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Conventions of usage vs. meaning conventions

1. Introduction

For more than 15 years we have been witnessing more or less violent border wars[1]. When they started it was literalists (i.e. those who claim that non-deficient declarative utterances have truth-conditional literal content which is determined solely by linguistic rules and which usually is divergent from speaker's meaning) who dominated the field but the situation changed very quickly. I'm not sure whether François Recanati was right when he wrote in the introduction to his 2004 book that "Literalism is the dominant position" (2004: 3), but there is no doubt that at present his claim is false. Literalists turned into semantic minimalists and their number dramatically diminished, while contextualism flourishes.

There is no unique way to divide "warriors" into semantic minimalists and contextualists. There are at least three main points on which the participants in the debate disagree: 1. Propositionalism (i.e. the claim that all declaratives devoid of ellipsis, indexicals and ambiguities semantically express a truth-evaluable proposition), 2. Admissibility of strong pragmatic effects on semantic content (strong pragmatic effects being contextual effects not linguistically controlled) and 3. The number of context-sensitive expressions in natural language.[2] Radical contextualists and relevantists reject propositionalism, admit strong pragmatic effects and argue that most natural language expressions are context-sensitive. Semantic minimalists such as Emma Borg (2004) and Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore (2005) accept propositionalism[3], claim that strong pragmatic effects are not admissible and argue

[1] See Horn 2006.

[2] See Odrowąż-Sypniewska 2013.

[3] Cappelen and Lepore object that nowhere in their book have they explicitly accepted propositionalism, but in my opinion (and I follow Bach here) propositionalism is the most likely justification for their claim that sentences like "Rudolph is ready" and "Nina had enough" semantically express propositions. Compare the exchange between Bach and Cappelen & Lepore from 2006 (Bach:

that indexicals are limited to those from David Kaplan's list. Kent Bach calls himself a radical minimalist, since he claims that strong pragmatic effects are not admissible, argues that indexicals are few and far between, but rejects propositionalism. Others regard his position as a version of contextualism rather than minimalism, since they take the rejection of propositionalism to be a mark of contextualism. Indexicalism, which accepts propositionalism, claims that strong pragmatic effects are inadmissible and argues that context-sensitive expressions are very many, but their context-sensitivity is explained in terms of hidden variables, is usually regarded as a kind of contextualism, but some have argued that since it allows only for linguistically controlled pragmatic processes it belongs with minimalism.[4]

One might also look at the debate between contextualists and minimalists as a dispute concerning what is right and worth preserving in Paul Grice's philosophy of language. As is well known Grice distinguished what is said from what is otherwise communicated and stipulated that the former should – among other things – be (i) close to conventional meaning and (ii) meant by the speaker. Indexicalists are the only ones who believe that what is said can fulfil both requirements. Other minimalists and contextualists think that what is said cannot have those two properties at the same time. Contextualists tend to think that the requirement that it be meant by the speaker is more important, so they design their notion of what is said in such a way that it satisfies (ii), but does not satisfy (i). They claim that what is said is pragmatically enriched and postulate replacing truth-conditional semantics with truth-conditional pragmatics. Minimalists agree with contextualists – *pace* Grice – that what is said is a pragmatic notion[5]. However, they postulate in addition minimal semantic content which is close to conventional meaning. This notion satisfies (i), but does not satisfy (ii). Minimal semantic content is truth-evaluable but it rarely corresponds to the intuitive truth-conditions that users ascribe to utterances. Cappelen and Lepore's standpoint was a clear example of this view. Contextualists say either

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"The Excluded Middle: Semantic Minimalism without Minimal Propositions", "Minimalism for Dummies: Reply to Cappelen and Lepore", "From the Strange to the Bizarre: Another reply to Cappelen and Lepore"; Cappelen, Lepore: „Kent Bach on minimalism for dummies").

[4] In *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics* (2010) Recanati argues that the only interesting version of minimalism is one which claims that intuitive truth-conditions are semantically generated. In my opinion indexicalism is the only such version of minimalism.

[5] A notable exception here is Bach, who modifies Grice's notion of what is said and makes it even more syntactically constrained, not necessarily truth-evaluable and not necessarily meant by the speaker (and still calls it "what is said"). See Bach 2001.

that there is no truth-evaluable semantic content or that such content is theoretically useless.

In *Imagination and Convention* Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone do not take a stance in this debate. Their aim is much more revolutionary: they want to overturn the whole setup in which the debate has been taking place. They do not reject the received view according to which semantics is concerned with knowledge of language but they interpret this knowledge in a much broader way so that it contributes to settling not only what the speaker is saying, but also to what he is doing. They argue that meaning which has been deemed pragmatic is in fact semantic and is signalled by the speakers through various linguistic conventions. Whereas minimalists and contextualists agree that Grice was (more or less) right as far as implicatures are concerned, Lepore and Stone claim that many cases that have been categorized as conversational implicatures belong in fact to semantics since they rely on linguistic conventions and not on general interpretative principles *à la* Grice: "The rules of language are NOT exhausted by a bare-bones semantics; the rules of language can signal many other aspects of interpretation" (2015: 5). Rules of language (conventions) encode much more of interpretation that it is traditionally assumed (see 2015: 6). Lepore and Stone also postulate a reconceptualization of pragmatics: it should not be seen as a domain concerned with the behaviour of rational agents (2015: 1), because interpretative reasoning is heterogeneous, aimed at different goals and "does not privilege rationality" (2015: 5). As a result the authors of *Imagination and Convention* claim that they "have no use for a category of conversational implicatures" (2015: 6): some of alleged CI belong to semantics and some are too unconstrained to count as calculable implicatures. They argue that "[p]ragmatics can be, at most, a theory of disambiguation; pragmatic reasoning never contributes content to utterances" (2015: 83).

They divide their book into the "convention" part and the "imagination" part (see 2015: 4, 5). The imagination part is part III in which they investigate various figurative and evocative linguistic devices such as metaphor, sarcasm, irony, humour and hinting and argue that imagination, not calculation, is needed to interpret them. In what follows I'm going to concentrate on the convention part of their book and in particular on chapter 6.

2. Indirect speech acts

2.1. Lepore and Stone's ambiguity view

According to Lepore and Stone conventional meaning goes beyond truth-conditional meaning. That claim is not new of course: Grice postulated a separate category of conventional implicatures, which are part of conventional meaning but are not included in the truth-conditional content of the utterance. The authors of *Imagination and Convention* claim however that linguistic rules constrain possible interpretations of the utterance in a much tighter way than Grice envisaged. Linguistic knowledge encompasses truth-conditional meaning, discourse relations, presupposition and information structure (2015: 88). Many interpretations that have been traditionally regarded as results of pragmatic inferences, are in fact encoded in the rules of language.

In demonstrating that many alleged conversational implicatures are encoded in linguistic rules they concentrate on three examples:

25. Can I have a French Toast?,

26. Oil prices doubled and demand for consumer goods plunged,

27. Well, it looked red,

and claim that their interpretations are linguistically – and not pragmatically – determined. We read (25) as a request not because we appeal to Maxims of Quality and Relation, but because (25) is ambiguous and request is one of its meanings. We interpret (26) as saying that oil prices doubled and *then* demand for consumer goods plunged, not because we appeal to the Maxim of Manner, but because the narrative interpretation is dictated by conventional meanings (in particular by aspect (simple past tense)). And finally we take (3) to mean that the relevant object might not be red, not because we appeal to the Maxim of Quantity, but because of information structure, which is a dimension of meaning and is encoded by intonation (see 2015: 129).

I will focus here on

(25) Can I have a French Toast?

When uttered in a restaurant it will be understood as an indirect request. Lepore and Stone argue that indirect speech acts are an instance of ambiguity (*scil*. polysemy). Just as (89) "Can you play Chopin's E minor prelude?" might be either an inquiry how good one is at playing piano or a request for performing this particular piece of

music (98), "Can I have a French toast?" is ambiguous between an inquiry and a request. The authors of *Imagination and Convention* claim that the fact that the sentence uttered is associated with a request is a meaning convention: "another lexical sense for the word *can*" (2015: 100). They agree with traditional views that in order to arrive at the intended meaning the hearer should undergo an inference, which might be summarized as (2015: 99):

"(90)
a. An utterance of (25) looks as a matter of literal meaning to be asking a question about what's possible.
b. But, here, in a restaurant, the menu already says what's possible, so there's nothing to be gained by asking about it.
c. If, though, the speaker intends to be placing an order, then her utterance is a cooperative move for her to make in this conversational context.
d. And, as a matter of fact, the sentence she uttered is associated with a request.
e. Therefore, we infer the speaker intends to be making a request."

but insist that (90d) is in fact a linguistic convention not a pragmatic reasoning. Therefore (90) represents a process of disambiguation rather than a pragmatic interpretation. One problem with this view is that it is hard to specify what this additional meaning of "can" could be. In the case of (89) we might say that "can" either means "know how to" or "are able to", whereas in the case of (25) the alleged "request" sense is not easily specified[6]. It seems to me that we interpret (25) as a request as a result of a global rather than a local process. We see (25) as a request when we look at it as a whole so to speak. "Can" by itself does not indicate that the speaker intends to request something.[7] Moreover, if indirect speech acts in general are to be explained by appeal to lexical ambiguity, the authors will have to argue not only that "can" is ambiguous but also that expressions like "I would like to" have a "request" sense as well (cf. their example (93) "I would like to have the Eggs Benedict please").

[6] Merriam-Webster dictionary lists 8 different meanings of "can", but none of them fits:
a : know how to <she *can* read>
b : be physically or mentally able to <he *can* lift 200 pounds>
c —used to indicate possibility <do you think he *can* still be alive> <those things *can* happen> ; sometimes used interchangeably with *may*
d : be permitted by conscience or feeling to <*can* hardly blame her>
e : be made possible or probable by circumstances to <he *can* hardly have meant that>
f : be inherently able or designed to <everything that money *can* buy>
g : be logically or axiologically able to <2 + 2 *can* also be written 3 + 1>
h : be enabled by law, agreement, or custom to
We can stipulate a new meaning, but – as I say above – it is not easy to find a likely candidate.

[7] If I were to go for ambiguity I would rather argue that the whole phrase "can I have" is ambiguous between "is it possible/allowed that I have" and "please give me".

A few pages further Lepore and Stone say that "the interpretative difference among readings of (89) is not a matter of syntactic structure or semantic content. It's a matter of what the speaker is doing" (2015: 106). Were "can" lexically ambiguous, different disambiguations would result in a difference of semantic content, hence this claim is in tension with the lexical ambiguity view of "can". They still want (89) to be a case of "genuine ambiguity" but now they argue that ambiguity pertains to what the speaker is doing. Such ambiguity is semantic according to them, for it is due to speaker's linguistic knowledge.

The authors contrast their view with that of Grice or Searle, which they call "the reinterpretation account". The main difference between their "ambiguity account" and the reinterpretation account is the view on linguistic knowledge. They argue that whereas on their account the speaker in order to understand an indirect speech act must know the linguistic meaning of the terms used ("two senses of can" (2015: 99)), on Searle's view she must possess social knowledge. They offer two arguments for the ambiguity account: "please"-diagnostic and variability across languages.

2.2. Arguments for the ambiguity account

The authors suggest using "please" as a diagnostics. They claim that it is felicitous to use "please" both in direct, explicit requests and in indirect requests, such as

(93) I would like to have the Eggs Benedict please.

The fact that "please" is appropriate in (93) but not in "I'm thirsty" suggests to them that "*please* can accompany requests, as long as they are marked as requests in the usual way, rather than left implicit" (2015: 101). This implies in turn that in both direct and indirect speech acts requests are part of the conventional meaning. However, it is worth noticing that "please" may also be added to short requests like "Coffee" or "Two beers". Thus, a consequence of the view is that "two beers" is likewise ambiguous and in one of its meaning signifies a request. The authors may embrace this consequence but I find the claim that "two beers" has two *lexical* meanings (it can mean either "two beers" or "Give me two beers") hard to swallow.

Stone and Lepore notice that the form of indirect speech acts interpretations vary across languages and take this to be

"a knock-down argument against the Gricean view that these interpretations are conversational implicatures – and against the broader neo-Gricean view that these interpretations are derived by

general pragmatic principles" (2015: 102-103).

I have to admit that I do not see why variation across languages should be regarded as an argument against the relevant interpretations being conversational implicatures. To my mind the fact that in certain languages certain linguistic forms give rise to certain implicatures whereas their direct translations into other languages do not give rise to such implicatures has no bearing on the issue of whether a given interpretation is semantic or pragmatic. Moreover, I suspect that it might be the case that those translations that do not carry their indirect interpretations are not felicitous speech acts. I will not discuss the Polish example (98) Miałbyś ochotę na piwo?, because to my ear it sounds perfectly all right and does constitute an indirect offer of beer. But take

(102) Can you do us a favour of having us listen?

It is grammatical, but it is something that people do not say and - as the authors notice - have trouble understanding. Thus, it might be argued that (102) is neither an indirect speech nor a felicitous speech act at all. If it is not a proper locutionary act in English, then no wonder that it does not carry implicatures. Moreover, Grice himself claims that generalized implicatures are carried by "the use of a certain form of words" (1989: 37)[8], thus he seems to be open to the idea that there are certain conventions which govern generalized implicatures (and in particular generalized indirect speech acts[9]), but there is no reason to suppose that such "forms of words" are the same across languages. Neo-Griceans like Larry Horn and Stephen Levinson admit that there are typical (unmarked) ways of saying things and atypical (marked) ways and the former carry different implicatures than the latter. And it seems that what is typical for one language need not be typical for another. Obviously in order to say something that will carry an intended implicature the speaker must have the mastery of language, must know what form to choose, but admitting this is not admitting that implicatures are simply encoded.

2.3. Searle on indirect speech acts

[8] His examples involve certain occurrences of indefinite descriptions ("He is meeting a woman this evening", "X went to a house yesterday and found", "He broke a finger yesterday").

[9] Bach calls such acts "standardized", where "a form of words is standardized for a certain use if this use, though regularized, goes beyond literal meaning and yet can be explained without special convention". Bach 1998.

It is striking that many of the observations that Lepore and Stone make agree with those made by John Searle and yet they draw completely different consequences from them. Searle notices for instance that indirect speech acts "have a generality of form" (1979: 36): they share certain formal features in the surface grammar. He also remarks that such expressions are idiomatic and are idiomatically used as directives (1979: 41). Other ways of saying the same do not have the same indirect illocutionary act potential (compare "Do you want to hand me the hammer over there on the table?" and "Is it the case that you at present desire to hand me that hammer over there on the table?"). Thus, Searle notices the regularity of indirect speech acts (and even calls it "generality of form") but does not conclude that they are semantic in nature. On the contrary, he employs huge pragmatic machinery including Grice's maxims and his own speech act theory to explain how they work. Searle claims that

"In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" (1979: 31-32).

According to Searle, in the case of "Can I have a French Toast?" making a request is a primary illocutionary act, which is performed by way of performing a secondary illocutionary act of asking a question (the secondary act is literal, whereas the primary act is not). As we have already seen (see (90) above) in order to understand the question "Can I have a French Toast?" as a request the hearer has to perform a certain inference. He must first infer that the speaker means more than he says and then establish the point of the primary illocutionary act (cf. 1979: 35). Searle notices that such cases can be explained without postulating any kind of ambiguity (1979: 35-36). He argues that they do not have imperative force as part of their meaning; they are not ambiguous between an imperative and nonimperative illocutionary force, but still are conventionally used to issue directives (1979: 40).

Searle notices also that translations of sentences used to perform indirect speech acts "*often, though by no means always*, produce sentences with the same indirect illocutionary act potential of the English examples" - my emphasis (1979: 41). He stresses here that translations usually carry the implicatures, but acknowledges that indirect speech acts may vary for different languages and does not take this to be an argument against his view (let alone "a knock-down argument").

Searle stresses that he has not demonstrated that his approach is the correct one but argues that his suggested pattern of analysis is consistent with all the important observations concerning indirect speech acts.

3. Conventions of usage vs. meaning conventions

The main point of difference between Searle on the one hand and Stone and Lepore on the other seems to be their view on conventions. As we have seen Stone and Lepore treat claims like (90d) as linguistic conventions and because of this they regard indirect speech acts as semantic phenomena. A similar argument has been put forward in the debate concerning the semantic significance of referential-attributive distinction. One of the arguments for the claim that definite descriptions might have referential as well as attributive meanings is the Argument from Convention which says that since "referential uses of descriptions are common, standard, regular, systematic, and cross-linguistic", we should admit that „such uses are *conventional*, a direct function of linguistic meaning (…)" (Neale 2004: 173). Stephen Neale who used to defend a no-semantic-significance view of referentially used descriptions takes it to be „an intuitive and powerful argument for ambiguity in definite descriptions" (2004: 173) and one of the reasons for abandoning his earlier view. Michael Devitt to whom this argument is mainly due puts it as follows:

„The basis for [referential descriptions] is not simply that we can use a definite referentially, it is that we regularly do so. When a person has a thought with a particular object in mind, there is a regularity of her using 'the *F'* to express that thought. And there need be no special stage setting enabling her to conversationally imply what she has not literally said, nor any sign that her audience needs to use a Gricean derivation to understand what she means. This regularity is strong evidence that there is a convention of using 'the *F'* to express a thought about a particular *F,* that this is a standard use. This convention is semantic, as semantic as the one for an attributive use. In each case, there is a convention of using 'the *F'* to express a thought with a certain sort of meaning/content." (2004: 283)

Devitt's exact reasoning could be repeated and used as an argument for Lepore and Stone's semantic view of indirect speech acts.

As I've already mentioned Searle notices the regularity of using e.g. "Can you pass the salt?" to express requests, but addressing the problem of why some syntactical forms are better than others in performing indirect speech acts he says:

"there can be conventions of usage that are not meaning conventions. I am suggesting that "can you", "could you", "I want you to", and numerous other forms are conventional ways of making requests (…), but at the same time they do not have an imperative meaning" (1979: 49).

As we can see Searle distinguishes here conventions of usage from meaning conventions. I take this to be a fundamental insight. From the fact that certain expressions tend to be used to express certain propositions it does not necessarily follow that those propositions are the meanings of those expressions. There might be a convention to use a term in a certain way without the accompanying meaning convention. A similar point was made by Salmon in his paper "The Pragmatic Fallacy":

"The Pragmatic Fallacy embodies the idea that if the use of a particular expression fulfils a certain illocutionary purpose of the speaker's, then that purpose must also characterize the expression's semantic function with respect to the speaker's context. The purpose fulfilled by the use of an expression, of course, often indicates the expression's semantic function, but not invariably so." (1997: 306)

He insists that the fact that speakers typically use *S* in context *c* to convey that *p* should not tempt one to claim that *S* in *c* expresses *p* (2004: 349). To do otherwise is to commit the above-mentioned pragmatic fallacy.

The difference between meaning conventions and conventions of usage has also been exploited in the analysis of semantically underdetermined sentences. The proper analysis of such sentences is a subject of a lively debate between contextualists and semantic minimalists. The former argue that

I've had breakfast.

Alice and John went up the hill.

Steel is strong enough.

express pragmatically enriched propositions:

I've had breakfast [today].

Alice and John went up the hill [together].

Steel is strong enough [for a contextually specified purpose].

Minimalists on the other hand argue that they express either minimal propositions or proposition radicals:

I've had breakfast [some time in the recent past].

Alice and John went up the hill.

Steel is strong enough/ There is something for which steel is strong enough.

Bach argues for his minimalist standpoint by noticing that "What a sentence is most typically used to communicate is one thing; what *it* means may well be something else" (2001: 30)[10]. Admittedly speakers typically use "I've had breakfast" to say that they have had breakfast on the day of utterance but from the fact that this sentence is most often used to say this it does not follow that it means it. Using Searle's terminology we might say that "I've had breakfast" is conventionally used to express the proposition that I've had breakfast this morning, but it is not a meaning convention. By the way it would be interesting to learn what is Lepore and Stone's take on the phenomenon of semantic underdetermination. They take conventions of usage to be linguistic conventions, so they probably would argue that "I've had breakfast" means "I've had breakfast this morning", but at the same time they argue against pragmatic enrichment. So it seems that they would have to say that "I've had breakfast" is also ambiguous and might mean either "I've had breakfast this morning" or "I've had breakfast some time in the past".

Another group of expressions for which the distinction between meaning conventions and conventions of usage comes in very useful are sub-sentential speech acts. The most commonly given examples are expressions such as "Nice dress", "Under the table", "From Spain", "Two black coffees", "Where?" etc. uttered in such circumstances in which speakers uttering them are regarded as "making moves in a language game", e.g. stating, asking, requesting, promising etc. If Mum knows that Johnny is looking for his tennis ball and says "Under the table" she probably means – and will be understood as meaning – "Your ball is under the table" (or „The ball is under the table"). On most views "under the table" uttered in such a situation is not an ellipsis because there is no linguistic antecedent (see e.g. Stainton, Merchant)[11]. The defenders of sub-sentential speech acts argue that in the right circumstances a sub-

[10] He also says that "Pragmatic regularities give rise to faulty 'semantic' intuitions" (2005: 22). For Bach the most natural interpretation often is not a CI, so here he agrees with Lepore and Stone. However, the agreement is merely superficial, since Bach would argue that the most natural interpretation is an impliciture, i.e. the effect of pragmatic enrichment, whereas, as we have seen, Lepore and Stone deny that pragmatics ever delivers content to utterances.

[11] On the contrary, if "Under the table" were uttered in response to the question "Where is my ball, Mummy?" Mum's utterance would be a straightforward case of ellipsis (although compare here Bach who voices some reservations ("The myth of conventional implicature")).

sentential utterance may constitute a speech act even though it cannot be regarded as a case of ellipsis. For many admitting that sub-sentential speech acts are genuine amounts to allowing pragmatic enrichment and so joining the ranks of contextualists. However, if one distinguishes conventions of usage from meaning conventions, one might argue that there are conventions according to which such phrases are used to perform relevant speech acts but these conventions do not amount to meaning conventions. Even if used in the context described above, "Under the table" does not mean "The ball is under the table", although it can be used to convey this. Again, if Lepore and Stone acknowledge that there is such a convention of usage (and it would be hard not to acknowledge this) and if they regard it as a meaning convention, then they seem to be forced to concede global ambiguity. "Under the table" might be used as an assertion ("The ball is under the table"), as a request ("Put it under the table"), as a question ("Is it under the table?") and so on. If conventions of usage are meaning conventions and ambiguity pertains to what the speaker is doing then all such phrases are massively ambiguous. This is not a conclusive argument against such a standpoint but the view which does distinguish conventions of usage from meaning conventions and does not postulate such global ambiguity seems much more plausible.

4. Conclusion

Thus, if one admits that there might be conventions of usage that do not constitute meaning conventions one is in a position to provide an adequate analysis of a broad range of phenomena (indirect speech acts, sub-sentential speech acts, semantic underdetermination) without invoking global ambiguity. If additionally one agrees with Kripke's famous dictum 'It is very much the lazy man's approach to philosophy to posit ambiguities when in trouble' (1977: 243), then one is likely to reject Lepore and Stone's account. Lepore and Stone will no doubt claim that their account is explanatorily equal (or even better) than the account that appeals to conventions of use. Moreover, they might remark that Kripke clarifies his dictum in the following way: "Do not posit an ambiguity unless you are really forced to, unless there are really compelling theoretical or intuitive grounds to suppose that an ambiguity really is present" (ibid.). And we already know that the authors of *Convention and Imagination* think that there are "really compelling theoretical *and* intuitive grounds" to posit ambiguity. However, Kripke also asks (talking about attributive-referential

distinction): "why posit a semantic ambiguity when it is both insufficient in general and superfluous for the special case it seeks to explain?" (ibid.). Thus, following Kripke we might ask why posit ambiguity for some (conventionalized) indirect speech acts when it is neither sufficient (for it does not explain particularized indirect speech acts[12]) nor needed (for someone not convinced by the arguments Lepore and Stone propose (i.e. "please"-dialectic and variability across languages) might still claim that generalized speech acts are adequately explained by Gricean mechanism).

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[12] The ambiguity view does not explain indirect speech acts that depend on particular context, e.g. if someone says "I'm tired" in reply to the question "Will you go to the movies with me tonight?", his answer will be understood as denial, but one cannot argue that "I'm tired" means "I will not go to the movies with you tonight".

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