

# Rhotacization and the ‘Beijing Smooth Operator’: The social meaning of a linguistic variable<sup>1</sup>

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Recent sociolinguistic studies on style have focused much attention on the construction of social meaning in situated discursive practices. Despite a general recognition that the linguistic resources used are often already imbued with social meanings, little research has been done on what these meanings may be. Focusing on rhotacization, a sociolinguistic variable in Beijing Mandarin, this article explores its imbued social meanings and sociocultural associations. I demonstrate that rhotacization takes on semiotic saliency through co-occurrence with key Beijing cultural terms and frequent use in written representations of authentic Beijing-ness. Furthermore, this feature is associated with the ‘Beijing Smooth Operator,’ a salient male local character type, and is ideologically construed as reflecting its characterological attributes. The findings of this study shed light on the meaning potential of a linguistic variable, rhotacization in this case, which can enhance understanding of the possibilities and constraints for its use and meaning in new contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** Social meaning, linguistic variable, meaning potential, stereotype, ideology, character type, rhotacization, Mandarin Chinese

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Jing you-zi, Wei zui-zi, Baodingfu de gou tui-zi

Beijing Smooth Operator, Tianjin Talker, Baoding Henchman

(A well-known Chinese saying about three local stereotypes)

In fact, Beijingers are said to be smooth, the so-called ‘Beijing Smooth Operator’, mainly because Beijing speech has a lot of rhotacization. Beijingers are naturally gifted with gab, and with heavy r-sounding, then [Beijingers] appear to be smooth. Have you heard anybody saying the Cantonese have ‘oily accent, slippery tone?’ That’s because their tongues can’t curl.

(Liu, a 38-year-old male chief representative of a foreign bank)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an outpouring of studies have examined linguistic variation as a resource for the construction of identities and styles (e.g. Bucholtz 1996;

Coupland 2001a; Eckert 2000; Eckert and Rickford 2001; Schilling-Estes 1998). This focus is part of a broader move in sociolinguistics, particularly variationist sociolinguistics, to adopt practice-based approaches to the study of linguistic variation (e.g. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Compared with earlier variationist studies, this strand of research pays more attention to speaker agency and the ways in which social meanings are constructed through deployment of linguistic and other semiotic resources. These studies demonstrate that speakers often draw on pre-existing linguistic resources that are already imbued with social meanings through their association with a social group or character type. When these linguistic features are used to construct a different style or persona, their existent meanings are transformed. Hence, the employment of a pre-existing linguistic element in a new context, or what Bauman and Briggs (1990) call 'recontextualization,' is a transformational process wherein new meaning emerges. Although much focus has been on investigating the emergent meanings of linguistic features, more work is needed from sociolinguists to explore the imbued meanings that the recontextualized element brings with it. A better understanding of imbued meanings helps to address a crucial question in the study of style and social meaning: how do linguistic resources become available for appropriation by new groups?

Thus, the main concern of this article is to explore the meanings and sociocultural associations imbued in a salient linguistic feature that make it amenable to stylistic work. Specifically, this article examines rhotacization in Beijing Mandarin, a locally salient sociolinguistic variable. The questions to be addressed are: (1) how does rhotacization take on social saliency and consequently semiotic potential to do stylistic work? and (2) what are the social meanings and associations that this feature carries with it? This empirical investigation draws on insights from the recent work of Agha (2003) on the historical development of the cultural value of Received Pronunciation and those of Johnstone and her associates on the social history of 'Pittsburghese' (Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006; Johnstone, Bhasin and Wittkofski 2002). The goal of this study is to contribute to the ongoing efforts in developing 'a coherent theory of the social meaning of variables' (Eckert 2004: 41).

## 2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IMBUED SOCIAL MEANING

The present study builds on insights from recent sociolinguistic research on the use of linguistic resources in the construction of identities, styles, and personae (Bell 1999, 2001; Bucholtz 1996, 2001; Cameron 2000; Chun 2007; Coupland 2001a, 2001b; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2007; Podesva 2007; Schilling-Estes 1998, 2004; Q. Zhang 2005; studies in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 1999 special issue on styling). Treating styles and personae as dynamic and motivated semiotic processes, these studies elucidate how social meanings emerge in situated discursive practices, or 'the situated face of meaning' in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992: 474) terms. In addition, many of the studies cited above attest to

a tendency among speakers to draw on a limited set of such resources that are already imbued with social meanings. However, not much attention has been devoted to investigating what the meanings are.

Employing linguistic resources with imbued meanings is a key strategy in Bell's (1984, 2001) conceptualization of initiative style in his audience design framework. As illustrated in his studies of New Zealand television commercials (Bell 1992, 1999), the language varieties and features used in the advertisements are saturated with meanings through their associations with salient social groups and cultural stereotypes. Such meanings and sociocultural associations constitute the indexical potential for these resources to carry out new stylistic work in the advertisements. Similarly, salient dialect features and repertoires of Welsh English with conventionalized meanings are deployed in the stylized performance by two Welsh radio presenters examined in Coupland (2001a). The reworking of existing resources for new purposes in these cases points to what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as the dialogic orientation of language, which both Bell and Coupland draw on in their work on styles (e.g. Bell 2001; Coupland 2001a). According to Bakhtin's (1981: 293) notion of 'dialogism,' language 'lives a socially charged life' and carries tastes of its past uses and users. The Bakhtinian dialogic view of language has profound implications for investigating social meaning beyond the immediate context. As Ochs (1992: 383) notes, '[p]art of the meaning of any utterance (spoken and written) is its social history, its social presence, and its social future.' Bauman and Briggs (1990) operationalize Bakhtin's rather abstract notion of dialogism in terms of decontextualization and recontextualization, two aspects of a transformational process wherein ready-made discourse is extracted from one context and fitted into another (Bauman 1996: 301). As Bauman and Briggs (1990: 75) point out, '[b]ecause the process is transformational, we must now determine what the recontextualized text brings with it from its earlier context(s) and what emergent form, function, and meaning it is given as it is recentered.' Sociolinguistic studies on style tend to focus on the transformed, emergent aspect of social meaning. As linguistic features and styles bear traces of their past uses and users real and imagined (Irvine 1996: 151), the sociocultural associations that they bring from their 'socially charged life' (Bakhtin 1981: 293) constitute potential for, as well as constraints on, their uses in the present and future contexts. Hence, it is important for analysts to explore the meanings imbued in a linguistic feature that make it available for stylistic work.

Particularly relevant to the case presented in this article is work by Agha (2003) and Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006). Agha (2003) traces the 'enregisterment' processes whereby the Received Pronunciation has taken on a specific scheme of cultural values linked to correctness and a prestigious social status. Whereas Agha (2003) examines the historical emergence of a supralocal variety, Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006) explore that of a named local variety, 'Pittsburghese.' Using multiple methods, including historical research, ethnography, discourses analysis, and sociolinguistic interviews, Johnstone,

Andrus and Danielson (2006) reveal the historical and ideological processes through which a set of linguistic features have come to take on meanings of localness and to be enregistered as 'Pittsburghese.'

The empirical case investigated in this article is rhotacization, a sociolinguistic variable in Beijing Mandarin. Although the scope of this study is smaller than that of Agha (2003) and Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006), by focusing on one dialect feature, the present investigation explicates how rhotacization takes on semiotic saliency and builds its meaning potential. Before presenting the data and analysis, I provide a brief description of the feature under study.

### 3. A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF RHOTACIZATION

Rhotacization, or *er-hua* in Mandarin Chinese, is a phonological process involving the syllable final<sup>2</sup> in which the subsyllabic retroflex [ɻ] is added to the final, which causes the final to become rhotacized (Chao 1968; Lu 1995). As a stable dialect feature, rhotacization is shared among Northern Mandarin varieties, with its earliest record dating back to the mid-16th century (Lu 1995: 78). This feature is especially prominent in Beijing Mandarin (Chao 1968; Lu 1995). As is the case with salient features of local varieties of American English, for instance, the monophongized /aw/ of 'Pittsburghese' (Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006) and the raised and backed /ay/ of the 'hoi toider' dialect of Ocracoke (Schilling-Estes 1998; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997), rhotacization is a well-known feature associated with the vernacular accent, *jing qiang*, a Mandarin term referring to the Beijing accent. It is often the topic of overt social commentary, a 'stereotype' in Labov's (1972: 180) terms.

Unlike alphabet-based scripts, which can represent elements of 'accents' with creative/alternative spelling, the logogram-based standard written Chinese (in both simplified and traditional characters) is less versatile in representing dialectal sound features. In the case of rhotacization, however, it is conventionally represented in written Chinese by the character 儿 [ɻ], literally meaning 'son.'<sup>3</sup> In example 1, a realization without rhotacization is followed by one with the feature. For both realizations, the pinyin spelling (the romanization system used in the People's Republic of China) is followed by an IPA transcription, which is followed by the Chinese script in simplified characters.

1. 'bag'    *bao* [pau] 包 ~ *baor* [pau.ɻ] 包儿

The subsyllabic retroflex [ɻ] can be added to all thirty-seven Mandarin finals (Chao 1968; Lu 1995). Little research has been done on the linguistic constraints on the variable application of rhotacization in Mandarin except for some general descriptive observations (Chao 1968; Lu 1995). Rhotacization occurs most often in casual speech and with nouns; with a small number of verbs, e.g. *wan* 'play'; with demonstratives such as *zhe* 'here' and *na* 'there'; and with classifiers (Li and Thompson 1981). Q. Zhang (2001: 114–118) provides a preliminary variable

rule (VARBRUL) analysis on several internal constraints. As this article is not concerned with linguistic conditioning of rhotacization, I do not devote more space to this issue.

The current study is motivated in part by some of the findings from my earlier work on the linguistic construction of a new cosmopolitan professional identity among a group of native Beijing business professionals working for international companies (Q. Zhang 2001; 2005). Rhotacization was one of the four phonological variables examined, and it displayed an interesting pattern somewhat different from the other Beijing Mandarin features, in that it had the most pronounced gender difference. The male professionals used the rhotacized variant at a relatively high frequency of 64 percent (still significantly less frequent than their counterparts in state-owned businesses), whereas the female professionals used it in only 23 percent of the total potential environments (see Q. Zhang 2005: 447). In Q. Zhang (2001), I suggested that the great gender discrepancy in the use of this feature was to a large extent attributed to its association with a well-known local character type called the 'Beijing Smooth Operator.' This association, not sufficiently investigated in my earlier work, is the focus of this article. In what follows, I seek to reveal how this feature takes on semiotic saliency and I explore the sociocultural associations that make it amenable to stylistic work.

#### 4. DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis to be presented is based largely on data drawn from selected sources in standard written Chinese. They are complemented with a small amount of spoken data – metalinguistic commentaries – from audio recorded sociolinguistic interviews conducted during my fieldwork in 1997 – 1998 for the study of the linguistic practice of business professionals in Beijing (Q. Zhang 2001). The metalinguistic commentaries from the interviews are included in this study because they provide folk perceptions of the saliency of rhotacization and its sociocultural associations. These commentaries constitute supplementary evidence of the link between the linguistic feature of Beijing speech and social attributes of Beijingers. This association is valorized in other metapragmatic practices, as demonstrated by the written data drawn from two sources: (1) novels and literary works categorized as *jing wei wenxue* 'Beijing-flavor literature,' particularly *jing wei xiaoshuo* 'Beijing-flavor novel,'<sup>4</sup> and (2) literary criticisms of Beijing-flavor literature. A list of the literary works and literary criticisms on which the analysis of this study is based is provided in the Appendix.

'Beijing-flavor literature' refers to those literary works that have a distinctive Beijing style in depicting unique cultural characters of Beijingers, their lives, living environments, and folk customs (Li 1989: 24; Lü 1994; L. Zhang 1994: 18–20). One of the most salient and shared devices profusely used to produce the unique 'Beijing flavor' is Beijing vernacular features. Among them, rhotacization, one of the few accent features that can be represented in writing, is used as

a prominent resource to capture the putative uniqueness of Beijing speech. Thus, written texts from Beijing-flavor literature are particularly suitable for exploring the use of rhotacization for stylistic purposes. Furthermore, according to Agha's (2003) observation, as a genre of metadiscourses of accent, literary works foreground selected correlations between ways of speaking or speech features and social personae. In this case, Beijing-flavor literature provides a rich source for investigating how rhotacization comes to take on semiotic saliency to invoke a Beijing style and the sociocultural associations imbued in this feature – particularly its association with a stock character type, the 'Beijing Smooth Operator,' as shown in the following analysis.

The majority of the written literary texts examined in this study are drawn from works published in the late 20th century, except for those from the works of Lao She (1899 – 1966), who is considered the pioneer of Beijing-flavor literature and a master of writing in Beijing vernacular (e.g. Jin and Bai 1993; L. Zhang 1994; Y. Zhao 1991). It is generally agreed among literary scholars that Lao She's writings in the early 20th century (1920s to 1940s) mark the maturation of Beijing-flavor literature (e.g. Jin and Bai 1993; Lü 1994; Wang 2006). Literary creations of Beijing-flavor literature were discouraged and interrupted in the period from the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) (Jin and Bai 1993; Wang 2006). The 1980s saw the revival and the beginning of the most prolific period of Beijing-flavor literature. Hence, the majority of texts examined in this article – literary works and literary criticisms discussed below – are from the second half of the 20th century.

Writings of literary critics on Beijing-flavor literature are another important source of data for exploring the meanings and sociocultural associations imbued in the Beijing vernacular and rhotacization. Because the use of elements from the vernacular variety constitutes one of the defining features of Beijing-flavor literature, literary criticisms on such works typically involve commentaries and interpretations of the social meanings of Beijing speech and its features. These criticisms, metadiscursive practices, provide another set of data that can be used to directly measure the imbued social meanings of the vernacular variety and its features.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. RHOTACIZATION: SEMIOTIC SALIENCY AND IMBUED MEANINGS

In what follows, I first examine uses of rhotacization in literary works and writings of literary scholars to show how it has come to take on the semiotic saliency of an emblem representing an 'authentic' Beijing style (section 5.1). Second, I examine data from Beijing-flavor literature and explicit metapragmatic discourse from sociolinguistic interviews and writings of literary critics to explicate the meanings and sociocultural associations imbued in Beijing Mandarin and, specifically, rhotacization (section 5.2).

### 5.1 *Jing qiangr jing diaor: Rhotacization as an emblem of Beijing vernacular style*

*Er-hua* 'rhotocization,' or *er yin* 'r-sound,' the Chinese technical terms for rhotacization, are hardly linguistic terms among lay Beijingers. They were used by many participants during my fieldwork interviews to characterize Beijing Mandarin. To them, rhotacization was an object that they had a name for, referred to, and described. In the written data, rhotacization is frequently used in the expressions *jing qiangr*, 'Beijing tune,' *jing diaor*, 'Beijing tone,' both of which are folk linguistic terms for the Beijing accent. For example, rhotacization is used with *jing qiang* in '*Fuhai de jing qiangr*' 'Fuhai's Beijing speech[r]' (J. Zhao 1996: 83) to describe the speech style of the protagonist in Lao She's novel *Zheng Hong Qi Xia*, '*Beneath the Red Banner*.' In contrast to *Beijing hua* 'Beijing speech,' a neutral term for the local variety, *jing qiangr* and *jing diaor* are names for an 'authentic' Beijing speech style, distinctive from other local styles. The use of rhotacization adds a perceptual effect to the terms, projecting a 'sound image' of the local style of speech.

Rhotacization is also often used with the term *jing wei*, 'Beijing flavor.' Although *jing qiang* and *jing diao* refer specifically to Beijing speech style, *jing wei* or *jing weir* are more general terms used for anything with a distinctive Beijing style, including the local culture, speech, and cuisine, as illustrated in the following example from Lin Haiyin's essay '*Wo-de jing weir zhi lü*', 'My Beijing-flavored[r] trip' (note the use of rhotacization in the title) (1994: 36).

2. zai Beijing guo-le liu tian 'jing weir' de rizi, . . . guo zu-le shuo 'jing weir' dehua, ting 'jing weir' de xi, chi 'jing weir' xiao-chi de yin.

[I] spent six 'Beijing-flavored[r]' days in Beijing, . . . enjoyed to my heart's content talking in 'Beijing-flavored[r]' speech, watching 'Beijing-flavored[r]' plays, and eating 'Beijing-flavored[r]' local specialties.

In the above excerpt from the end of the essay in which Lin summarizes what she did on her trip to Beijing, rhotacization is applied to all four occurrences of 'Beijing-flavor.' Such a high frequency of its use brings into prominence and enhances the localness of the writer's touring experiences in Beijing: from talking in the Beijing speech, to listening to the traditional Peking Opera, and to eating the local specialties, all constitutive of the distinctiveness of the local culture.

In addition to its use as a general term for Beijing-specific cultural forms, *jing wei* is used to designate a particular literary style, *jing wei xiaoshuo* 'Beijing-flavor novels,' or *jingwei wenxue* 'Beijing-flavor literature,' whose stylistic characteristics were described in section 4. As shown in example 3, the snappy chapter title of a book on the language style of Beijing-flavor literature, the rhotacized realizations of both *jing wei* 'Beijing flavor' and *wei* 'flavor' vividly invoke the local 'flavor' of this style of writing.

3. 'jing weir xiaoshuo' de 'weir'

'The flavor[r]' of 'Beijing-flavor[r] novels'

(chapter title, Jin and Bai 1993)

*Jing qiang*, *jing diao*, and *jing wei*, discussed above, are all key cultural terms that semantically denote the distinctiveness of a Beijing style. When realized in the rhotacized form, the referential content of the terms, that is distinctive Beijing-ness, merges with the phonological feature. Thus, similar to the 'h-dropping' in tokens of the word '[h]umble' in the speech of Uriah Heep, a character of humility in Dickens's *David Copperfield* (Agha 2003: 256), *jing qiangr*, *jing diaor*, and *jing weir* implement, in Agha's (2003: 256) terms, 'a reflexive trope' that 'semantically denotes the interactional effect indexed by its phonological shape.' The merging of the vernacular variant and key Beijing cultural terms heightens the social meaning of rhotacization – i.e. distinctive Beijing-ness – and consequently contributes to its salient status (see also Eckert 1996).

In addition to its frequent co-occurrence with key cultural terms, this feature is used ubiquitously in the writings of Beijing-flavor literature to represent the local dialect and to evoke localness. Example 4 illustrates that rhotacization, as a stylistic device, not only represents the voice of the narrator as a Beijinger but, more importantly, projects the setting of the story as a unique local cultural site. The excerpt is taken from the short story '*Hong dian ker*' 'Siberian Rubythroat[r],' by Han Shaohua, a famous 'Beijing-flavor' novelist (1989 [1983]: 254; note again the use of rhotacization in the title of the short story).

4. chengtān gēr, kè zhènshì gè hào qūchū. . . . dān pīng nà chéngpiān de lǎo sòng lǎo bái, shìfāng jītān, bù jiù pō yǒuxiè gū yīr mē? rúrúo yìdà qīngzǎor, liúdào zhè tǎn qiāngzì xībèi jiāor litóu lái, jiù gēngyǒu yìsì le. chūnqiū r bēngtǐ lǎ, jiù zhè xiàjǐng tiānr, bǎishù yīnr nòngde shuāngren, jìbiān húnshēng shì hān, yìdào zhèr, yè lìshì lǎoxiāgè qìbā chéng r qū. dōngjǐng tiānr nē, yǒu bēi fēng r, yǒu chāo yāng r, dà guān, tuīshǒu, zhānzhuāng, dòu bù yìdìng fēi dài shǒutǎor bùkè. nāngūai chāng lái zhèr 'huì niǎor' de nāgè cuopāng lǎotóur – jīshì shuohuà yǒu kuài yǒu cuì yǒu liáng, chuòhào rēnchéng 'bāngzì' de nēiwei, zōng ài kuā zhèr shì kuài 'bào dì' le.

Chengtān gēn[r] is indeed a great place to visit. . . . The stretches of pines, and cypresses, and the stone altar, don't they look ancient[r]? It's even more interesting if you stroll down to the northwest corner[r] of the park early in the morning[r]. Even in summer days[r] like this, let alone in spring and autumn[r], the shade[r] under the cypresses is refreshing. Even though you sweat all over, coming here[r] would immediately cool you off[r]. In winter days[r], the place is protected from the wind[r] and faces the sun[r]. Doing [shadow] boxing, pushing hands, and standing pole, you don't have to wear gloves[r]. No wonder the stout old man[r], nicknamed 'wooden clapper' and speaking fast with a crisp and resonant voice, often comes here[r] for a 'bird[r] rendezvous.' He always praises this place[r] as a 'treasure land.'

In the above excerpt, the opening paragraph of the short story, rhotacization is used 17 times in the description of *chengtan genr* in Ditan Park,<sup>6</sup> a favorite meeting place where locals, and elders in particular, gather to do traditional morning exercises. It is also a place for *hui niaor* 'bird[r] rendezvous,' a time-honored Beijing leisure activity.<sup>7</sup> Nowhere else in the short story is rhotacization used so intensively as in this paragraph, which does not mention Beijing by name. That is, except for the name of the meeting place, *chengtan genr*, and the activity of *huiniaor*, nothing in the content of the description can be identified explicitly as associated with Beijing. Such meeting places in a park, with lush trees and historical structures, may also be found elsewhere. Hence, it is the repeated use of rhotacization that brings about the unique Beijing-ness of such a local milieu.

The frequent co-occurrence of rhotacization with key cultural terms, as in example 3, and its repeated use to represent and evoke authentic Beijing-ness, as in example 4, constitute part of the process by which this particular dialect feature comes to take on semiotic saliency as the quintessential emblem of the uniqueness of Beijing vernacular style. Such saliency renders this dialect feature a rich resource for stylistic work, particularly for expressing meanings of localness.

## 5.2 Imbued meanings

In this section, I examine the sociocultural associations imbued in rhotacization through examining metalinguistic comments from sociolinguistic interviews, Beijing-flavor literary works and explicit metapragmatic commentaries of literary scholars.

***The 'smoothness' of Beijing speech and rhotacization.*** In responding to my open-ended questions about characteristics of Beijing speech in the sociolinguistic interviews, some participants described it with the idiom *zi-zheng qiang-yuan*. *Zi-zheng* means that each character (i.e. syllable) has the right tone. *Qiang-yuan* means the intonation is *yuan* 'round,' that is, the sound flows smoothly, free of roughness and harshness. Such a characterization of Beijing Mandarin is also echoed in some of the literary scholars' descriptions about Beijing speech. In example 5, Lü elaborates on this distinctive feature, using a series of eight adjectives to describe the *qiang-yuan* aspect of speech, five of which (marked in boldface) pertain to the qualities associated with smoothness (1994: 136, emphasis added):

5. renmen dui Beijing hua sulai you 'zi-zheng qing-yan' zhi ping. suowei 'zi-zheng', wufei jishi zhi qi si sheng xiangbei, diaozhi bianhuan hexie youxu; suowei 'qiang-yuan', zeshi zhi zai qi yuyan de ... shengqiang diaoshi ... chengxian chu hexie, **yuanrun, liuli, huashuang**, bu caozao, bu xiepi, **bu zhise, bu jiqu aoya** de tedian.

Beijing speech has always been described as '*zi-zheng qiang-yuan*.' The so-called '*zi-zheng*' simply refers to the speech bearing all four tones: changes in the pitch values are harmonious and orderly. The so-called '*qiang-yuan*,'

on the other hand, refers to the tonal patterns and intonation contour of the speech . . . displaying the characteristics of being harmonious, mellow and **smooth** [*yuanrun*: of sound and voice quality], **fluent** [*liuli*: of smooth flow of speech], **smooth** and comfortable [*huashuang*: of surface or fabric free from roughness and coarseness to the touch], not noisy, not strange and rare [i.e. familiar], **fluid and smooth** [*zhise*: of flow of liquid and speech], and **smooth** [*jiequ aoya*: of writing and speech difficult to read, or tongue-twisting. *Bu jiequ aoya* means writings that read smoothly].

Other literary critics also associate Beijing speech with the quality of ‘smoothness.’ In example 6, literary critic Changzhi Li (1934) argues that Beijing speech used by Lao She in his novels is the most authentic and lively. He describes Beijing speech as imbued with ‘smoothness and crispness’ (Li 1934 quoted in Quan Zhang 1997: 275, emphasis added):

6. Lao She yong de Beijing hua, shi bi renhe zuojia didao de, zhenshi huo de Beijing hua. Beijing hua you shi zui puzhang de, zui jiang paichang de. Qizhong suyong de, naishi **youhua** he gancui.

No other writer can compare with Lao She in using authentic Beijing speech. His is real and living speech. Beijing speech is also the most extravagant and spectacular. What is inherent in it is **smoothness** and crispness.

The ‘smooth’ characteristic of Beijing speech is found extended to rhotacization. Recall example 4 in section 5.1, in which there are 17 occurrences of rhotacization. According to Lü (1994: 149, emphasis added), the ‘extensive employment of rhotacization brings out the typical ‘mellow and **smooth**’ quality of Beijing vernacular speech.’ Furthermore, in the following commentaries on the characteristics of *jing qiang*, she again attributes the smoothness of Beijing speech to the extensive use of rhotacization (1994: 156, emphasis added):

7. ‘er-hua yun’ de guangfan shiyong, **ba yuyan damo de wuleng wujiao**; . . . ting-zhe **guanghua yuanrun**, shi ren gandao chunre qinqie.

The extensive use of ‘rhotacization’ **smoothes out the edges and corners of speech**; . . . [it] sounds **smooth and mellow**, and engenders a feeling of warmth and intimacy.

It is not Lü’s characterization of rhotacization in example 7 that indicates that this feature makes smooth-sounding speech in any phonetic sense; rather, it is the literary critic’s interpretation that rhotacization has the stylistic function of making the speech sound smooth.<sup>8</sup>

**Rhotacization and the ‘Beijing Smooth Operator’.** The above descriptions (5, 6, and 7) of Beijing speech and rhotacization in terms of ‘smoothness’ attest to Agha’s observation that ‘the native speaker’s metalinguistic grasp of semiotic phenomena is an inherently leaky thing’ (1998: 162). In other words, the same metalinguistic description can be applied to different kinds of linguistic objects,

for example, words, sentences, and registers (Agha 1998: 162). As demonstrated in the preceding examples (5, 6 and 7), the metalinguistic characterization of 'smoothness' is applied to, or leaks across, different kinds of linguistic objects, namely, the Beijing vernacular style and one of its prominent components, rhotacization. Moreover, such leakage is also exhibited across aspects of speech and speakers such that the 'smoothness' of Beijing speech and rhotacization is identified with a smooth Beijing persona. Such cross-level leakage, prevalent in native speakers' talk about Beijing Mandarin, is illustrated by the comment made by a participant in one of my sociolinguistic interviews, reproduced in 8 below.

8. (Liu, a 38-year-old male chief representative of a foreign bank)

- 1 qishi, shuo Beijing ren you,  
In fact, **Beijingers** are said to be **smooth**,
- 2 suovei jing you-zi ma,  
the so-called **Beijing Smooth Operator**,
- 3 zhuyao shi yinwei Beijing hua you haoduo er-hua yin.  
mainly because **Beijing speech has a lot of rhotacization**.
- 4 Beijing ren benlai jiu neng shuo,  
**Beijingers are naturally gifted with gab**,
- 5 zai jiashang er yin zhong,  
and with **heavy r-sounding**,
- 6 na jiu xiande youhua.  
then **[Beijingers] appear to be smooth**.
- 7 ni ting shei shuo guo Guangdong ren you-qiangr hua-diaor a?  
Have you heard anybody saying **the Cantonese have 'oily accent[r], slippery tone[r]'**?
- 8 na shi yinwei tamen shetou bu hui dawanr  
That's because **their tongues can't curl[r]**.

Typifying Beijingers as having a smooth personality (line 1), Liu refers to the well-known local character type, *jing you-zi*, 'Beijing Smooth Operator' (line 2). The smooth character is further motivated in relation with rhotacization in line 3. In other words, rhotacization is interpreted as the cause for the smooth character. In lines 4 – 6, another causal relationship is established, where Beijinger's gift of gab and 'heavy r-sounding' speech are construed as effected by their smooth character. In lines 7 and 8, the contrast between the smooth-tongued Beijinger and the Cantonese is considered to be brought about by the fact that the latter's 'tongues can't curl.' The Mandarin idiomatic expression *you-qiangr hua-diaor* 'oily accent, slippery tone' in line 7 means smooth-tongued.

Example 8 thus represents a typical case of 'iconization' (Irvine 2001; Irvine and Gal 2000), a semiotic process whereby 'linguistic differences appear to be iconic representations of the social contrasts they index – as if a linguistic feature

somehow depicted or displayed a social group's inherent nature or essence' (Irvine 2001: 33). In 8, the 'smooth' quality of rhotacization and Beijing speech is identified via ideological construal with a corresponding naturalized attribute of Beijingers. In line with what Bell (2001: 142) and Coupland (2001b: 198) have observed, this example demonstrates that linguistic features and styles derive their meanings from their associations with social personae and identities. Therefore, exploring the full import of the salient local character type is necessary for a better understanding of the social meanings of rhotacization. To do this, I turn to works of Beijing-flavor literature in which *jing you-zi* 'Beijing Smooth Operator' is a stock character type. As explained in Q. Zhang (2005: 441):

Jing in *jing you-zi*, is Beijing. While *you* is the Mandarin word for 'oil,' it is also part of *youhua*, which means literally 'oily' or 'slippery.' When used to describe a personality, *you* connotes smooth and worldly-wise. With the nominalization suffix *-zi*, *you-zi* refers to someone who is versed in the ways of the world.

This local character type is reified by the fact that *jing you-zi* is included in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, defined as 'a longtime resident of Beijing who is worldly and slick' (*Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 1998: 663). Beijing-flavor literature offers many vivid examples of various kinds of Beijing Smooth Operator characters in different historical periods. The following summary of the five categories of literary representatives of this stock character is based on L. Zhang's analysis (1994: 111–125).

**Businessmen:** Wang Lifa, also known as Wang Zhanggui 'Manager Wang,' of the Yutai Teahouse in Lao She's *Cha Guan*, 'The Teahouse' (1980 [1958]); Huar Han in *Xunfang* 'Huar Han,' 'Looking for "Huar Han"' (Deng Youmei 1989 [1982]), an assistant manager of an art shop, skilled in discerning authenticity of paintings and counterfeiting. These characters are shrewd businessmen who skillfully dealt with all kinds of customers to keep their businesses running in difficult times.

**Fallen Manchurian noble descendants:** Fuhai, in Lao She's *Zheng Hong Qi Xia*, 'Beneath the Red Banner' (1984 [1979]); Na Wu in Deng Youmei's 'Na Wu' (1989 [1982]).

These characters are descendants of Manchurian aristocrats who have lost their wealth and status with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. Living in straitened circumstances, they have to survive on their remaining resources, if any. For some, their smoothness and worldly wisdom is all that they have for survival.

**Entertainers/artists:** Yun Zhiqiu and Jia Shirong, in Wang Zengqi's *Yun Zhiqiu Xingzhuang*, 'Yun Zhiqiu Goes to Court' (1989 [1983]) The above two characters are Peking Opera singers. Their smooth skills help them survive the Cultural Revolution when many Peking Opera singers and other traditional art performers were persecuted.

**Intellectuals:** Zuiqin Zhai Zhu, a freelance writer, in 'Na Wu' (Deng Youmei 1989 [1982]); Yu Deli, a magazine editor in *Bianji Bu de Gushi* 'Stories of the Editorial Department' (Wang and Feng 1992).

Living in Beijing, the political center of the country, these intellectuals have an acute political sensitivity, which helps them survive and thrive in turbulent times.

L. Zhang (1994) observes that all the smooth characters rarely take advantage of their smoothness to harm others. Although 'smoothness is hardly regarded as a virtue,' as the critic explains (L. Zhang 1994: 126), it functions as a form of social lubricant. Despite their diverse socio-economic and professional backgrounds, the literary instantiations of the folk icon share a set of characterological attributes centering on worldly wisdom, street smarts, slickness, remarkable urban versatility, and *savoir faire*. It is worth noting that L. Zhang's examples of the smoother operator character type are all **urban male characters**. This does not seem to be a sheer coincidence of her analysis. Evidence for this gendered attribute is also provided by the participants of my sociolinguistic interviews: the archetype of a Beijing Smooth Operator is always a male character.

A detailed portrayal of a well-known Beijing Smooth Operator is given in Lao She's novel *Zheng Hong Qi Xia* 'Beneath the Red Banner' (1984 [1979]; written in the late 1950s). The protagonist, Fuhai, is the son of a large Manchurian noble family that has lost its fortune with the decline of the Qing Dynasty. As a descendent of the Manchu nobility, Fuhai is accomplished with both the pen and the sword, and is well versed in both Manchurian and Han culture. Among his relatives and friends, Fuhai is the most popular character. '*Piaoliang you laocheng*,' 'handsome and experienced,' he is the exemplar of impeccably 'beautiful' manners: 'He greets people beautifully, sits beautifully, walks beautifully, rides on horseback beautifully' (1984: 207). Fuhai's *jing qiang* is also described as 'beautiful' (1984: 208). The following excerpt, a direct quote of Fuhai's speech, happens after the author's lengthy portrayal of this 'handsome and experienced' character. Because of his graceful manners and '*nengshuo huidao*,' 'gift of gab' (1984: 292), Fuhai is often asked to help family and friends handle difficult situations. From the first-person narrative before the excerpt, we come to know that 'my' mother is worried about the 'Third Day Bath' ceremony,<sup>9</sup> because 'my' family is short of money and there is no adult son in the family to take charge of the ceremony. Fuhai, 'my' cousin, comes into the scene and offers his help (1984: 216):

9. Nin fangxin, quan jiao gei wo la! mingtian xisan, qi laolao ba yi de zong dei lai shi-kou ba-kour de, zher er meimei guan zhuang yan dao cha, wo gen xiao liur dang chuzi, liang bei shuijiu, yi die chao can dou, ranhou shi yangrou suan cai re tangr mian, you weir mei weir, chi-ge rehu jinr. hao bu hao? Nin na?

Set your [polite form] mind at ease and leave it all to me! Tomorrow at the Third Day Bath, many grannies and aunties [i.e. distant relatives] will come

visit. Second sister will be here[r], taking care of filling up tobacco pipes and serving tea, and Little Six[r] and I will do the cooking. [Each guest will have] two glasses of liquor, a plateful[r] of roasted fava beans, followed by hot noodle soup[r] with mutton and pickled cabbage. Tasty[r] or not tasty[r], it will be nice and warm[r] at least. How do you [polite form] think about it?

With the help of Fuhai, the Third Day Bath ceremony goes off smoothly. He manages to run it 'economically, and at the same time, respecting the superstitions of "old wives' tales"' (1984: 217).

The use of direct speech, which prominently features seven occurrences of rhotacization, gets across to the reader a vivid smooth operator persona. What also gets across is a metapragmatic message that links the dialect feature to the smooth operator character. Although such a message is often implicit in literary works, as Agha (2003) explains, the use of selected speech features by characterological figures, be it the 'h-dropping' depicted in *David Copperfield* or rhotacization in Fuhai's speech cited above, makes the message 'become more concrete and palpable to the reader' (Agha 2003: 257). In addition, reproductions of literary works in the genres of Beijing-flavor films and television drama series, many of which enjoy nation-wide popularity (Wang 2006), contributes to increased public awareness of the association between rhotacization and the Beijing Smooth Operator character type.

If the metapragmatic message is implicit in the previous example, it becomes more explicit in 10. This is a case where Zhu (1989), a literary critic, **added** rhotacization to the quoted speech of a smooth operator character in the short story 'Na Wu' (Deng 1989 [1982]). In the story, Na Wu is about to buy a martial arts novel from Zuiqin Zhai Zhu so that he can plagiarize and sell it to a newspaper. He tells Zhai Zhu that he brings the money, but he needs to check the manuscript first. What follows is Zhai Zhu's response to Na Wu's request in the original story (Deng 1989 [1982]: 191). Note that rhotacization is not used in the original version as shown below.

10. nin you lao dou le bu shi? mai gaozi zhe wanyi[ø] bu neng xiang mai huanggua, fan guolai diao guoqu kan, zai qiao yi kou changchang xian[ø]. nin ba neirong kan zai duzi li, fang xia bu mai le, huitou zhao zhe yisi you bian chu yi ben lai wo zenme ban? ge shan mai lao niu, quan ping de shi xinyong.

You're joking again, aren't you? Buying a manuscript, it[ø] is not like buying a cucumber. You can turn it over and over to see if it's good, and you can even snip off a bit and taste its freshness[ø]. If you read through my manuscript and commit its story to memory, and decide not to buy it, what shall I do if you later cook up another story after mine? [It's like] buying an ox from the other side of the mountain, all depends on credibility.

As categorized by L. Zhang (1994), Zhai Zhu is an example of the business smooth operator character. Zhu (1989: 250) describes him as a shrewd businessman,

calculating and careful about protecting his economic interest. However, in quoting Zhai Zhu's speech from the story to illustrate her analysis, the critic rhotacizes two words, marked in the above excerpt with [ø]. As a result, by rhotacizing the character's speech, the critic performs an explicit metapragmatic act that anchors this dialect feature to the smooth operator character.

The association between rhotacization and the smooth persona and its characterological attributes becomes even more explicit in the metadiscursive evaluations, or explicit comments about speech, produced by participants in the sociolinguistic interviews as illustrated in example 8 earlier (e.g. 'Beijing speech has a lot of rhotacization. . . [Beijingers] appear to be smooth'). Similar metadiscursive comments are produced by literary critics, as shown in 11 and 12, both of which are cases of iconization.

In 11, the critic Y. Zhao ideologically construes the 'smoothness' of Beijing speech as a natural reflection of, and giving rise to, a set of qualities of the archetypal Beijinger depicted in Beijing-flavor novels. Such naturalized and generalized characteristics as worldly wisdom and astuteness remind the reader of the social attributes associated with the smooth operator.

11. **Melodious, smooth, and sonorous, Beijing speech expresses, and, to a certain degree, 'prescribes' the Beijinger's life and character. . . .** You would even think that the person who speaks such melodious and smooth Beijing speech, can never act violently to others. Naturally, you probably would not expect him to rebel abruptly, either, because he is so refined, cultivated, and smart, so worldly-wise that others are not even aware of his worldly wisdom. He is so astute to the extent of appearing innocent, simple and kind. (Y. Zhao 1991: 149, emphasis added)

In her analysis of Beijing speech as a rich stylistic resource for Beijing-flavor novels, Lü (1994) observes that the local variety has many unique characteristics due to historical and regional factors. In the following excerpt, she naturalizes a causal relation between Beijingers' cultural character, that is, being 'well versed in the ways of the world' (1994: 155), and the smoothness of their speech. She further attributes the smoothness of Beijing speech to the result of rhotacization 'smoothing out the edges and corners of speech,' which is repeated from example 7 above (1994: 155–156, emphasis added):

12. Beijing speech is also known as 'jing qiang,' sprightly, sonorous, and melodious. It also sounds **mellow, familiar, and smooth. Such accent features . . . are determined by Beijingers' cultural character, formed over a long history of being the residents of the capital. . . .** As such, **Beijingers are well versed in the ways of the world. This makes their speech sound smooth and mellow,** as smooth and fluent as if a string of beads rolls out of their mouth [when speaking]. One specific component of this kind of speech style is the **extensive use of 'rhotacization,' smoothing out the edges and corners of speech; . . . [it] sounds smooth and mellow, and engenders a feeling of warmth and intimacy.**

Although explicit metapragmatic comments by the lay native speakers in the sociolinguistic interviews and literary scholars in the genre of literary criticism anchor rhotacization (and Beijing speech) to qualities of 'smoothness' and the Beijing Smooth Operator character type, those produced by the latter group, such as the ones in 11 and 12, are in effect 'expert' evaluations. As Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson (2006) observe in their study of the enregisterment of 'Pittsburghese,' published 'expert' testimonies of language scholars and teachers in newspaper articles have an influential effect on 'enregistering and legitimizing' a set of speech forms as a named dialect, 'linked explicitly, via its name, with place' (2006: 97). The 'expert' evaluations of the literary critics cited above revalorize the social meaning of rhotacization and are likely to have a wider reach at a translocal level.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that rhotacization is a semiotically loaded linguistic variable. It takes on semiotic saliency through its frequent use in written representations of authentic Beijing-ness and its co-occurrence with key cultural terms which denote local distinctiveness. As an emblem of a perceived authentic Beijing style, rhotacization is a rich linguistic resource for evoking localness.

In addition, the data from Beijing-flavor literature and metadiscursive evaluations produced by lay native speakers and literary scholars offer strong evidence for a shared awareness of the sociocultural associations imbued in this dialect feature, specifically, its association with the salient local character type, the Beijing Smooth Operator. Exploration of its instantiations in Beijing-flavor literature has revealed that the smooth operator is not a single, fixed character, but a **gendered character type** consisting of **a set of male urban Beijing social personae** from various walks of life. Furthermore, the 'smoothness' of the character type is not a singular, fixed personality trait, but a **cluster of attributes** ranging from manners to interactional styles (including speech style) and ways of engaging in social transactions. These attributes constitute a unique set of Beijing-based urban-centered qualities, knowledge, and skills. The foregoing analysis reveals that the meaning of rhotacization is not specifically 'smoothness,' but a constellation of social meanings based in ideological construals of Beijing and its people, particularly the Beijing Smooth Operator character type (as shown in examples 11 and 12).

The semiotic saliency and the sociocultural associations imbued in the linguistic feature constitute its meaning potential, which on the one hand, makes it available for stylistic work, and on the other hand, constrains its recontextualization in certain ways. An understanding of rhotacization's association with the salient male character type can thus shed light on the stark contrast in its use, i.e. recontextualization, by the women and men in international businesses found in my earlier work (Q. Zhang 2001, 2005) and

mentioned at the beginning of this article. The shared awareness of such an association as attested in this study may motivate the women professionals to eschew this feature so as to avoid sounding 'smooth' and being associated with the Beijing Smooth Operator, a male character type that is incompatible with a woman's professional image in international businesses. In contrast, sounding 'smooth,' albeit to a limited extent, and being associated with the well-known smooth character may not clash with a man's professional image in international businesses.<sup>10</sup> As a highly salient linguistic stereotype, rhotacization is amenable to strategic deployment, because, following Agha's observation, the indexical values of stereotypes are consciously grasped by speakers (1998: 186). Therefore, the findings presented here are crucial to future analyses of recontextualizations of rhotacization in Mandarin Chinese.

The current study departs from most recent sociolinguistic studies on the social meaning of linguistic variation which tend to focus on the synchronic emergence of meaning in the immediate context. In this article, I have explored the sociocultural associations that a sociolinguistic variable carries with it before it is recontextualized. Rhotacization's semiotic saliency in evoking localness, its connection with the Beijing Smooth Operator character type, and the social attributes of this character type constitute part of the meaning potential of a sociolinguistic resource. Hence, while this study has focused on a particular linguistic feature from Beijing Mandarin, it attempts to shed light on the issue of meaning potential. At the same time, my findings complement recent theorizations of style and social meaning. For example, both Coupland (2007: 24 and 103) and Eckert (2004: 44) observe that sociolinguistic resources (Coupland's term), or stylistic resources (Eckert's term), are imbued with meaning potentials that become more specific when employed in situated contexts. Their own studies (e.g. Coupland 2001a; Eckert 2000) and those of numerous others have demonstrated that the employment of pre-existing linguistic resources in styling practices involves tapping into the meaning potentials of these resources and making new meanings (e.g. Bell 1999; Cameron 2000). Hence, exploring the meaning potentials of sociolinguistic resources can greatly enhance our understanding of the possibilities of as well as constraints on their use and meaning, and consequently, it can benefit our understanding of meaning-making in situated moments of interaction. With recent increasing attention on treating sociolinguistic variation as a resource for the construction of social meaning, examining the meaning potential of salient sociolinguistic variables should be given more prominence in sociolinguistic research.

Finally, this article underscores the importance of examining the social history of linguistic resources. Exploring meaning potential requires the analyst to pay attention to the historicity of sociolinguistic resources (see also Coupland 2007: 104) and to adopt an approach to social meaning that attends to the social history of these resources. Indeed, historicity is integral to the concept of recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990), the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism, and 'bricolage' as originally theorized by Lévi-Strauss (1962:

particularly 16–19),<sup>11</sup> all of which have found increasing appeal among recent sociolinguistic studies on style and social meaning. This article has demonstrated that the social history of even a single sound feature is immensely complex. Providing a detailed snapshot of rhotacization's social history based on data largely from the late 20th century, this study reveals that it 'lives a socially charged life' (Bakhtin 1981: 293) and hence points to the importance of social history in our analysis of social meaning. It is hoped that in our continuing efforts to develop approaches to examining the social meaning of linguistic resources, more sociolinguists will inquire into the social history of these resources. Such inquiry will address the question of how a linguistic resource becomes amenable to making meaning in the first place.

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## NOTES

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2. The 'final' is a term used in the study of Chinese phonology. It refers to the nucleus and coda of a syllable, also known as the syllable rime.
3. The earliest records of representing rhotacization with the character 儿 date back to the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) (Lu 1995: 78). In *Xi Ru Er Mu Zi*, a book written by the French Jesuit Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628) and published in 1626 to teach Mandarin to foreign missionaries, the character 儿 was used to represent rhotacized finals. It was also used extensively in written records of folk songs in the same period. In *Zhu An Yun Wu*, a book on rimes written in 1674, the rhotacized finals represented by the Chinese character were marked as *su*, meaning colloquial or vernacular speech (Lu 1995: 79–81).
4. The 14-volume *Jing Wei Wenxue Congshu*, 'Anthology of Beijing-Flavor Literature,' published by Beijing Yanshan Publishing House in 1997, includes fourteen 'Beijing-flavor' writers. All the literary examples cited in this article are drawn from their writings.
5. Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) point out that the indexical meanings of dialect features in perceptual dialectological research are typically elicited by means of forced-choice techniques requiring subjects to make meaning judgments. A drawback of such techniques is that 'the task could be creating the indexical association rather than measuring a pre-existing one' (2008: 12). Obviously, the folk perceptions of Beijing speech and rhotacization as revealed in the metalinguistic comments from the sociolinguistic interviews in this study are of a different kind from that elicited by the forced-choice techniques.

6. Ditan Park is a historical landmark in Beijing. The main structure in the park was constructed in 1530 and was used by the emperors of the Ming and Qing Dynasties to offer sacrifices to the god of earth. Now it is a public park.
7. Pet bird raisers and trainers meet at the bird rendezvous to show (off) their birds and socialize with their friends. Raising and training pet birds and related activities, including *liu niaor* 'strolling with the bird' and *hui niaor*, are part of a traditional lifestyle of leisured-living deeply rooted in the history of Beijing (Y. Zhao 1991). The short story is about a pet bird and its owner.
8. Lü's metalinguistic comment about rhotacization making speech smooth is an ideological construal of this sound feature, which does not necessarily reflect any phonetic property of the actual sound. Her comment in excerpt 7 may also suggest that rhotacization can produce perceptively smoother speech flow. A perception study is needed, however, to draw any conclusion about whether the occurrence of rhotacization actually leads to perceived 'smoother' speech flow. I thank Allan Bell for bringing the issue of perception to my attention.
9. 'Third Day Bath,' *xi san*, is a traditional Beijing custom to celebrate the birth of a baby. On the third day after a baby is born, the family hosts a ceremony to bathe the newborn. Relatives bring gifts to the mother and the baby, and the host family offers the guests a banquet. Traditionally, the ceremony involves complicated rules and etiquette based on the 'old wives' tales,' or *lao mama lun*, and it can be an expensive event.
10. Q. Zhang (2007) further discusses the effect of the differences in the women's and men's career trajectories on their differential linguistic practice.
11. According to Lévi-Strauss, 'the possibilities [of the bricoleur's materials] always remain limited by the particular history of each piece . . . The elements which the "bricoleur" collects and uses are "pre-constrained" . . . restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre' (1962: 19).

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