

The Translation of Fictional Worlds in Superheroic Comic Books

The Case of *Action Comics* #1000

Robert Szymyślik
Universidad Pablo de Olavide (Seville)

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Abstract

The following paper represents a contrastive translation study concerning the intercultural transport of the main traits of fictional worlds built in the comic book sphere. It is specifically centred on the fictional world shown in the narratives published by DC Comics regarding the character called Superman. The study features an exposition about the characteristics of the translation of fictional worlds present in superheroic comic book narratives from a theoretical perspective and, subsequently, shows a contrastive study of this fictional universe through the analysis of the work entitled *Action Comics* #1000.

Key Words

Action Comics, Contrastive, Fictional worlds, Superman, Translation.



Introduction

This paper is centred on the study of the translation of the main conceptual elements that form fictional worlds in the comic book sphere through the exploration of the strategies and solutions that can be found in the rendered version of a work of this kind by means of a contrastive analysis between English and Spanish. It focuses on the foundations of the fictional universes found in superheroic comic books, which show particular characteristics that require specific translation procedures to transport their content in an integral

way. The information of these works and fictional worlds can be linked to the inner universes of the stories and to different real fields of knowledge, which can cause the appearance of demanding translation problems.

The objectives of this paper are to analyze the translation of the main components of fictional worlds created in graphic narrative products, to explore the translation methodologies and strategies applicable to the rendering of graphic narratives (in this case, comic books) and the contrastive study of the translation of a specific case of graphic narrative work belonging to the superheroic genre: *Action Comics #1000 (Superman: Especial Action Comics Núm. 1000* in Spanish), published by DC Comics.

1. The Translation of Fictional Worlds in Comics Books

A fictional world can be described as a "small possible world shaped by specific global constraints and containing a finite number of individuals" (Doležel, 1998: 20). It can also be seen as an alternate reality construct: a fictional world is a "system with a [...] structure of its own [...], analogous to the actual world in that it has its own set of facts and its own subworlds" (Ronen, 1994: 29). Every kind of narrative requires a fictional world to locate its events and characters, according to Ryan (1980: 403). This means that any form of narrative works will contain a fictional world.

This paper is centred on fictional worlds built in comic books: comic books are part of what is known as graphic narrative, which makes a notable use of images as a means of transmitting information, alongside standard textual messages. It is also described as sequential art, which can be dated back to 15 000 BC (Honour and Fleming, 1987: 9). According to Stein and Thon, some of its main traits are "sequential storytelling, gutters separating framed panels, direct speech represented in balloons with additional conventions such as motion lines, thought bubbles [...]", among others (2015: 10).

A comic book can be defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1993: 9). It constitutes a mixture of images and words that tells a story to the recipients, who can both conceive and see every action described in a narrative of this kind. Comic books thus represent the fusion of two expressive means, of a linguistic as well as a visual code (Groensteen, 1999: 3). To understand completely a graphic work of art,

the reader/viewer must detect the whole amount of information transmitted by the textual as well as the graphic channel: each of them delivers different types of content and, according to Kaindl (2012: 39), image and text can "affirm, supplement or contradict each other [...]".

Regarding the translation of graphic narrative works, the complete understanding of the data contained in a composition is essential to transport every detail from the original to the target sociocultural context and to enable recipients to represent the story mentally. Kaindl (2012: 39) specified different parts of graphic narratives, aside from the explicit textual content (mainly shown in a dialogic form), that translators should pay attention to during their transposition between languages, such as typographic signs (font and size, for example) with semantic content; pictorial signs (colors or the form of the panels); and linguistic signs (dialogs, inscriptions, inner narratives or onomatopoeia). These elements can add different kinds of content and be crucial for the understanding of a graphic narrative and without them the recipients might not be able to conceive completely this type of works.

In a similar way to what happens in audiovisual or video game translation, space restriction is an important characteristic of graphic narrative rendering. It may affect both the creation and the translation of a comic book or a graphic novel, but (in the case of translations) it can determine the strategies available to solve a specific translation problem in a prominent way (Rodríguez, 2019: 115).

The main conclusion about the translation of comic books and of graphic narratives as a whole is that professionals work with visual and linguistic content that is mainly interpreted in a semiotic way by the recipients and which constitute different meaning layers that should be totally decoded in the target context (Zanettin, 2015: 12), which require different types of translation strategies.

2. *The Fictional Worlds of DC Comics, Superman and Action Comics*

The company behind the publication of *Action Comics*, the comic book series that tells the stories of the fictional world of the character called Superman is DC Comics. It was founded in 1934 by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, then called National Allied Publications. Superman was created by Jerry Siegel and

Joe Shuster and debuted in *Action Comics*, no. 1 in 1938 (Britannica, 2019: Online).

This character comes from the fictional planet Krypton, which was destroyed by a cosmic catastrophe, and was sent by his parents to the Earth as a baby. His real name is Kal-El and was raised by Martha and Jonathan Kent, who named him Clark Joseph Kent. As an adult, he became a journalist and lived and worked in the fictional city called Metropolis (*Ibid.*).

Superman can be seen as the first superhero, the model that the following characters inserted in this genre followed, each of them with their own idiosyncrasies and stories. Even the definition of a "superhero", according to the Oxford Dictionary (2019: Online), uses Superman as an archetypal example: this work describes a "superhero" as a 'benevolent fictional character with superhuman powers, such as Superman.'

The work studied in this paper, *Action Comics #1000* (Jurgens *et al.*, 2018), achieved in 2018 the Guinness World Records title for the "Longest-running Superhero Comic Book Series" (DC Comics, 2019: Online).

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this paper to study the rendering of the traits of the fictional world described in *Action Comics #1000* (written originally in English) into Spanish is the contrastive analysis of translations. It is centred on the comparison of original segments and the equivalents proposed by the translators that undertook their transmission into another language. It can also be used to detect concrete translation problems that appear during the transport of content between certain sociocultural contexts; to study the functionality of any translation solution; and to develop a catalogue of possible strategies to solve particular rendering questions in any kind of translation assignment.

The conclusions reached by several theoreticians that studied the characteristics of translation can be applied to create a personal contrastive method destined to the observation of source and target messages. Toury (1980: 112-113) and Valero (2007: 129) share thoughts about the description of translations and state that reduced fragments of content should be extracted from both linguistic manifestations of the same message to gather valuable results during any research.

The theories of Van Leuven-Zwart (1989: 58-60) can be used as well to define the scope and traits of the contrastive system employed in this paper, centered on the exploration of *Action Comics #1000*. Her studies analyzed the concept of "translation shifts", which represent minor changes in the expression of specific portions of the messages that form any work in comparison to the original information. These changes can even alter the whole narrative structure of any message. These conclusions can be applied to the reception of works of art (such as comic books), whose main objective is the aesthetic joy and the immersion in a story. If a rendered narrative shows a notable amount of minor modifications, the vision that the recipients will achieve of it will differ from the original idea of their authors, what can modify or even hinder the artistic experience of a composition or the fictional world that it contains.

According to Munday (2016: 157), "there is no set model for the analysis of [...] translations" and this is why an original descriptive model was used in this paper in order to study the rendering of the fictional world depicted in *Action Comics #1000*. The extracted examples are centered on specific translation problems, linked to the specific terminology or mythos of the stories told by this comic book series and the scientific and technical content employed by their writers to create solid conceptual foundations for their tales and the overall fictional world. Each reproduced fragment of this work is included in independent paragraphs from the general text of this study and shows a code that enables the understanding of each example and locate it within the comic book: ST (Source Text) and TT (Target Text), alongside the number of the page of the excerpt (TT/3, for example).

4. Analysis of the Translation of the Fictional World Shown in Action Comics #1000

This section of the paper includes the translation analysis of the main traits of the vast fictional world present in *Action Comics #1000*, published by DC Comics in 2018. The only target version available in the Spanish context is entitled *Superman: Especial Action Comics Núm. 1000*, and was translated by Francisco San Rafael Simó and published by ECC Ediciones in 2018.

This translation analysis is mainly focused on two types of content present in *Action Comics #1000* that help to build the fictional world of Superman's narrative universe: first of all, the information regarding the character (that is,

Superman and his narrative microcosmos); and, secondly, data linked to scientific and technical concepts used by the writers of the different tales included in this work, which act as the empirical foundations of these stories and that add specific problems to the translation process of this comic book. The first analyzed example can be found in this excerpt:

ST/6: "[...] we are here today to recognize the man who has done more than we can ever thank him for... the man who has saved us time and time again and sacrificed for us in ways that we probably can't begin to imagine... Superman!"

TT/13: [...] *nos hemos reunido hoy para rendir homenaje al hombre que ha hecho más de lo que podemos agradecerle... al hombre que nos ha salvado una y otra vez y se ha sacrificado por nosotros en sentidos que es probable que no podamos ni imaginar, ¡Superman!*

The first mention to the name of the character can be found here, which has implications for the translation processes that can be applied to transfer it between English and Spanish. The term "Superman" represents a neologism formed by the fusion of two components, the prefix "super-" and the noun "man".

From a translative point of view, its transfer does not represent a complex task, because it can be rendered almost without modifications. Thus, the equivalent Superman is functional in the target comic book, because it can be probably understood by a large number of recipients in the target sociocultural context due to the low level of specialization of the English noun "man".

This decision caused the application of this translation strategy in the case of the denominations of different superheroes that came after the publication of the first story of Superman in 1938 (Britannica, 2019: Online), in which the English noun "man" was maintained in the Spanish version of the name of diverse characters such as Iron Man (Panini Comics, 2019: Online), Miracle Man (*Ibid.*), Batman (ECC Ediciones, 2019: Online), or even Wonder Woman (*Ibid.*).

It is, nonetheless, interesting to study the use of graphic accents in regard to the transcription of "Superman" in the Spanish language, because this term could be pronounced placing the accent on the last syllable. In that case, following the Spanish pronunciation and orthographic rules, the equivalent would require a graphic accent (*Supermán*), which would have also probably needed (due to the specific nature of comic books) the modification of the drawings to include the graphic accent.

This happened indeed in the first translations of the stories of Superman that were imported to Spain from South America between 1952 and 1979, in which the equivalent *Supermán* was used and even the logo of the comic books was modified to show the graphic accent (Cañamero, 2001: 117).

The use of an equivalent without accent in *Superman: Especial Action Comics Núm. 1000* implies that this term was transplanted maintaining the graphic features of the English language and that its translator has followed the terminology established by previous professionals concerning the title "Superman" in the translations completed directly in Spain, which began in 1979 and that were published by Editorial Bruguera, which can be seen, for example, in *Superman. Super-Acción 7* (Bates and Swan, 1979) and later by Ediciones Zinco (Cañamero, 2001: 118). The study of *Action Comics #1000* goes on in the following lines:

ST/8: "We have a number of testimonials here today. Chief Carlisle? / I can't begin to tell you the number of people I've seen the Man of Steel save. Too many to count."

TT/15: *Hoy contamos con varios testimonios. ¿Jefe Carlisle? / No sabría decir cuántas personas he visto salvadas por el Hombre de Acero. No podría contarlas.*

This is an example of the specific terminology associated to the character named Superman that helps to add conceptual layers to the fictional world. In superheroic comic books, it is common that the denominations of some characters also show alternative forms, such as epithets. Here the epithet for Superman can be seen, "Man of Steel", which describes some of the singularities of this character, like, for example, his resilience or superhuman strength.

The title "Man of Steel" was originally translated as *Hombre de Acero* into Spanish, as can be seen in *Superman. Super-Acción 4* (Bates and Swan, 1979), published by Editorial Bruguera in Spain in 1979. This equivalent can be found in the fragment included above these lines and it represents a functional example of content and meaning transfer. It also contains the complete information of this neological epithet. The use of this equivalent also indicates that (as in the previous example) the translator has undertaken an efficient documentation process regarding the established terminology for this comic book character. The specific lexicon associated to Superman is further explored in the next example:

ST/9: "Captain Maggie Sawyer has something she'd like to say. / As Head of Metropolis' Special Crimes Unit, I like to think we're capable of holding our own. Ninety-nine percent of the time, that's the case."

TT/16: *A la Capitana Maggie Sawyer le gustaría decir una cosa. / Como Jefa de la Unidad de Delitos Especiales de Metropolis, me gusta creer que nos podemos defender solos. Por lo menos, el 99% de las veces.*

As was explained before, Metropolis is the hometown of Superman and where he lives and works as Clark Kent. Regarding the translation of this component of *Action Comics'* fictional world, its transfer does not show a high complexity, but there are aspects that may become problematic during its transference: the English noun "metropolis" exists in Spanish as well (*metrópolis*). Due to the location of the accent on a specific syllable, it requires a graphic accent according to the Spanish accentuation and orthographic rules.

However, in the above reproduced excerpt, the option *Jefa de la Unidad de Delitos Especiales de Metropolis* can be located, where the equivalent *Metropolis* is used, which shows no graphic accent. This translation decision may derive from a reflection process about the nature of this concept of the fictional world of Superman.

It is a fictional city and not a common noun and, due to that fact, the translator may have decided not to use the graphic accent to establish a distinction between these linguistic elements and to provide the comic book city with exoticism. Moreover, the translator has made another efficient documentation process regarding Superman's terminology, because the equivalent *Metropolis* can be found in previous translations of this comic book series, such as *Superman. Super-Acción 28* (O'Neil and Chiaramonte, 1980). The translation of concepts pertaining to the mythos of Superman comic books are further studied in this fragment from *Action Comics #1000*:

ST/46: "I get so busy. There's always another... something. Someone needs help. But hey, I'm not so bad. I'm here once a year. Generally. If I'm not stuck in the Phantom Zone [...] or whatever."

TT/54: *Estoy muy ocupado. Siempre surge... algo. Alguna persona que necesita ayuda. Pero no me porto tan mal. Por lo general, vengo una vez al año. A menos que esté en la Zona Fantasma [...] o donde sea.*

The term explored here is "Phantom Zone". It constitutes an important part of Superman's fictional world and it is described as a dimension used as a prison, created by Superman's father (Jor-El). Many of Superman's story arcs take

place in this place and it is linked to important characters of this fictional universe (Egan, 2019: 134).

Linguistically, it represents a neologism in the form of a syntagm, composed of an adjective and a noun. The equivalent used by the translator is *Zona Fantasma*. It can be seen that a neologism in the Spanish language has also been created and that no alternative translation strategy has been used (such as descriptions or compressions). These could have altered the neological nature of this concept, diminished the amount of information that will reach the target audience or eliminated specific components of this term, needed to detect and understand it completely and functionally.

The next example included in this paper is a sample of the scientific and technical content used by the writers of this comic book to develop their stories and this fictional world. This passage describes the destruction of the Earth, which can be seen in the following panel:

ST/48: "With the Sun's mass dropping, I... I really thought the orbit expansion would be enough to escape the red giant [...]. Yeah, I get it. I'm aware. I could push it. Knock it out, let it float somewhere else."

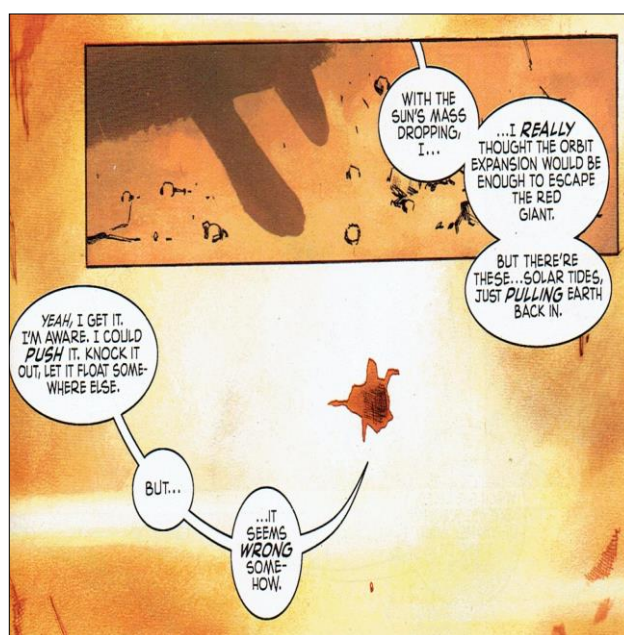


Figure 1. *Action Comics* #1000, p. 48

TT/56: *La masa del Sol se desploma. Creía que la expansión de la órbita bastaría para escapar del gigante rojo [...]. Sí, lo entiendo. Soy consciente. La podría empujar. Golpearla y que flotara en otra parte.*

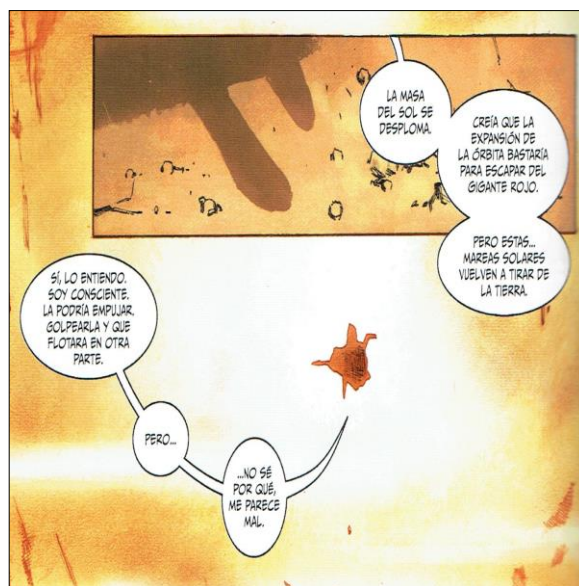


Figure 2. *Superman: Especial Action Comics Núm. 1000*, p. 56

In this case, the studied element is "red giant". It is a term that possesses a notable level of specialization and that belongs to the field of cosmology. It refers to the phase of the life of a star in which some layers of this kind of celestial bodies begin to cool and become red and then the star starts expanding (Larsen, 2007: 29-30).

In the translated version of *Action Comics #1000*, in the fragment *Creía que la expansión de la órbita bastaría para escapar del gigante rojo*, the equivalent *gigante rojo* can be found. It is an adequate option and proves that the translator has carried out a documentation processes. However, as can be seen in specialized books about cosmology written in Spanish, the most common equivalent for this concept in Spanish-speaking contexts is *gigante roja* (Cepa, 2007: 30), which requires to change the gender of the term proposed in the translated comic book. There are more examples of specialized lexicon in *Action Comics #1000*, which are shown in these lines:

ST/62: "Rick Fagen. Bad Temper. Pulled a few home invasions. This is his third strike. When these videos hit the Internet, Child Welfare is taking his son away. He's the scariest villain of all. Someone with nothing left to lose. I see his bronchi dilate. Glucose rushes to his skeletal muscles. His body preparing for what's coming next."

TT/69: *Rick Fagen. Mal genio. Lleva varios allanamientos. Es su tercer aviso. En cuanto esos vídeos lleguen a Internet, los servicios sociales se llevarán a su hijo. Es el villano que más miedo me da. Aquel que no tiene nada que perder. Veo que se dilatan los bronquios. Se le dispara la glucosa en los músculos esqueléticos. Su cuerpo se prepara para lo que va a pasar.*

Here terms belonging to the biology sphere can be detected, which have different degrees of complexity. The first one is "bronchi": it is the plural form of the noun "bronchus", which refers to the [...] major air passages of the lungs which diverge from the windpipe' (Oxford Dictionary, 2019: Online). It constitutes a term that is used in common contexts as well as in specialized texts concerning medicine or biology (among others). This is the reason why the documentation process needed to transfer this noun functionally can be done through non-specialized sources.

The second term found in this section shows a higher level of complexity: "skeletal muscles". This is a term that comes from the field of physiology and which stands for the muscle fibers whose function is to generate movement or force (MacIntosh, Gardiner and McComas, 2006: 1).

In this case, the translator has chosen a functional equivalent that transports the whole content of this term to the target language, *músculos esqueléticos*, as can be seen in physiology works written originally in Spanish: *A nivel microscópico el músculo esquelético y el músculo cardíaco presentan bandas claras y oscuras que se alternan [...]* (Teijón, 2006: 129). The writers of the stories contained in *Action Comics #1000* have used more scientific and technical content in their works from diverse fields of knowledge to expand the density of this fictional world, as shown below:

ST/63: "I watch the gunpowder ignite. A femtosecond later, the bullet rotates along the grooves of the barrel. This particular .45 travels 830 feet per second. I know my speed. I know the distance. I'm close. But this is math. I won't make it."

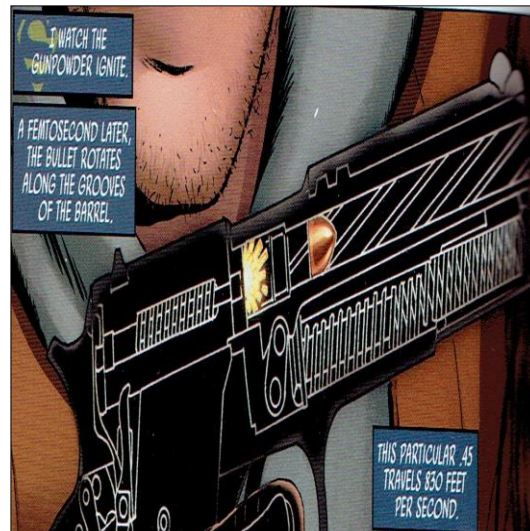


Figure 3. *Action Comics* #1000, p. 63

TT/70: Veo cómo se prende la pólvora. Un femtosegundo después, la bala gira por las muescas del cañón. Esta 45 en concreto viaja a 250 metros por segundo. Sé qué velocidad alcanzo. Y a qué distancia está. Falta poco. Pero es matemático. No llego.



Figure 4. *Superman: Especial Action Comics Núm. 1000*, p. 70

The first technical term of this fragment is "femtosecond". It represents a unit of measurement of time used, for example, in physics that stands for 'one quadrillionth of a second' (Merriam-Webster, 2019: Online).

In the target comic book, the sentence *Un femtosegundo después, la bala gira por las muescas del cañón* is used and the equivalent *femtosegundo* can be detected. As can be seen in textbooks concerning physics written originally in the Spanish language, this translation option is functional, because it is used in the Spanish-speaking context: *Con técnicas adecuadas, como las del láser, se pueden estudiar reacciones que tienen lugar en tiempos del orden del femtosegundo* (Costa, 2005: 508).

The second specialized term included in this excerpt is ".45". It refers to the caliber of ammunition and firearms, shown graphically in the panel included above. In this story pertaining to *Action Comics #1000*, the writers have specified the caliber of a bullet fired by the weapon wielded by a criminal.

The translated version of this comic book shows the sentence *Esta 45 en concreto viaja a 250 metros por segundo*, where the equivalent *Esta 45* can be found. According to Fundéu BBVA, the proper way to express calibers in Spanish is the following one: *En nuestro idioma se escribiría [...] 0,38. En estos casos es más habitual decir, simplemente, un (revólver del) 38* (2019: Online).

5. Conclusions

This paper has shown that the translation of complex fictional worlds, and specifically those present in comic books, possesses singularities that can hardly be found in other rendering assignments. The fusion of a dramatic purpose, the exposition of an artistic narrative and the combination of different information channels that contribute to build a unified multimodal work inserted in an interdependent narrative universe can cause diverse types of translation problems during the transposition of a message and a fictional world between sociocultural contexts.

The understanding of the plot, the importance of images for the completion of the narrative data and technical issues such as space restrictions are factors that demand a reflection upon the translation strategies available to functionally and completely transplant the information of a comic book between languages.

It can be seen in this paper that the translation into Spanish of the fictional world contained in *Action Comics #1000* required advanced documentation

skills, knowledge about the specific story and the mythos regarding Superman, and mastered transference abilities due to the content that the writers of the story use, coming from multiple fields of knowledge, a fact that increases the conceptual depth of this narrative. It can also be concluded that the translator that undertook this linguistic transplant studied the specialized information that can be found in these stories thoroughly and produced a target text that enables the target readers to admire completely the narrative, conceptual and creative traits of this composition and of this fictional world.

Action Comics #1000 has proven to be an interesting source of information concerning the study of the structure and content of fictional worlds built in comic books and the analysis of the requirements of their transport between languages due to its combination of stories about a character with solid mythos (which require advanced documentation processes about this particular fictional universe) and a complex narrative content with multiple semantic and conceptual layers.

All these components add additional translation problems to the task of transporting the fictional world of *Action Comics #1000* into any language and its study can provide theoreticians, researchers and professionals with valuable conclusions about the needs of comic book translation, the rendering of superheroic comic books and fictional worlds created in this sphere and to conceive possible strategies to tackle translation questions within an assignment related to this narrative modality.

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