

## **Discourse Dimensions of Dominance Relations in Dul Johnson's**

### *Across the Gulf*

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#### **Abstract**

That discourse and dominance are closely linked and in various ways inseparable is undeniable. This paper examines the relations between both constructs paying particular attention to how the former contributes to the reproduction of the latter in literary texts. Extracts purposively selected from Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf* were analysed following Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory and Van Dijk's (1993) Critical Discourse Model (with particular reference to his macro-, micro- and meso – levels). This is to identify the dimensions of dominance relations in the text; uncovering the ideology which underlies the exercise of dominance, and determining how discourse structures have been used in constructing dominance relations. The study found that the dimensions of dominance relations were dominance and resistance, and dominance and compliance. Both dimensions were reproduced by action and cognition. Speech acts, namely, assertive, directive, expressive and commissive, as well as discourse structures such as turn-taking, lexicalised verbs, statements, questions, commands and reference, foregrounded the patriarchal, ethnic bigotry, religious, feminist and humanistic ideologies which underlie the reproduction of dominance relations in the data examined. The study submits that dominance reproduced by cognition is far more effective, and can engender positive result than that which is enacted by action.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Dominance relations, Hegemony, Social power

## **1. Introduction**

‘Discourse’ is one notion that has been used extensively in linguistics. It has several meanings, but for us, in this paper, it will be used in contrast with ‘text’, where ‘text’ denotes authentic written data (Bloor and Bloor, 2007) or the manifestation of writing (Clark, 2004). That discourse and dominance are closely linked and in various ways inseparable is undeniable. Discourse plays a central role not only in reproducing dominance but also in resisting or accepting it. Dominance is the use of social power by individuals or groups that result in social disparity (Van Dijk, 1993). Social power is described in terms of control (Van Dijk, 2001) and may be predicated on “privileged access to socially valued resources such as wealth, income, status, force, group membership, education or knowledge” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 254). It is predominant in all spheres of life (Fairclough, 1994, p. 50).

In everyday interaction and experience, we employ the mediums of speech and writing in relating with other people in society. When we engage in these communicative events, dominance relation is reproduced by our text and talk. Dominance relation is an interpersonal relationship in which an individual or group can change or influence the minds or acts of another individual or group. Such a relation may be witnessed between couples, parents and children, superiors and subordinates, leaders and laity, lecturers and students, doctors and patients, and members of one group and those of another. Two dimensions of dominance relation are dominance and resistance, and dominance and compliance. For explanatory purposes, the former dimension is concerned with an interpersonal relationship where dominance is resisted or challenged. Conversely, the latter dimension focuses on the compliance or acceptance of dominance. The foregoing dimensions are what Van Dijk (1993, p. 250) refers to as the “top-down relations of dominance and bottom-up relations of resistance, compliance and acceptance”.

A dominant group may use action (that is, force) or cognition (that is, persuasion or manipulation) to influence the minds or the acts of a dominated group. Groups wield power if they can control the acts and minds of members of other groups. While dominance reproduced by action, is illegitimate as it is predicated on force and may lead to violence; dominance enacted by cognition is legitimate or natural because it is mutual (Van Dijk, 1993, 2001).

Studies on dominance relations in several disciplines have generated extensive literature. Most of these works have examined discourse as a means of dominance to be enacted, maintained and perpetrated while not much has been accomplished on discourse as a means for dominance to be resisted or accepted (Negm, 2015). The concern of this study is, therefore, to examine how discourse is used in resisting and accepting dominance in literary discourse. The objectives of the study include: (i) to identify the dimensions of dominance relations observed in the text under investigation, (ii) reveal the ideology that underlies the exercise of dominance, and (iii) determine the discourse structures that have been used in constructing dominance relations. The text chosen for this study is Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf*. The choice of this text is hinged on its treatment of pressing social issues which Critical Discourse Analysis (Henceforth, CDA) is interested in investigating. It is hoped that the approach adopted in this paper will provide a better understanding of how discourse structures are used in reproducing, resisting and accepting dominance in literary discourse.

## **2. Theoretical Perspectives**

This study draws insights from the resources of speech act theory (Henceforth, SAT) and CDA.

We discuss these concepts below starting with SAT which is connected with the work of J.L Austin (1962) and his student John Searle (1969). The crux of the theory hinges on the idea that humans use language to accomplish more than what they say in any communicative event.

According to Austin, the theory is a set of performative activities that consists of three parts: (a)

the locutionary force (the act of expressing); (b) the illocutionary force (the act accomplished in expressing), and (c) the perlocutionary force (the act completed due to expressing something). Austin's taxonomy of speech acts was later reviewed and elaborated on by his student, John R. Searle.

Searle (1969, 1976, 1979) identifies five types of speech acts, namely: assertive and representative, directive, commissive, expressive and declaration. Assertive defines the physical world by stating, expressing, claiming, reporting, announcing, telling or describing. Directives are designed towards getting people to do something. The acts include asking, ordering, commanding, demanding, begging and advising. Commissive acts commit speakers to some future action. These acts include promising, threatening, vowing, pledging, and swearing. Expressive acts express the speaker's moods and thoughts. They include thanking, congratulating, apologising and condoling. Declarations are used to change the external situation because they illustrate that the world can be changed through language. Acts that typify declarations include baptism, marriage, and divorce. This study benefits from Searle's model of speech act, especially the illocutionary act.

CDA is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (Van Dijk, 2001). It examines the structures of power that underlie all acts of speech and writing and therefore is concerned with the politics of language. CDA analyses how speech and writing and the practices associated with them construct and shape reality and the world in which we live. It is 'critical' in the sense that it encourages readers to question assumptions and not to take anything for granted, to examine social issues as they are

constructed in discourse and how discourse contributes to the construction of society (Clark, 2004, p. 137).

The aspect of CDA applied in this study is Van Dijk's micro-, macro-and meso model. The micro focuses on language use, that is, the immediate lexical items, grammatical choices and rhetorical interrelations holding within any type of text (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 2001). Lyons (1981) asserts that this level covers aspects such as phonemes, morphology and syntax. The macro, on the other hand, is the higher level representing the topic, theme or gist of the text. It is the level that addresses concepts like power, dominance, and inequality among social groups (Van Dijk, 2001). The macro has a relationship between language and all the meta-language features of communicative behaviour. Finally, the meso level acts as a bridge between the micro and macro levels and focuses mainly on the context of the text and how it is initially produced (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 2001). The aforementioned levels are bridged to arrive at a unified critical analysis. The present research merges the three theoretical perspectives to critically explore the interrelation between discourse and dominance.

### **3. Methodology**

Short (1996) observes that the novel is perhaps the most problematic genre to investigate linguistically owing to its length. Therefore, he recommends that a close analysis is only possible if some short excerpts were selected for the study. This premise underlies the selection of few excerpts purposively sourced from the text under investigation. The excerpts selected are subjected to critical analysis via Van Dijk's macro-, micro- and meso-levels. The micro-level identifies the linguistic features used in the data; the macro discusses the themes and how power and dominance are enacted and reproduced while the meso-level deals with the context of the text. Finally, the pragmatic functions of the selected excerpts are examined using Searle's speech act model.

#### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

A close study of the extracts selected for this study reveals that the dimensions of dominance relations are dominance and resistance, and dominance and compliance. Both dimensions are reproduced by action and cognition. We begin the discussion with the first dimension of dominance relations.

##### **4.1. Dominance and Resistance**

This aspect of the analysis focuses on instances where participants question, challenge and oppose the authority exercised by dominant groups. The discussion begins with the extract below:

Kalu had insisted on painting the house sparkling chalk-white, inside and outside: The outward proclamation of his spirituality. Nwamaka stoutly resisted this until Kalu decided he would use sky “heaven” blue on the outside and “Spirit” white inside (Dul, 2017, p. 11).

The text above centres around a family setting where the interlocutors argue over the kind of paint to be used on their new house. Both interlocutors share similar background knowledge of the discourse subject. Dominance relations observed here is that which is enacted by action. The text is laced with assertive verbs which are instrumental in relating an important part of its meaning. These verbs highlight the issues of patriarchal domination and feminist resistance. Just as Fairclough (1992) opines that power relations are always relations of struggle; this is demonstrated here as power relations are not confined to one interlocutor. Kalu exerts dominance over his wife who in return challenges such dominance. Both interlocutors exploit the devices of power and none accepts to be a passive recipient. The dominance exercised by Kalu is predicated on his access to a valued resource such as his position in the family. His choice of language as captured in the lexical expressions ‘had insisted’, ‘...the outward proclamation of his spirituality’... and ‘decided’ unveils his patriarchal ideological stance as well as his religious fanaticism. However, the authority exerted by Kalu is challenged by Nwamaka who equally

exploits the device of power in registering her own opinion regarding the discourse subject. In so doing, she exhibits the feminist ideology which encourages women to assert their rights. The representative acts used in the text are statements asserting both interlocutors' stance regarding the discourse subject.

The second example, as cited below, relates an encounter between two interlocutors (a Nigerian soldier on the one hand and a Nigerian medical officer on the other) who argue over a wounded lady that was brought into the clinic for treatment.

‘What is this?’ the soldier asked. ‘Let me shoot her brains out, my friend! ‘We wouldn’t do that even to a prisoner of war’, how could we do it to a woman? (Dul, 2017, p. 18).

The text begins with a directive act used by the soldier in asking a question. This is reflected in ‘what is this?’ This question highlights the soldier’s contempt for the injured lady due to her affiliation with the Biafran troops. The question is immediately succeeded by the representative act used by the same soldier in requesting permission to execute the lady. The assertive verbs ‘shoot’ and ‘do’ connote physical acts. Other lexical items such as ‘soldier’, ‘war’ and ‘prisoner’ provide more details about the events in the text. The context of the text foregrounds the struggle for supremacy between the two interlocutors who exploit the devices of power to dominate each other. This struggle corroborates Negm’s (2015) position that no one agent in discourse is entirely more powerful than the others and that interlocutors keep trying to resist each other. The authority exercised by the soldiers is influenced by their ideology of ethnic bigotry that leads to ethnic polarization which motivate one to regard or treats members of a group with hatred and intolerance. However, the medical officer employs the directive and the representative acts in questioning and challenging the soldiers’ authority. His refusal to concede to their request is

motivated by his humanistic ideological orientation, which values human life and as a result protects it.

The next extract captures instances where female interlocutors exploit the device of power in enacting dominance. The following quoted piece between Kalu and his wife serves as a case in point.

‘Be a man, Nna’anyi! It is past 5 O’clock in the morning. What daybreak are you talking about? I don’t want to bump into any Awusa soldier pointing a gun at me. Nwamaka laughed sadly, but did not utter another word. Kalu shuffled about until he became too embarrassed by Nwamak’s presence and decided to go out on the search (Dul, 2017, p. 35).

The extract above typifies a kind of dominance and resistance exerted by cognition. It is configured with the directive and representative acts. Both speech acts are instrumental in projecting gender-based dominance. The context relates to the precarious circumstance surrounding Kalu’s family consequently the sudden disappearance of his daughter, Ifunanya. The use of turn-taking indicates that the conversation is initiated by Nwamaka who represents the dominant character. Her exercise of authority over Kalu is exemplified in the imperative expression ‘Be a man, Nna’anyi!’ which is a directive act functioning as a command. This act is followed immediately by a representative act employed by the same interlocutor inventing her frustration due to the current situation in their home. The interrogative ‘...What daybreak are you talking about?’ is also a directive act employed in ordering Kalu to go in search of the missing child. The directive act, apart from serving as a persuasive tool, indicates that Nwamaka is in control of the discourse subject. The dominance exercised by Nwamaka is based on her position as the mother of the home as well as her feminist ideological orientation. Though Kalu attempts to resist Nwamaka’s order through the excuse given for not wanting to go out; he eventually succumbs to her demand.



Apart from the utilisation of force and persuasion in exerting dominance; manipulation, another strategy of power relation under cognition, is also employed for a similar purpose. The extract below illustrates this instance.

‘So, we need to let your people know that you are truly alive and well. I think we should send’- But I want to go home, sir. There is peace in Okigoli now. Young lady, he said, being equally formal. ‘You don’t want to just abandon me and the good work we are doing, do you?’ (Dul, 2017, p. 43).

In the discourse above, Ifunanya expresses her intention of leaving the medical facility where she had been since the day, she was treated by Jambut, the medical officer. She performs a directive act by requesting permission to leave the facility. This request is accompanied by a representative act employed in stating the reason for her wanting to leave. However, Jambut, who is against this idea, employs a similar act for suggestion as captured in ‘...we need to let your people know that you are truly alive... I think we should send...’. This suggestion is followed immediately by a directive act employed for asking a question as reflected in ‘...You don’t want to just abandon me and the good work we are doing, do you?’ Here, Jambut exploits the strategy of manipulation to change the mind of Ifunanya.

As we cite more examples on dominance and resistance, it is important to state that Harris (1994, p. 156) considers discourse as a negotiating desk where each interlocutor exploits the instrument of power for negotiation and “no interlocutor can exercise power while the other interlocutor remains a passive subjected entity”. This is exemplified in the extract below which is a dialogue between Ofala and the Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM).

‘You remain here,’ the RSM said sternly and turned away. The admin officer had assured him that if he got the RSM’s nod, he would not need to wait for the Commanding Officer’s approval, as the C.O. himself was a difficult man to deal with. ‘I will surrender a week’s allowance, sir,’ Ofala said under his breath. The RSM turned back and beamed a smile that faded away as quickly as it had appeared...’ Alright.

Three days. No more. From tomorrow, but you can leave this evening  
(Dul, 2017, p. 16).

The text above captures the Nigerian-Biafran conflict. The use of turn-taking indicates that the RSM is the initiator of the conversation. His choice of language reveals that he is the dominant character. Dominance as exercised by the RSM is based on his access to valued resources such as his high rank in the army. Three speech acts are observable here. They include directive, commissive and expressive acts. The narrative dialogue begins with a directive act employed by the RSM in issuing an order to Ofala. This is reflected in the imperative expression ‘You remain here. This act corroborates the RSM’s status as the dominant character. However, the dominance exercised by the RSM is tactfully resisted by Ofala. This resistance is reproduced through the commissive act employed for making a promise as exemplified in the expression ‘I will surrender a week’s allowance, sir’. The resistance displayed by Ofala is achieved through persuasion. Finally, the expressive act is used by the RSM in accepting the offer made by Ofala.

The next example relates a verbal conflict between two interlocutors who argue as a result of their conflicting stance on a particular discourse subject. Consider the extract below:

Helon and Ifunnaya arrived when one of them was threatening to shoot Jambut if he insisted on taking in the Biafran soldier. Jambut looked at the soldier until he felt ridiculed (Dul, 2017, p. 41).

This is a narrative dialogue between Jambut and some soldiers who had mistakenly included a Biafran soldier among the casualties brought into the clinic for treatment. While these soldiers wanted the Biafran soldier killed; Jambut is of a contrary opinion. A close study of the text indicates that the Soldier is the dominant character. Dominance, as exercised by the soldier, is predicated on his access to ammunition. It is important to note that power is not only exercised by the dominant agent here, but also by the dominated interlocutor who through the strategy of manipulation challenges the request of the soldiers. Dominance relations between both

interlocutors is exemplified using the commissive and expressive acts. While the soldier employs the commissive act in intimidating Jambut; the expressive act is employed by Jambut in resisting his intimidation. The enactment and challenge of authority as seen in this text validate Fairclough's (1992) stance that power relations are always relations of struggle.

The final example illustrates a kind of power that is a two-way dyadic interactive relation. It is a narrative dialogue between Jambut and Maya, his wife. The discourse, as presented below, centres on the return of Jambut's son whom he had never seen since birth.

He is not a visitor, Maya; he is my son. But let that wait for now.  
Please get Wuyep's son to slaughter a goat while you prepare a special meal'. This night? Maya protested weakly (Dul, 2017, p. 235).

The discourse begins with an assertive act used for stating as captured in the statement 'He is not a visitor, Maya; he is my son, our son'. This is followed immediately by a directive act utilised for giving orders. The order is reflected in the imperative expression 'Please get Wuyep's son to slaughter a goat while you prepare a special meal.' The order issued by the dominant interlocutor is motivated by his patriarchal ideological orientation as well as his access to a socially valued resource such as his position in the family. However, because no interlocutor can exercise power while the other interlocutor remains a passive subjected entity (Harris, 1994); Maya is seen in the text to exploit the device of power in questioning the order issued to her by Jambut. She achieves this by the aid of the directive act exemplified in the interrogative expression 'This night? Maya protested weakly'. From the foregoing, power is seen to be exercised by both interlocutors.

#### **4.2. Dominance and Compliance**

Here, we highlight and discuss instances in the data where dominance was complied with or accepted by a dominated group. Consider the extract below:

Two hefty male teachers and Miss Domko went to Jambut, apparently to intimidate him out of the scene. But Jambut was smarter. Because of you, he said to Miss Domko, walking towards the gate. I will spare

the man. Tell him I will get a job. He will see. Still, they flanked him and walked him out of the venue (Dul, 2017, p. 21).

The text above describes one group exploiting all the devices of power while the other group is passively showing no active response. It is configured with a directive and commissive acts. The discourse relates to the misunderstanding between Jambut and his headmaster, Mr Lohnan. The two male teachers with Miss Domko represents the dominant group. The authority exercised by the dominant group is based on their relationship with the headmaster. The directive act is utilised for urging and threatening. It is captured with the lexical words ‘intimidate’, ‘flanked’ and ‘walked’. These lexical items denote physical actions performed by the dominant group whose aim is to get the dominated one doing something. The commissive act unveils the dominated character’s intention to carry out future action. Thus, it is used in making a promise as captured in the lexical expressions ‘...I will spare the man. Tell him I will get a job. He will see.’ Compliance to the dominance exercised by the dominant group is reflected in the lexical expressions ‘... flanked him and walked him out of the venue.’

The next extract, as cited below, depicts the religious crisis in the northern part of Nigeria where human lives and properties were destroyed.

The things his eyes had seen were unbelievable. Those Awusas were beasts, flogging women naked and in the open, using it to satisfy their perversions! (Dul, 2017, p. 31).

This text is an example of a semantically controlled topicalisation. It is constructed with the representative act which is used for informing and describing. The Awusas represent the dominant group. The assertive verb ‘flogging’ highlights the dominance relation between both groups as it describes the activity of the dominant group. Also, it signals the power wielded by the Awusas which is based on their privileged access to weapons. Dominance, as exercised by the Awusas, is influenced by their ideology of religious extremism which promotes

dehumanisation and decapitation of people belonging to religions different from theirs. In addition, the author's choice of language presents women as victims of violence perpetrated by men.

Gender-based violence is another pressing issue addressed with the author's powerful linguistic acumen. This is captured in the following quoted piece:

Ofala smashed his right palm across Ifunanya face, then raised it again, but suspended it mid air (Dul, 2017, p. 90).

A close study of the text above indicates that the power exercised is a one-way relationship. This is because the dominant interlocutor is seen exploiting the device of power while the dominated one is passively showing no active response. Vocatives such as 'Ofala' and 'Ifunanya' introduce the dominant and dominated characters respectively. Observe the force and intensity of the lexical items, 'smashed', 'raised' and 'suspended' used linguistically to depict power relations between the two interlocutors. They are subjugating and oppressive. The lexical and linguistic acumen exhibited in the expressions '...smashed his right palm across Ifunanya's face...' and '...raised it... suspended it ...' indicate power asymmetrically. Dominance as exercised by Ofala is based on the location of the discourse and his position as being the head of the family. Also, it is motivated by his patriarchal ideological orientation, which upholds men's domination over women. The dominance exercised by the dominant character is complied with by the dominated one who does not attempt to resist or challenge such dominance.

Dominance relations are exemplified in the next extract as captured below where the writer employs excellent linguistic resources in depicting gender inequality.

The child cannot grow up under my roof and I would not show affection (Dul, 2017, p. 112).

The text above is a dialogue between two interlocutors. The use of turn-taking as a narrative strategy indicates that Ofala is the initiator of the dialogue and the dominant character while Ifunanaya represents the dominated one. The dominance exercised by the dominant character is realised through the commissive act which serves dual purposes: to threaten as captured in the lexical expression, ‘the child cannot grow under my roof...’ as well as to resolve as exemplified in the expression ‘...I will not show affection...’. Both lexical expressions ‘...cannot grow’ and ‘would not show’ depict power relations in the text. Apart from depicting power relations, the lexical expressions are instrumental in that they foreground the social issue of gender inequality.

Dominance relations is also witnessed between friends in the data under scrutiny. This is captured below.

We have drunk a thousand *bichi* and will drink more. I would have happily stayed to share in it, but I think that you need to give your guest, your son, some time. He has travelled a very long distance and must be tired. Indeed, Domkat my brother. I thank you for being so understanding, but make sure that you knock at my door with the second cockcrow to share tomorrow *bichi* (Dul, 2017, p. 235)

This text illustrates a kind of dominance relations that is reproduced by cognition (that is, persuasion). It is a dialogue between two characters who both share similar background knowledge of the discourse subject. Domkat and Jambut are the characters in this text. The former represents the dominant character while the latter is the one who is dominated. Reference and vocative are used for identification. The text is configured with three kinds of speech acts: representative, expressive and directive acts. These acts provide the reader with the gist of the text. The representative act is used for stating and suggesting; the expressive act for acknowledging and thanking; and the directive act for requesting. Domkat uses the representative act in stating his reason for not obliging the request made by Jambut. He uses a similar speech act characterized by suggestion as seen in ‘...I think that you need to give your

guest, your son, sometime’. Dominance as exercised by Domkat is based on his knowledge of the fact that he had already drunk too much liquor before coming to see Jambut and therefore, could not take any more then. However, Jambut employs expressive and directive acts in responding to Domkat. While the former act as captured in ‘I thank you for being so understanding...’ is used for acknowledging the reason offered by Domkat as well as thanking him; the latter is used for making a request.

The next example depicts a dominant relation between parents and children. This is illustrated in the extract below:

It is a beautiful name, father. But my mother said that you gave her a name for me, which she translated into what they now call me. Yes, I did give her name. But it is the circumstance that has made me to change it (Dul, 2017, p. 236)

The above text is a conversation between Nnnena and his father, Jambut. It is constructed with the representative act which is employed for appraising, stating and acknowledging. Dominance and compliance are realised by cognition. The dialogue begins with a representative act used by Nnenna, the dominated character, in appraising the name given to him by his father. The appraisal as captured in the expression ‘It is a beautiful name, father’ is followed by another statement in the form of interrogation deployed by the same interlocutor. However, Jambut uses a similar speech act in responding to Nnnenna as reflected in ‘...Yes, I did give her name...’. This act is employed by Jambut for acknowledging the claim made by his son and for stating his reason for changing the name.

Another instance of dominance relation between parents and children is further exemplified in the extract below:

You fool! You fool! How could you be getting drunk and snoring away here like a log when a bastard son, born of some mercenary Awusa soldier, is taking away your birthright from you? Eh, how could you? (Dul, 2017, p. 184).

The expressive and directive acts are largely associated with the above text which unveils and describes the psychological state of the characters. The text is a dialogue between Ikenna and his son, Chinedu. The use of turn-taking shows that the conversation is initiated by Ikenna who employs the expressive act of insulting. This act is followed immediately by the directive act used for asking. Apart from this function, the directive act provides a vivid description of the reason behind Ikenna's frustrations and anger. The imperative and interrogative propositions are instrumental in that they project Ikenna as the dominant character. The dominance exercised by Ikenna is realised through action and based on the fact that he is the father to Chinedu, the character who is being addressed in the discourse. Thus, the text exemplifies the kind of dominant relations between parent and children.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study has investigated the role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance relations among characters in literary discourse. The study found that the dimensions of dominance relations identified were dominance and resistance, and dominance and compliance. Both dimensions were reproduced by compulsion, persuasion and manipulation. Speech acts, namely, assertive, directive, expressive and commissive acts as well as discourse structures such as turn-taking, reference, vocatives, lexicalised verbs, statement, questions, and coordination highlight social issues such as gender-based violence, religious extremism and patriarchal domination. Also, they foregrounded the patriarchal, religious, feminist and humanitarian ideologies which underlie the reproduction of dominance relations in the data examined. The study submits that dominance reproduced by cognition is far more effective, and can engender positive result than that which is enacted by action.



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