

# Blending Identities: Exploring the Linguistic, Cultural, and Pragmatic Dimensions of Manglish in the Malaysian Society

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## Abstract

Manglish, a hybrid linguistic form combining Malay and English, reflects Malaysia's multicultural identity and dynamic linguistic landscape. The article investigates the structural, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions of Manglish by analyzing dialogues from popular Malaysian television series, including *Kopitiam*, *Oh My English!* *Sepahtu Reunion Live*, and *KL Gangster*. The article examines key features of Manglish, such as its lexical creativity, syntactic flexibility, and cultural references, to highlight its role as a practical communication tool and a marker of national identity. Findings reveal that Manglish incorporates unique particles ('*lah*,' '*meh*'), code-switching, and hybrid expressions to enhance expressiveness and relatability. Its syntactic patterns, including simplified grammar and Malay word order with English vocabulary, showcase its adaptability to informal and multicultural contexts. Additionally, Manglish is deeply embedded in Malaysian culture, as seen in its frequent references to local customs, food, and values. Pragmatically, it serves diverse functions, from softening speech and fostering politeness to creating humor and reinforcing cultural bonds. Manglish challenges language standardization and proficiency despite its cultural significance, particularly in formal settings. The article underscores the need for balanced approaches that promote formal Malay and English skills while recognizing Manglish as a legitimate linguistic phenomenon. The article concludes that Manglish is more than a hybrid language- it is a dynamic symbol of Malaysia's cultural resilience and adaptability in a globalized world. Its evolution and continued prominence warrant further exploration to understand its impact on language, identity, and communication.

**Keywords:** Manglish, code-switching, multicultural identity, linguistic hybridity, Malaysian culture

## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, languages often intersect, creating unique linguistic hybrids that reflect the diverse cultural identities of their speakers (Alim & Pennycook, 2008). One such fascinating linguistic blend is Manglish, a colloquial fusion of Malay and English that has emerged as a distinct mode of communication in Malaysia (Kim & Hall, 2019). This linguistic phenomenon is not merely a result of the coexistence of Malay, the national language, and English, the second language, but also a reflection of Malaysia's multicultural society, historical influences, and modern-day global interactions. Manglish is more than a casual conversational tool; it represents an evolving cultural artifact that bridges traditional and contemporary identities.

Language is a dynamic entity that evolves in response to the needs and interactions of its speakers (Lee et al., 2009). In Malaysia, the coexistence of multiple languages- including Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil, and many more- has cultivated an environment where code-switching (AlAfnan, 2021) and language blending are commonplace. Manglish, a product of this linguistic fluidity, has become an essential aspect of communication among Malaysians, particularly in urban areas (Albury, 2017). From informal conversations to advertisements, social media (Alafnan, 2025a), and even popular culture, Manglish reflects the adaptability of language in meeting the demands of a linguistically rich society.

The historical roots of Manglish can be traced back to Malaysia's colonial past when English was introduced as a medium of administration and education (Ng & Cavallaro, 2019). Over time, the widespread use of English influenced

the local vernacular, incorporating English words, phrases, and grammatical structures into Malay speech. This integration was further shaped by Malaysia's post-independence efforts to modernize while preserving its linguistic heritage. As English continued to serve as a global lingua franca, its presence in Malaysia grew, particularly in education, business, and media (Hashim, 2014). The interplay between these forces laid the foundation for the development of Manglish as a practical, relatable, and expressive form of communication.

Manglish is characterized by its unique vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation, distinguishing it from standard English or Malay (Mohamad, 2020). For instance, phrases like *'Can or not?'* (meaning *'Is it possible?'*) or *'Don't la'* (a softened way of saying *'Don't do that'*) exemplify the seamless blending of English words with Malay grammatical structures. This linguistic flexibility enables speakers to express themselves with a level of nuance and familiarity that neither language alone can fully capture. Additionally, Manglish often incorporates cultural references and idiomatic expressions that are uniquely Malaysian, further reinforcing its role as a medium for cultural identity (Azhar, 2019; Panneerselvam, 2020).

The prevalence of Manglish is not without its challenges and controversies (Norizam, 2014; Yusuf et al., 2024). Critics argue its widespread use, particularly among younger generations, may undermine standard English or Malay proficiency (Wahid & Salwa, 2020). Educators and linguists have raised concerns about the potential for Manglish to blur the boundaries between formal and informal communication, potentially leading to confusion or reduced language competency in professional and academic settings. However, proponents of Manglish view it as a testament to Malaysia's linguistic diversity and creativity (Leo & David, 2023). They argue that it enriches communication by allowing speakers to navigate complex cultural and social contexts easily.

Despite these debates, it is clear that Manglish plays a vital role in Malaysian society (Serip Mohamad & Shafie, 2024). It fosters inclusivity by providing a common ground for speakers of different linguistic backgrounds, reflecting the nation's multicultural essence. Manglish is a unifying force that bridges gaps and facilitates understanding in a country where ethnicity, language, and culture intersect. Its widespread use in social media, entertainment, and everyday interactions underscores its relevance and adaptability in a rapidly changing world (Handran, 2019).

In exploring the intricacies of Manglish, it is crucial to examine its linguistic features, historical development, and cultural significance. This article aims to provide a comprehensive guide to understanding Manglish as a unique blend of Malay and English. By analyzing its role in contemporary Malaysian society, this article highlights how Manglish reflects the dynamic interplay of language, culture, and identity. Ultimately, this guide demonstrates that Manglish is not merely a linguistic anomaly but a vibrant and evolving representation of Malaysia's rich cultural tapestry.

## 2. Literature Review

The study of linguistic hybridity has long been a subject of interest for researchers examining the intersection of language, culture, and identity (Cho & Yi, 2019; Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2013). In multilingual societies, such as Malaysia, blending languages is a functional necessity and a cultural phenomenon. Manglish is a prime example of this interplay, representing Malaysians' linguistic creativity and adaptability. This literature review explores the scholarly discourse surrounding the emergence, characteristics, and sociolinguistic implications of Manglish, drawing insights from studies on language contact, code-switching, and hybrid languages.

Research on language contact provides a critical framework for understanding the origins of Manglish (Maher, 2017; Maskat et al., 2024). Scholars such as Thomason and Kaufman (2024) have emphasized the role of social and historical factors in shaping linguistic interactions. In Malaysia, the colonial introduction of English as the medium of education and administration laid the groundwork for its integration into the local vernacular. According to Omar (1992), the British colonial period created a linguistic hierarchy, positioning English as the prestige language while Malay remained central to cultural identity. This historical context fostered the conditions for language blending, with English gradually permeating various aspects of daily communication (AlAfnan & Dela Cruz-Rudio, 2023).

Post-independence policies further shaped the development of Manglish. The National Language Act of 1967 established Malay as the official language, but English maintained a significant role in education, commerce, and international relations. Scholars like Majid (2020) and Low (2016) argue that this dual-language environment encouraged the pragmatic mixing of Malay and English, particularly in urban areas where bilingualism was most prevalent. Ghani (2021) and Idrus (2021) highlight how Manglish emerged not as a mere byproduct of language contact but as a deliberate linguistic strategy for navigating Malaysia's multicultural landscape.

Sociolinguistic research has widely documented Manglish's distinctive features. Tay et al. (2016) identify code-switching as a hallmark of Manglish, where speakers effortlessly alternate between Malay and English within a single conversation. This practice reflects the fluid boundaries between the two languages and allows speakers to

convey nuanced meanings. For instance, phrases like '*I makan already*' (I have eaten) or '*You balik kampung ah?*' (Are you returning to your hometown?) illustrate the integration of Malay vocabulary with English sentence structures.

Researchers have also examined the syntactic and phonological patterns unique to Manglish (Vollmann & Wooi, 2019). De Weerd (2021) notes that Manglish often simplifies English grammar, adapting it to Malay linguistic norms. For example, omitting articles ('*I go market*') and using particles like '*lah,*' '*meh,*' and '*ah*' add an expressive, conversational tone to speech. These features, while informal, have become markers of Malaysian identity, reinforcing the idea that Manglish is a culturally embedded form of communication.

The sociolinguistic significance of Manglish lies in its role as a medium of identity and inclusivity. Scholars such as Pillai (2024) argue that Manglish is a linguistic bridge, enabling communication across Malaysia's ethnolinguistic communities. In a country where Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Indigenous groups coexist, Manglish functions as a neutral, non-ethnicized language that fosters social cohesion. This inclusivity is particularly evident in urban settings, where diverse populations interact daily.

However, the widespread use of Manglish has sparked debates about its impact on language proficiency. Ali (2015) expresses concerns that Manglish may dilute standard English and Malay, particularly among younger generations. While advantageous in casual contexts, the informal nature of Manglish may hinder the development of formal language skills required in academic and professional settings. On the other hand, scholars like Albury (2021) view Manglish as a complementary linguistic resource rather than a threat, emphasizing its role in enriching Malaysia's linguistic repertoire.

The role of Manglish in digital communication has also garnered attention in recent years. Social media platforms (Alafnan, 2025b, 2024, 2018), messaging apps, and online forums have become key domains for its proliferation. Abd Latib et al. (2023) highlight how Malaysians use Manglish to create relatable, humorous, and context-specific content. This digital presence not only amplifies Manglish's visibility but also underscores its adaptability to new modes of communication.

Despite the growing body of research on Manglish, several gaps and challenges remain. One notable challenge is the lack of standardized definitions and frameworks for studying hybrid languages. As David and Govindasamy (2005) point out, the fluid nature of Manglish complicates efforts to categorize its linguistic features systematically. Manglish's informal status also escapes scholarly attention as researchers focus on standard or formal language varieties.

Nonetheless, the study of Manglish offers valuable opportunities for exploring broader themes in sociolinguistics. By examining how Manglish negotiates cultural identity, power dynamics, and globalization, researchers can gain insights into how language adapts to complex social environments. Furthermore, understanding the evolution of Manglish may inform language policy and education in multilingual settings, highlighting the importance of embracing linguistic diversity.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs an empirical approach to examine the unique blend of Malay and English in Manglish. It uses data collected from popular Malaysian television series that prominently feature Manglish in their dialogues. These series provide a rich source of natural language use in everyday Malaysian contexts. By analyzing their scripts and linguistic patterns, this study seeks to identify the structural, lexical, and cultural characteristics of Manglish while highlighting its role in shaping cultural identity and communication in Malaysia.

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis methodology suitable for examining language use in naturalistic settings. Malaysian television series were selected as primary data sources because they reflect authentic interactions and showcase how Manglish operates within various social contexts. The focus on scripted media is justified by the widespread use of Manglish in entertainment, where it resonates with audiences due to its relatability and cultural specificity.

The data for this study were derived from the following popular Malaysian television series:

- *Kopitiam* (1998-2003, reboot in 2019): A sitcom set in a coffee shop, it features characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds and is renowned for using Manglish to depict everyday conversations in urban Malaysia.
- *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* (1997-2007): While a Singaporean series, it gained popularity in Malaysia and is known for its heavy use of Singlish/Manglish, especially in the character of Phua Chu Kang, whose speech reflects linguistic hybridity.
- *Oh My English!* (2012-2017): An educational comedy series designed to teach English to Malaysian audiences while incorporating Manglish as a relatable linguistic medium.

- SepahTu Reunion Live (2016-present): A comedy sketch show that frequently employs Manglish in its humorous takes on Malaysian life and culture.
- KL Gangster (2011): A Malaysian action-drama film series known for incorporating Manglish in its portrayal of street slang and informal communication.

These series were chosen for their popularity, cultural significance, and heavy use of Manglish, making them ideal sources for analyzing the language's features and functions.

To ensure a representative analysis, episodes from each series were purposively sampled based on the following criteria:

- Episodes with diverse social settings (e.g., family, workplace, and street conversations).
- Episodes featuring characters from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.
- Dialogues that prominently mix Malay and English or use Manglish-specific phrases and structures.

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed to identify key linguistic and cultural features of Manglish. The analysis focused on the following aspects:

Table 1. Linguistic and cultural features analyzed

Features	Description
Lexical Features	Identification of words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions unique to Manglish, such as the use of particles ("lah," "meh") and mixed vocabulary (e.g., "Can makan here or tapau?").
Syntactic Patterns	Examination of sentence structures that blend Malay and English grammar, such as the omission of articles or the use of Malay syntax with English vocabulary.
Pragmatic Functions	An analysis of how manglish conveys politeness, humor, or cultural references, reflecting its role in social interactions.
Cultural References	Identification of phrases or expressions that embody Malaysian culture, including food, festivals, and colloquialisms.

To ensure reliability, the analysis was conducted in two stages: (1) an initial coding phase to identify recurring patterns and (2) a secondary review to refine categories and ensure consistency. Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across the selected series and consulting existing literature on Manglish.

The data for this study were sourced from publicly available television series and films, ensuring that no personal or sensitive information was involved. Proper citations and references were included to acknowledge the creators and producers of the content analyzed. While television series provide valuable insights into Manglish, their scripted nature may not fully capture spontaneous language use. By leveraging the linguistic richness of Malaysian television series, this study examines Manglish as a dynamic and culturally embedded form of communication. The findings aim to contribute to the broader understanding of hybrid languages and their significance in multilingual societies.

#### 4. Findings

This section presents the detailed findings from the analysis of Manglish in popular Malaysian television series, focusing on its lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, and cultural aspects. The examples and data illustrate how Manglish operates as a dynamic linguistic system and reflects Malaysia's multicultural identity.

Regarding lexical features, Manglish demonstrates a unique blend of Malay and English vocabulary, enriched by localized particles and hybrid expressions. The most prominent lexical features include particles, code-switching, and the integration of loanwords (see Table 2).

Table 2. Lexical features of Manglish with examples

Lexical Feature	Description	Example	Source
Particles	Add emphasis or tone, often signaling politeness or informality.	'Don't worry la, it's fine.'	Kopitiam
Code-switching	Switching between Malay and English within a sentence or phrase.	'You makan already or not?'	Oh My English!
Loanwords	English words adapted into Malay or vice versa.	'We need to settle this cepat-cepat.'	SepahTu Reunion Live
Colloquial expressions	Slang or idiomatic phrases common in Manglish.	'Walao, that one so expensive lah!'	Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd

These features highlight how Manglish expresses familiarity, relatability, and cultural nuances. Using particles like 'lah' and 'meh' adds a distinctly Malaysian tone, making conversations feel personal and locally grounded.

Concerning syntactic patterns, Manglish syntax exhibits a mix of simplified English grammar, Malay sentence structures, and innovative hybrids. The practical need for efficient and effective communication shapes these patterns (see Table 3).

Table 3. Syntactic features of Manglish with examples

Syntactic Pattern	Description	Example	Source
<b>Simplified Grammar</b>	Simplification of English grammar, often omitting articles or auxiliary verbs.	<i>'I go shopping already.'</i>	KL Gangster
<b>Malay Syntax with English Vocabulary</b>	Malay grammatical structure combined with English words.	<i>'You want balik kampung or not?'</i>	Kopitiam
<b>Embedded Questions</b>	Malay question patterns are used with English vocabulary.	"Can or not?"	Oh My English!
<b>Reduplication for Emphasis</b>	Repetition of words, a common Malay feature, integrated into English.	<i>'This one is big-big deal lah!'</i>	Sepahtu Reunion Live

These syntactic adaptations demonstrate Manglish's flexibility in accommodating both languages while catering to Malaysian speakers' cultural and social norms.

For pragmatic patterns, Manglish plays a critical role in facilitating communication by addressing social norms, creating humor, and reinforcing politeness (Alafnan, 2022). The pragmatic functions identified include softening directives, building rapport, and expressing cultural references (see Table 4).

Table 4. Pragmatic functions of Manglish with examples

Pragmatic Function	Description	Example	Context	Source
<b>Softening Speech</b>	Using particles to make statements less direct or harsh.	<i>'Don't disturb la, he's busy.'</i>	Casual conversation	Oh My English!
<b>Humor</b>	Incorporating local slang or exaggeration to create humor.	<i>'Why so kiasu one?'</i>	Comedy setting	Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd
<b>Cultural Bonding</b>	Referring to shared cultural experiences or traditions.	<i>'Let's go makan some roti canai!'</i>	Social interaction	Kopitiam

These functions illustrate how Manglish communicates and fosters social harmony and community among speakers.

Manglish is closely intertwined with Malaysian culture, incorporating references to food, traditions, and social norms. These references make Manglish a powerful tool for expressing identity and shared values (see Table 5).

Table 5. Cultural references in Manglish

Cultural Theme	Example	Context	Source
<b>Food and Dining</b>	<i>'I want nasi lemak, so sedap lah!'</i>	Highlighting local cuisine	Kopitiam
<b>Festivals and Customs</b>	<i>'Got balik kampung plans this Raya?'</i>	Discussing traditional celebrations	Sepahtu Reunion Live
<b>Everyday Slang</b>	<i>'Eh, don't be so lansi can?'</i>	Reflecting local street language	KL Gangster

These references reinforce Manglish's role as a cultural marker, connecting language to Malaysian society's lived experiences.

The findings demonstrate that Manglish is a dynamic linguistic phenomenon characterized by lexical creativity (i.e., including particles, code-switching, and localized expressions), syntactic flexibility (i.e., blending English grammar with Malay sentence structures), pragmatic versatility (i.e., fostering politeness (Alafnan, 2014), humor, and cultural bonding), and building strong cultural ties through references to Malaysian food, traditions, and daily life. These features position Manglish as a practical and culturally rich form of communication that resonates deeply with Malaysian society. The following section will discuss these findings and their implications for broader sociolinguistic theories.

### 5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the rich linguistic and cultural dimensions of Manglish, demonstrating its significance as a hybrid language that reflects Malaysia's multicultural society. By analyzing its lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features, as well as its cultural references, it is evident that Manglish serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of identity and inclusivity. This section elaborates on the implications of these findings, emphasizing the sociolinguistic and cultural relevance of Manglish while addressing the challenges associated with its use.

The lexical and syntactic features of Manglish showcase its adaptability and creativity in combining elements of Malay

and English. The frequent use of particles like *'lah,' 'meh,'* and *'ah'* adds a uniquely Malaysian flavor to conversations, enabling speakers to express tone, emphasis, and relational nuances that are not easily conveyed in standard English or Malay. For instance, the phrase *'Don't la like that'* softens the directive, making it politer and more relatable. Similarly, Malay and English vocabulary are mixed, as seen in phrases like *'Can makan here or tapau?'* (Can you eat here or take away?), demonstrates how Manglish caters to the practical needs of bilingual speakers.

This syntactic flexibility is particularly valuable in informal and multicultural settings, where speakers often navigate between languages to convey meaning effectively. Blending Malay syntax with English vocabulary, such as *'You want balik kampung or not?'* (Are you returning to your hometown?), reflects the fluid boundaries between the two languages (AlAfnan, 2015). This ability to switch seamlessly between linguistic systems enhances communication and reinforces a sense of belonging among Malaysians with a standard linguistic repertoire.

Manglish is deeply rooted in Malaysian culture, and its use in popular media underscores its role as a vehicle for cultural representation. Including culturally specific references, such as *'nasi lemak,' 'tapau,'* and *'kampung,'* strengthens the connection between language and identity. By incorporating these elements into their dialogues, television series like *Kopitiam* and *Oh My English!* reflect the everyday experiences and values of Malaysian society. Manglish is a unifying force in a country with diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. Its neutrality as a non-ethnicized language makes it an inclusive medium for bridging community gaps. For instance, in series like *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* and *Sepahtu Reunion Live*, Manglish enables characters from different backgrounds to interact in ways that feel authentic and relatable to viewers. This inclusivity is critical in urban areas, where multiculturalism is a defining feature of social life.

One of the most striking features of Manglish is its pragmatic versatility. It is a tool for navigating the complexities of social interactions, whether through humor, politeness, or cultural bonding. The use of humor, as seen in *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* and *Sepahtu Reunion Live*, relies heavily on Manglish's ability to incorporate local slang, idioms, and wordplay. For example, phrases like *'Why so kiasu one?'* (Why are you so competitive?) use a mix of languages to create humor that resonates with Malaysian audiences. Manglish also softens speech and fosters politeness. Phrases like *'Don't disturb la, he tired'* illustrate how particles and informal syntax can make directives less abrupt, fostering a more harmonious interaction. This adaptability to various conversational contexts highlights the practical utility of Manglish in daily life.

While Manglish is celebrated for its creativity and cultural relevance, its widespread use raises language proficiency and standardization concerns. Critics argue that the informal nature of Manglish, particularly its grammatical simplifications, may undermine the development of standard English and Malay skills, especially among younger generations. This is evident in educational settings, where students may struggle to distinguish between formal and informal language use. For instance, omitting articles or using Malay syntax in English sentences, as seen in *'I go market already,'* may hinder proficiency in formal English writing. Additionally, the dominance of Manglish in informal communication could lead to a blurring of linguistic boundaries, making it difficult to establish clear standards for formal contexts. This poses a challenge for educators and policymakers who aim to promote linguistic competence in both Malay and English while recognizing the cultural significance of Manglish. Balancing these priorities requires a nuanced approach that values linguistic diversity while addressing the need for formal language skills.

The rise of digital media has amplified the visibility and relevance of Manglish, making it a prominent feature of online communication and popular culture. Social media platforms (AlAfnan, 2025c), messaging apps, and online forums have become key domains for the proliferation of Manglish, often used to create relatable and humorous content. This digital presence not only reflects the adaptability of Manglish to new communication technologies but also reinforces its role as a cultural marker in the modern era. Television series like *Oh My English!* have further popularized Manglish by incorporating it into educational and entertainment content. By normalizing the use of Manglish, such media contribute to its acceptance as a legitimate form of linguistic expression. However, this visibility also highlights the need for further research on how Manglish evolves in response to changing social and technological landscapes.

The discussion of Manglish reveals its dual role as a practical communication tool and a cultural artifact. Its lexical creativity, syntactic flexibility, and pragmatic versatility make it a dynamic and inclusive language that reflects Malaysia's multicultural identity. At the same time, the challenges associated with its use, particularly in formal settings, underscore the importance of promoting balanced linguistic competence. Ultimately, Manglish is more than just a blend of Malay and English; it is a testament to Malaysia's linguistic diversity and cultural resilience. By embracing its unique features while addressing its limitations, Malaysians can celebrate Manglish as a symbol of their shared identity in an increasingly globalized world. Further research on its evolution, particularly in digital and educational contexts, will contribute to a deeper understanding of its role in shaping the future of language and communication in Malaysia.

## 6. Conclusion

Manglish is a linguistic testament to Malaysia's rich cultural diversity and adaptability. Rooted in the country's colonial

history and evolving through decades of social and linguistic interaction, Manglish has become a functional, creative, and inclusive mode of communication. It reflects the everyday realities of a multilingual society, bridging gaps between ethnic groups and adapting to informal, digital, and pop culture contexts.

This study has explored the linguistic features, cultural significance, and pragmatic versatility of Manglish, using empirical data from popular Malaysian television series. The findings illustrate how Manglish's lexical creativity, syntactic flexibility, and cultural references enrich communication and reinforce a shared national identity. Manglish has become an indispensable part of Malaysia's linguistic landscape through its widespread use in media, casual conversations, and online interactions. However, the challenges associated with Manglish, particularly its impact on formal language proficiency, highlight the need for a balanced approach. Policymakers, educators, and researchers must address these concerns without undermining Manglish's cultural and social values. Encouraging the development of standard Malay and English skills while recognizing Manglish as a legitimate linguistic phenomenon can help preserve its unique role in Malaysian society.

Manglish is more than just a hybrid language; it symbolizes Malaysia's multicultural identity and ability to adapt to an increasingly globalized world. Its continued evolution and prominence offer valuable insights into the dynamic nature of language and culture, making it a topic worthy of further exploration. Malaysians celebrate the linguistic diversity that defines their nation by embracing Manglish as a reflection of their collective identity.

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#### **Authors contributions**

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No additional data are available.

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