

**EXPLORING REGIONAL DIALECTS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY THROUGH  
LANGUAGE VARIATION**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the relationship between regional dialects and social identity through the lens of language variation. The study is based on a qualitative sociolinguistic approach and draws on major theoretical and empirical works in variationist sociolinguistics, interactional sociolinguistics, and identity studies. The analysis shows that regional dialects function not merely as geographically distributed speech forms, but as socially meaningful resources that index locality, belonging, authenticity, and group differentiation. The findings reveal that dialect features help construct social boundaries, perform identity, and generate different meanings depending on context and interaction. The article also argues that globalization and social mobility have not erased the importance of regional dialects; instead, they have transformed them into dynamic symbolic markers of place and community. The study concludes that regional dialects should be understood as active elements of social meaning-making and identity construction rather than as static linguistic remnants. This research contributes to the broader understanding of how language variation reflects and shapes social life.

**Keywords:** regional dialects, social identity, language variation, sociolinguistics, indexicality, style, identity construction, locality, enregisterment, speech community

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**Introduction**

Language is one of the most important social markers in human society. It functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic resource through which individuals and groups express identity, belonging, and difference. Sociolinguistic research has long demonstrated that linguistic differences are not random; rather, they are closely related to region, class, age, ethnicity, gender, social networks, and local cultural values [1], [2]. In this context, regional dialects occupy a particularly important place because they often signal where speakers come from, what communities they belong to, and how they position themselves socially [3], [4]. Therefore, the study of language variation cannot be limited to phonetic, lexical, or grammatical differences alone; it must also address how these variations construct and reflect social identity [5]. For a long time, regional dialects were mainly understood as products of geographical separation. However, modern sociolinguistic approaches argue that dialects are more than regional speech forms; they are socially meaningful resources that convey local identity, group solidarity, and symbolic distinction [2], [4]. One of the classic examples of this argument is Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard, which showed that certain phonetic features were not simply accidental pronunciations but meaningful markers of local loyalty and resistance to outside influence [6]. This finding made clear that language variation and language change are often motivated not only by internal linguistic processes but also by social meanings and identity-related choices [6], [7].

The relationship between language variation and social identity has become even more significant with the development of concepts such as **social meaning**, **indexicality**, and **style**. Eckert argues that linguistic variables do not merely correspond to fixed social categories; instead, they participate in what she calls an “indexical field,” where forms can evoke multiple social meanings depending on context [7], [8]. In this sense, dialect features may signal locality, authenticity, informality, solidarity, toughness, or even marginality, depending on how and where they are used [7]. This perspective expands the study of dialects beyond the question of “who speaks this way?” to include “why is this form chosen?” and “what social meanings does it produce?” [7], [8]. At the same time, identity itself is no longer treated as a stable or fixed category. According to Bucholtz and Hall, identity is not something speakers simply possess and display; rather, it is something they actively construct, negotiate, and perform in interaction [5]. Their sociocultural linguistic approach emphasizes that identity emerges through discourse, positioning, similarity and difference, authentication, and legitimacy [5]. From this perspective, the use of regional dialect features can be seen as more than habitual speech. It may function as a deliberate or semi-conscious strategy for aligning with a local community, distancing oneself from outsiders, expressing solidarity, or claiming authenticity [3], [5]. Thus, dialect variation becomes an important site for observing how social identities are produced in real communicative practice.

Processes such as globalization, urbanization, migration, and digital communication have further complicated the role of regional dialects in contemporary societies. On the one hand, increased mobility and media exposure have contributed to dialect leveling, reducing some traditional regional differences [3]. On the other hand, these same processes have often made local speech forms more noticeable and symbolically valuable, turning them into markers of regional pride, heritage, and belonging [3], [4]. Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson, in their study of “Pittsburghese,” show that dialect features can become enregistered, meaning that they are socially recognized and culturally circulated as symbols of a place and its people [3]. This demonstrates that regional dialects are not simply disappearing in the modern world; in many cases, they are being reinterpreted and revalorized as identity resources [3], [4]. The study of regional dialects is therefore important not only for theoretical linguistics but also for broader social and cultural analysis. Dialect features can influence educational practices, media representation, social inclusion, and public attitudes toward speakers [1], [4]. Some dialects are associated with prestige and authority, while others may be stigmatized, stereotyped, or treated as signs of low social status [4]. As a result, language variation often intersects with power relations, center-periphery dynamics, and the unequal distribution of cultural capital [4], [5]. Examining regional dialects thus helps researchers understand not only how language works, but also how society organizes difference, value, and belonging [5], [7].

From an academic point of view, this topic is especially significant because it connects classical variationist sociolinguistics with more recent identity-based and interactional approaches. Earlier studies focused primarily on identifying which linguistic features were used by which social groups. Later scholarship, however, has shifted attention to the meanings these forms carry, the styles they help create, and the processes through which they become socially recognized as emblematic of particular communities [3], [7], [8]. This shift has enriched the study of language variation by showing that dialect is not just a matter of geography or pronunciation, but also a matter of performance, ideology, and symbolic social practice [2], [5]. Against this background, the present article aims to explore the relationship between regional dialects and social identity through the lens of language variation. It focuses on how dialect

features function as markers of belonging, how they generate social meaning in interaction, and how they are reshaped by broader social changes in contemporary society. In doing so, the article argues that regional dialects should be understood not merely as linguistic remnants of geographical separation, but as dynamic and meaningful resources through which speakers construct, negotiate, and communicate social identity [3], [5], [7].

### Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative sociolinguistic research design** to examine the relationship between regional dialects and social identity through patterns of language variation. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the main objective of the article is not only to identify linguistic differences across regions, but also to interpret the social meanings attached to those differences and to understand how speakers use dialect features to construct, negotiate, and display identity in interaction [1], [5]. Since identity is socially produced and context-dependent, a methodology that combines variationist insights with interpretive analysis provides the most suitable framework for the present research [5], [7]. The study is grounded in the theoretical traditions of **variationist sociolinguistics**, **interactional sociolinguistics**, and **third-wave sociolinguistics**. Variationist sociolinguistics provides the basis for identifying systematic patterns in language use across speakers and communities, while interactional and third-wave approaches make it possible to analyze the social meanings of those patterns in relation to identity, style, and indexicality [1], [6], [7]. In particular, the study draws on Labov's model of socially meaningful variation, Bucholtz and Hall's sociocultural linguistic approach to identity, and Eckert's concept of the indexical field, which explains how linguistic features acquire multiple social meanings depending on context [5], [6], [8]. These frameworks together allow the study to move beyond a purely descriptive account of dialect differences and toward an explanation of how such differences function in social life.

The article uses a **descriptive-analytical method** based on the examination of selected linguistic features associated with regional dialects and their social interpretation. The descriptive dimension focuses on identifying dialectal variation at the phonological, lexical, and discourse levels, while the analytical dimension explores how these forms are linked to belonging, locality, authenticity, solidarity, prestige, or stigma [2], [4], [7]. Rather than treating dialect variation as a fixed regional marker, the study approaches dialect features as socially meaningful resources that speakers may use strategically or habitually in different communicative settings [3], [7].

The research relies on **secondary sociolinguistic data and documented case studies** drawn from established academic literature on language variation and identity. This includes classic and contemporary studies dealing with regional dialects, enregisterment, style, social meaning, and identity construction [3], [5], [6], [8]. The use of secondary sources is justified because the purpose of the article is conceptual and analytical: it aims to synthesize major theoretical and empirical insights in order to explain how regional dialects function as markers of social identity. In this sense, the methodology is based on a **thematic review and comparative analysis** of influential studies rather than on large-scale original fieldwork. Among the central cases considered are Labov's research on Martha's Vineyard, which demonstrates the social motivation of sound change [6], and Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson's work on Pittsburghese, which illustrates how regional forms become enregistered and associated with place-based identity [3]. These cases are especially relevant because they show that regional dialect features

are not merely residual forms of speech but active symbolic resources within local communities [3], [6]. Additional theoretical support is taken from works that discuss language and identity more broadly, especially those emphasizing style, indexicality, and discourse-based identity formation [2], [4], [5], [7].

First, the study identifies **recurring themes in the literature** related to regional dialects and identity. These themes include locality, group membership, authenticity, social differentiation, prestige, stigma, symbolic resistance, and stylistic performance [2], [3], [5]. This stage provides the conceptual categories necessary for organizing the literature and comparing different sociolinguistic perspectives. Second, the study examines how **specific dialect features are interpreted socially** within the selected research traditions. At this stage, attention is paid not only to the presence of linguistic variants but also to the meanings speakers and listeners associate with them. This reflects the principle that dialect forms do not carry a single fixed meaning; instead, they may index multiple social values depending on the social setting, the speaker's stance, and the broader ideological context [7], [8]. For example, the same regional feature may signal solidarity and authenticity in one interaction, while in another it may be interpreted as non-standard, informal, or socially marginal [4], [7].

Third, the study compares how different scholars explain the connection between **language variation and identity construction**. Variationist studies tend to emphasize correlations between linguistic variables and social categories, whereas more recent approaches focus on performance, positioning, and the dynamic production of social meaning [1], [5], [7]. By comparing these approaches, the article seeks to show that regional dialects should be understood both as patterned social variation and as interactional resources used in identity work. This comparative procedure helps integrate classical and contemporary perspectives into a coherent methodological framework. The first concept, variation, refers to the existence of alternative linguistic forms used by speakers in different social and geographical contexts [1], [6]. This concept is essential for identifying dialectal differences and for recognizing that such differences are systematic rather than random.

The second concept, indexicality, refers to the capacity of linguistic forms to point to social meanings such as locality, solidarity, authenticity, or status [7], [8]. In this article, indexicality is used to explain how regional dialects become associated with particular identities and how these associations may shift depending on context.

The third concept, identity construction, is used to interpret dialect use as part of a broader interactive process through which speakers position themselves and others [5]. Rather than assuming that dialect simply reflects a pre-existing identity, the study treats dialect use as one of the means through which identity is actively produced in discourse [5]. This study is primarily **theoretical and interpretive** in nature. It does not attempt to provide a full quantitative account of all dialect features across all speech communities. Nor does it claim that every speaker uses regional forms in the same way or for the same social purpose. Instead, the article focuses on the broader conceptual relationship between dialect variation and social identity, using representative cases from the literature to illustrate major patterns and arguments [3], [6], [7].

A further limitation is that the study relies on published academic sources, which means that the analysis is shaped by the scope, methods, and contexts of those original studies. Nevertheless, this approach remains useful because it allows the article to synthesize well-established findings

from different sociolinguistic traditions and to draw broader conclusions about the social significance of regional dialects [1], [5]. The goal is therefore not statistical generalization, but **analytical generalization**: to develop a coherent understanding of how regional dialects function as meaningful resources in the construction of social identity.

## Results

The analysis of the selected sociolinguistic literature shows that regional dialects function not merely as geographical speech forms, but as active social resources through which speakers express belonging, difference, authenticity, and group membership [2], [5], [7]. Across the studies reviewed, language variation consistently appears as a meaningful social practice rather than a random linguistic phenomenon. The findings indicate that dialect features gain significance when they become socially recognized, ideologically interpreted, and interactionally deployed in specific communities [3], [7], [8]. One of the most important results of this study is that **regional dialect features serve as markers of local identity**. In several classic and contemporary studies, speakers use dialect forms to signal attachment to place and community. Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard demonstrated that phonetic variation could index a speaker's positive orientation toward local identity and resistance to outside social pressure [6]. Similarly, research on Pittsburghese showed that dialect features may become culturally noticeable and socially circulated as emblems of a region and its people [3]. These cases suggest that dialects are not simply inherited linguistic habits; they often act as symbolic expressions of "where one belongs" and "who one is" within a social landscape [3], [6].

A second major result is that **dialect variation contributes to the construction of social boundaries**. The reviewed literature suggests that regional forms often help distinguish insiders from outsiders, locals from non-locals, and authentic members of a community from those perceived as peripheral [2], [5]. In this sense, dialect features function as boundary markers. Speakers may consciously or unconsciously use them to position themselves in relation to a group, while listeners interpret those forms as signs of social proximity or distance [5], [7]. This supports the view that language variation is deeply involved in the creation of social categories and not merely in their reflection [5]. The findings also reveal that **the social meanings of dialect forms are context-dependent**. A regional feature does not carry one single fixed meaning across all situations. Instead, its meaning shifts depending on the speaker, audience, interactional setting, and broader ideological context [7], [8]. For example, the same dialect feature may signal solidarity and authenticity in one context, but lack of education or low prestige in another [4], [7]. This result is especially consistent with Eckert's concept of the indexical field, which explains that linguistic variables may point to multiple related meanings rather than one direct social category [7], [8]. Therefore, regional dialects should be understood as flexible semiotic resources whose meanings are socially negotiated.

Another important result concerns the role of **style and performance** in dialect use. The literature suggests that speakers do not always use dialect features at a constant rate; instead, they may increase or reduce their use depending on the identity they wish to project in a given moment [4], [5], [7]. This means that dialect variation is closely linked to stylistic practice. Speakers may employ local forms to appear more authentic, friendly, informal, or regionally loyal, while avoiding them in contexts where prestige or standardness is expected [4]. Such findings demonstrate that regional dialects are part of identity performance and interactional positioning, not merely passive remnants of place-based speech traditions [5], [7]. The analysis

further shows that **regional dialects can become enregistered**, meaning that they become socially recognized as culturally meaningful sets of features associated with a specific place or social type [3]. When this happens, dialect forms begin to circulate beyond everyday speech and enter popular discourse, media representation, humor, local branding, and public stereotypes [3], [4]. The case of Pittsburghese is especially illustrative here, as certain features became widely recognized symbols of the city’s linguistic identity [3]. This result is significant because it demonstrates that dialects are shaped not only by speakers’ usage, but also by collective metalinguistic awareness and public discourse.

At the same time, the findings indicate that **regional dialects may carry both positive and negative social value**. In some communities, dialect features are associated with pride, solidarity, authenticity, and historical continuity [2], [3]. In others, they may be stigmatized as signs of rurality, backwardness, low education, or lack of refinement [4]. This ambivalent status shows that dialects are embedded in relations of power and ideology. Their value depends not only on linguistic structure but also on broader social hierarchies and dominant language attitudes [4], [5]. As a result, the use of dialect can simultaneously be an act of belonging and a site of social evaluation. A further result is that **modern social change has not eliminated dialect identity, but transformed it**. Globalization, urban mobility, migration, and mass media have undoubtedly influenced traditional dialect systems, often contributing to dialect leveling [3]. However, the reviewed studies suggest that dialects continue to survive as socially meaningful identity markers even when some traditional features weaken [3], [4]. In many cases, a smaller number of highly recognizable features remain symbolically important because they are enough to evoke locality and group identity [3]. This means that the social life of dialects may continue even under conditions of linguistic change, especially when those forms become culturally iconic.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that regional dialects play a central role in linking language variation to social identity. They function as markers of place, tools of group differentiation, resources for stylistic self-presentation, and carriers of ideological value [3], [5], [7]. Rather than viewing dialects as static speech systems tied only to geography, the findings support a more dynamic interpretation: regional dialects are socially meaningful forms that speakers use to negotiate who they are, where they belong, and how they want to be perceived [5], [7], [8].

**Table 1. Main Results on Regional Dialects and Social Identity**

No	Main result	Explanation	Supporting references
1	Dialects mark local identity	Regional features signal attachment to place, community, and local belonging	[3], [6]
2	Dialects create social boundaries	Linguistic variation distinguishes insiders from outsiders and reinforces group membership	[2], [5]
3	Dialect meanings are	The same feature may index authenticity, solidarity, stigma, or	[4], [7], [8]

No	Main result	Explanation	Supporting references
	context-dependent	informality depending on context	
4	Dialect use is stylistic and performative	Speakers adjust their use of dialect forms according to situation and identity goals	[4], [5], [7]
5	Dialects can become enregistered	Certain features become publicly recognized symbols of a region and its people	[3]
6	Dialects carry ideological value	Some dialects are prestigious, while others are stigmatized due to social attitudes and power relations	[4], [5]
7	Social change transforms rather than erases dialect identity	Globalization may reduce some features, but dialects remain meaningful identity resources	[3], [4]

These results suggest that the relationship between regional dialects and social identity is both stable and dynamic. It is stable because dialects repeatedly function as markers of locality and group belonging across different settings. At the same time, it is dynamic because their meanings shift according to context, ideology, and interactional purpose [5], [7]. Thus, the results support the general argument of this article: language variation should be studied not only as structural difference, but also as a form of social meaning-making through which identities are continuously constructed and interpreted [5], [8].

### Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that regional dialects are not merely linguistic by-products of geographical separation, but socially meaningful resources that play an active role in the construction and expression of identity [2], [5], [7]. This supports the broader argument in sociolinguistics that language variation must be understood not only as structural difference, but also as social practice. The results show that dialect features can index locality, group membership, authenticity, and distinction, which means that regional variation operates simultaneously at linguistic and symbolic levels [3], [7]. In this sense, the present discussion aligns with earlier work suggesting that dialects are central to how speakers position themselves within social space [4], [5]. One of the most significant implications of the results is that **local identity remains one of the strongest social meanings attached to regional dialects**. The reviewed studies demonstrate that speakers often use dialect features to signal attachment to place and to express affiliation with a particular community [3], [6]. This finding is especially important in light of common assumptions that globalization and mobility inevitably weaken local linguistic identities. While it is true that large-scale social change may reduce certain traditional dialect differences, the evidence suggests that locality still matters, and may even become more symbolically significant when communities feel pressure from outside cultural

influence [3], [6]. Thus, rather than disappearing, local identity may become more consciously expressed through selective dialect use.

The discussion also highlights that **regional dialects function as mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion**. Because dialect features are socially recognizable, they help define who counts as an “insider” and who is seen as an “outsider” [2], [5]. This means that dialect use is closely connected to the drawing of symbolic social boundaries. The significance of this finding lies in the fact that language is not simply reflecting social categories but actively helping to produce them [5]. In everyday interaction, speakers may use local forms to strengthen solidarity with members of their own group, while listeners may interpret the same forms as evidence of belonging or non-belonging. This makes dialect variation a powerful resource in community formation and social categorization [5], [7]. Another important point emerging from the results is that **the meaning of dialect forms is not fixed**. This is consistent with Eckert’s theory of the indexical field, which emphasizes that linguistic variables can evoke multiple related social meanings depending on context [7], [8]. A dialect feature may suggest authenticity and friendliness in one setting, but informality or low prestige in another [4], [7]. The discussion therefore suggests that regional dialects should not be analyzed through simple one-to-one relationships between form and social category. Instead, they need to be understood as flexible signs whose meanings are shaped by interaction, ideology, and stylistic practice [7], [8]. This point is crucial because it challenges overly deterministic interpretations of dialect and identity.

The findings further demonstrate that **style plays a central role in dialect use**. Speakers are not passive carriers of regional speech habits; they actively manage linguistic resources in order to project particular identities [4], [5]. In this respect, regional dialects are part of a speaker’s stylistic repertoire. A speaker may emphasize local forms in order to appear more authentic, more approachable, or more loyal to a community, while reducing them in contexts where standardized speech is associated with education, professionalism, or authority [4]. This supports interactional views of identity, especially the argument that identity is performed and negotiated rather than simply possessed [5]. From this perspective, dialect becomes a tool of self-presentation as much as a marker of origin. The concept of **enregisterment** is also especially valuable in interpreting the results. Once certain dialect features become publicly recognized as characteristic of a region, they take on a broader cultural life beyond ordinary speech [3]. They may appear in media, jokes, local branding, public discourse, and stereotypes, which strengthens the connection between language and place [3], [4]. The discussion suggests that this process helps explain why dialect identity often survives even when everyday usage patterns begin to shift. A community does not need to preserve every traditional feature in full for dialect identity to remain socially meaningful; sometimes a relatively small number of highly recognizable features are enough to sustain a shared symbolic identity [3]. This means that the durability of dialect identity depends not only on linguistic frequency, but also on cultural visibility and ideological circulation.

At the same time, the results make clear that **dialects are embedded in unequal power relations**. Some dialect forms are positively evaluated and associated with authenticity or charm, while others are stigmatized and linked to low status, lack of education, or backwardness [4]. This duality reveals that attitudes toward regional dialects are deeply ideological. Linguistic forms themselves are not inherently prestigious or inferior; rather, they acquire value through social judgment and institutional norms [4], [5]. The discussion therefore points to an important sociological dimension of dialect study: investigating regional variation also means examining



how societies distribute symbolic value and legitimacy among different groups of speakers [5]. In this sense, the study of dialect is inseparable from the study of inequality. The role of **modernization and globalization** also deserves careful interpretation. It would be too simplistic to conclude that contemporary mobility destroys regional speech identities. The results instead suggest a more complex process: some traditional differences may weaken, but socially salient features often remain and may even gain symbolic power [3], [4]. This indicates that language variation adapts to new conditions rather than disappearing under them. In late modern societies, identity is increasingly shaped through reflexive choices and public performance, which may actually increase the visibility of certain dialect forms [4], [7]. Therefore, regional dialects continue to matter because they offer speakers a meaningful way to express place-based belonging in an increasingly mobile and fluid social world.

From a theoretical perspective, the discussion shows that **classical variationist and newer sociocultural approaches should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory**. Variationist research remains essential for identifying patterns and correlations between linguistic features and social groups [1], [6]. However, such description alone is not sufficient to explain why those features matter socially. For that, concepts such as identity construction, style, and indexicality are necessary [5], [7], [8]. By combining these approaches, researchers can better understand both the distribution of regional forms and the meanings attached to them. The present study therefore supports an integrated view of sociolinguistic analysis in which quantitative patterning and qualitative interpretation work together. The discussion also has practical implications. Since regional dialects influence how speakers are perceived, they are relevant to education, media representation, public discourse, and cultural policy [1], [4]. If dialects are treated only as deviations from a standard language, then speakers may be unfairly marginalized. On the other hand, recognizing dialects as legitimate identity resources can promote linguistic inclusion and cultural diversity [2], [4]. This suggests that future work on dialects should not only document variation, but also address language attitudes and institutional responses to non-standard forms. Such an approach would be especially valuable in multilingual and socially diverse contexts, where regional speech often intersects with broader issues of class, ethnicity, and access to symbolic power [4], [5].

Overall, the discussion reinforces the central claim of this article: regional dialects are dynamic social signs through which speakers express, negotiate, and contest identity [3], [5], [7]. They matter because they connect language to place, social belonging, ideology, and self-presentation. The evidence reviewed here shows that dialect variation is not an outdated remnant of local isolation, but an active and evolving part of social life. For this reason, the exploration of regional dialects remains essential for understanding how language functions within communities and how identity is constructed through everyday linguistic practice [5], [7], [8].

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the relationship between regional dialects and social identity through the perspective of language variation. The analysis shows that regional dialects are not simply linguistic features tied to geographical areas, but socially meaningful resources through which speakers express belonging, locality, authenticity, and difference. In this sense, dialect variation should be understood not only as a structural aspect of language, but also as an important part of social interaction and identity construction. The study has demonstrated that dialect features function as markers of local identity, tools for drawing social boundaries, and

resources for stylistic self-presentation. At the same time, their meanings are not fixed; rather, they depend on context, social attitudes, and interactional purpose. This confirms that regional dialects operate within a dynamic field of social meaning where speakers actively use linguistic forms to position themselves and to be recognized by others. Another important conclusion is that processes such as globalization, mobility, and media expansion have not eliminated the social importance of regional dialects. Although some traditional features may weaken over time, dialects continue to survive as symbolic markers of place and community, especially when they become culturally recognizable and socially enregistered. This shows that regional dialects remain highly relevant in modern societies, not as static remnants of the past, but as evolving identity resources. The article also highlights the importance of combining variationist sociolinguistics with sociocultural and interactional approaches. While variationist studies help identify systematic linguistic patterns, concepts such as indexicality, style, and identity construction make it possible to explain why these patterns matter socially. Therefore, an integrated framework is necessary for a fuller understanding of how regional dialects function in everyday communication. Overall, the study confirms that regional dialects are a powerful link between language and society. They reveal how speakers negotiate identity, maintain local belonging, and respond to broader social change through linguistic practice. For this reason, the study of regional dialects remains essential for sociolinguistic research and for a broader understanding of how language shapes social life.

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