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History and trends of French research on organizational communication

Abstract:

The article proposes an overview of French research on organizational communication. It examines the historical conditions of the birth of the field of organizational communication in France, its development and its main current trends. It explains the relationships existing between organizational communication and other fields that study organization and examines how organizational communication has progressively found a specific place in the studies concerning organization. It studies how French trends in philosophy and sociology have influenced not only French research in organizational communication, but also more broadly speaking French researchers in that field, and how this trend has spread among the international community of communication researchers today.

Keywords:

Organizational communication – France – postmodernism – critical school – qualitative research

Introduction

Communication has developed in France for a long time now. As a discipline, communication has a particularity in France. Communication and information form a unique discipline, called sciences of information and communication (created as a discipline in 1975). This choice has consequently caused many debates within French researchers about the potential common basis of information and communication and also many controversies. However, those debates have not entered into the sub-discipline of organizational communication, which has its own realm of research and thoughts.

Current questions in organizational communication have not been developed as soon as organizational communication in US. In the 80', whereas the questions concerning the relationship between communication and organization began to be raised in US, and whereas Tompkins (1984) was already writing that "communication is organization" (see Tompkins & Wanca-Thibault, 2001), in France, the dominant paradigm was still the management paradigm. Nevertheless, the change happened quickly in France, because of the change in French communication studies. The socio-linguistic and anthropological turn in communication studies in France began in the 80', when some major books of the "School of Chicago" and of "Palo Alto" were translated in French (cf. Goffman, 1973; Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson,

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1979; Winkin, 1981). At the same time, other disciplines studying organizations (sociology and psychology) have also been influenced by the anthropological turn of the 80', so that the concept of organization has evolved in those disciplines at the same time and that they all have questioned the management approach of organization of that period.

In brief, organizational communication is the result of co-evolution and interaction between various disciplines. The story of its birth reflects in fact how the dominant functionalist and determinist paradigm has been challenged by the interpretative and interactionist paradigms in the 80', which have influenced all the disciplines related to organization, even management.

1. From communication and enterprise to communication in the enterprise: the birth of organizational communication in France

The history of organizational communication in France is related to the development and institutionalization of communication in the enterprises, even to the acknowledgement of the role of organization in society, through a model of a "communicating enterprise" nowadays.

1.1. Relationships between communication and enterprise

It can be said that organizational communication has its roots in the 1960'. Until that moment, the economic model for the enterprise was a model of production, but then, because of competitiveness between enterprises for access to the market, the development of the marketization of goods has led the productive model to change into a marketing model. The consumption model has made communication to enter into the enterprise: positions for internal communication and external communication have been created in the enterprise. In France, the first "department of communication" has been created in a big French enterprise in 1961. In the university, communication has begun being acknowledged through the multiplication of professional diplomas related to this "communication in the enterprise": internal communication, marketing, advertising, public relations, etc. According to Bernard (2002), the relation between studies in communication in the university and enterprise can be tracked to the end of 1950'. In 1957, the President of the association of students in humanities from Paris University organized a press conference on the relationships between humanities and industry in order to promote students in humanities for positions in enterprises. The Association created a journal "Humanities and Enterprise", which promoted the former students of humanities of Paris University who worked as directors of communication, advertisers, officers of public relations, etc. For instance, the former CEO of L'Oréal was the President of the association in the 80'. The relationships between training, research and enterprises in the communication field are more and more institutionalized thanks to the work of the Association of students in humanities from Paris University. In 1968, the President of the Association creates a Center in the faculty of literature: the Center of Applied Literature and Scientific Studies (Centre d'Etudes Littéraires et Scientifiques Appliquées (CELSA). In 1985, the CELSA becomes a School of High Studies in Information and Communication. Its role is to train future professionals of enterprise communication. Communication was then presented as a field of "applied humanities", which could help students to find positions at the end of their studies. In 1984-1985, 2500 candidates had enrolled in the CELSA. From the beginning, the journal "Humanities and Enterprise" has been created to be a place of exchanges between professionals, teachers and researchers. Consequently, research on humanities related to the enterprise could be institutionalized.

1.2. Economic model of the enterprise and research on communication

According to Bernard (2002), from 60' to 80', the journal "Humanities and Enterprise" promoted links between enterprise and university, but also its own model, which was influent, since it was promoted by a leading university in France, Paris University. In the 80', the Association self-presented as a form of base for communication studies in France. In fact, almost half of the articles published in the journal concerned internal and external communication of the enterprise. Nevertheless, most of those articles are written by professionals and not by researchers, so that discourse on communication had no distance with the circle of professionals: discourse on communication was a kind of self-promotion of practices already existing in the enterprise (Le Moenne, 2006; Bernard, 2002). Research on communication began to develop in universities as well. But until the middle of 80', researchers only repeated in a more abstracted way, the discourse of self-promotion of professionals in communication (Le Moenne, 2006; Bernard, 2002).

In order to understand this discourse, one must first look back to the history of organization studies and to the way enterprises were conceived until 80'. The paradigm describing the organization in the 80' was the economic paradigm of the profit organization: the enterprise, seen through a structuralist and functionalist lense. In this top-down approach, the enterprise was considered as a supra structure with superior objectives. Elements of the enterprise (departments, employees) work as functions in this structure which helped the supra-structure to reach its objectives. In such an approach, the enterprise determines the content of its composing elements. Grammacia (2001) relates this approach to structuralist discourse of linguistics in the 60'. As well as the significant part is distinct from the signified part in Saussure's linguistics, the organization is opposite to the organized: the superior structure (the organization) creates, and the content (the organized) only obey to the structure. The organized is only the content, it only describes the meaning of the already existing structure. Research in such a paradigm is a normative research: it produces normative discourse to say what elements of the structure have to do to help the structure to function. Economic and management research is based on this paradigm: the aim of this research is to help the enterprise to better function: to reach economic performance and to maintain efficiency in its internal functioning.

Communication, in such a paradigm, is only a function of the enterprise and a tool through which the enterprise can be more efficient and can better perform. Professionals of communication in the enterprise (marketing, advertising, public relations, internal communication) developed such discourse on the function of communication. For instance, function of internal communication departments is to make employees obey to the dominant discourse of the direction of the enterprise. In the 80', the concept of "enterprise culture" has been created to make employees obey to the values decided by their managers. Communication, in such a paradigm, is closely related to persuasion, and it can be said that the conception of communication in enterprises inherits from the paradigm of propaganda, where communication serves political projects.

Until the 80', research on communication focuses on this structuralist and functionalist paradigm. Classic theories on communication considers that good communication consists in the capacity to make the managerial discourse and the decisions of top managers to be heard (by the employees for internal communication, by consumers and others structures for external communication). The values and discourses defended by the top management represent the "objective reality" of the organization (structure). In order to function, the enterprise produces normative discourses on what have to be done (strategic planning for instance). In the same way, researchers on communication produce normative theories that explain what the communication function in the enterprise has to do in order to help the enterprise to develop (Le Moenne, 2006; Bernard, 2006; Bernard, 2002; Grammacia, 2001).

In the structuralist paradigm, the structure is considered as the sum of its part. In order to study them and make these parts working more efficiently together, the research reduces them to their simple functions and criteria². When communication is the topic of the research, communication becomes a function and information is the content of this function. The criterium is the amount of information exchanged. More information is exchanged, more communication there is and better the communication is considered. In this framework, “the structure determines a network of constraints independent from the individual” (Grammacia, 2001, p.25). In this model of informational exchange based on the mathematical theory of information and on decision theory, information is reduced to the combination of parts of a code: through the transmission process, information is consumed until reaching certainty (Grammacia, 2001). Communication is considered as the way to reduce uncertainty through a better processing of information. Grammacia (2001) points out that the individual is absent from the study. In such a framework, individual are only vectors of information transmission, like electronics circuits in computer systems.

Although this approach was above all important in the 80', it is still a dominant paradigm in management research today. Now, the economic model of the enterprise has become a model of society (Le Moenne, 2006), and in this model, communication has become the central point of the enterprise. However Bernard (2006) points out that it is still a technicist approach of communication. Communication becomes the instrument by which all the problems (problems of the enterprise, but also in society) could be resolved: one must only communicate more.

2. The critical approach and organizational communication

At the end of the 80', some researchers began to take some distance to managerial approach of communication. The research in this period was conducted on two mains approaches: first, the problems organizations encountered in communication and the solutions communication research could give to help them; second, a critical approach on communication in enterprises (Heller, 1998). The second approach has gained more and more importance in organizational communication research in the 90'. In fact, the critical approach is not born in the discipline of communication. Communication has used approaches that were developed in other disciplines, in particular in sociology³.

2.1. Organizational communication and its sister disciplines: the critical influence

As communication, organizational communication is an “inter-discipline” (Ollivier, 2000). It shares many common points with sociology of work, sociology of organizations, organizational behavior in management, and socio-linguistics. In fact, we can say that the characteristics of the French organizational communication do not come from the discipline itself, but from the ideas it has mainly inherited from its sister disciplines, mostly from the sociology.

² Consequently, quantitative methods are considered as the best way to conduct research : quantitative research separates the object of research in different parts. Each of them is reduced to some criteria, then the criteria are measured and re-combined together to produce results that show if the whole structure is or not efficient.

³ It must be reminded that communication studies tried to find their place in social science in being independent from linguistics, so that communication researchers have often imported concepts from socio-linguistics and sociology into communication studies.

French sociologists and thinkers are internationally well-known for their post-structuralism, postmodernist and constructivist⁴ contribution to the sociological theory (mainly in the 70' – 80'), and organizational communication has borrowed many of its ideas from them.

Barthes and Derrida are two main actors of the post-structuralist movement. Through the concept of “deconstruction”, Derrida criticizes the structuralist relationships between the signifier and the signified: there is no unique relationship between the two, and there are multiple and complex meanings. The postmodernist view of knowledge makes the object of knowledge be linked to the observing subject. Foucault (1969) has studied how knowledge was constructed and discourse produced through history in social sciences. In such conditions, researchers do not think that quantitative research leads to objective results. Latour (Latour & Woolgar, 1979) has shown that even in hard science, research results are constructed through daily social interaction, they do not represent the “truth”.

In management and the sociology of organization, some similar ideas have appeared as from the concept of bounded rationality of Simon. For instance, Crozier and Friedberg (1977) have developed a theory where actors act in order to reach their goals, so that they form a system where knowledge and rules are only local. Nevertheless, the bounded rationality is still “rationality”, whereas in the postmodernist approaches, the concepts of rationality and reality are questioned and the essentialism is rejected⁵.

As a consequence, an important part of French researchers have developed qualitative methods to conduct research. In qualitative studies, the researcher acknowledges that the results of the research are linked to the position of the researcher, so that he forms a “local system of knowledge” with its results.

Another influence here is the one of social psychology. In the 60', Moscovici (1961) has shown that psychological categories were not given, but socially constructed. That is, people understand the world they live through social representations whose meaning is socially negotiated, and social representations lead action and discourse. Language is the main tool to negotiate meaning. For some French researchers, as Foucault, language is not a tool, but rather something which forms and transforms humans: ideas exist through words and discourse.

Critical social theories have inherited from Marx and their common basis is to make people self-reflexive and understand how the dominating systems are constructed. Critical theories have been in their large part developed in the sociology of work, then have influenced communication studies. Sociologists were interested in workers and managers systems in factories. They built theories against the economic and management approach of work, showing that the economic theories were dominating systems that did not take into account the viewpoint of workers. Moreover, some of sociologists of work were influenced by the sociology of everyday life, so that they defended a more anthropological approach of work, thus a broader use of qualitative methods in the study of the enterprise.

In a broader approach, critical theories believe that dominating discourse in the society shapes ideas, thus action. From that perspective, we can see that another consequence of the postmodernist influence of French sociologists is the priority given to action and discourse in the research itself. For instance, an important part of French researchers in management conduct qualitative studies on discourse in organizations. In fact, the postmodernist trend of French research has led many researchers to get interested in communication in the organization of society, and naturally to the organizations themselves.

2.2. The critical stance and the creation of “organizational communication”

⁴ In our article, we choose to use only « postmodernist » to describe the three movements.

⁵ Cf. for instance Floris (2006), who criticizes the approach of the sociology of organization.

The critical approach has led to the study of communication in the enterprise from another point of view that the one of communication as a function of the economic system of the enterprise.

At the end of the 80', various researchers in sociology of work, in socio-linguistics, in management and in social psychology have shared their ideas through an interdisciplinary networked group called "language and work". As Borzeix, Boutet and Fraenkel (2001) point out, each researcher came from disciplines which were not used to work together: researchers in management did not understand that language was more than a simple tool for transmitting information, linguists did not know how to study language in its complex interaction with action in the setting of workplace, the sociologists of work were only used to examine the productive work of workers, not the communication of middle managers and other employees. From 1990, the network has been recognized by the French national center for scientific research and carry on to organize seminars and to publish works of researchers who share their common interest for language within workplace.

The group "Language and work" had mostly a linguistic approach of communication and was still focused on communication in the enterprise. According to Bernard (2002), in the 90', the field of « communication of enterprises » is progressively transformed in « communication of organizations ». The communication of enterprises was too much focused on managerial communication, whereas the organizational communication approaches try to go further in questioning relationships between domination, social relationships and construction of meaning in the organization, but also for and through the organization.

In the 90' then, the critical approach transforms the field of organizational communication. Research in organizational communication tries to differentiate itself from the purely professional point of view. According to Bernard (2002), researchers begin to:

- raise questions on circulation of theories and concepts (from other fields);
- link new theories and practical studies on emergent objects;
- construct objects of study in keeping some distance and in going beyond professional objects. In fact, until the middle of 80', research objects were very close to professional objects and practical teaching content. Discourse of researchers were very close to discourse auto-produced by the professionals themselves (in marketing and public relationships), without distance. Only then, researchers have begun to question the validity of professional discourse and to build the scientific base of organizational communication.

Research on organizational communication progressively finds its own field, its own questions. For Le Moenne (1998), research on organizational communication in the 90' "tries to understand what discourses and practices designed by these discourses cover, to evaluate to which problems these discourses and practices try to resolve, to precise with concept of the enterprises and the organization they convey" (p.12).

Naturally, researchers in that field question above all the relationships between organization and communication. Like for the group "Language and Work", mutual interest and curiosity are also the basis of the creation of a research network within the French Society of Science of Information and Communication, in 1994: "Org & Co" ("Organization and Communication")⁶. The birth of this group reflects the structuration and the recognition of the field in France (Bernard, 2002; Le Moenne, 1998). Although the group is a subdivision of the French Society of Science of Information and Communication, it has been international as soon as it was created. Its aim was to reunite the researchers in organizational communication from speaking French countries. In 2006, the group "Org & Co" has more than 200 members

⁶ Its institutional name is : National group of study on organizational communications (groupe national d'études sur les communications organisationnelles)

coming from 7 speaking French countries. The first conference on organizational communication was held in 1996 in France, then every year or two years. The first book with articles on the topic was published in 1998: its aim was to examine the conditions of the possibility of existence of the field of “organizational communications” within sciences of information and communication. Although organizational communication was born later than other disciplines related to organizations (in sociology, psychology and management), it has quickly structured and retained the attention of researchers from those disciplines.

For Le Moenne (1998), from the beginning, the group works in the following directions:

- listing research on communication and organization in the field of Science of information and communication;
- thinking to the content of teaching programs in that field;
- working in a interdisciplinary way, by listing research on communication and organization in other disciplines;
- pursuing the dialogue with the others persons involved in the field: professionals, institutions, experts, consultants, etc.
- maintaining dialogue within the international community. French researchers in organizational communication work with colleagues of French speaking countries, but also read broadly the international literature published in English.

3. Organizational communications and organizational communication

3.1. Evolution of French research after the 90'

As we said before, the main trend in French organizational communication is based on an effort to go beyond the dominant paradigms of structuralist research in organization studies and to propose an access to certain aspects of collective action in using theories, concepts and methods from various disciplines (Bouzon, 2006). Bernard (2006) describes three main characteristics of French research of the last ten years: (1) a broader opening to research on other organizations than profit ones; (2) study of emergent objects; and (3) the permissive phenomena of borrowing more and more concepts from other fields of research.

For Bouzon (2006), these characteristics are reduced to two main ones: extension and dispersion.

Extension: Research in organizational communication has become a structured and noticeable field. The role of the group “Org&Co” is essential in the development of the field of “organizational communication” in French academic community until today. It is seen by its members as a scientific and contact network that reunites speaking French researchers working on organizational communication. In 2007, the group has decided to reinforce the scientific production of the network by sending regularly scientific information to its members, and by organizing several conferences, among them some are exclusively for “young researchers” (doctorate or post-doctorate students). Another possible factor of this development is the double role given to communication and to enterprise in social life by modern society. Le Moenne (2006) describes how the evolution of organization of work in enterprises (networks, collaboration, etc.) has again positioned communication as a central concept in organizational life, but above all, how it has positioned the economic model of networked communication in enterprise as a new model for the society⁷. Gramaccia (2006)

⁷ According to him, this is because competition and the logic of market issued from capitalism have become the new model of society.

gives an example of this new managerial logic: the logic of collaboration. According to the new logic, cooperation (and problems of domination) does not exist any more, there is only collaboration: knowledge is the thing for what everybody works, since everybody has access to knowledge through the new technology. The central point becomes the competent and communicant individual. In fact, these critical researchers show how this new model still possesses a domination logic. There is no more control by the division of work, but a form of self-control through the model of competency (Heller, 2008; Le Moenne, 2006). Since the new model become a model for social life, organizational communication (in fact, only the concept of organizational communication conveyed by this new model) becomes a new model for social organizing in general. This may explain the success of some theories on organizational communication as Montreal School one's (cf. below).

Dispersion: Researchers in organizational communication become more and more specialized. There are 8 fields in organizational communication: intercultural communication ; communication of networks; communication of project; communication of change ; communication of innovation; crisis communication; communication, mediation and new media; ordinary communication (Bernard, 2006). Moreover, researchers in organizational communication borrow more and more concepts from others disciplines and fields, which can be a problem for the acknowledgement of organizational communication as a structured field.

3.1. Toward an international French-speaking approach of organizations: organizing by communicating

Despite the dispersion of topics, the fact that there is the "Org & Co" group has helped researchers from speaking French countries to structure their studies on some common basis. Bouzon (2006) proposes a large definition of organizational communication that reflects well the common basis of research conducted French researchers: "Organizational communication examines the content and modes of communication acts in organizations, and tries to understand the role of the latter in work and cooperation situations" (p.12)⁸.

Communication researchers do not to deny the economic reality of enterprise, neither talk only of domination, injustice and inequity in enterprise; but they do not serve and blindly obey to the economic and managerial logic either (Floris, 2006; Heller, 1998). The critical stance is helpful for such a project.

Moreover, the critical approach has helped researchers in organization to find a "place" for communication studies in the study of organization: organizational communication is different from organizational studies: in organizational studies, organization is the territory where communication happens, so that research that "finalizes" communication may have a greater place (communication is an instrument to reach some objective); in communication studies, communication phenomena are the lens through which the complexity of organization can be understood, since the communicational approach can establish relationships between the economic logic and the psycho-socio-anthropo-cognitive approaches (Bernard, 2002)⁹.

⁸ « La communication organisationnelle s'intéresse au contenu et aux modalités des actes de communication dans les organisations et cherche à comprendre le rôle de ces derniers dans les situations de travail et de coopération ».

⁹ Cf. Olivesi (2006) on the meaning of anthropology of communication : "Speaking of anthropology of communication means firstly that communication is a "human" activity whose understanding requires the objectification of factors explaining ways of how people behave, interact, live in society, respond to the requests of the environment. Any research in communication is related to a certain conception of man and society". (« Traiter d'anthropologie de la communication signifie d'abord que la communication est une activité « humaine » dont la compréhension suppose l'objectivation de facteurs expliquant les manières de se comporter,

Organizational communication articulates questions related to links, meaning, knowledge and action to understand organizations (Bernard, 2006).

Organizational communication in France has found its spirit on the basis of the relationships between the economic logic and the anthropological one. The name of “organizational communication” has evolved accordingly. In the 80’, researchers were working on “communication in enterprises” (communication was a function of the enterprise). At the beginning of the 90’, there were two changes: first, researchers were not anymore working on “communication in the enterprise”, but on “communications in the enterprises”, since they analyzed communication as a pattern of phenomena which occurred at any level in the context of the enterprise¹⁰. Second, researchers began to work more broadly on the context of organizations. Bouzon (2006) points out that studies in organizational communication, which were first bound into the object of enterprise, have enlarged their studies to organizations in general, that is “any social entity that have activities oriented towards an goal” (p.13)¹¹. Consequently, “communication in enterprises” changed to “communications in organizations”¹². In the 90’, researchers have begun to raise questions on the status of organization. Is organization an object, a thing in which communicational phenomena occur? Or is organization a process of putting elements in order? This would mean that in that case, organization would be made by communication? In others words, when we are talking about “organizational communication”, do we talk about “communication(s) in organization” or of “communicating as organizing” (Cooren, Taylor & Van Every, 2006)?

Currently, both meanings are available in French organizational communication researchers¹³, but from the end of the 90’, the second approach has convinced more and more researchers. Bouzon (2006) believes that efforts of the academic community as the one of the group “Org & Co” has contributed to the emergence of a “speaking French school” of organizational communication in an academic circle dominated by anglo-saxon research production. In fact, the theory of “communicating as organizing” does not belong to the French school, but is born in a Canadian speaking French university. This theory has spread in France in the 90’, in particular thanks to an article of Taylor published in 1993 in “Communication & Organization”, the French core journal in organizational communication. As we said, from the beginning, the group “Org & Co” has not been limited to France, but has built many relationships with researchers from speaking French countries. Among them were many Canadian researchers. Organizational communication theory of the “Montreal school” is said to be the result of the cross between the American and English research and the French postmodernist research. It has found a wide audience among communication researchers, even beyond organizational communication. Among the researchers of “Montreal school”, Cooren has gained a world-wide fame, since he has become today the President of the International Communication Association. It can be noted that Cooren is in fact French. He has studied as a doctorate student with Taylor. Today, more and more young French researchers work on organizational communication within Canadian universities, which helps the Canadian theories to spread in France.

d’interagir, de vivre en société, de répondre aux sollicitations de l’environnement. Tout travail de recherche en communication s’avère solidaire d’une certaine conception de l’homme et de la société » (p.181)).

¹⁰ See Delcambre (1997), who works on “writing in the working organizations”. For him studying writing is a way to observe the worlds of work and the way these working organizations function.

¹¹ « toute entité social ayant des activités orientées vers un objectif »

¹² Some researchers talk about « communication of enterprises » or « communication of organizations » (cf. Le Moenne, 1998b), but the meaning is the same.

¹³ Cf. Mucchielli (2006) on the concept of “organizational context”.

What is certain is that in the 2000', most of the French researchers in organizational communication believe that communication cannot be parted from organization. From that period on, the concept of "organization" has a broader meaning: the organization of society. « Communication exists through forms of social organization, as the same time it transmits those organizational forms. (...) When we attach more importance to discourse than to text¹⁴, we think that in numerous situations, the organizational structure itself is the object of the communication, as well as it governs this communication, in particular in ordering its course in space and time. (...) Production of communication is at the same time production of the social organization. But it is not limited to words" (Ollivier, 2000, pp.163-165).

Conclusion

French research on organizational communication is embedded in the history of the development of social science in France. It is in particular related to the development of Science of information and communication and of sociology, and it has inherited of the critical and postmodernist movements that characterize research of most of French philosophers and sociologists. The field of organizational communication has developed very soon thanks to the willing efforts of the academic community interested in this field to be structured in a network, the group "Org & Co". It has carried on developing quickly thanks to the essential position that the concept of "organization" has gained recently.

Above all, what should be noticed is that the development of the French research in organizational communication is not a French matter, but rather a French speaking community matter. Researchers of this community have joined their efforts to go beyond their national and theoretical differences to build some common basis of understanding of the concept of organization. Consequently, and mostly thanks to the Canadian researchers, concepts issued from the international French-speaking community have spread among the whole international community in the field of organizational communication and even communication studies. The main topic of the 2010 Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, on the question of materiality of communication, is directly based on the research of the Canadian school on organizational communication. This example suggests that organizational communication should continue to develop in the next years, and that concepts issued from the French-speaking community research should continue to influence international research in organizational communication and more generally in communication studies.

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¹⁴ Here, « text » means the content of the discourse, the words that are pronounced, seen from a pure linguistic lens. The discursive approach takes into account the social conditions in which the text is said or written (conditions of the enunciation of the text by the subject (s)).

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