

THE IMPACT OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES AND SPEECH ACTS ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: A CASE STUDY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN THAI NGUYEN PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of Politeness Strategies and Speech Acts on customer satisfaction in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam. Data were collected through a survey of 248 customers who had used products or services provided by SMEs in the province. The study employed several statistical techniques, including Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), and multiple linear regression analysis. The findings reveal that both politeness strategies and speech acts have positive and statistically significant effects on customer satisfaction. Specifically, employees' use of polite language, respectful and empathetic communication, and appropriate speech acts contributes to enhancing customers' service experiences and overall satisfaction. Based on these findings, the study proposes several managerial implications to improve employees' communication skills, enhance service quality, and increase customer satisfaction in small and medium-sized enterprises. The findings also provide empirical evidence for the application of pragmatic theories in service communication and offer practical guidance for SMEs seeking to strengthen customer relationships and achieve sustainable competitive advantages.

Keywords: *Politeness Strategies; Speech Acts; Customer Satisfaction; Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs); Thai Nguyen Province.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive business environment, customer satisfaction has become one of the key determinants of organizational competitiveness and sustainable development, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Beyond product and service quality, the quality of communication between employees and customers plays an increasingly important role in creating positive customer experiences and fostering long-term relationships. In this regard, politeness strategies and speech acts not only facilitate effective information exchange but also convey respect, empathy, and professionalism throughout the service encounter.

Although customer satisfaction has been extensively examined in previous studies, research focusing on the pragmatic aspects of communication—particularly the effects of politeness strategies and speech acts on customer satisfaction in the context of Vietnamese SMEs—remains limited. In response to this research gap, the present study investigates the impact of politeness strategies and speech acts on customer satisfaction among customers of small and medium-sized enterprises in Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence for the application of pragmatic theories in business communication while offering practical managerial implications to help SMEs enhance communication quality, improve customer experience, and strengthen their competitive advantage.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Research on the impact of politeness strategies and speech acts on customer satisfaction is grounded in pragmatics, Politeness Theory, Speech Act Theory, and theories of customer satisfaction. First, Speech Act Theory, initiated by Austin (1962), posits that language is not merely a means of conveying information but also a medium for performing social actions. According to Austin (1962), every utterance consists of three levels of action: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. Building upon this foundation, Searle (1969) further developed the theory by classifying speech acts into five major categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. In the context of service delivery, speech acts such as greetings, apologies, expressions

of gratitude, requests, explanations, and commitments to provide assistance are all forms of communicative action that can directly influence customers' perceptions and evaluations of interaction quality (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

In addition, Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory provides an important theoretical foundation for explaining communicative behavior in service settings. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), every individual seeks to maintain "face," which consists of both positive face and negative face. During communication, speakers employ politeness strategies to minimize Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships, and create a sense of respect for the listener. The four fundamental politeness strategies include bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record communication. In service contexts, employees' appropriate use of politeness strategies enables customers to perceive respect, empathy, and consideration, thereby enhancing service experiences and increasing customer satisfaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

From the perspective of services marketing, customer satisfaction is commonly explained by Oliver's (1980) Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT). According to Oliver (1980), customer satisfaction results from the comparison between customers' pre-consumption expectations and their actual post-consumption experiences. When the actual experience meets or exceeds initial expectations, customers are more likely to be satisfied. In this process, communication between employees and customers constitutes a critical component of the overall service experience, as customers evaluate not only the final service outcome but also the manner in which employees communicate, explain, respond to inquiries, and provide support throughout the service delivery process. In parallel, the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) identifies five dimensions of service quality: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Among these dimensions, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are directly influenced by the way employees communicate with customers, particularly through the appropriate use of politeness strategies and speech acts.

In recent years, numerous empirical studies have confirmed that politeness strategies and speech acts are important factors influencing service interaction quality, customer experience, and customer satisfaction. These studies have extended beyond face-to-face communication between employees and customers to encompass online service environments, e-commerce, hospitality, restaurants, and artificial intelligence, highlighting the increasingly important role of pragmatics in service management.

With regard to politeness strategies, Chen and Rau (2019) were among the first researchers to demonstrate that the use of politeness strategies in online customer service enhances customers' perceptions of service quality, increases trust, and improves customer satisfaction. Their findings indicate that customers evaluate responses expressing empathy, respect, and genuine concern more positively than responses that appear mechanical or overly direct.

In the hospitality industry, Noorani (2024) demonstrated that front desk employees' politeness strategies positively influence guests' experiences by fostering a sense of respect and care. The study found that customers highly appreciate employees who use friendly greetings, polite expressions, appropriate words of gratitude, and sincere apologies throughout the service process.

Recent studies have continued to reinforce the role of politeness strategies in service contexts. Zhang et al. (2021) investigated the online service co-recovery process and found that polite behaviors, such as offering sincere apologies, expressing empathy, and demonstrating commitment to providing assistance, enhance customer participation in the problem-solving process, thereby improving customer satisfaction and continuance intention. These findings suggest that politeness strategies not only alleviate customers' negative emotions but also contribute to restoring customer trust following service failures.

With regard to speech acts, numerous studies have shown that the content and communicative purposes of utterances directly influence customers' perceptions and responses. Chen et al. (2023), in their study of e-commerce livestreaming, found that speech acts such as product introductions, information provision, commitments, recommendations, and responses to customer inquiries positively affect customer trust, purchase intention, and satisfaction. Their findings emphasize that speech acts not only serve to convey information but also play a persuasive role in building relationships between sellers and customers.

In the hospitality sector, Rababah (2021) found that Jordanian businesses employ a wide variety of speech acts in advertising, with directives, assertives, and demands being the most frequently used to persuade customers, emphasize product quality, and communicate promised benefits to consumers. In addition, rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, metaphor, and rhetorical questions are commonly employed to enhance the attractiveness of advertising messages and strengthen their persuasive impact.

From the perspective of digital transformation, Hu et al. (2022) investigated the conversational design of intelligent voice assistants based on Politeness Theory and found that the use of politeness strategies enables users to perceive such systems as more user-friendly, thereby improving user experience and increasing satisfaction. Similarly, Luo (2025) argued that incorporating culturally appropriate politeness strategies into conversational artificial

intelligence systems significantly enhances user satisfaction and reduces communication misunderstandings. These findings suggest that the value of politeness strategies extends beyond human-to-human communication and can also be effectively applied to intelligent service systems.

Overall, empirical studies consistently suggest that politeness strategies and speech acts are two fundamental components of effective service communication. Politeness strategies enable customers to perceive respect, empathy, and genuine concern, whereas speech acts determine the clarity, persuasiveness, and overall effectiveness of information exchange. However, most existing studies have examined these factors independently or have been conducted primarily in the contexts of hospitality, tourism, and e-commerce in developed countries. Quantitative research investigating the simultaneous effects of Politeness Strategies and Speech Acts on Customer Satisfaction in the context of service enterprises in Vietnam remains limited. This represents an important research gap that the present study seeks to address by providing additional empirical evidence on the role of pragmatic factors in enhancing service quality and customer satisfaction.

Based on theory and empirical research, this study develops the following research hypothesis:

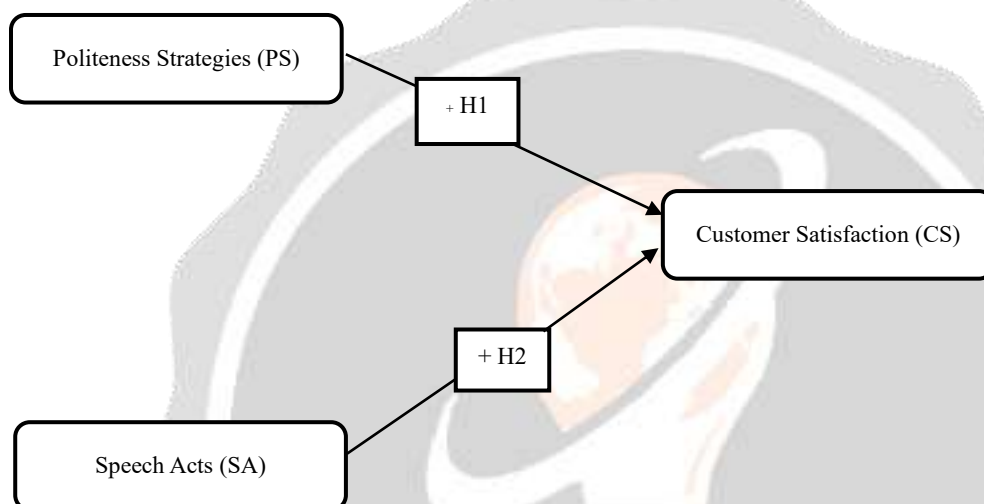


Figure 1: Proposed model

The study variables measured using the 5-point Likert scale are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables in the model

Code	Items	Source
PS1	Staff always use polite language when communicating with me.	Adapted from Brown & Levinson (1987); Leech (1983)
PS2	The staff showed respect for me throughout the service.	Brown & Levinson (1987); Culpeper (2011)
PS3	Employees choose the appropriate expression for each communication situation.	Brown & Levinson (1987)
PS4	Employees always listen and respond with a courteous attitude.	Leech (1983); Kim & Kang (2021)
PS5	The staff showed empathy when I had a problem.	Brown & Levinson (1987); Zhang et al. (2021)
PS6	Employees use apologies and thanks at the right time.	Brown & Levinson (1987); Song & Zhang (2023)
PS7	Employees avoid using offensive or offensive language.	Leech (1983); Culpeper (2011)
PS8	The way the staff communicated made me feel respected.	Zhang et al. (2021); Song & Zhang (2023)
SA1	Staff provide clear and understandable information.	Austin (1962); Searle (1969)
SA2	The staff fully explained when I needed assistance.	Searle (1969); Rababah (2023)
SA3	Staff provide specific guidance during the use of the service.	Austin (1962); Searle (1969)
SA4	Employees use appropriate apologies when mistakes occur.	Searle (1969); Song & Zhang (2023)
SA5	Employees show gratitude to customers.	Searle (1969); Rababah (2023)

SA6	Employees make clear commitments when solving problems.	Searle (1969); Zhang et al. (2021)
SA7	The staff answered my questions fully and accurately.	Austin (1962); Chen (2023)
SA8	Employees choose expressions that are appropriate for the communication situation.	Austin (1962); Searle (1969)
CS1	I am satisfied with the experience of communicating with employees.	Oliver (1980); Oliver (1997)
CS2	The service I received met my expectations.	Oliver (1980)
CS3	I am satisfied with the way the service staff.	Parasuraman et al. (1988); Oliver (1997)
CS4	I will continue to use the services of this business.	Oliver (1997); Kotler & Keller (2016)
CS5	I am willing to recommend this business to others.	Zeithaml et al. (1996); Kotler & Keller (2016)
CS6	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of service of the business.	Oliver (1997); Parasuraman et al. (1988)

3. METHODOLOGY

Design

This study was conducted based on a questionnaire system. The questionnaire is designed to find out the attitudes and views of customers at some typical small and medium-sized enterprises in Thai Nguyen province about the impact of polite strategies and verbal actions on customer satisfaction. The questionnaire is designed to consist of 2 main parts. The first section includes general information about the surveyed subjects. The second part is questions to evaluate the impact of polite strategies and verbal actions on customer satisfaction at some typical small and medium-sized enterprises in Thai Nguyen province

Sampling

To determine the sample size, this study inherits the view of Hair et al. (2010). According to Hair et al. (2010), the minimum sample size should be at least 5 times larger than the observed variables. In this study, the authors used 22 observational variables. Therefore, the minimum sample size is 110. The author takes samples according to a convenient sampling method. After the survey period, the author obtained 248 votes, which is larger than the minimum sample size, ensuring the representativeness of the sample. In terms of gender, there were 78 people (accounting for 31.5%) for men, 170 for women (accounting for 68.5%). In terms of age, there were 91 people under 30 years old (accounting for 37.9%). There were 102 people between the ages of 30 and under 45 (accounting for 42.5%). There were 55 people over the age of 45 (19.6%)

Data Collection and Instruments

The questionnaire is randomly sent to customers who use the services of some typical businesses in Thai Nguyen province. This study conducted the survey in person and online via email in May and June 2026.

The questionnaire is designed according to strict guidelines for drafting survey questions and is formulated according to standards that comply with the requirements (Schutt, 2012). Measurement factors through the 5-level Likert measurement: (1) – Strongly disagree; (2) - Disagree; (3) – No opinion; (4) – Agree; (5) – Fully agree

The questionnaires were examined for special defects. This process was carried out outside the study area through a group of customers living in Thai Nguyen province with sample standards similar to the study. The answers have been tested with Alpha Chronbach measurement with the aim of improving reliability.

Data Analysis

The data was performed through fundamental analyses such as statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability assessment, EFA factor analysis, and linear regression from data collected through a survey of 248 customers in Thai Nguyen province

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Cronbach's alpha reliability assessment

The results of the Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis indicate that all measurement scales exhibit excellent internal consistency. Specifically, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are 0.939 for Politeness Strategies (PS), 0.934 for Speech Acts (SA), and 0.921 for Customer Satisfaction (CS), all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The Corrected Item–Total Correlation values range from 0.753 to 0.815 for the PS scale, from 0.741 to 0.805 for the SA scale, and from 0.764 to 0.794 for the CS scale, all of which are above the acceptable threshold of 0.30, indicating strong correlations between the observed variables and their respective constructs. Furthermore, the Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted values are consistently lower than the corresponding

overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficients, suggesting that no observed variable reduces the reliability of its measurement scale. Therefore, all 22 observed variables were retained for subsequent Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

Table 2. Results of testing the reliability of the scale

Item-Total Statistics					
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha
PS1	20.94	53.191	.785	.931	.939
PS2	20.94	52.757	.801	.929	
PS3	20.92	53.832	.753	.933	
PS4	20.87	53.497	.782	.931	
PS5	20.88	53.399	.771	.932	
PS6	20.89	52.319	.815	.928	
PS7	20.90	52.742	.786	.931	
PS8	20.91	53.501	.767	.932	
SA1	21.01	50.891	.759	.926	.934
SA2	21.00	51.146	.741	.927	
SA3	21.03	50.853	.741	.927	
SA4	21.00	50.838	.781	.924	
SA5	20.99	51.093	.774	.924	
SA6	21.02	51.413	.773	.925	
SA7	20.98	50.688	.772	.925	
SA8	21.00	49.883	.805	.922	
CS1	14.99	27.785	.766	.908	.921
CS2	14.97	27.809	.764	.908	
CS3	15.02	28.182	.776	.907	
CS4	14.98	28.032	.794	.904	
CS5	15.01	27.413	.781	.906	
CS6	14.99	27.644	.764	.908	

EFA factor analysis

After testing the reliability of the 22 scales, the study proceeded to conduct an exploratory factor analysis with the 22 scales mentioned above.

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.957
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2868.120
	df	120
	Sig.	.000

The results of the KMO and Bartlett's tests indicate that the data are fully suitable for conducting Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). Specifically, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is 0.957 (> 0.50), indicating a very high level of correlation among the observed variables and confirming that the sample is adequate for EFA. Furthermore, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yields a Chi-square value of 2868.120 with a significance level of 0.000 (< 0.05), rejecting the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix. This result demonstrates that the observed variables are sufficiently correlated to form underlying latent factors. Therefore, the research data satisfy all the necessary assumptions and are appropriate for further Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

Table 4. Total Variance Explained

Total Variance Explained									
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	8.022	50.138	50.138	8.022	50.138	50.138	5.653	35.334	35.334
2	3.100	19.375	69.512	3.100	19.375	69.512	5.469	34.178	69.512
3	.503	3.142	72.655						
4	.442	2.764	75.419						
5	.437	2.729	78.147						
6	.405	2.533	80.680						
7	.396	2.475	83.156						
8	.381	2.382	85.538						
9	.350	2.189	87.726						
10	.325	2.029	89.756						
11	.316	1.976	91.731						
12	.289	1.804	93.535						
13	.286	1.785	95.321						
14	.265	1.659	96.979						
15	.263	1.646	98.625						
16	.220	1.375	100.000						
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.									

The results of the total variance explained indicate that two factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, with Eigenvalues of 8.022 and 3.100, respectively. These two factors account for 69.512% of the total variance, exceeding the recommended threshold of 50%, suggesting that the extracted factors explain a substantial proportion of the variance in the observed variables. Following Varimax rotation, the first factor explains 35.334% of the variance, while the second factor explains 34.178%, indicating a relatively balanced contribution of the two factors. These findings confirm that the measurement scales exhibit satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity and are therefore appropriate for subsequent regression analysis to test the proposed research hypotheses.

Table 5. Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Changed	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.781 ^a	.610	.606	.65655	.610	191.262	2	245	.000	2.162
a. Predictors: (Constant), SA, PS										
b. Dependent Variable: CS										

The regression analysis results indicate that the proposed model demonstrates a good level of fit, with a correlation coefficient of $R = 0.781$ and a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.610. This suggests that the two independent variables, Politeness Strategies (PS) and Speech Acts (SA), explain 61.0% of the variance in Customer Satisfaction (CS). The adjusted R^2 is 0.606, indicating that the model has strong explanatory power and is only minimally affected by the number of independent variables included. The F-test confirms that the regression model is statistically significant ($F = 191.262$, $\text{Sig.} = 0.000 < 0.05$), demonstrating that the model is appropriate for the data and that the independent variables jointly have a significant effect on the dependent variable. In addition, the Durbin-Watson statistic is 2.162, which falls within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.5, indicating that there is no autocorrelation among the residuals and that the assumption of error independence is satisfied.

Table 6. ANOVAa Analysis Results

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	164.890	2	82.445	191.262	.000 ^b
	Residual	105.609	245	.431		
	Total	270.500	247			
a. Dependent Variable: CS						
b. Predictors: (Constant), SA, PS						

The results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicate that the regression model is statistically significant, with an F-value of 191.262 and a significance level of 0.000 (< 0.05). This demonstrates that the regression model is appropriate for the research data and that the independent variables, Politeness Strategies (PS) and Speech Acts (SA), jointly have a significant effect on Customer Satisfaction (CS). Furthermore, the Regression Sum of Squares (164.890) is substantially greater than the Residual Sum of Squares (105.609), indicating that the model explains a considerable proportion of the variation in the dependent variable. Therefore, the regression model is considered suitable for testing the proposed research hypotheses.

Linear Regression Models

Table 7. Regression of the model

Coefficients^a								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.205	.149		1.372	.171		
	PS	.516	.045	.511	11.452	.000	.801	1.249
	SA	.418	.046	.405	9.078	.000	.801	1.249
a. Dependent Variable: CS								

The regression results indicate that both independent variables have positive and statistically significant effects on Customer Satisfaction (CS). Specifically, Politeness Strategies (PS) exhibit the strongest influence, with a standardized regression coefficient of Beta = 0.511 ($t = 11.452$, Sig. = 0.000). This finding suggests that politeness strategies are the most influential determinant of customer satisfaction. Speech Acts (SA) also have a positive and statistically significant effect on Customer Satisfaction, with a standardized coefficient of Beta = 0.405 ($t = 9.078$, Sig. = 0.000). These results imply that enhancing the use of appropriate politeness strategies and speech acts during customer interactions can significantly improve customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF = 1.249) and Tolerance value (0.801) for both independent variables fall within the recommended thresholds (VIF < 10; Tolerance > 0.10), indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the regression model. Therefore, both research hypotheses regarding the positive effects of Politeness Strategies and Speech Acts on Customer Satisfaction are supported.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the empirical analysis of customers in Thai Nguyen Province, the findings indicate that both Politeness Strategies and Speech Acts have positive effects on Customer Satisfaction. Based on these empirical findings, several managerial implications are proposed to enhance customer satisfaction through improvements in organizational communication practices.

First, enterprises should foster a customer-centered communication culture. Communication standards should be standardized to emphasize politeness, respect, and empathy at every customer touchpoint. In addition to providing accurate information, employees should be encouraged to use positive language, actively listen to customers, and demonstrate genuine concern for their needs, particularly when handling complaints or service failures.

Second, enterprises should strengthen training programs on the effective use of politeness strategies. Training should extend beyond basic communication skills to include guidance on selecting appropriate politeness strategies for different customer groups and communication contexts. The appropriate use of greetings, expressions of gratitude, apologies, respectful forms of address, and empathetic communication can significantly enhance customers' positive perceptions of the organization.

Third, enterprises should place greater emphasis on developing employees' competence in the use of speech acts during customer interactions. Employees should be trained to provide clear information, offer comprehensive explanations, deliver specific guidance, make appropriate commitments, and respond promptly to customer inquiries. Selecting appropriate communicative intentions and expressions can reduce misunderstandings, improve communication effectiveness, and strengthen customer trust.

Fourth, enterprises should establish standardized communication procedures for customer service activities. Standard communication protocols should be developed for various service situations, including consultation, request handling, complaint resolution, after-sales support, and service recovery. These communication guidelines should integrate appropriate politeness strategies and speech acts to ensure service consistency and enhance customer experience.

Fifth, in the context of digital transformation, enterprises should incorporate the principles of politeness strategies and speech acts into online communication platforms, such as chatbots, virtual assistants, omnichannel customer service systems, and social media. Designing communication messages that are polite, user-friendly, and

personalized can enhance customer experience, increase customer satisfaction, and foster long-term customer relationships.

Finally, enterprises should regularly evaluate employees' communication quality through customer feedback and customer satisfaction indicators. The evaluation results should serve as a basis for improving training programs, refining service procedures, and developing performance evaluation systems that incorporate communication quality. Such initiatives will not only enhance customer satisfaction but also strengthen brand image, increase customer loyalty, and improve the long-term competitiveness of the enterprise.

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