Journal of Translation and Languages مجلة الترجمة واللغات
ISSN : 1112-3974

Sociolinguistic Dimensions of Dialect use in the Algerian Education System

Azzoug Omar
University of Tlemcen Abou Bekr Belkaid- Algeria
azzoug.cherifomar@gmail.com

Abstract: *Algeria is a diglossic community, the existence of MSA as the only means of instruction on one hand and AA, the mother tongue of the Algerian learner on the other, makes the process of learning an arduous one. The paper examines the classroom environment in primary school. It explores the teachers' awareness, knowledge and understanding of, and attitudes and feelings towards, monolingualism, bidialectalism. The study also briefly considers whether teacher training has amply prepared these teachers for the confrontation of a bidialectal classroom. The data is discussed in terms of education and Second Language Acquisition theory and the Algerian education and language policies. The results of indicate that the teachers have two fundamental suppositions that support their action and classroom construction. (1) a lack of exposure to MSA is the primary cause of language problems for learners, (2) AA, the mother tongue, does not need to be maintained or promoted in the school environment because learners are sufficiently exposed to their L1 in the home.*

Keywords : *Monolingualism, bidialectalism, bidialectal, Acquisition, Sociolinguistic, dialect.*

Résumé *: L'Algérie est une communauté diglossique, l'existence du MSA comme seul moyen d'instruction d'une part et de l'AA, langue maternelle de l'apprenant algérien d'autre part, rend le processus d'apprentissage ardu. L'article examine l'environnement de la classe à l'école primaire. Il explore la conscience, les connaissances et la compréhension des enseignants, ainsi que leurs attitudes et sentiments à l'égard du monolinguisme, du bidialectalisme. L'étude examine également brièvement si la formation des enseignants a suffisamment préparé ces enseignants à la confrontation d'une classe bidialectale. Les données sont discutées en termes de la théorie de l'éducation et de l'acquisition d'une langue seconde et des politiques éducatives et linguistiques algériennes. Les résultats indiquent que les enseignants ont deux hypothèses fondamentales qui soutiennent leur action et la construction de la classe. (1) le manque d'exposition à lMSA est la première cause des problèmes de langage pour les apprenants, (2) AA, la langue maternelle, n'a pas besoin d'être maintenue ou promue dans le milieu scolaire car les apprenants sont suffisamment exposés à leur L1 à domicile.*

Mots clés *: Monolinguisme, bidialectalisme, bidialectal, acquisition, sociolinguistique, dialecte.*

1. Introduction

Modern Standard Arabic, (henceforth MSA) the language of instruction in Algeria, can be seen as disconnected, as it were, to a large extent from everyday reality of learners' needs. As a matter of fact, Algerian children come to the formal school setting with knowledge in the mother tongue and mastery in communicative competence. This is the sound basis on which learning is usually built. But, because they are never in contact with the Standard form of Arabic in normal conversation with parents or friends, and in real-life activities within their home and out in the environment, Algerian children's experience with their oral language does not serve as a satisfactory vehicle for the learning process. In the classroom, Algerian children learn to use spoken MSA but this does not usually happen without the appearance of

artificiality and lack of spontaneity. Not only do they find great difficulty in putting their inherent native linguistic competence in Algerian Arabic, (henceforth AA) to task but they are also not allowed to use their lexical 'stock', native basic Arabic forms and structures, because these are not identical with MSA patterns. The linguistic relatedness which exists between MSA and the colloquial does not provide helpful indications and does not contribute at all to successful learning.

The core assumption that is linked to this research is that inserting the dialect in the Algerian educational system, mainly during the pre-schooling, particularly in the listening and speaking skills, is advantageous and is something that should be developed and pursued. In our opinion, using the colloquial variety should be viewed as an asset and a right, not a weakness, a disadvantage or a problem that needs to be overcome.

2. Arabic Instruction in Basic Education

The early Algerian initiative when dealing with the choice of the language of education at the period of the post Arabization was the abrupt decision about MSA as the only means of instruction. It was the schools' task to correct a child's language. Furthermore, the teacher's handbook dictates:

Our job will be two-fold. We must use the child to correct the language of its family… This will be possible only when we have closed the gap between the written grammatical language and the anarchic spoken language… We shall express ourselves in writing as we speak orally, and we shall speak orally as we write.

(Teacher's handbook for the first stage of basic education, Year 1980/1981).

A number of Algerian intellectuals analysed and denounced this teaching approach designed to make children feel guilty about their mother tongue. Khaoula Taleb-Ibrahimi (quoted in G. Guillaume 1983: 10) had the following criticisms to make:

> The clearest manifestation of this sociolinguistic split is the inflexible and obstinate negation of a child's language experiences and achievements during its pre-school years, a negation very much apparent in the Algerian education system's stated goals with regard to language.

Whatever has been said or made the ideal solution to the problem should be dealt with in such a way to bring the low variety to accommodate and merge into the high variety. Vernacular Arabic accommodation to (H) helps reduce the linguistic dissimilarities by engaging in the process of interaction with (H) variety. Reducing the gap between H and L varieties bridges also the gap between the social and the educational environment; to the extent that the school environment becomes an extension of the family environment concerning the language acquisition process.

3. The Actual Status of MSA

The curriculum in the primary cycle (years 1 to 5) of basic education has been completely Arabised. It includes teaching MSA (reading, writing, oral expression, and grammar) to children whose native language is AA and most of whom would have developed some knowledge of MSA (the alphabet from preschool as well as some oral comprehension ability from children's TV programmes). Proficiency in MSA among these children varies depending on the child's family situation (the parents' level of education, in particular), but it is supposed to develop rather quickly so that the child can study the other school subjects that are taught in MSA.

In an attempt to prepare the students for the language switch, the textbooks present the equations from left to right, following French writing, while the rest of the text (presentation, explanation, problem, etc.) is in MSA, written from right to left. Furthermore, the terms of the equations are in French, while the teacher and learners read the signs (+, =) in Arabic. For example, the equation:

a + b = c is verbalised as a zi?d b yussaawi c

((French /a/) (Arabic for 'plus') (French /b/) (Arabic for 'equals') (French /c/)). Similarly, geometrical figures are uttered in one language and named in another (e.g. line (AB) is printed as such and read in Arabic as (khatt AB). It is very difficult to understand how such a manoeuvre would prepare the learners for the switch to French in the university.

Several other problems remain unresolved at the level of planning and implementation. Teachers are not properly retrained to teach with the arabised textbooks, which not only causes mistakes in communication, but results in contradiction among classes and, eventually, inadequate competencies which are carried over to the higher levels.

4. Which Language Do Teachers Use in the Classroom?

Learners in the lower grades in basic school reported less than spontaneous use of MSA and French by the teachers and a predominance of AA in explaining or giving instructions and managing the classroom. As for the arabised subjects in the humanities and sciences, while teaching materials and examinations are in MSA, the language spoken by teachers and students in the classroom reflects very much the diglossic continuum, and may involve a variable degree of code-switching and code mixing, depending on the subject taught and the teacher. Overall, teacher talk in the humanities is predominantly in MSA during lectures, but it shifts towards EA and AA during question, answer and discussion periods. Students report that their overall participation in class is very limited and that they use AA exclusively, the students agree and reveal that they are unable to manage in MSA.

They add that all Algerian students lack spontaneity while speaking in MSA. It seems reasonable to argue that the situation just described trigger a serious language-related dilemma that Algerian educational policy makers will have to face sooner or later.

5. The Impact of Diglossia on Education

The impact of diglossia on education can be felt by the fact that for many speech communities, the high variety (H) is learned as a second language through formal education (Baugh 1997:33). This can be problematic because:

Schools advocate the dominant literate and linguistic norms of a given society and students will not acquire the most influential linguistic standards

This means that learners from a mother tongue background will, therefore, be at a serious disadvantage when compared to children who are born into well-educated families where the official language is the first language (Baugh 1997). Schools that choose to use both the standard and the informal languages, that is, attempt bidialectal education, have a number of difficult questions to consider (Baker 2001), such as:

- At which stage of schooling is the high or low language going to be used and in which curriculum areas?
- ii. Is the low language just used for oral communication or is biliteracy a goal of the school's curriculum?
- iii. Are science, technology and computing taught in the high or low language?
- iv. Is the low language going to be allowed for a year or two in primary school?
- v. Does the school deliberately exclude or include the low language as a medium of instruction?

Answering these questions is necessary because as stated by (Baker 2001: 48).

The purpose and functions of each language in a diglossic situation are both symbolized and enacted in the school situation.

The gap between MSA and the vernacular spoken at home and most everywhere outside of school walls seems to be a major cause of low learning achievement in schools everywhere in the Arab region (Ibrahim 1983; Maamouri 1998). The mixture of language structures in the classrooms (MSA and dialectal Arabic code-switching) is a cause of serious pedagogical problems, sometimes leading to lack of adequate language competence, to low linguistic self-confidence, and usually to consequent social problems. The learning difficulties that relate to MSA stem from its lack of immediate application to the learning process and to the environment of the child. There is an important linguistic distance which separates MSA from the learners' experience, familiar topics, and concrete real world materials (Ibid). The experience of learners with MSA is that of an abstract and decontextualized language learning situation, which brings with it "linguistic insecurity" and often results in learner suffering at error or failure to remind correct structures and patterns.

6. Bi-Dialectal Education

A bidialectal situation is defined for the present purposes as one where the varieties in contact are the standard and a genetically related dialect of the same language. Bidialectal learners often have a dialectal mother tongue which is different from the standard variety that the educational system treats as their mother tongue. Nevertheless, bidialectal learners do need to be taught new language elements if they are to master their second dialect. Both teachers and learners are expected to use MSA for formal learning within the classroom boundaries. The total absence of one of the two linguistic varieties that co-exist means that Algerian schools treat pupils as being monodialectal. It is agreed by academics, linguists and educationists in Algeria that dialect affects speakers' attitudes and performance in the standard variety and causes learners to include dialectal terms when using MSA at school. This interference is especially evident in learners' oral production.

Thus, through this study, the researcher aims to give a general sight into primary classroom and to test whether to implement the Algerian dialect in the education system, mainly from the first year of the nursery school until the young learner reaches the right age of schooling, will be advantageous. However, some issues may rise whilst inserting the nonstandard code into education; this will be discussed in the next section.

7. Findings and analysis

7.1. Teaching Activities

Below is a description of the various teaching activities that were observed during our sessions. The intention is to show how the three learning areas that are covered in grade 1, namely, numeracy, literacy and life skills are taught on a daily basis in these classrooms with specific reference to the various language activities we observed.

Regularly, a day would start with revision of the previous day's work, either phonics or maths. For example, during my first observation session T1 did the sound *Taa'* as in [Ta:'ira] ('plane') (T1: Obs 1: 11/4/06) and T2 revised the sound *hamza*, the glottal stop, as in ['a:latun] ('instrument') (T2: Obs 1: 12/4/06). During our second session, T1 went over the letter *kaf* /k/ explaining its realisation in association with the three short vowels /a, u, i/ giving /ka/, /ku/, /ki/, as in [**ka**lbun], [**ku**ratun], [**ki**ta:bun] (respectively 'a dog', 'a ball' and 'a book'); and then he explained that that day they were going to do the sound /k/ in final position, as in [ma:li**k**] (a first name in Arabic) (T1: Obs 2: 27/4/06). T2, on the other hand, went over the difference between the letter *waw* in [**w**aladun] and ['awla:dun] ('boy vs. boys') (T2: Obs 2: 18/4/06). Both teachers' primary method of teaching a phonic sound is through words like those provided, which the learners first write out in their phonics book and then they learn the phonic sounds by heart. Later in the week, the teachers will give the learners a spelling test consisting predominantly of the words taught.

The language syllabus consists of phonics, vocabulary skills, grammar-based worksheets, writing, reading and numeracy which are also reflected in the posters that decorate the walls of the classrooms. Each of these areas will now be discussed.

7.2. Phonics

To teach reading and spelling both teachers follow a phonics approach, which is based on the sounds in MSA. The learners practice how to break down and build up words based on these sounds, which they then learn by heart. Both teachers introduce a new sound with a 'story' and use these stories to help the learners remember the sound and to learn to recognize and spell a number of words with that sound.

The 'story' method is used because, according to T1, it helps with sentence construction and gives the learners some practice with punctuation and so on, while at the same time it encourages more creativity than just a list of words (T1: Obs 2: 27/4/06). What is interesting about these 'stories' is that they often have very little meaning as stories. Also, they are often not really stories, but rather a set of sentences.

The other point worth noting is that often the vocabulary, style and context used in the stories are very complex and strange for the learner. For example, the *ghazwu l fadaa'* story (the space conquest) has an arduous style and vocabulary with '*makouk'*, '*qorsan el fadaa*'' and '*konpyuter*', '*majarra*', is very particular, something most children would be unfamiliar with; '*tubba: n*' is a kind of short pants for kids no longer very common to wear by little boys; '*wasi: datun*', '*dou* '*souka*', '*kabsoula*' (Appendix 10) are also all words that are not commonly used in Algerian speech.

As they are invented, these stories present an ideal opportunity for bi-dialectalism to come through in the lesson content. They can still be written in MSA but involve more Algerian ideas and concepts, and should be discussed in AA which may makes them easier to understand and learn at this fundamental stage of their development.

7.3. Vocabulary Skills

In T1's class, teaching vocabulary consist of three learning activities. First, each learner has a small notebook, their personal 'dictionary' '*kunna: ʃ'*, with vocabulary lists assembled by T1, which they can refer to when trying to spell and explain certain words. Every time they ask T1 how to spell a word and what is the meaning of a word that is not in their lists, they take their 'dictionary' with them and T1 writes the word down for them. Second, each child has a seventeen-page activity book called "Dictionary Skills". The book consists of sections related to the alphabet, putting words in their functional order, finding words and the definitions of words and each section is made up of appropriate activities (T1: Obs 4: 13/05/06). In T2's classroom, the main vocabulary skills activity that we observed involved the activity book called "Dictionary Skills". T2 often relates the activities to a particular theme

such as transport and the learners have to think of words related to transport that begin with various letters of the alphabet, for example, [qit:ar], [qa:tira], [sayya:ra], [ta:'ira] and so forth (train, car, plane...) (T2: Obs 2: 18/05/06).

7.4. Grammar Worksheets

In both classes most of the practices involve language activities. Exercises for conjunctions, but there are also activities for nouns and adjectives (T1: Obs 4: 13/05/06). The learners also have worksheets that involve filling in the missing letters and full stops (T1: Obs 5: 14/05/06). Also, T1 and T2 occasionally use stories: for example, during my second observation session, T1 used a story entitled "*Tariq essalaama*", which was about riding a bicycle safely (T1: Obs 2: 27/04/06). He read the story aloud without any adjectives and then gave copies to the learners who then had to fill in suitable adjectives for the nouns and the missing letters.

During my fifth observation session, T2 used a story entitled "*Sabaahu l 3iid*" (the morning of the feast). The teacher also read the story aloud and then gave copies to the learners, who then had to add the letters *alif* and *nuun* to express duality in MSA, and sometimes only *alif* to some words in the story for the same morphological function. (T2: Obs 5:20/05/06).

7.5. Writing

In both classrooms, writing is not taught but rather practiced. All the learners can basically write and what we observed was practice. They are, however, learning the cursive style or small dashes in their possible positions but are not actually writing words or sentences in it yet. The learners are still at the letter stage and make patterns in their workbooks that look like the cursive letter. For example, T1 instructed the learners on a new writing pattern: the cursive '**ب**' and described it as 'a small box without a cover or a top' (T1: Obs 2: 27/04/06).

Writing, in this way, consists of making the learners realise cursive patterns in their book and then practice letters in the print style. So, for example, they would draw a cursive pattern and then write "...**ب با ب با ب با** and occasionally a sentence like "*baaba wara' al baabi*" (Daddy's behind the door) across the line (T2: Obs 1: 4/5/06) or "*laila fi ddaari*" (Leila at home) as practiced in T1: Obs 2: 7/5/06.

As can be seen, there are numerous activities that involve language skills that the learners participate in and whilst a number of them appear to purely involve grammar or language structure, there are still opportunities for teachers to make use of AA dialectal forms to portray these concepts, even though they need to concentrate on MSA. Switches to Algerian Arabic in oral explanations or comments will certainly trigger more involvement and motivation from the part of the children as it is the variety which stimulates their emotions and feelings.

7.6. Reading

One of the purposes of the reading skill as implemented in our schools is to expose learners in the early stages of schooling to new, interesting and exciting

concepts existing in the world. It is also important to provide a platform for learners and this is achieved through familiar concepts and the representation of day-to-day events in an Algerian context. Mainly, the texts of the first and second grades will now be briefly discussed in order to illustrate further how a language can be acquired and reinforced by reading.

There are a number of factors that contribute to the current situation. For example, there is a lack of suitable Algerian texts for grades 1, 2 that learners actually use; also difficult decisions have to be made regarding which kind of books is eventually chosen and how they are distributed. These factors must be taken into consideration and it is important to realize that these teachers are doing a hard job under what must be difficult and challenging circumstances.

7.7. Training

The training courses did not cover techniques related to second-language learning, bidialectalism and the diglossic situation in any way, which is a concern because teachers have to cope with learners whose mother tongue is not MSA, and thus may be considered as second-language learners.

This indicates that both teachers have received little assistance and training with regard to the dreadful challenges they face in teaching in a diglossic environment and they have in fact been left to manage for themselves.

We find it quite surprising that neither of the two teachers mentioned the issues they are faced with resulting from the gap between the pupils' mother tongue and MSA, the school language. Both did not appear to be aware of the challenges associated with diglossia and education. Neither of them seemed to believe that the difficulties brought about by the shift from the mother tongue to the school tongue presented a significant challenge to teaching.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

A number of factors play an important role and deserve consideration in discussing the construction of the classroom environment:

- First, the demographics of the two classrooms;
- Second, the teachers' attitudes towards the discrepancies between the two varieties, MSA and AA, as evidenced by their practices;
- Third, their belief that exposure to MSA is vital;
- Fourth, the nature of 'diglossic' education in the classrooms.

Just as the Algerian society is linguistically very complex, the demographics of the classrooms reflect the same linguistic complexity. Indeed, MSA, AA and some French are the primary languages represented in the classrooms. Ironically, it is because of this diglossic and bilingual linguistic complexity that problems emerge related to language learning. We do not insinuate that a monolingual class would be unproblematic, but the problems would be very different in nature.

However, the fact remains that Algerian pupils will always find difficulties in coping with the school language to a much larger extent than, say, a Cockney English child when he/she is faced with RP English in the school context. As a matter of fact, much of the apparent divergence between the High variety and Low variety of Arabic has led to controversies as to the language of instruction and to rather negative attitudes towards the use of the mother tongue in school.

8.1. Attitudes towards formal education in a diglossic context

There are many varying factors that impact the current situation in the Algerian school. These factors include a lack of appropriate in-service training, financial constraints and parental pressures which seem to result in a situation whereby the school does not prioritize bidialectal education and consequently does not make a concerted effort to achieve or pursue it. This is illustrated by the fact that at no point did either of the teachers clearly state that developing bilingual/diglossic or culturally aware learners is a goal in their teaching strategies.

Both teachers do, however, reveal an unconscious awareness of the necessary association of the mother tongue with cognitive development. Indeed, they do suggest that if a learner is really struggling with the classroom environment, then perhaps they should consider attending a pre-school period where they are instructed initially in their L1. However, one of the key factors that influence the way in which the teachers carry out their lessons is the belief that exposure to MSA is crucial.

8.2. Exposure to MSA

This study reveals that the mother tongue of the Algerian learners in the classrooms is often viewed as a challenge that needs to be overcome. The primary method employed for overcoming these challenges is to expose the learners to as much MSA as possible as early as possible, in the classroom, on the playground and even in the home to the exclusion of the L1(the aim of the Algerian decision-makers). This view appears to motivate and strengthen most teaching practices. For example, the learners are strongly encouraged to speak only MSA in the classroom. Furthermore, the parents are strongly encouraged to practice MSA with their children, for example by reading stories to them or by encouraging them to follow TV cartoon sessions or film stories in Standard Arabic.

The issue of exposure is particularly important because it has a far-reaching impact on the education that these learners receive. Both teachers state that their primary objective is to teach these learners to cope with academic knowledge in whatever stage they go to, and their responsibility is to produce well-rounded and confident young people with a sound basis from which to carry on.

8.3. Language issues (MSA Vs AA) in the Classrooms

Encouraging learners in basic school grades to use their mother tongue in parallel with MSA – what we may perhaps term as ‘bidialectalism’ i.e. using AA side by side with MSA’ instruction – is not actually an explicit goal or intention of

the teachers, or of the school as a whole. The school does not fully acknowledge the teachers' powerful impact and important role in maintaining what the learners' have already acquired along with their first language, their cognitive capacities and experience.

Research in psycholinguistics and psychology of language has shown the importance of the cognitive abilities acquired by the infant along with the process of the native tongue acquisition. Emphasizing the difference between language acquisition and language learning, Corder (1973:107) writes:

Language acquisition takes place in the infant and the young child at a time when he is acquiring many other skills and much other knowledge about the world. Language learning, i.e. learning a second language, normally starts at a later stage, when language performance has already become established and when many other physical and mental processes of maturation are complete or nearing completion.

The point is that a child of three or four years old has already been 'naturally' provided with the grammar, the whole set of rules related to his/her native language, i.e. his/her linguistic competence. In school, by virtue of the fact that MSA is learned and not acquired as a mother tongue, the child may perhaps learn to be linguistically competent, but to develop communicative competence in him is a much harder task.

However, it should be born in mind that, in our context, learning the school language is not to be equated with learning a second language, for the gap between MSA and AA is not as wide as it is usually thought, first because they are varieties of the same language and have related linguistic structures; second, children today are quite often exposed to the standard form, particularly through TV programmes, well before they start going to school. The following two AA utterances that were produced in class, illustrate the close relation between the Low variety and the Standard form of Arabic:

- *Pupil*: [ma za:l ma nəmʃiw ləssa:ħa] = [ma: zilna: lam naðhab 'ila ssa:ħa(ti)] *'We're not going out to the school yard yet.'*
- *Teacher*: [qultəlkum ərqdu bəkri trəjħu] = [qultu lakum urqudu: ba:kiran tarta:ħu:] *'I told you to sleep early you will feel better.'*

This study begins to map the territory and provide indicators for the road ahead. As such, the research recognises the considerable capabilities of young Algerian pupils as they begin school and aims to assist them in engaging in a meaningful dialogue concerning the learning process in order to meet the challenge of improving long-term educational outcomes. Continuously, the teachers interviewed were asked to comment on the importance of promoting dialect in pre-school. The majority of them considered it to be important for a number of reasons both at a personal and professional level.

9. Conclusion and suggestions

There were a number of problems identified in the two classrooms, all fundamentally revolving around a basic short-fall in understanding and training.

Neither of these teachers has been trained in theoretical aspects of diglossic situations or second language acquisition. They have not been trained in how to implement bidialectal use. Most of the in-service training that they receive at present is focused on methodology in general and that training does not include dialectal considerations. This imbalance of training has led to misunderstanding of bidialectalism from the part of teachers and their sticking to the conviction of the absolute need for exposure to MSA. Consequently, the primary measure that could address this problem is an improvement in the in-service training for teachers and schools. Currently, most of the training carried out in schools is focused on methodology, but this training should include increased emphasis on dialect use for a number of purposes. We will briefly mention some of the topics which, in line with the research, we believe could be usefully addressed:

- Bilingualism and its advantages.
- The distinction between additive bilingualism and subtractive bilingualism: what each is and why it is important.
- Models of bidialectal education.
- Second Language Acquisition in general and particularly the processes a learner goes through in acquiring MSA.
- Factors that contribute to the successful acquisition of a second language
- The importance of L1 maintenance.
- Bidialectal education: what it actually is, how to implement it and why it is important.
- Language in the Algerian society and its impact on the school environment.

Furthermore, the school does not have a comprehensive formal language policy regarding language use in the school. Their entrance policy explicitly states that the governing body has chosen MSA as the medium of instruction. However, there is an informal policy in terms of which, because the school involves MSA-medium instruction, the learners are expected to speak MSA only.

We believe that a formal policy that focuses specifically on language use in the school should be developed and implemented and that it should explicitly state whether diglossia should be taken into account and also how dialectal practices are to be managed which would allow L1 to be maintained while MSA is added. Some other practical measures that we feel the school could take into account in order to improve bi-dialectal practices include:

- Allowing learners to attend lessons in their L1 if they are offered by the school;
- Or else provide more opportunities for learners to talk about their native knowledge and experience;

- The education ministry should provide, and the school should purchase and implement, new syllabi, learning materials and readers that accurately reflect the diglossic nature of the classroom community;
- Finally, the school could increase parental awareness and inform parents of the importance of maintaining their home language and culture and encourage them to develop their children's cognitive abilities in their L1 through various events.

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