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## **Discourse and Intercultural Communication**

**Carolyn Debray and Helen Spencer-Oatey**

### **What is intercultural communication?**

This chapter focuses on the analysis of discourse as it pertains to intercultural communication. It is important therefore to start by considering what counts as ‘intercultural’ communication. The word ‘intercultural’ literally means ‘between cultures’ and so that immediately brings us to a preliminary question – what is meant by culture. Definitions of culture have been proposed by numerous theorists from many different disciplinary backgrounds (e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics), resulting in a huge number of versions, most of which are contested by others.

Within the discourse field, Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2012: 3) propose that culture can be seen as ‘a way of dividing people up into groups according to some feature of these people which helps us to understand something about them and how they are different from or similar to other people’. Here, as with most definitions, culture is linked with social groups, yet as these authors point out, this leads immediately to some fundamental problems, such as what criteria can be used to divide people into groups, and how far such categorization masks differences within each group. There are no straight forward answers to these questions, especially since everyone belongs to multiple types of social groups. Some authors (e.g. Bremer et al., 1996; Kecskes, 2014) have used language as the key dividing criterion for intercultural communication, while others (e.g. Sarangi, 1994b) have regarded this as too essentialist. Yet others have emphasized that the key is the perception of the interactants concerned, rather than a hard and fast discourse external criterion. For instance, Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (in press), drawing on work by Žegarac (2007) and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009), propose the following definition of ‘intercultural’:

An intercultural situation is one in which the cultural distance between the participants is significant enough to have an effect on interaction/communication that is perceived in some way by at least one of the parties.

We explore some of these conceptual challenges further in the next section. The notion of perception by one or more of the participants is an important element that we discuss further when considering intercultural discourse data. A key theme that runs throughout this chapter is the following question raised by Scollon et al. (2012: 2): ‘what good does it do to see a given moment of communication as a given moment of intercultural communication?’ In other words, what insights and benefits can we gain by analysing discourse in this way? Before we can explore these issues, though, we first need to examine how culture can be theorized in relation to intercultural discourse.

### **Theorising culture in intercultural discourse**

Attempts to theorize culture in intercultural discourse not only need to address the challenge of deciding what constitutes a cultural group, but also need to conceptualize what members of that cultural group have in common (and thus make it into a cultural group) and how those facets are manifested in (linguistic) behaviour.

Traditionally in cross-cultural psychology and organizational behaviour, culture has been conceptualized in terms of dimensions of fundamental values, such as individualism–collectivism and high–low power distance (e.g. Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1994). Nations have been compared for their average scores on such dimensions, and behavioural differences explained in this way. However, there are many problems with such an approach, which some psychologists themselves have pointed out. For example, experts such as Shalom Schwartz (2011) have emphasized the importance of distinguishing values held at societal level from values held at the individual level, explaining that it is invalid to move between the two levels. In addition, recent research has drawn attention to the large amount of individual variation within national groups as well as across them, with the former sometimes being greater than the latter (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011). As a result, current work in psychology is exploring how culture can be conceptualized in additional ways, including social norms (e.g. see the special issues edited by Zou & Leung, 2015, and by Lefringhausen, Spencer-Oatey & Debray, 2019).

This move towards norms brings us a little closer to a discourse approach to conceptualising the role of culture. A key early figure working on this issue is John Gumperz. Gumperz (e.g. 1982, 1992) was particularly concerned about the ways in which ethnic minority workers were being discriminated against by managers and interviewers as a result of lack of shared awareness of patterns of interaction. The following extracts explain his approach:

A general theory of discourse strategies must [...] begin by specifying the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge that needs to be shared if conversational involvement is to be maintained, and then go on to deal with what it is about the nature of conversational inference that makes for cultural, subcultural and situational specificity of interpretation. (Gumperz, 1982: 3)

I use the term ‘contextualization’ to refer to speakers’ and listeners’ use of verbal and nonverbal signs to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended. (Gumperz, 1992: 230)

As can be seen from these two quotations, Gumperz argues that shared linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge is vital for successful interpretation during conversations. The implication of this is that if interlocutors do not have that shared knowledge, successful communication will be more difficult. Gumperz further maintains that the contextualization cues that interlocutors need to be able to jointly interpret cover features such as prosody (e.g. intonation and stress), paralinguistic signs (e.g. tempo, pausing and hesitation), code choice, choice of lexical forms, and use of formulaic expressions. Using this approach, he analysed discourse data involving migrant workers in a range of contexts, and argued that they were being discriminated against as a result of misunderstandings that derived from a lack of shared awareness of the contextualization cues the dominant host interlocutors were using and expecting their listeners to be able to interpret.

Gumperz’s work drew much needed attention in the 1980s and 1990s to issues of workplace discrimination. However, Sarangi (1994a) criticizes Gumperz’s discourse approach from several angles, maintaining the following:

1. It avoids fundamental issues of (a) the power of the host interlocutors and (b) the existence of ‘institutional racism’;
2. It looks at linguistic evidence in an isolated way, excluding the wider discursive context, and yet seeks to explain misunderstandings by referring to that wider context;
3. It pays insufficient attention to the impact of the type of communicative activity;
4. It ignores the discursive choices that individuals can and do make, and the co-constructed nature of misunderstandings.

A much more comprehensive theorization of culture in intercultural discourse has been proposed by Scollon et al. (2012). They explain their overall position as follows:

Most cross-cultural research takes as its unit of analysis cultural systems of meaning or behaving or thinking, and these systems are also important in our approach. But they are only important in so far as they affect how people do things with other people. Thus, our unit of analysis will not be just systems of culture by themselves nor just the individual person by herself or himself, but rather ‘people doing things’ using these systems of culture. (Scollon et al., 2012: 5)

They go on to argue that people ‘do things’ with sets of cultural tools, which include not only physical things like clothes or chopsticks, but also abstract phenomena like language, conventional ways of treating people, social institutions and structures, and concepts such as freedom and justice. They use the term ‘discourse system’ to refer to this ‘cultural toolkit’ and maintain that it has four main elements:

1. Ideologies or systems of thinking that comprise assumptions about what is true or false, good or bad, right or wrong, and normal or abnormal.
2. Conventional ways of treating other people that are affected by factors such as power, face systems (involvement and independence), concept of the self, and ingroup-outgroup relationships.
3. Forms of discourse, such as cognitive schemas and scripts, intonation and timing, inductive and deductive organizational patterns.
4. Method of learning of the discourse system, such as through education, socialization, enculturation and acculturation.

Scollon et al. (2012) apply their discourse system approach to corporate and professional discourse, generational discourse, and gender and sexuality discourse, although somewhat surprisingly their explication of the four elements of their discourse system use primarily cross-national examples. The authors maintain that their discourse system approach reduces the risk of inappropriately regarding culture as having a deterministic impact. However, they also acknowledge that there can still be a ‘them’ and ‘us’ mentality. This is because members of a particular discourse system become comfortable interacting with each other and feel a sense of solidarity and security, and this then can lead to a boundary with non-members, leading to ingroup–outgroup orientations.

Another comprehensive theorization of culture in intercultural discourse has been put forward by Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (in press). They argue that cultural meaning systems ‘frame’ interlocutors’ perceptions and performance of behavioural encounters. These cultural

meaning systems derive primarily from membership of multiple social groups (and the associated formal and informal socialization) and comprise the following:

1. Cultural group identities and intergroup orientations
  - a. Ingroup–outgroup, Insider–outsider
2. Cultural patterning
  - a. Cultural norms (interactional norms and interpersonal norms)
  - b. Cultural schemas (conceptualizations of situational contexts, such as communicative activities and role responsibilities)
  - c. Cultural perspectives (values and attitudes)

There are many links between this framework and that of Scollon et al. (2012). The method of learning is not included in Spencer-Oatey and Kádár's conceptualization because they did not take a developmental approach. On the other hand, they apply their framework much more extensively and in greater detail to actual examples of discourse, both brief and extended.

In the next section we identify studies that have explored the various ways in which culture can impact on interactional discourse, and consider how the concepts and frameworks discussed in this section can be applied analytically.

### **The impact of culture in intercultural interaction**

Research on intercultural discourse is wide-ranging, covering *inter alia* interactions in social and institutional settings, across different language proficiencies, and from a small number of interlocutors to large scale societal discourses, for example in the areas of intercultural politics or crisis communication (e.g. Diers-Lawson, 2017; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006), and also across social media groups (Smith Pfister & Soliz, 2011; Sobré-Denton, 2016). Covering this variety of settings, activity types and participants, it has resulted in very different – sometimes contradictory – insights into the way culture can impact on interactions. Much research has investigated misunderstandings, but there are also important implications for interpersonal relationships, discrimination and personal growth. These four areas of inquiry are by no means separate issues but are in fact tightly interwoven as we will show in the following sections.

### **Misunderstandings and Miscommunication**

Research on intercultural communication has traditionally focused significantly on misunderstandings, in that intercultural communication has often been seen as inherently more vulnerable to misunderstandings and miscommunication due to the assumption that interlocutors share less common ground than in intracultural communication (Kecskes, 2014).

This perspective has, however, been criticized by many. Sarangi (1994b), for example, has demonstrated that misunderstanding is often not the 'fault' of the 'outsider', which is a deficit orientation, but rather is co-constructed by all the interlocutors. Furthermore, recent research has increasingly questioned whether misunderstandings are as prevalent in intercultural communication as originally thought (Kaur, 2016; Mauranen, 2006; Meierkord, 2002). Many researchers have pointed to a generally positive and collaborative spirit in intercultural interactions, particularly in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) interactions (Kecskes, 2014; Meierkord, 2002). Here, interlocutors were found to use a number of supportive strategies to

promote understanding. In light of these strategies, Mustajoki (2017) even concludes that intercultural interactions are actually less prone to misunderstandings than interactions with very familiar others. This has prompted a research shift, with attention less directed at the failure of intercultural interactions, and more on the successful ways with which understanding is achieved (e.g. Bühlig & ten Thije, 2006). Table 1, which combines insights from Bremer et al. (1996), Firth (1996) and our own thinking, provides an overview of some of the strategies ensuring successful communication that have been found to characterize much intercultural discourse, especially ELF discourse.

**Table 1: Strategies for mutual understanding**

<b>Problem-preventive Strategies</b>		
<b>Type of Strategy</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Example</b>
Linguistic strategies	Phonetics & phonology	Speak more slowly, more clearly, with more pauses etc.
	Lexis	Choose easier vocabulary, avoid slang, etc.
	Grammar	Use shorter sentences
Discourse/pragmatic strategies	Topic choice	Choose easier topics
	Structuring	Use discourse markers, e.g. <i>Firstly, secondly</i>
	Explicitness	Explain things fully and directly
<b>Problem-focused Strategies</b>		
<b>Type of Strategy</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Gloss with Example</b>
Own performance problem-related strategies	Comprehension check	Ask questions to check that the other person can understand; e.g. <i>Do you follow what I mean?</i>
Other performance problem-related strategies	Repetition request	Ask for repetition of something not heard or understood properly; e.g. <i>Pardon?</i>
	Clarification request	Ask for further explanation of something that is not clear, e.g. <i>What do you mean by ...?</i>
	Confirmation check	Ask for confirmation that one has heard or understood something correctly, e.g. <i>Do you mean ...?</i>
	Let it pass	Ignore the problem.

At the same time, it appears that many of these more positive findings are made in research on interactions where participants may have self-selected to engage with linguistic and cultural others. The picture looks slightly different if we look to intercultural communication in institutional settings, such as studies from workplaces (Clyne, 1994; Günthner, 2008), education (Haugh, 2016; Lin, 2017; Tyler, 1995), job interviews (Birkner & Kern, 2008; Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Reissner-Roubicek, 2012); health care encounters

(Dalby Landmark, Svennevig, Gerwing, & Guldbranden, 2017; Pilnick & Zayts, 2019; Roberts, Moss, Wass, Sarangi, & Jones, 2005), or interviews with asylum seekers (Grazia Guido, 2004) where problematic incidents seem more frequent. Coupland, Wiemann, and Giles (1991) provide a very helpful multi-level model for analysing the source of the misunderstanding that interlocutors attribute it to; for example, presumed personal deficiencies or cultural differences in norms. Others (e.g. Kasper, 1992; Žegarac & Pennington, 2008) have analysed the impact of an infelicitous pragmatic transfer of a discourse strategy that is either wholly inappropriate or is evaluated less positively than is likely intended by the speaker.

### **Interpersonal Relations**

A number of the studies reported above commented not only ‘message misunderstandings’ but also on the negative impact they had on interlocutor relations. For instance, in Tyler’s (1995) study, an American student became extremely angry with a Korean teaching assistant, although much of it stemmed from an initial language interpretation problem (see the discussion in Žegarac & Pennington, 2008). Sometimes it is not so much language code issues that underlie the problem as different normative expectations over ‘acceptable behaviour; for instance, what counts as ‘suitable’ phatic talk in workplaces (Béal, 1992) or in initial informal encounters (Günthner, 2008). In these cases, the interlocutors held differing norms as to how communication in these contexts ‘should’ or ‘should not’ take place (see Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, in press, for an in-depth discussion). Attitudes towards others can also play a significant role (e.g. Lindemann, 2002). We would not, however, want to attribute the whole explanation to differing normative patterns and interpersonal attitudes. Intercultural encounters are not isolated interactions but are embedded in larger political, social and economic discourses, and these also frame interlocutor perception and evaluation. Holmes (2018: 33) explains this as follows:

In many, perhaps all, societies the relative social status of different social and cultural groups results in hegemonic relationships or an ‘order’ manifested as sets of taken-for-granted unmarked societal norms which influence behavior, including linguistic behavior.

Holmes further suggests that most frequently these ‘culture orders’ are dominated by the cultural norms of the majority group and are usually only felt by the minority group members, who are required to adjust their behaviour to the dominant culture order. Holmes draws on interactions in Maori workplaces, making the different possibilities of norms visible that otherwise are taken for granted. Intercultural exchanges and relations are therefore often constructed on uneven ground and include subtle power differences between interlocutors and in whose interactional norms are treated as more valid and appropriate in a given context.

### **Prejudice and Discrimination**

One criticism of the focus on misunderstandings is that benign claims of misunderstanding or an inability to communicate may in fact mask uglier issues such as prejudices. The early work by researchers such as Gumperz (1982) and Roberts, Davies and Jupp (1992) demonstrated this clearly. It can also be seen in discursive phenomena such as hate (Assimakopoulos, Baider, & Millar, 2017) and linguistic aggression (Mugford, 2018), as well as in so-called micro aggressions that minorities can be confronted with. In a study on subtle

discrimination in the workplace, Van Laer and Janssens (2012) report on seemingly innocent questions that migrant employees were regularly confronted with that were not designed to get to know them as an individual, but to confirm pre-existing stereotypes and to expose cultural differences and to reduce the individual to only some aspects of their cultural identities.

A number of studies (Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019; Piekkari, Oxelheim, & Randøy, 2015; Rogerson-Revell, 2008) have shown how turn-taking practices can result in the sidelining of participants, with the result that they are not able to contribute fully to discussions and decisions. Similarly, Tenzer, Pudelko, and Harzing (2014), in a study of intercultural teams in the German automobile industry, found that language competence was strongly conflated with technical competence. However, not only was trust in technical issues affected, but so was the ascription of personal integrity. Insecurity of having to switch languages in meetings also resulted in avoidance and discriminatory behaviour, as non-German speaking employees were not invited to important meetings, and less proficient members self-excluded from attending meetings where they may be forced to speak their L2.

Inadvertent discrimination can also take place when infelicitous pragmatic transfers affect gatekeeping judgements (Birkner & Kern, 2008; Grazia Guido, 2004). It should be noted that many of these examples could not be explained without the prevalence of monolingual ideologies that underpin the culture order in the contexts they occur in. This together with discursive mismatches and stereotypes result in the marginalization and discrimination of interlocutors perceived as culturally different.

### **Intercultural Learning and Growth**

Research in fields such as international business have identified many positives from intercultural interaction (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Tjosvold, Wong, & Chen, 2014), yet despite the concern that too many intercultural studies have focused on the negative, there has been little intercultural discourse research into the positives of intercultural learning and growth. While there are occasional exceptions (e.g. Grieve, 2010), there is a clear need for more research in this area. We follow up on this at the end of the chapter.

#### **A sample study**

We will now turn to some data examples to explore some of the features described as characterising intercultural discourse and to return to some of the questions we raised in the beginning. The following excerpts stem from a longitudinal study on interactions in an MBA student team and both are taken from breaks during team meetings. The team was assembled by course coordinators in an attempt to make it as diverse as possible – a fact not lost to the team and the source of some jokes. Within the encounters of this team, we find many of the features we have discussed above: The creation of intercultural friendships, intercultural learning and growth, but also the darker sides including marginalization, stereotyping and even discrimination – sometimes between the same two interlocutors. What type of interactions and relationships are constructed and foregrounded in specific situations is therefore highly variant and depends on the context and the activity members are engaged in.

Excerpt 1 occurs after reference was made to a female lecturer being attractive. Bruno ends the sequence by sharing a German proverb which roughly means that it is okay to look admiringly at other people but that you can only engage in sexual activity with your partner.



Excerpt 1:

- 1 Bruno: in German there is a way to say (.) In Germany/ in Germany we say  
you can get hungry outside the house but eaten you do at home
- 2 David: hhhhhh
- 3 Bruno: this is very subtle
- 4 Akshya: what what what? Say that again
- 5 Bruno: you can get hungry outside the house but eat do it in house
- 6 Jay: £BUT/ what if you're REALLY hungry?£=
- 7 Bev: =yeah?
- 8 Akshya: eaten?
- 9 Bruno: eaten yeah (.) you can get hungry
- 10 Akshya: hungry okay/ but you eat at home okay
- 11 Bruno: you eat at home yeah exactly
- 12 Jay: yeah you might wanna munch or nibble or something

Bruno jocularly introduces a German proverb into the conversation. This is clearly appreciated by the other team participants and constitutes the basis of laughter and some further jokes. Bruno's translation of the German proverb into English is grammatically incorrect, but – apart from Akshya, who seems to actually struggle to understand – no one picks up on that and most team members, all of them highly proficient English speakers, seem to apply the 'let it pass'-principle (see Table 1). Akshya herself asks first for a repetition of the utterance (line 4) and then repeats the meaning back to Bruno in line 10 providing the correct verb form. In this she now explicitly indicates understanding by repeating 'okay' twice, which also functions to structure the different components of the utterance. Bruno picks up the right verb form and repeats it back to her in line 11, confirming that this is the right interpretation.

The conversation is in general quite collaborative, with team members joking and supporting each other in achieving understanding and in the completion of their jokes (e.g. line 7). Jay in particular spins the humour further by continuing to draw on the underlying metaphor of 'eating is having sex'. While team members come from three different continents, speak very different first languages and have had very different life experiences, including in countries that are much more conservative in regards to sexual innuendos than in the UK (where the team is located), all of them seem to grasp the underlying metaphor easily and can find humour in the utterance, while being slightly transgressive together, which fuels good relationships (Coupland & Jaworski, 2003). While all this is jocular and light-hearted, cultural knowledge and values are exchanged and negotiated here quite explicitly, especially by Bruno who introduces the 'German' take on having or not having an affair. This also constitutes clear boundary marking in regards to acceptable behaviour and social norms within the team.

In Excerpt 2 team members similarly are taking a break from their meeting in their team room. All six team members are present, but only three participate in this interaction. Jay is sitting next to the plate with biscuits and is asked by David to pass him one.

Excerpt 2:

- 1 David: can you chuck me a Bourbon please?
- 2 Jay: hm?
- 3 David: could you chuck me a Bourbon biscuit please [[slightly funny pronunciation]]
- 4 Jay: mhm
- 5 David: Bourbon [[funny pronunciation]]
- 6 Jay: [[chewing]] which one/ Bourbon/ the chocolate or the
- 7 David: chocolate biscuit (.) [[ funny pronunciation]] the one that says Bourbon at the top (.) for future reference
- 8 Akshya: hhh
- 9 Jay: yeah?
- 10 David: they say Bourbon:on
- 11 Jay: yeah I know that.
- 12 Akshya: Bourbonon?
- 13 David: but you just ask which one was a Bourbon biscuit
- 14 Jay: no no I asked which Bourbon the chocolate or the the white one (.) Cause there are two different
- 15 David: OH SORRY I misunderstood
- 16 Jay: cause I love Bourbons
- 17 Akshya: yeah we get them in India

The interaction again starts quite humorously with David joking – mostly to himself – about the pronunciation of ‘bourbon biscuit’, however it unfolds very differently to Excerpt 1. Miscommunication occurs after Jay’s question in line 6, which David interprets erroneously as indicating Jay’s lack of knowledge of the nature of the required biscuit. If we take this as ‘lack of world knowledge’ as it is often called in research on misunderstandings, we could argue that culture was not in fact playing any role in the exchange and that this could equally happen in intracultural interaction. Even if we judge David’s joke in line 7 that the name is written at the top as slightly patronizing and wonder at the forcefulness of his response, and at the passion with which Jay declares his love for Bourbon biscuits, but still continue to treat it as an everyday miscommunication that could happen anywhere.

We would argue, however, that throughout the interaction, a ‘culture order’ that aids in positioning the participants at unequal footings throughout and privileges David, the white L1

speaker in the team, who alone is native to the team's location base, the UK. His language jokes on the pronunciation of 'Bourbon biscuits' would be interpreted differently by anyone who did not 'own' the language, neither could his explanation in line 7 be given by someone who does not fully 'own' and embody the culture. Akshya's comment in line 17, functions to make this visible by making their different national backgrounds explicit. Her utterance 'we get them in India' suggests that she perceives a subtext to be present, one in which David's misunderstanding of Jay's question is not accidental but is driven by his assumptions about Jay's national cultural identity.

Culture is rarely discussed explicitly in the team, nor are cultural stereotypes. In many interactions, culture may appear invisible to the point that a focus on the team as an intercultural team may appear as an analyst's imposition on the data – yet the sheer amount of data we have viewed from this one team reveals that the culture order, in the form of cultural assumptions, appear at many different points and impact the exchanges and relationships overall. Certain forms of marginalization and privilege in the team (Debray, in press; Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019) would simply be impossible to explain without monolingual ideologies of speaking and without cultural stereotypes fuelling evaluations of each other as people and of each other's competence. At the same time, as we could see in Excerpt 1 much of the interactions were also very positive, including many possibilities for building friendships and for fostering mutual learning.

### **Future directions in intercultural discourse research**

Much previous work has pointed to the crucial real-world implications that research in intercultural discourse can have for social justice and fair and equal societies. Yet, it appears that after some very crucial studies in the 80s and 90s, debates about the definition of culture, and of how culture can be located in interactions, have diminished the attractiveness of this topic for many discourse scholars. Current debates on intercultural communication are dominated by scholars from psychology, business studies, foreign language teaching, and pragmatics.

Given the fascinating insights discourse studies have yielded, we want to urge scholars to engage in more research on intercultural communication. The different studies presented here have all used creative methodologies, including attitude tests, longitudinal data and post-event interviews to deal with 'the problem' of culture and research has pointed to the fact that even the perception of cultural differences has huge impacts on interactions. A particularly under-researched area is intercultural learning and growth. We are aware that investigating this is by no means a simple endeavour: Such a focus requires a longitudinal approach, yet this can also address the challenge of demonstrating 'culture' in a single discourse segment, as we have shown with the excerpts from our study. Given that intercultural communication has become a routine, everyday phenomenon, additional expertise on how to navigate stereotypes and discrimination, and how to improve relations and make personal adjustments, are urgently necessary.

## Transcription Key

Symbol	Meaning
/	Intonation unit boundary
?	Rising intonation
:	Lengthened sound
(.)	Short pause, below one second
=	Unit of pause follows another with no discernible interval
CAPS	Louder voice
_____	Word emphasised
hh	Laughter
££	Laughing voice
[[ ]]	Description of additional features

## Key Readings

- Debray, C. and Spencer-Oatey, H. (2019), "“On the same page?” Marginalisation and positioning practices in intercultural teams', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 144: 15–28.
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