021), who argue that translanguaging is not a fixed method

but a dynamic process shaped by pedagogical intent and learner needs. Recent scholarship further supports this view, highlighting how translanguaging adapts to diverse educational contexts and learner profiles (Zhang & Fang, 2022). This observation is consistent with findings from East African classrooms, where code-switching is often negotiated in real time. For instance, Mutai et al. (2024) in Kenya and the Ajernet Editorial Board (2023) in Rwanda report that instructors adjust their language use based on students' immediate comprehension challenges and engagement levels. These studies support the idea that translanguaging is not merely linguistic flexibility but a responsive instructional strategy.

Classroom observations in the current study confirmed that strategic use of Kiswahili, particularly during conceptually dense lessons, encouraged students to ask questions and participate more actively. This aligns with Translanguaging Theory's emphasis on cognitive and social scaffolding, in which the learner's full linguistic repertoire is mobilised to support a deeper understanding and interaction. While some may argue that such variability risks inconsistency, the findings suggest that flexibility is a strength, not a flaw, of translanguaging pedagogy. It allows educators to tailor their approach to the evolving dynamics of the classroom, thereby reinforcing the theory's relevance in multilingual educational contexts such as Tanzania.

5.4 Policy-Practice Gap and Pedagogical Implications

The study uncovered an apparent tension between institutional policies mandating English as the sole medium of instruction and the practical use of Kiswahili to support student learning. This dissonance reflects broader patterns observed in Tanzania and other African contexts, where official language policies often fail to accommodate the multilingual realities of classrooms (Brock-Utne, 2021; Mapunda et al., 2024). While policy frameworks tend to promote English for its perceived global utility, classroom practices reveal a more nuanced picture, one where Kiswahili plays a vital role in facilitating comprehension and engagement.

Translanguaging Theory, as articulated in recent scholarship, provides a compelling lens for interpreting these findings. Rather than viewing the use of Kiswahili as a deviation from policy, translanguaging legitimises it as a strategic pedagogical tool that enhances learning while still supporting English acquisition. The theory emphasises fluid, purposeful language use, allowing learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning and access academic content (García, Flores, & Seltzer, 2021; Banda & Mwanza, 2022).

In practice, the study observed that Kiswahili served multiple pedagogical functions. Most notably, it acted as a scaffold, helping students bridge gaps in understanding when grappling with complex English concepts. This was particularly crucial for learners entering college with uneven English proficiency, a reality that institutional policies often overlook. Kiswahili also functioned as a meaning-making resource, enabling instructors to tap into students' prior knowledge and cultural frames, thereby deepening conceptual understanding beyond surface-level language forms.

However, the findings also underscore a pedagogical dilemma: while translanguaging supports comprehension, excessive reliance on Kiswahili may limit students' exposure

to English, potentially hindering the development of advanced proficiency. This concern, echoed by some instructors, underscores the need for a balanced, intentional approach. Translanguaging, in this context, should not be about replacing English but about strategically integrating Kiswahili to enrich learning without compromising fluency goals.

The study suggests that instructors who consciously manage their translanguaging practices by aligning them with learning objectives and student needs are better positioned to foster positive outcomes. This reinforces the relevance of Translanguaging Theory, not as a blanket endorsement of multilingualism, but as a framework for responsive, context-sensitive pedagogy in linguistically diverse classrooms.

6.0 Conclusion

This study underscored the universal and pedagogically significant role of translanguaging, specifically the use of Kiswahili, in English language-facilitated courses within college education in Tanzania. Far from being a mere “interference,” Kiswahili serves as a vital linguistic resource for both instructors and students, facilitating comprehension, reducing anxiety, and fostering engagement. While concerns about potential over-reliance exist, the evidence suggests that strategic and principled translanguaging can be a powerful tool for enhancing English-language command outcomes.

The study advocates for a shift from a prescriptive, monolingual approach to a more flexible, pragmatic stance that embraces the linguistic realities of Tanzanian students. Recognising and explicitly integrating translanguaging into language education policies, teacher training, and curriculum design will be crucial for optimising English language acquisition and ensuring that students in Tanzania’s college education can effectively navigate and thrive in an increasingly globalised world. Ultimately, the study concludes that careful and purposeful translanguaging, rather than strict monolingualism, holds the key to unlocking the full linguistic potential of Tanzanian learners.

7.0 Recommendations

This study carries several significant implications for language education policy and practice in Tanzania’s college education. Current language policies that strictly enforce English as the sole medium of instruction in English language-facilitated courses may need re-evaluation. A more flexible policy that acknowledges and strategically integrates translanguaging could be more effective and realistic. Correspondingly, there is a clear need for teacher training programmes to equip English language instructors with the theoretical understanding of translanguaging and practical strategies for its effective and principled use in the classroom. This includes guidance on when, why, and how to use Kiswahili to optimise English language proficiency rather than as a crutch. Curriculum designers should also consider how translanguaging can be intentionally incorporated into English-language course materials and activities to facilitate comprehension and engagement while still prioritising the development of English proficiency.

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