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## SWISS MULTILINGUALISM: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO LANGUAGE POLICY

**Abstract.** Specific historical and linguistic circumstances gave way to a Swiss original concept of a multilingual state as the nation of the will. The discussion concerns problems inherent to the unity-in-diversity philosophy and the proportional representation of national languages within the framework of the Swiss constitution, including the legislation protecting language and the language principles obtaining in Switzerland. Drawing on the language ideology studies, this paper shows how the linguistic diversity is designed on the administrative level and what provisions have been made to maintain multilingualism. The discussion also addresses and concludes on the ever timely questions of diversity, pluralism and intergroup cooperation fostered by the Swiss political and social culture.

*Keywords:* multilingualism, linguistic peace, territoriality principle, federal constitution.

### 1. Introduction

The Swiss owe their specific national identity to political institutions which have made a marked contribution to the unification of different language communities. The Swiss government builds on the cooperation of four major parties which take up about 80 per cent of the electorate. The government is made up of seven equal-rank ministers, including a president elected by rotational appointment. The participatory democracy in Switzerland means that the main instruments of direct democracy, i.e. legislative initiative and the right of referendum, rests with the citizens (Brunetti, 1997; Huld & Lejins, 1988; Schaffner, 1998). The major political forces collaborate jointly within the governmental system. The exclusion of any political party would be regarded as a mistake, since peace can be attainable only if the main actors are included in discussion. In other words, dialogue is not easy

but worth the effort. For a long time the Swiss have professed this philosophy which is distinguished by the unity-in-diversity formula with regard to every field of life, not least language issues. Therefore, this paper aims to show how linguistic diversity is addressed in the Swiss political context and what effects some historical facts have on the current language policy in Switzerland. In what follows, by reviewing the literature on language ideology, I argue that Swiss multilingualism is not only rooted in but also sustained by the tradition of federalism, though with moderate success.

### 1.1. The Swiss national identity

The tenet of ‘unity in diversity’ is that unity should not subvert diversity and diversity should not dissolve unity. In effect, unity will not equal suppression while individualism will not be eradicated nor will it break up the unity. Such circumstances have rendered national identity an intricate concept. A multi-ethnic nation regarded as a political organization and wilful association develops its strength as indissoluble as ethnic bonds. It is united by tradition, the shared goals and above all by internal bonds of its people with their regional and national identities (Smolicz, 1990).

The principles of federalism aspire to secure a peaceful coexistence between nations by averting conflicts. The Swiss idea of nation-building has been successful due to the lack of possibilities to establish a state of one language, one culture and one religion (Linder, 1996). As opposed to big European nation-states, the languages of Switzerland do not typify national sentiments and major consolidating forces (Wardhaugh, 1987, p. 4; Watts, 1997, p. 299). The ‘national identity’ rather denotes a combination of a few vital elements (cf. Watts, 1988, 1996). The Swiss ideology of nationhood appeals to democracy, federalism and freedom of religion and language, i.e. values that are fundamental and timeless. These values inform the sense of community which becomes a common denominator for the diversity of languages, customs, cultures and religions (cf. Tanner, 1998). Such a model of state came to be referred to as the ‘Swiss phenomenon’. Switzerland is named a *Willensnation* (‘nation of the will’), which means a “political nation” (Bańbula, 1998, p. 133) and a “voluntary federation” (Haugen, 1985, p. 15). Therefore, Switzerland is defined *by* its linguistic diversity and not *in spite of* it (cf. Lüthy, 1962; Weilenmann, 1925, p. 221). This perspective renders the Swiss pluralism “an imperative national value” which is regarded as “*raison d’être* of its national existence” (Billigmeier, 1979, p. viii).

Swiss societal multilingualism has its roots in the historical development of the federation defined as a union of diverse ethnic groups and nationalities

which are politically supervised by one state. The decentralising forces of federalism allowed the linguistic diversity to perpetuate and, importantly, have consigned language issues to a cantonal level where many problems hard to deal with at a national level have become depoliticised at the communal level (cf. Rash, 1998, p. 29). Integration does not equal homogeneity in the Swiss context since only dissimilar elements may be integrated. Integration may be studied either as a social process or as its consequences. Since the integration of a social system is distinguished by relativity and gradation, it would be hard to argue that full integration proves better than a loose one. Indeed some degree of integration is essential for the functioning of a social system.

### **1.2. Languages and peace**

McRae (1983, p. 229) considers the Confederation to be “the most successful multilingual state in modern history”. In his opinion, the coexistence of languages in Switzerland “has been built upon an intricate combination of historical, structural, attitudinal, and institutional factors skilfully and patiently woven into a reinforcing pattern by human effort and statesmanship” (McRae, 1983, p. 240). No single majority can emerge with respect to language, culture or religion, but only allied minorities depending on the problem in question (Schmid, 2001).

The present language distribution in Switzerland goes back to the Middle Ages when Swiss states formed a loose confederation (Studer, 1998). It was a military defensive alliance of thirteen cantons that expanded from the 1291 original bond made between the first three cantons. The language of the first leagues of cantons was German which maintained its official status in the Confederation until 1798 when it fell down under the French invasion. This was the onset of the Napoleonic Helvetic Republic which collapsed in 1803. The term *Helvetia* was promoted by Swiss humanists who regarded the Celtic Helvetic peoples as the chief Germanic tribe in that region. Hence, the name *Confoederatio Helvetica* which is the Latin translation of the German *Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft* (cf. Szulc, 1999, p. 104). Drafted in Paris, its constitution provided for the equal status of German, French and Italian for the first time in the Swiss history (cf. Anders, 1990, p. 21). Between 1798 and 1848, the political aura changed and so did the linguistic distribution. In 1815 the Confederation returned to German, but the cantons maintained multilingual principles (Mayer, 1968, p. 713; Watts, 1997, p. 281). At that time the term ‘confederation’ denoted a system of sovereign states based on a treaty. In turn, the term ‘federation’ refers to a state where power is shared by the central government and local governments of

the member cantons. Based on this distinction, Switzerland between 1815 and 1848 is referred to as a confederation whereas for the later period the name 'federation' came to be used.

The constitution of 1848 laid the foundation for parity of the three officially restored languages. The federation and cantons developed a satisfactory power-sharing. The federal state assumed control over administration, the army and the federal capital. The tensions between languages prove the everlasting rivalries between communities, but the language-group awareness is mostly symbolic (cf. Stevenson, 1990, p. 230). The 'Swiss' conflicts arise from specific relations between language groups which came to be referred to as the *Röstigraben* ('Rösti trench') between French- and German-speaking Swiss, political strife in bilingual cities (Freiburg/Fribourg and Biel/Bienne), the isolation of Swiss German due to the wide use of spoken dialects (cf. the so-called 'Basel-Lörrach effect') and the receding Romansh patches in southeastern Switzerland (cf. Nelde, 1991, p. 63).

### **1.3. The canton of Jura**

The canton of Jura demonstrates a rare example of intense linguistic sentiments which took over conciliatory forces of the cantonal politics. Though the conflict had a denominational and economic character, language was soon made a symbol of separation and cultural identity (cf. Zielińska, 2009, p. 133). The Jura region was the northern part of Berne and the second biggest Swiss canton. It was established in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna by Prussia, Great Britain, Austria and Russia. In 1978 after many turbulent years the region of Jura was proclaimed a canton. Before 1978 riots were a common occurrence as the Jurassian minority in the fight for autonomy accused Berne of discrimination. The Jura region had a double minority, i.e. both Catholic and Protestant francophones lived in a Protestant and German-speaking canton, additionally distinguished by social and economic differences. The disputes over the future of Jura divided Jurassians into two opposed parties. After World War II, the conflict intensified not only between the Jura and Berne, but also among the people of the Jura, i.e. between 'separatists' and Bernese 'loyalists'. In 1967 the authorities in Berne put forward three solutions to the situation: to maintain the *status quo*, to introduce autonomy, or to establish a new canton. In 1970 the canton of Berne adopted an amendment to the constitution thereby giving the assent to divide the canton. In 1974 and 1975 Jurassians went to a referendum. The people from the northern areas were in favour of the partition whereas those living in the southern areas preferred to stay with Berne. The year 1978 began with preparations for the

establishment of a new canton. First, the constituent assembly drafted the constitution for the Jura and a year later the constitution was adopted by the Jurassians. In consequence, the Jura was created as the 26<sup>th</sup> canton of the federation.

## **2. Languages in the Swiss constitution**

In 1848 multilingualism was officially resolved by the Federal Constitution which made the country's three main languages equal in Article 119. In 1874 Article 119 changed its numbering to 116 when the constitution underwent a thorough revision (McRae, 1983, p. 119). Article 116 makes a distinction between the Confederation's three official and the four national languages, by including Romansh in the latter group. Another revision of the article was initiated in 1985 on a motion from the canton of Grisons. The motion aimed to amend Article 116 on the grounds that it did not provide for adequate protection and promotion of the most endangered national languages. In other words, Romansh should be given official status and the historical regions of minority languages should be safeguarded. In April 1999 came the last major change to the Constitution. As a result, the federation now has the constitutional duty to meet the requirements regarding the country's official multilingualism, which is of special importance for the integration of ethnic minorities. The federal authorities coordinate all levels of public education that are within cantonal jurisdiction. In addition, the federation provides a disproportional support for Grisons and Ticino to foster Romansh and Italian on the grounds that the economic potential of these two cantons is too weak to realize such tasks on their own.

### **2.1. German**

Article 116 of the Swiss constitution was harshly criticized for the ambiguity about the German language (Berthele, 2016, p. 33). The constitution makes reference only to the standard variety of German and not to the Alemannic dialects of Swiss German. Consequently, no account is taken of the diglossic situation in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland. Standard German is considered to be a foreign or a 'second' language (Watts, 2001, p. 302), and therefore is used mostly in writing but rarely in speaking, especially in direct conversation among the Swiss. The issue whether to regard the Alemannic variety as a language or a dialect has not been conclusively resolved.

## 2.2. French

The centralized policy on language connotes prestige only with the French standard, thereby dismissing dialects (*patois*) as inferior (Watts, 1988, p. 319). The Swiss variety of French is very much like standard French. Historically, the marked divisions in religion, politics, economy, education, culture and social customs affected the mentality of the French Swiss. The recurring problem of diglossia on the German-speaking territory is the source of unabated laments on the part of the Romans who perceive it as a “genuine stumbling block” (Lüdi, 1992, p. 48). The knowledge of Standard German does not solve their communication problems within the country, whereas Swiss German is of no use outside Switzerland. In such a situation, the French Swiss are more likely compromised to see English as a *lingua franca* (cf. Andres, 1990, p. 27).

## 2.3. Italian

Italian has a secured status as an official language of the federation. However, the Italian-speakers are most burdened with the task of making the Swiss linguistic pluralism work. The Italian Swiss have at their disposal the local Ticinese dialect, the general Lombard dialect or *Lombardic koine*, and the literary or High Italian (cf. Bianconi, 1980). The Lombard dialects from the *gallo-italici* family add to the linguistic complexity of Ticino and the Grisons. The canton of Ticino has a double diglossia as there are two pairs of Low (L) and High (H) variants. Two L variants, based on Lombardian dialects, are used alternately with a regional and standard H variant of Italian (Anders, 1990, p. 29). Standard Italian functions as a token of good education and a higher social status (cf. Porębski, 1994).

## 2.4. Romansh

Romansh is one seriously endangered language of Switzerland. It is spoken in dialectal varieties by less than half of one per cent of the population (cf. Camartin, 1995, p. 233). On the eve of World War II in 1938 Romansh was elevated to the rank of a national language. Article 116 of the Federal Constitution incorporated a distinction between the Confederation's three official and the four national languages of Switzerland. In the opinion of Schmid (2001, p. 131), the amended language article had three objectives. First, to make the cantons and the confederation formally responsible for promoting mutual understanding between the language communities. Second, to make the cantons of Grisons and Ticino eligible for special support from the confederation. Third, to make Romansh a language of communication between the Romansh-speaking population and the federal govern-

ment. All these goals included in the amendment amount to “a declaration in favour of diversity recognising that special protection is needed to prevent it [Romansh] dying,” and that “the greatest possible success would be to maintain its position” (Gillett, 1989, p. 37). Thus, the survival of Romansh is seen as a “touchstone of the reality of Swiss plurilingualism” (Camartin, 1983, p. 22).

In Grisons the territorial principle does not apply because Romansh has no single undivided territory. The disquieting numbers related to the Romansh language come from the fact that almost half of the speakers of Romansh live outside their language area and about a quarter live outside the Grisons (cf. Grünert *et al.*, 2008; Lüdi & Werlen, 2005). As a rule, Romansh speakers need to use either Romansh or German, be it in their private, professional or political interests; and they need to do so with “comparable authenticity” (Camartin, 1990, p. 84).

Most probably it is the extreme dialect fragmentation of Romansh that has led to its marginalisation. The dialectal plurality is seen as a key factor reducing the survival chances of Romansh. Moreover, the five idioms (Vallader, Sursilvan, Surmiran, Puter and Sutsilvan) which are subsumed under one umbrella name of Romansh have uneven distribution in percentage. In 1982 professor Heinrich Schmid developed a compilation language which was a written artificial standard of Romansh called *Rumantsch Grischun* (cf. Camartin, 1987; Pedretti, 2000, pp. 295–299). It was an orthographic *koiné* made up from the Romansh dialects which was designed for intelligibility among their users. The situation of Romansh speakers proves that the crucial factor conducive to Romansh survival is their linguistic attitudes and choices in their everyday lives, including their overall language conduct in response to social, cultural and economic changes (cf. Dörig & Reichenau, 1982; Steinberg, 1996, p. 149; Weinreich, 1953/1968).

### **3. Principles about language**

The principles about language in Switzerland originate from two traditions, i.e. individual rights (language freedom) and local autonomy (language territoriality) (cf. Hegnauer, 1947, pp. 25–32; Schmid, 2001, p. 140). Language freedom corresponds to the ‘personality principle’ according to which the federal authorities recognize the languages of individual citizens who are entitled to choose the language of communication with public institutions. Cantonal sovereignty manifests itself in the ‘territorial principle’

which hinges on the territory in question and specifies the official language of the canton's jurisdiction, thereby imposing on individuals the need to adapt to a given language (McRae, 1975, p. 33; Wehling, 1988, p. 86). The territorial principle regulates language use in official contexts, but individual speakers adapt differently to the language of the canton in which they live (cf. Billigmeier, 1979, p. 424; Rash, 1998, p. 35).

There is no point in evaluating the principles of territoriality and personality of the Swiss circumstances. A full integration of any linguistic order needs a blend of personal and territorial rights. Indeed, non-territorial minorities may enjoy their personal rights more, while territorial rights would serve particularly well the minorities confined to delineated territories (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, 2007, p. 380). The synthesis of these two principles places them in an exception-to-the-rule relation. The territorial principle favours linguistic concentration, whereas the personality principle tends to support dispersion (cf. Schäppi, 1971, p. 55). The territorial principle refers to cantons and guarantees their linguistic autonomy by which cantons are obliged to safeguard their languages. The contact between the citizen and the federal level is organized in accordance with the personality principle. The federal government must adapt to any of the national languages indicated by a citizen, both in spoken and written form (cf. Schmid, 2001, pp. 140, 157).

Some authors have proposed a threefold division of the principles in place of the 'personal' and 'territorial' dichotomy, inferred from Article 116 of the Federal Constitution. Three institutional principles, named by Grin (1999, p. 4) "the pillars of diversity management", can well organize and control the linguistic diversity in Switzerland. Beside the two principles (language territoriality and language freedom), Grin (1999) mentions the principle of 'subsidiarity' which foregrounds the cantonal sovereignty by taking account of certain areas that fall specifically within the competences of federal authorities. One example is education where most aspects are controlled by the cantons, but some issues concerning tertiary education need approval at the federal level. This three-principle set provides for the equal status of the Swiss languages, the linguistic sovereignty of cantons and linguistic territoriality (see McRae, 1983, pp. 121–122, cf. Paulston, 2003, pp. 476).

Language freedom cannot interfere with the public interest. The federal law on language restricts language freedom in two aspects: first, through Article 116 about the national and official languages of the federal constitution; and, second, through the territoriality principle. These limitations on language freedom deriving from the territorial principle are seen as an-



tithetic (cf. Billigmeier, 1979, p. 424; Pedretti, 2000, p. 303). The territoriality principle imposes on every newcomer to Switzerland an obligation to assimilate linguistically at their place of residence (cf. Schäppi, 1971, p. 76; Wehling, 1988, p. 82), with an exception of the strictly private domains of life. However, one could argue that the territorial principle offers protection to the communal freedom of a language in its traditional area, including the linguistic and cultural character of a group. The territorial principle understood as a tool of realizing democratic duties, rather than as a restriction, becomes a constitutional warranty given to different language communities. The fact that the linguistic map of Switzerland has remained unchanged until today, including only minor demographic shifts in favour of any language, indeed may be ascribed to the territoriality principle (cf. Pap, 1990, p. 118; Camartin, 1995, p. 230; Watts & Smolicz, 1997, p. 286).

However, the linguistic principle that confines language to a territory does raise some debatable issues. The first problem concerns the rigidity of language boundaries which has positive aspects but creates a linguistic blockade and effectively strengthens monolingualism (Reichenau, 1997, p. 107). As a result, the territoriality principle hampers migration across the language borders (cf. Lüdi, 1992) and poses a challenge for the educational system, whose goal is to equip all citizens with a set of the national languages thereby making their communication feasible (cf. Nelde, 1991, p. 67; Nelde, Labrie & Williams, 1992, p. 397). As Blommaert (2004, p. 59; italics added) argues, "territorialization stands for the perception and attribution of values to language as a local phenomenon, something which ties people to local communities and spaces. Customarily, people's mother tongue (L1) is perceived as *territorialized language*." This has consequences for the linguistic repertoires of the Swiss people. The Swiss from German- and French-speaking cantons do not feel strong pressure to learn another national language, but so do the Ticinesi and the speakers of Romansh (cf. Watts, 1991, p. 92). The undesirable effect of the territoriality principle in the canton of Grisons is the paucity of institutional support for the Romansh language, because the commune is classified as German-speaking. Romansh is receding from public domains and the schools teach it mostly as a subject (cf. Camartin, 1987). In the case of the Italian-speaking area, the territoriality principle is thought to render Italian as insufficiently observable at the national level (cf. Bianconi, 1994; Grin, 1999).

According to McRae (1975, p. 42), the two language principles (territoriality and personality) in combination with the three "dimensions

of language policy” can aspire to a “framework of options for a national language policy”. The first dimension distinguishes between linguistic equality and minority status, i.e. either national minorities are given special language rights or the national languages are on an equal footing. The second dimension focuses on the notion of domain comprehensiveness, which is to identify the total number of functions controlled by a linguistic regime. Lastly, the third dimension of language policy deals with the degree of centralization and decentralization in decision-making related to language policy. McRae (1975, p. 46) admits that “because language policy in the real world has several possible dimensions, language regimes seldom represent pure territoriality and pure personality, no matter how strongly they lean towards the one principle or the other”. In the context of the two main language principles, there is also a certain awareness present in the Swiss way of interpreting the language law. Namely, linguistic rules should not be executed in an excessively meticulous way. Rather, an approach distinguished by flexibility and tolerance is generally expected, especially with reference to language minorities (Schäppi, 1971, p. 76).

#### **4. Languages under protection**

Language protection understood as equality before the law, non-discrimination and the freedom of speech is the guiding principle of all forms of language legislation. Not only is language the key tool of communication, but it also perpetuates culture and accumulates knowledge of the world. These reasons alone make language liable to protection in two basic dimensions. The first one acknowledges the linguistic existence encapsulated in the social, cultural and communication context, including language diversity. The other dimension concerns the universal right to use the language of one’s own identification with a given speech community (cf. Puppel, 2007, pp. 9–10). For Puppel (2011, p. 97) “any natural language is entitled to its preservation which is best implemented through the application of the universal natural language preservation mechanism” which should be regarded as a “complex multi-component operation which focuses on the maintenance of the biological-psychological and social-cultural aspects of language as such, as well as on the maintenance, or stabilization, of the particular natural languages.” Similarly to language protection, the preservation process has two main concerns: “(a) the preservation of the resources of language as a uniquely human trait, and (b) the preservation (or revital-

ization) of the particular natural languages as repositories of unique culture- and language-specific features which jointly contribute to the world's current natural language diversity encountered in the natural language global arena" (Puppel, 2011, p. 95).

For the past decades international organizations of global and regional-continental range have made a joint effort to provide protection for language in the form of legal documents. Thus, quite understandably, these documents vary in significance depending on their scope, be it the national, regional or global level. They deal with problems ranging from universal human rights formulated as declarations to documents that apply to specific structures and socio-legal contexts. National constitutions usually provide for an entry about official languages, although a number of countries have constitutions without any mention of language. In the Swiss case, the official multilingualism is overtly stated in the constitution, but the principles of Swiss language policy empower the cantons to exercise autonomy in language matters. The policies on language status established by multilingual states are part of their political activity of far-reaching consequences, including the language used in political institutions such as both chambers of the Swiss Parliament and the National Council (Kuźelewska, 2016, pp. 134–135). Despite their form or the level of implementation, decisions on status assign particular languages to different functions and domains, such as public administration, law, education and the media. A decision on language status may also necessitate the acquisition of a new language to enable full participation in a multilingual society (cf. Spolsky, 1998, pp. 67–69). In my opinion, such measures or similar ones could effectively increase the survival chances of endangered languages, as evidenced also by earlier studies (e.g. Fishman, 1991).

Since Switzerland has a strongly decentralized administration and political structure, the interpretation and realization of language protection provided for in the federal constitution looks different (cf. Watts, 1991, p. 83). The territorial principle does not allow to establish one supra-cantonal institution in charge of language policy and planning nationwide. The proposals that voiced this idea stressed the significance to maintain a balanced multilingual policy by foregrounding the presence of language minorities and thereby strengthening their protection on the national scene. Above all, such an institution for languages has been envisaged as a meeting forum for political actors of all administrative levels involved in language matters to ensure cooperation. However, any new institution for languages in Switzerland will be deemed redundant as long as the distribution of competences between the federation and cantons remains unchanged.

## 5. Conclusion

Nations which value multiculturalism accept linguistic diversity as a civil right to be constitutionally protected. I understand this right as a language right which, following Paulston (2003, p. 473), may be interpreted as “the legal regulation of the use of languages in public life as part of the arrangements dealing with interethnic regulations in a country with a mixed ethnic structure.” The Swiss federal parliament warrants the equal status of its three official languages, but at the same time pursues a low-profile language policy imposed by highly de-centralised systems of administration and education. Linguistic diversity viewed as a resource of social and economic enrichment of the culture strongly promotes the acquisition of additive bilingualism understood as an individual approval to expand one’s own linguistic repertoire.

Haugen (1972, p. 244) defines a nation as “the effective unit of international political action” where internal differences are minimised whereas the external distinction tends to be maximised. Switzerland as a federal organization breaks this rule. The centre-driven forces were counteracted by pluralism which effectively prevented languages from becoming a political issue. Thus, even today the Swiss linguistic diversity may be regarded as “an antithesis of the modern European state” (Mayer, 1968, p. 709). One open cultural and language conflict was the problem of Jura, but resolved in a typical Swiss way, i.e. by involving all parties in working out an appropriate course of action to mitigate the conflict.

The institutional means of protecting linguistic minorities reveal some possibilities. One, federalism provides for a harmonious coexistence between the Romansh-, Italian- and French-speaking minorities within their cantons which are eligible to take part in the political decision-making processes at the central level. Two, language minorities enjoy a statutory power in the form of territoriality principle which guarantees them linguistic autonomy. Three, federal expert commissions and parliamentary committees have strengthened the linguistic parity which regulates the proper representation of diverse ethnic minorities, yet cannot guarantee the proportional share of influence.

The idea of multilingualism is expected to guard language diversity and to ensure the equal principles for all national languages, thereby minimising the number of potential language conflicts (cf. Camartin, 1995, p. 231; Kolde, 1988, p. 521). The right to use one’s mother tongue comes from individual rights and personal liberties, including the belief that the freedom of expression is inherent in the freedom to speak one’s mother tongue. There-

fore, language freedom forms a basis for the federal rights of language, such as the free choice of language and the decision with regard to the language of one's own children. This right concerns any language of preference and not only the mother tongue (cf. Viletta, 1984, p. 107). Thus, the territorial principle becomes in effect a demonstration of an underlying feature of the Swiss political culture, i.e. the acceptance of diversity not as a hindrance, but as a constructive quality. Such a philosophy of the federalist organization of a society leads to better understanding and solving problems related to individuals and communities alike.

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