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‘QUO VADIS, CORONA?’: METAPHORICAL FRAMING OF THE PANDEMIC IN DAILY PRESS

The paper deals with the ways Croatian and Serbian daily newspapers wrote about the Covid-19 pandemic at its outbreak in 2020. The aim of the paper was to identify and describe metaphors in the selected corpus of texts in order to determine the metaphorical framing used in newspapers. This corpus-based research of media discourse was based on a qualitative bottom-up analysis that started from lexical metaphors found in the texts.

The results of this study suggest that a whole range of metaphorical mappings is used to frame the pandemic in the media in Croatian and Serbian. The results indicate that in both languages the same conventional metaphors were used. The pandemic was metaphorically conceptualized as an opponent, as some kind of disaster such as fire, or war. Different elements of the metaphorical mapping were made salient and foregrounded, depending on the text type. The obtained results are largely in line with previous research on using metaphors to describe the process of dealing with diseases.

Keywords: conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, Covid-19, Croatian, Serbian, metaphorical framing

INTRODUCTION

Extensive research on metaphors and metonymies in the last few decades has been mostly centered on the tenet that metaphorical and metonymic expressions in language provide an insight into conceptual structures in human thought, as Lakoff and Johnson showed in their seminal work (1980). For that reason, as soon as the world faced “the invisible enemy”, Covid-19 (officially called SARS-CoV-2), at the beginning of 2020, linguistically and metaphorically speaking, we were equipped to talk about it resorting to a whole range of conventional metaphors that have been used to

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describe some other diseases. Since then, millions of people were infected, thousands of whom died. In the process of informing the public and announcing the measures that have been taken, the media had a dominant role.

One of the aims of this paper was to see how Covid-19 was written about in Croatian and Serbian daily press, since it soon became the most important topic discussed in all kinds of discourse. Drawing on Semino's definition of discourse, as "naturally occurring language use: real instances of writing or speech which are produced and interpreted in particular circumstances and for particular purposes" (Semino, 2008: 1), our aim was to determine the forms and functions of metaphors used to describe and refer to Covid-19 in written media discourse in Croatia and Serbia. In addition to that, it was necessary to identify the aspects of metaphorical mapping that was found in the corpus so that we could determine foregrounded aspects that lead to metaphorical framing of Covid-19. The analysis was based on two languages, Croatian and Serbian.

Conceptual metaphor theory

As it is well known, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) was put forward by Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Within this theoretical framework, metaphors are no longer regarded as rhetorical embellishments, but a part of everyday use of language that affects human perception and conceptualization. As Kövesces has it, "a conceptual metaphor is understanding one domain of experience (that is typically abstract) in terms of another (that is typically concrete)" (Kövesces, 2017: 13).

In the attempt to find authentic data to support the theoretical claims summarised by CMT, many researchers (Cameron, 2003; Stefanowitch, 2006; Semino, 2008; Koller, 2008) based their analyses on corpus, focusing on methodological problems and some additional properties of metaphors in real discourse. Questioning the use of staple examples in CMT, their main argument is related to the need to explore extensively both the context and linguistic properties of metaphor as it occurs in language, since metaphor is an inseparable part of the social context as well – it is situated, a matter of language and discourse, not just as a matter of thought and cognition (Zanotto et al., 2008: 3).

Hence, CMT might provide an insight into the conceptual level, however, it rather neglects the influence of language on metaphor, as well as the impact of real

context in which these metaphors occur. For that reason, metaphor needs to be studied in the given context, and it is not always sufficient to rely only on conceptual domains and metaphorical mapping to account for its meaning, as proposed by CMT, since metaphors may vary along different dimensions, most notably within, but also across culture (Kövecses, 2005). As Cameron (2007) has put it, metaphor in use is dynamic because it is constructed by people as they talk or write, to suit their evolving purposes and goals.

Starting from the premise that discourse represents language use as social practice in its abstract sense, Koller stresses its cognitive basis, since “discourses construct the world from a particular perspective and they are inextricably linked to cognition, transporting the models and schemata by which its participants make sense of reality” (Koller, 2008: 105). Along the same lines, media discourse, particularly in written form represents a rich source of naturally occurring language data, or language in use, which may suggest that it is metaphorical to a great extent. That was one of the reasons why this study was corpus driven, as it was expected that exploring metaphors in real context would provide a deeper insight into the interface of social practice and language use.

One of the first and main problems related to corpus-based analysis of metaphors and metonymies is closely related to metaphor identifying and extracting the data from the corpus, since one needs to apply a reliable set of criteria in order to select the data. This process becomes even more challenging given the fact that metaphors in discourse are characterized by fuzziness (Cameron 2003; Stefanowitsch 2006; Steen 2007, 2009). Nevertheless, in order to fully grasp metaphorical language in discourse, one needs to take into account the context, word classes and patterns of metaphorical expressions depending on the given context in which they are found (Semino 2008: 22). Stefanowitsch (2006: 2) argues that conceptual metaphors are not linked to a particular linguistic form and for that reason, identifying and extracting the relevant data from the corpus seem to be the first two stumbling blocks in metaphor analysis.

Functions of metaphors in discourse

As it has been argued in research on the functions of metaphors in discourse (Steen, 2005, Semino, 2009, Musolff and Zinken, 2009), metaphors play versatile and crucial role in discourse by serving various functions very often simultaneously. Not only do they enhance understanding by simplifying abstract concepts and provide shared common ground, as suggested by CMT, but they also facilitate create a powerful impact. By associating an idea with a positive or

negative image, metaphors can influence attitudes and opinions particularly since they have the ability to evoke emotions and create a more engaging experience for the readers. They appeal to the senses and can make the discourse more memorable.

Furthermore, they play a pivotal role in shaping the rhetorical dimension of discourse, imbuing language with layers of meaning that resonate with cultural, social, and historical contexts. In doing so, metaphors wield a significant role in framing perceptions and shaping discourse within various domains. As cognitive tools, metaphors not only facilitate comprehension but also influence the interpretation of information by framing particular perspectives and guiding the audience towards specific conceptualizations. This framing effect extends beyond individual expressions to permeate entire discourse structures, influencing how issues are perceived and discussed within societal, academic, or professional contexts.

In the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic in the daily newspapers, metaphors were abundantly used. In terms of functions, the metaphors that were used played a vital role in understanding the dangers and threats related to the process of spreading the disease. In that sense metaphors shaped the public health message and had an influence on shaping the public response by creating metaphorical framing and affecting the emotional response of the readers.

Metaphorical framing

The interplay of language, cognition and context in public discourse shows that metaphors indeed have a very important function: they foreground some elements and background some others, which results in metaphorical framing. As Begonja and Rončević (2014: 330-331) state, conceptual metaphors are basic cognitive processes that help us comprehend and talk about the world around us and for that reason they are of fundamental importance in political and public discourse. The systematic use of specific metaphors in public discourse is described in the literature as “metaphorical framing” (Semino et al., 2018; Brugman et al., 2019).

Metaphorical framing implies that the use of specific metaphors may affect people’s reasoning, attitudes, and even behaviour (Entman, 1993, Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011; Burgers et al., 2016; Semino et al., 2018; Brugman et al., 2019). As Pinero-Pinero (2018: 22) argues, in framing, the topic of discourse in a specific conceptual domain, metaphor, contributes to establishing the attitudinal position of the user in relation to the events and those involved in them. Some experimental studies have shown that, when linguistic metaphors are used to conceptualize a wide variety of issues or events, they are more persuasive than their literal

counterparts (Sopory and Dillard, 2002; Van Stee, 2018). According to Entman, framing a topic implies making some aspects of it more salient in “a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993: 53). In other words, by framing certain aspects of reality are selected and made salient in a text (Entman, 1993: 52), which makes these foregrounded elements more accessible and first to be processed.

Metaphorical framing of diseases

Many empirical studies (cf. Semino et al., 2017) show that metaphorical framing is very frequently applied when talking about serious diseases, such as cancer. In that context, people use metaphors to talk about different stages of the given disease: treatment, symptoms and outcome. One of the most widespread conventional metaphors is war metaphor (Sontag, 1979). As Semino et al. (2017) argue the use of military metaphors was regarded by many patients and health care practitioners as negative, as it creates anxiety and a sense of helplessness. For example, Semino et al. (2017) proved that “when violence metaphors express patients’ perception of their illness, cancer can be described as ‘attacking from the inside’ and ‘invading’ the body. In such cases, the disease is presented as an aggressive opponent, while the patient is in a passive position”.

Mundwiler (2013) states that a virus, as an abstract entity, will typically be described as something else, be it a killer, a person, an animal, a plant or an object, making the abstract virus more easily understandable. Her (Mundwiler, 2013) analysis of the ways swine flu was conceptualized in the British media in 2009-2010 reveals that there were changes both in frequency of metaphors and type of conceptualisation of the pandemic over time. Moreover, conceptualizing the virus as killer, added to a more sensationalist media reporting.

Talking and writing about Covid-19 is not an exception in this respect, particularly having in mind the images that everyone saw in the media in 2020: doctors and nurses dressed in special protective equipment, wearing masks, face shields and visors, working for days and nights without breaks to treat patients. A high number of casualties can only add to this scenario. In an attempt to move “Beyond the battle, far from the frontline” a group of researchers created an initiative trying to create alternative ways of talking about Covid-19, in the form of #ReframeCovid (<https://sites.google.com/view/reframecovid/home>). The main idea behind this initiative is to promote non-war related language on Covid-19, as it has

been noted that in many countries war metaphors dominate public discourse in reference to the pandemic.

Kranert et al. (2020), in their still ongoing research on the localization of the global pandemic, point out the fact that in some countries (specifically those that belong to out-group), the personified virus is seen as an enemy to fight against, which is evident by the lexical choice of military vocabulary and metaphorical language (front-line, fight, deaths, destroy, defeat, stop, hit, foreign/invisible enemy, those who offend us/those who attack us). They mention the example of Serbia, where the virus is directly named the enemy: "... as of today Serbia has been at war against an invisible enemy, a dangerous and vicious enemy that our country must defeat." (Kranert et al., 2020: 4). Still, in many other countries worldwide, the situation is the same, since the global Covid-19 discourse has been used in line with nationalist discourses and political issues (Bieber, 2020; Kranert et al., 2020).

The initial aim of this research was to explore linguistic metaphors and see to which conceptual metaphors they correspond in order to compare commonalities and differences, as well as typical discursive features of metaphors on Covid-19 used in daily newspapers. In the rest of this paper the focus will be on methodology that was used and the discussion of the obtained results.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

For the purpose of this study, we created two corpora, one of which contained 100 texts taken from two daily newspapers in Croatian (*Večernji list* <https://www.vecernji.hr/> and *Slobodna Dalmacija* <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/>) and the other one in Serbian (*Politika* <http://www.politika.rs/> and *Danas* <https://www.danas.rs/>). The choice of newspapers was based on two criteria: 1) each of them represents a widely read newspaper with a relatively high circulation of printed version and all are newspapers with a reputation of serious journalism in their respective countries. That was used as a premise to exclude tendency towards sensationalism, if that is possible in any media in the modern world. Moreover, the choice of newspapers was also determined by the fact that their online editions have easily accessible search options, which was used to find and extract the texts.

The number of texts was limited to a hundred in each language only for the sake of data management. Even though the number of texts collected from the period from March to July 2020 exceeded that number, we started from the premise that 200 texts in total would be sufficient for a qualitative analysis. The texts contained key words that were also used as search tokens: *Covid-19*, *coronavirus*

and corona. In order to ensure a systematic and valid procedure of extraction and metaphor identification, we relied on bottom-up approach in order to avoid deductive, top-down approach that searches predetermined conceptual metaphors.

The corpus for this study was analysed manually for metaphorical expressions and it was done in several steps. We used the search option in the online editions and created a database with all texts that contained them. Our second step involved looking for the context in which the given key words were used, in order to determine whether they were used metaphorically or not. When the data was collected, we started from the target domain (the pandemic, Covid-19, coronavirus) in order to find the source domains that were used, by determining the meaning of the given lexeme. All instances of metaphorical usage were analysed together, i.e. we did not separate headlines from the main parts of the articles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that linguistic metaphors in the media discourse in Croatia and Serbia were mostly based on several dominant conventional metaphorical conceptualisations of Covid-19. As it was hypothesized, the virus was almost exclusively written about using metaphors or metonymies. While many metaphorical mappings could be corroborated by similar research, some seem to be culture and language specific.

In terms of metaphorical mappings, it should be mentioned that most metaphorical expressions were conventional, primary metaphors such as *DIFFICULTIES ARE OPPONENTS* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, Grady and Johnson, 2003). This is also in line with Semino et al. (2016), whose research on dealing with cancer revealed similar results. When developed, that primary metaphor implies that *DISEASE IS PHYSICAL AGGRESSION*, since fighting a disease is fighting an opponent, and linguistically, it is expressed by the means of a whole range of expressions, which we tried to classify. In this classification, our main criteria was whether the meaning of the given lexeme could be related to the given semantic field.

In addition to that, the results of the analysis indicate that morphological and syntactic properties of Croatian and Serbian had a significant impact on the choice of the source domain, both in terms of conventional and creative metaphors. For instance, nouns in Croatian and

Serbian have grammatical gender, and the lexeme ‘corona’ in Croatian and Serbian (Croat./Serb. *korona*), or ‘pandemic’ (Croat./Serb. *pandemija*), are classified as female nouns, since they end in *-a*. On the other hand, the virus (Croat./Serb. *virus*), or Covid-19, end in a consonant, and therefore, they are classified as masculine nouns. In our corpus these lexemes mostly functioned as subjects of sentences, or, to be precise, as semantic agents and in that way allowed personification of Covid-19 as a human being. This is quite specific, as in other similar studies that dealt with metaphors used to describe diseases (Semino et al., 2017, 2021; Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020, Yang, 2020), the metaphor VIRUS AS A HUMAN BEING was not noted.

Virus as a human being

One of the dominant conceptual metaphors in our corpus was the metaphor virus as a human being which was expressed through a whole range of different linguistic realizations. This generic-level metaphor allowed creating different kinds of meaning to suit the function of the text by adopting a whole range of specific attributes or event structures. It was used to underpin various specific scenarios, all of which had one thing in common: as the agent, the virus was described to perform many activities and hence, it was easily held responsible for performing them. In that way, it was implied that neither those in charge nor the citizens were accountable for anything, as can be seen in the following examples:

- *Corona entered the Croatian National Theatre in Split.* (Croat. *Korona je ušla u splitski HNK*)
- *The main culprit for the delay was Covid-19.* (Serb. *Glavni krivac za zastoje je Covid-19*)
- *Corona was “having a party” with more than 300 people, the total number of the infected is not known yet.* (Croat. *Korona je ‘partijala’ sa više od 300 ljudi, još uvijek nije poznat ukupan broj zaraženih*)
- *Quo vadis, corona?* (Serb. *Quo vadis, korona?*)
- *Covid-19 did not save us from cancer.* (Serb. *Covid-19 nas nije spasio raka*)
- *The crazy corona is back* (Croat. *Luda korona se vratila*)

Among these conceptualizations, a dominant specific mapping was VIRUS IS A THIEF, which was realized through a whole lexical field of mostly verbs related to stealing.

- *Corona stole our sleep: insomnia and sleep related disorders are spreading as a virus*
(Serb. *Korona nam je ukrala san: nesаница i problemi sa spavanjem se šire poput virusa*)
- *Corona plundered the club of Perišić and Borozović, three more people are infected*
(Croat. *Korona je poharala Perišićev i Borozovićev klub, još troje zaraženo*)
- *Covid-19 is looting and the sanitary inspectors are sent in isolation.*
(Croat. *Covid-19 hara, a sanitarni inspektori su u izolaciji*)

These examples could also be related to the conceptual metaphor DISEASE IS PHYSICAL AGRESSION since the virus is conceptualized as an aggressive attacker that takes something away and leaves casualties and havoc. In essence, they indicate that there is a network of conceptualizations that sometimes overlap, due to fuzzy domain boundaries.

It is important to mention that resorting to the metaphorical mapping that includes a human being as source domain enables highlighting different aspects of that domain, many of which do not necessarily evoke the fighting or aggressive scenario, but rather reckless or frivolous behaviour, which might have positive consequences on framing the disease so as to help people come to terms with it.

Fighting covid-19 is fighting a war

Our findings are in line with other research (Semino et al., 2017, 2021; Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020; Yang, 2020) which shows that the most typical conceptualization used to talk about fighting a disease is by using the war domain and specific elements related to it. This comes as no surprise as this complex schema allows mapping that includes several agents and event structures. War metaphors are deeply entrenched in our conceptual system and language, as these experiences of facing an aggressive opponent, being involved in a battle, winning or losing are basic and embodied (Lakoff and Turner, 1989; Grady, 2002; Semino, 2021). For that reason they can easily fit new situations such as talking about “the invisible enemy” (Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020).

In this kind of metaphorical mapping, there are many correspondences between the source and the target domain which may be created. On the one side, there is the virus as the enemy and on the other either whole nations or individuals as the afflicted and with a mission to defend themselves and eradicate the enemy. As in a real war, unfortunately, many lose the battle. Health practitioners and the special equipment need as a protection adds to this overall image.

In that respect, both Croatia and Serbia were no exceptions. War metaphors dominated the corpus, as can be seen in the following examples. Sometimes, the source domain is even explicitly referred to, but more often, reference is made to specific elements entailed in the mapping:

- *We hope that the vaccine will become “a weapon” against the coronavirus, at the moment, the biggest global plague of the modern era. (Croat. Nadamo se da će cjepivo postati “oružje” u borbi protiv koronavirusa, trenutačno najveće svjetske pošasti).*
- *The state needs to get ready for the new attack of Covid-19. (Serb. Potrebno je da se država pripremi za novi udar kovida).*
- *We are not even close to winning the war against Covid-19, since the victory means that there are no casualties for a longer period of time. (Serb. Još nismo ni blizu pobjede protiv kovida-19, jer pobjeda podrazumeva da virusa nema, kao i nijednog smrtnog ishoda duži period).*
- *Corona has become the common enemy of the humanity. People are gathered and united on the same front. (Serb. Korona je postala zajednički neprijatelj čovečanstva. Ljude okuplja i zbija na jedinstvenom frontu).*

The advantages and disadvantages of framing diseases by using war metaphors has been discussed a lot (Flusberg et al., 2018; Semino, 2021). In line with the arguments presented in Flusberg et al. (2018), our findings indicate that in the cultural context of the two languages analysed in this research, using war metaphors increased the urgency of prompt and adequate reaction, especially at the onset of the pandemic, since the recommendations of the authorities were mostly disregarded and mistrusted by the public. Nevertheless, it is also evident that such metaphors were mostly used in texts that dealt with other issues, not only health issues, which simultaneously provide a strategy for politicizing health risks.

Another typical way of viewing the virus metaphorically is using the domain of fire. Fire as a conceptual domain is similar to war in the sense that people have deeply entrenched experience with fire. In addition to that, fire is something that easily gets out of control and becomes destructive. It should be mentioned that for the speakers of Croatian and Serbian, both war and fire metaphors are deeply embedded in their conceptualizations and that fact certainly affected the dominant source domains found in the corpus. Consequently, this is also evident in lexical metaphors in our corpus:

- *Corona is burning in the USA* (Serb. *Korona u SAD-u sve više bukti*)
- *Corona virus is ablaze in Europe* (Croat. *Korona bukti u Europi*)
- *Our journalist reports from the heart of the corona fire* (Serb. *Naš novinar se javio iz žarišta korone*)
- *Zadar starts to feel the consequences of the explosion of the real corona wildfire* (Croat. *Zadar upravo počinje osjećati posljedice eksplozije stvarnog žarišta koronavirusa*).
- *If the corona fire ignited at the wedding reception continues to spread...* (Croat. *Ako se žarište koronavirusa rasplamsano na spomenutoj svadbi nastavi širiti...*)

Our data shows that fire metaphors were mostly used to foreground contagion and rapid spreading of the virus. Considering framing, it is evident that the use of a specific frame or a scenario has a huge impact on the way people react and feel and using fire metaphors. Similarly to war metaphors, fire metaphors always relate to fear, and panic, but also anger and despair when faced with loss and damage. Our findings show that in media discourse in Croatian and Serbian, the pandemic was almost exclusively described using conventional metaphors. War and fire metaphors were predominantly used, as these source domains are culturally salient in both speech communities.

Nevertheless, the data indicated that the metaphors described above were not the only metaphors, even though they were the most prominent. There occasional instances of describing the pandemic as some natural force (for example a strong wind) or an object which exerts force (a speeding vehicle or a bomb) were also found:

- *Sweeping through schools, Covid left them abandoned* (Serb. U svom posljednjem naletu kovid je opustošio škole)

- When corona and flu collide, there will be many problems... (Croat. Kad se sudare korona i gripa, moglo bi biti problematično...)
- Corona exploded in Portugal and Austria (Croat. Korona je eksplodirala u Portugalu i Austriji)

What is emphasised by the means of these metaphors is the fact that people are unable to exert control over forces or objects that can devastate humanity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper the aim was to deal with metaphorical framing of the Covid-19 pandemic in Croatian and Serbian newspapers in order to identify how it was written about it. This qualitative analysis was bottom-up, since the starting point was the selection of linguistic metaphors found in the corpus of media text. After that, the attempt was made to match the target domain with source domains that dominated the selected data.

The results of the study indicate that in both languages the same conventional metaphors were used. The pandemic was metaphorically conceptualized as an opponent, either in the form of a human being, or as some kind of disaster such as fire, or war. Different elements of the metaphorical mapping were made salient and foregrounded, depending on the text type. The results of this study are largely in line with previous research on using metaphors to describe the process of dealing with diseases.

Media discourse in Croatia and Serbia preferred metaphorical mappings that entailed higher emotional valence and metaphorical mappings that are culturally salient. Since our research included the first several months of the pandemic in 2020, the prevalence of war and fire metaphors can be explained to some extent by the need to make people more responsible for taking care of their health and measures that were introduced to prevent, or at least slow down spreading of the pandemic. Some further quantitative research into the exact frequency of metaphors might indicate changes in the use of specific metaphors over time, which may account for certain preferences in terms of metaphorical mappings.

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‘QUO VADIS, CORONA?’: METAFORIČKO UOKVIRIVANJE PANDEMIJE U
JUŽNOSLOVENSKIM JEZICIMA

Rezime

Osnovni cilj ovog rada je bio da se izdvoje metaforička i metonimijska preslikavanja na jezičkom planu u odabranom korpusu novinskih članaka na hrvatskom i srpskom jeziku, da bi se utvrdio i opisao obrazac metaforičkog uokvirivanja koji je korišćen tokom pandemije 2020. godine. Rad je zasnovan na kvalitativnoj kontrastivnoj analizi korpusa. Sama analiza je obuhvatala nekoliko koraka. Najpre su izdvojeni tekstovi iz onlajn izdanja četiri vrste dnevnih novina, po dva na svakom jeziku, koji su sadržavali lekseme ‘kovid-19’, ‘korona’, ‘korona virus’, a zatim je analiziran kontekst u kome su se te lekseme javljale, i na mikro-planu, odn. u neposrednom kontekstu date rečenice, da bi se utvrdila pojmovna metafora ili metnimija u pozadini jezičkog izraza, i na makro-planu čitavog pasusa i teksta. Rezultati ove analize pokazuju da se u oba jezika koriste konvencionalne metafore kada se govori o ovoj bolesti, i to: virus se konceptualizuje kao čovek, konkretno kao lopov koji se prikrada i šunja, odnosno kao neprijatelj u ratu, i kao požar. Ovakvo metaforičko uokvirivanje pokazuje da se pandemija posmatra kao nešto što je van kontrole, a što napada silovito i razorno. U tom pogledu rezultati dobijeni u ovom istraživanju poklapaju su se sličnim istraživanjima u drugim jezicima.

Ključne reči: pojmovne metafore, pojmovne metonimije, kovid-19, hrvatski, srpski, metaforičko uokvirivanje

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