Language Transformation and Innovation in Online Malaysian English

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the existence of some prominent features in Malaysian Online Communicative English Language that may categorize itself as a transformation to another sub-variety of Malaysian English in online communication settings. This new variety, which is mutually intelligible amongst its users, may lead to the formation of a new linguistic community that is basically dominated by the younger generation. This is identified through the criteria of language variety given by early researchers, such as the influence of first language, code switching, the use of certain words and many more. By employing Virtual Ethnography, a one-year of Facebook-conversation among 120 young Malaysians from different ethnic groups, mother tongues, and cultural backgrounds was observed, and recorded. Data were meticulously examined using Content Analysis. Findings significantly suggest that Malaysian Online Communicative English has been transformed into another sub-variety of Malaysian English that signifies the identity of young Malaysian Facebook users.

Keywords: Malaysian English, Malaysian Online Communicative English, language innovation, language transformation, language variety

INTRODUCTION

As technology has brought huge impacts on our life, particularly our communication styles and behaviours, it is hypothesized that a social networking website such as Facebook may create another sub-variety of Malaysian English in online communication.
settings among the new generation. The major issue basically lies in the fact that Malaysian Online Communicative English has been transformed into a new variety and has gained popularity among the new generation of Malaysians, and this may set them apart from the older generations who basically employ different varieties of Malaysian English. David (2000, p. 65) suggests that “teenagers speak another kind of language and it is not uncommon to hear that some parents often complain that they cannot understand their children. This group of English-speaking Malaysian youth, like teenagers everywhere, will create terminology for group identity and as a secret language”. As young Malaysians nowadays are widely exposed to various cultures due to the rapid development of information and communication technology, it may lead to the transformations of their communication patterns and attitudes, precisely in their own online social networking environment and virtual communities.

Kirkpatrick (2007) compiles a number of studies involving varieties of English Language around the world and reveals some common forms and patterns among the varieties of Englishes used by Malaysians, Singaporeans, Indians and Africans. He proposes the act of simplifying inflectional systems as a prominent mark of a new variety. The existence of these varieties is basically an outcome of the direct translation process of L1 (first language) transfer. Some common lexical features among both Malaysians and Singaporeans would involve borrowings of the Malay such as “dadah addict”, “to run amok” (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 125). Apart from that, English words being spelled in the Malay language such as “konfiden” and the colloquial word such as “buaya” that carries the meaning as a womanizer in the Malay Language being translated into English as “crocodile”. Kirkpatrick (2007) concludes that the localization of terms and words is very common in the varieties of Malaysian English.

Apart from that, another common feature of both the Malaysian English and Singaporean English varieties is the lack of articles in many sentences (Mc Arthur, 2002). Platt, Weber and Ho (1984) found the word ‘already’ being used as an indication of past tense; in some occasions, it even replaced the past tense marker (‘ed’). Platt (1991) also found that the usage of proper past tense markers is more frequent among educated speakers.

One prominent feature of the low variety (or local dialect) or Malaysian English is the simplification of pronunciation (Wong, 1978), which most Malaysians “feel very much belongs to them and forms a part of their identity” (p. 101). In her research back in 1978, Wong found that:

*This simplification usually takes one or two forms, either by omitting one or more of the consonants in the cluster (e.g. “depth” becomes “dep”, “guest” becomes “gues”, “risks” becomes “ris”, and “desks” becomes “des”) or by inserting a vowel into the consonant cluster, thus breaking it up into two syllables.*
(e.g. “film” becomes “filem” and “little” becomes “lettel”). The “th’ sound is often replaced by “t” when it is voiceless (e.g. “thread” becomes “tread”, “three” becomes “tree”, “think” becomes “tink”, “thought” becomes “taught”) and by “d” when it is voiced (e.g. “this” becomes “dis”, “though” becomes “dough” and “that” becomes “dat”) (Wong, 1978, p. 100).

Another characteristic of Malaysian English is the use of “fillers” (Wong, 1978, p. 102) or prefixes and suffixes such as “lah”, “what”, “ah” and “man”. Tongue (1974) suggests that the use of these fillers serves as a mark of an informal variety, which sometimes indicates a sense of intimacy between speakers of the same linguistic community. Apart from ‘lah’, other fillers such as ‘ah’ and ‘what’ are also recorded in Malaysians’ conversations and they also serve similar purposes of establishing rapport and signifying each other’s familiarity. Lowenberg (1992) also found the particles ‘lah’, ‘ah’ and ‘what’ as some of the prominent features that signify the identity of Malaysian English. These particles appeared in most parts of Malaysians’ daily conversations, “commonly used to foreground familiarity and rapport in informal conversations among close friends and intimates” (Lowenberg, 1992, p. 49).

Other works on additional suffixes include the use of additional suffixes such as ‘lah’, which is also very apparent among speakers of these varieties (Kirkpatrick, 1995; Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984; Hashim, 2002).

The issue on the nature of online communicative language has been discussed by many researchers. Scholars like Maynor (1994) and Crystal (2006) classify online communicative language, email for instance, as a written speech, a unique form of language that stays in between of written and spoken. While Ferrara, Bruner and Whittemore (1991, p. 10) categorized online communicative language as “a hybrid language variety” or a “hybrid register” in terms of its hybrid characteristics of the existing spoken and written languages. Baron (1998) collected data from email, bulletin boards, and computer conferencing, suggested that as of the late 1990s, online language was essentially a mixed modality which resembled speech as it was largely unedited; it contained heavy use of first and second person pronouns, present tense, and contractions; its level of formality was generally low. Apart from that, online language could be rude or even obscene. At the same time, it looked like writing because interlocutors were physically separated, and that separation fostered personal disclosure and helped level the conversational playing field between interlocutors at different points on a social hierarchy. Moreover, it resembled writing in that the medium was durable, and interlocutors commonly employed a wide range of lexical choices and complex syntax. Crystal (2001) used the term “Netspeak” to the collective forms of language used online, concluded that “Netspeak has far more properties linking it to writing than to speech … Netspeak is better seen as a written...
language which has been pulled some way in the direction of speech than as spoken language which has been written down” (2001, p. 47). This is further supported by Werry (1996, p. 61) who argues that online language “reproduces and simulates the discursive style of face-to-face spoken language.” It displays informal and speech-like features, including abbreviations, short turn-taking, and omission of auxiliary verbs and pronouns which he attributes to the “temporal, spatial, and social structures imposed by IRC [Internet Relay Chat], specifically that messages be typed as quickly and efficiently as possible” (p.55).

THE STUDY

This study primarily aims to see whether there are some transformations that categorize the language as another sub-variety of Malaysian English in online communication settings. This new variety of Malaysian Online Communicative English Language may lead to the formation of a new linguistic community among its users, which is generally dominated by the younger generation. Two research tools were employed in this study, which are, Virtual Ethnography and Content analysis. Stemmed on the traditional method of ethnographic research, virtual ethnography focuses on the Internet, as a place where real humans’ interaction and communication takes place. Content Analysis is used to identify the occurrence of certain words, phrases, characters or sentences contained by texts.

A total of 120 respondents from three major ethnic groups in the country (namely, Malays, Chinese and Indians) took part in online communication as real social networkers on Facebook. The group of sample consists of 30 Malays, 30 Chinese and 30 Indians; equally divided into 15 male and 15 female participants for each ethnic group, aged between 18 to 24 years, from different urban areas around the country. The sample is also a group of college students from various higher institutions around the country. The students were explained about the research and permission was asked to use their online interactions as the data for the research. The rationale of selecting the participants stemmed from the fact that this is the group of people who are born and brought up in this Information Age where technology plays a pertinent role in determining one’s life. Apart from that, they are also born in the era whereby Internet becomes the prominent medium of communication that seems to replace any other medium of interactions and about to replace the existing mass media in no time (Tapscott, 2009). The researchers took part in this virtual ethnography which involved daily observations for a period of 12 months. All the conversations were documented and analyzed using Content Analysis.

Findings

Respelling Phenomenon to sound more like Colloquial Malaysian English spoken language/dialect

The first prominent feature of online communicative language use by young Malaysian Facebook users is partial
spelling modifications which involve some modifications of certain parts of the words, for example, the omissions of middle letters or last letters or the change of certain letters in the words to produce homophone words. Modifications of spelling to sound more like colloquial Malaysian English spoken language would involve both changes in spelling and pronunciation in signifying the local identity of Malaysian English. Among the popular words being used in online communication settings are ‘gud’ for ‘good’ (1586 units), ‘ma’ for ‘my’ (1171 units), and ‘oso’ for ‘also’ (1542 units). Other forms of modifications can be seen through words such as ‘bek’ for ‘back’ (328 units), ‘bufday’ for ‘birthday’ (913 units), ‘besday’ also for ‘birthday’ (520 units), ‘cum’ for ‘come’ (488 units), ‘hapi’ for ‘happy’ (1089 units), ‘rite’ for ‘right’ (887 units), ‘nid’ for ‘need’ (292 units), ‘sum’ for ‘some’ (235 units), ‘skul’ for ‘school’ (103 units), ‘siyes’ for ‘serious’ (31 units) and ‘yew’ for ‘you’ (428 units). The findings also show that online communicative English language in Malaysia incorporates elements of the established documentation of ME; one of them is the existence of local dialects. Wong (1978) stresses that spoken Malaysian English is basically categorized as a local dialect that is not international intelligible and mixes with a lot of features that indicate the local identities (Wong, 1978). One assumption that can be made based on the findings is that online communicative English language in Malaysia is definitely not a formal language, and performed as a blend of both written and spoken features. It is also observed that the language has significantly been placed under the category of the low variety (or local dialect) or Malaysian English as it matches one basic criteria given by Wong (1978), which is ‘the simplification of pronunciation’ (Wong, 1978, p. 101), with most participants feel that the language “very much belongs to them and forms a part of their identity” (p. 101). In her research back in 1978, Wong (p. 100) found that simplification normally involved one or two forms, occurred in four different situations:

The above situations are very much similar with the findings recorded in the conversations employed by young Malaysian Facebook users. Firstly, words such as ‘dun’ for ‘don’t’ (2901 units), ‘wat’ for ‘what’ (3500 units), ‘oni’ for ‘only’ (464 units), ‘tenkiu’ for ‘thank you’ (40 units), ‘bes’ for ‘best’ (22 units) show similar patterns with Wong’s (1978) findings of an omission of one or more of the consonants in a word pronunciation.

Next, word like ‘setel’ for ‘settle’ (13 units) proves an existence of the second situation, which is the addition of a vowel into the word and dividing it into two syllables. As Wong (1978) found the replacement of “th” sound by “t” in voiceless pronunciation, the findings also recorded some words such as ‘ten’ for ‘then’ (133 units), ‘tey’ for ‘they’ (63 units), ‘tink’ for ‘think’ (218 units), ‘wit’ for ‘with’ (834 units) that represent such criteria. The findings are also supported by many other early researchers such as Augustin (1982, p. 255) who found some deviations
in the pronunciation of vowels, clusters of consonants as well as final consonants. Some of his findings would include similar pronunciation of certain words such as ‘/tin/’ as ‘think’ and ‘/botol/’ for ‘bottle’.

Finally, words like ‘da’ for ‘the’ (2842 units), ‘de’ also for ‘the’ (2111 units), ‘den’ for ‘then’ (613 units), ‘dis’ for ‘this’ (865 units), ‘der’ for ‘there’ (260 units) support Wong’s (1978) findings of the replacement of “th’ sound by “d” in voiced pronunciation.

As Wong (1978) and other researchers are basically focusing on the pronunciation of words in spoken Malaysian English, and not in online communication settings, another assumption that can be made is that online communicative English employed by young Malaysian Facebook users nowadays significantly portrays itself as a written form of spoken colloquial Malaysian English which has been passed down over several generations for more than three decades. It best supports Ferrara, Bruner and Whittemore (1991, p. 10) who categorize online communicative language as “a hybrid language variety” or a “hybrid register” in terms of its hybrid characteristics of existing spoken and written languages.

Table 1 (Appendix 1) shows how the transformation of Malaysian English has taken a step further by some other modifications and improvisations on the use of spoken language in written form, in online communication settings. The findings in this table indicate thorough word modifications made by the participants on Facebook. The following excerpts demonstrate the use of different words in various Facebook conversations employed by Malaysian youngsters:

**Sample 1:**

Prince: besh r lgu nie... faberet lme daaaaaa

In sample 1 the writer has used the word *besh* for best and *faberet* for favourite and this support the claim that the Facebook users tend to modify and improvise the spelling of the words as they are spoken.

**Sample 2:**

Dash Mint: “wa u got many laling ah gud gud...”

In the entry by sample 2 the *laling* is used instead of darling and *gud* instead of good. *Laling* is a kind of pronunciation commonly used among the youths. And the word *gud* show similar patterns with Wong’s (1978) findings of an omission of one or more of the consonants in a word pronunciation.

**Sample 3:**

Dash Mint: my maggie is cooking 2.46 in the morn!! hehe a nice tym to hv hot dinner =)

Vaporize: Vpc4me?

Dash Mint: finish d la hehee
Vaporize Vpc: go la euuu....i dah merajuk
Dash Mint u so late =( not my fault next tym i give euu k?
Vaporize Vpc: i dun wan....kip the change!

In sample 4, there are a few examples of the short forms (*tym* for time, *hv* for have).
The use of the word *kip* for keep shows the modification of spelling to sound more like colloquial Malaysian English used in spoken language.

**Sample 4:**

Siddarth Raj: seri da dash.......gona slip..see u tomoro k....gud nyte..sweet dreamss...tc..<br>hav a nice day da.......  

This excerpt shows the use of *gona* for going to, *slip* for sleep, *tomoro* for tomorrow, *gud* for good, *nyte* for night. These modifications of spelling also show the tendency of using the spellings that suit the spoken mode in Malaysian English. The same explanation can be found in Sample 6.

**Sample 6:**

Dash Mint: u need to b taught a good lesson ...<br>Velayutham: who is the 'u'?<br>Dash Mint: got la...<br>Velayutham: need any help?<br>Dash Mint: hahaha dnt worry i cn hndle it.. hahaha 4 the offer neways<br>Velayutham: now a days all ur comments are like luv failure only...<br>Dash Mint: hahahaha love??? wat is love la?? who is dat?? =P

One obvious phenomenon that signifies the categorization of this language as a sub-variety of the colloquial Malaysian English is the existence of local dialect, slang, code switching and code mixing phenomena in almost every conversation employed by the participants. Lowernberg (1992, p.47) states that “Colloquial English involves code mixing and code switching. In the more colloquial sub-varieties of Malaysian English, transfer from other languages expands from lexical borrowings to more extensive code alteration and the pragmatic functions...”. One obvious example that supports Lowernberg (1992) is as follows:

**Sample 8:**

Hong Chiang: thanks princess!! :D kekeke. freakin beh tahan seeing the vase action like a tortoise wehh.. but ngorr dou mm song lei dei, mmm you kiu hut zou yehh.. what so scared of? lol.. that’s how things should be done, and i gotta continue that.

Apart from that, the above sample (Sample 1) also shows the use of slang, when ‘favourite’ is mentioned as ‘faberet’ and ‘besh’ is mentioned instead of ‘best’ by one Malay teenage guy. Sample 2 shows code switching and code mixing phenomena as Siddarth, an Indian guy uses English, Malay as well as Tamil languages in his conversation. Sample 8 shows how Dash Mint, an Indian girl uses the word ‘laling’ (which means ‘darling’) that formerly was categorised as an English slang employed by the Chinese (Tan & Richardson, 2006) but it is now employed by Malaysians regardless of their ethnic groups and language background. This is supported by other researchers (see Tan & Richardson, 2006; Norizah Hassan & Azirah Hashim, 2009) who indicate the phenomenon as a localization of online communicative English language in Malaysian setting. Samples 4 and 6 also show some evidence of code switching of English and Malay language in conversations between a few
Indian youngsters on Facebook. The findings also indicate similar situations described by David (2002) on the formation of a slang, creation of new words, new meanings being given to existing familiar words, the shortening of words as well as borrowings in the use of Malaysian English among the youngsters.

The use of Fillers
Fillers or tail words are very common in Malaysian English. Not just known as a common Malaysian English feature, fillers such as “lah”, “what”, “ah” and “man” (Wong, 1978; Tongue, 1974; Lowenberg, 1992; David, 2000) also define the unique identity of this variety. Findings however indicate that the uses of fillers or tail words are not just restricted to a few prominent words (“lah”, “what”, “ah” and “man”) given by early researchers but varied across different dialects and mother tongues. With the total of 22,372 units of 27 different fillers or tail words employed by participants, it is believed that these words basically carry certain functions and implication in users’ online conversations. Among the popular ones are ‘eh’ (1056 units), ‘lar’ (1026 units), ‘ni’ (2396 units), ‘lah’ (1699 units), ‘lo’ (1641 units) or ‘lor’ (704 units), ‘de’ (1971 units), ‘la’ (7097 units), and ‘kot’ (945 units).

The word ‘yar’ for instance, is highly dominated by the Indian users (328 out of 337 units). The word ‘kot’ which means ‘maybe’ or indicates uncertainty derived from the Malay language is popular among the Malays (775 from the total of 846 units). Moreover, words derived from the popular Hokkien such as ‘lor’ (440 from the total of 704 units) and ‘liao’ are highly employed by the Chinese participants. However, the use of these words is not solely restricted to certain ethnic groups. The word ‘kot’ for instance, even though is derived from the Malay language, and highly dominated by the Malay participants, is also employed by participants from other ethnic groups. The following excerpts describe the findings:

Sample 1
Rajendra Kumar: shit man..., water coming out from my nose non stop, MC kot 2moros...

Sample 2
Rajendra Kumar: hehehehe.... thanks notty girl...i think i have 2 marry u kot notty..

Sample 3
Izzati: hehehe. TERBAEK kan? ;ppp... but not now kot kakak... its still early.: huu~

The above three samples illustrate the use of fillers ‘kot’ to indicate one’s uncertainty and hesitation. Sample 3 indicates one situation involving Izzati, a Malay girl who wasn’t sure whether she should hang out with her friend since it was too early. As she says “but not now kot…its still early”, it somehow indicates that, by depending on her friend’s responses, Izzati might change her mind and agree to join her friend. In sample 1 and 2, Rajendra Kumar, an Indian boy, uses the word ‘kot’ for the same purpose. Rajendra was down with
flu or fever. As he says, “shit man..., water coming out from my nose non stop, MC kot 2moro...”, Rajendra actually feels that he might be on medical leave if his condition gets even worse than before. The above samples clearly show that these participants are not just familiar with the word, but also aware of its meaning and context. As fillers are also believed to portray certain expressions and emotions, it is also believed that fillers might alleviate a strong remark, indicate stress on certain words or statement, verify a statement as well as transform a statement into a question (Norizah Hassan and Azirah Hashim, 2009). The following excerpts also demonstrate how fillers or tail words were appropriately employed by participants from different ethnic groups and first languages:

Sample 4 to 10 indicate the use of ‘haizz’, ‘liao’, ‘meh’, and ‘lor’; (fillers derived from various Chinese dialects) among the Malay and Indian participants:

Sample 4:
Sonia Patel: hate it.... n stupid titas.. haizz
Thiruselvan Manian: yah, it’s a nonsense assignment....wasting our time..
Sonia Patel:1 credit hour sumo.... n u kno hu will be doing the assig. hope u understand
Thiruselvan Manian: yes, i understand....it’s really bad....btw,have u registered for the wiley plus?
Sonia Patel: yes.. talking about calculus i trauma again. Haizz

The above excerpt demonstrates how the word ‘haizz’ been used to strengthen Sonia’s statement on her feeling of dissatisfaction with her study. Sonia believes that the assignment is useless and just a waste of time. Apart from that, she is also traumatized with her past experience learning Calculus. With tail word ‘haizz’ being employed a few times in the conversation, Sonia managed to express her frustration and made the friend understood her bad situation.

Sample 5:
Vrnda Sre: y open relationship la .... not close relationship meh ..... 

Sample 6:
NoorLiza Kassim: hahaha! nisa,.my bf is one of the debaters:) Khairunnisa Khairuddin: really? dr mana? what’s his name?
NoorLiza Kassim: hahaha! time ktorang bowling same2 dlu lor if u still rmmber;)
name die ezmeer...haha;) 

Sample 7:
Renuka Jeyabalan: sam played guitar....wow ...i missed tht moment lor

Sample 8:
Nalini Arumugam: wakaka..Loose anjali i lyk ur brother means i lyk ur mother too..Hehe..♥ ur mom ler..Miss her..!Wan cum hse lor =p

Sample 9:
Nalini Arumugam: hahaha..Yea lor ka.. dats our port..=)
Sample 10 to 12 demonstrate the use of ‘dei’, a tail word derived from Tamil language among the Malay and Chinese participants:

**Sample 10:**  
*Wan Azian:* gud la dei

**Sample 11:**  
*Shirlene Tam:* oi haha kaka dont suck! he isnt fit for the game lah dei

**Sample 12:**  
*Joseph Yeow:* thanks… hey,, saturday wanna play o not… they very cheng le…  
*Koogan Sardoo:* i wan bt cnt le.. gt exam next week.. zzz followin sat la…  
*Joseph Yeow:* we play for abt 4 to 5 hrs only la… if we enter semi final la… if not only 3 hrs… Koogan Sardoo:  
*cnt la dei.. calculus n phy.. zzz no study=GG*

Samples 10 to 12 show how the word ‘dei’ being used as a remark to indicate stress on statement. The word ‘dei’ is actually derived from the informal Tamil spoken language. In a normal face-to-face conversation, this tail word normally comes with a loud and very friendly intonation, which means ‘hey’ or ‘hey friend’. It is also observed that this word is more popular among Indian male speakers and not the females. This word is also applicable in a very informal conversation among close friends and not with strangers. Apart from that, the word is also perceived as inappropriate or rude to be said towards older speakers. The finding, however, indicates a growing popularity of this word among the female users from other ethnic groups. Samples 10 and 11 demonstrate the use of this particular tail word by a Malay and Chinese girl. It is observed that the word is also used to indicate intimacy or close relationship among friends, besides demonstrating a stress on the statement.

**CONCLUSION**

This study aims at investigating the transformation of online communicative English language. It is found that the language used by the teenagers on a social network site, namely Facebook, has been transformed into a new variety of English. The mode used in online communication is what we can call spoken mode written down. These new variety is unique in a sense that the spelling of words is now transformed or modified to sound more like Colloquial Malaysian English spoken language/dialect as well as the omissions of letters in the middle or the end of some words. Without any doubt, the entire process of online communicative English language formation involves a localization of online communicative English language in Malaysian setting (Tan & Richardson, 2006; Norizah Hassan & Azirah Hashim, 2009) through a re-spelling phenomenon (Shortis, 2007; Ross, 2006) derived from more than three decades of English language practice in the country.

Another finding is the use of fillers, suffixes and tail words. This shows another transformation of English language which is also a written form of spoken language. This variety, which is used by teenagers,
regardless of their ethnic groups and backgrounds on Facebook makes it relevant to cluster them as one linguistic community that employs the same language within the same communication setting. The use of fillers and tail words derived from various languages indicates a linguistic connection shared by these users/people.

Through the massive use of code switching, fillers, colloquial-spelling, it can obviously be seen that this is a kind of transformation in Malaysian Online Communicative English Language. It is developing and determining itself as another a sub-variety of Malaysian English in online communication settings, which represents the identity of young Malaysians of different ethnic groups, cultural background and first language.

REFERENCES


Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics. p. 41-55.


APPENDIX 1

TABLE 1
Modifications of spelling to sound more like Colloquial Malaysian English spoken language/dialect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<td>Altimet</td>
<td>Ultimate</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Brader</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>Better</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Best</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Duwan</td>
<td>Don’t want</td>
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<td>Excited</td>
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<td>Everyone</td>
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Total