

Why Can't *It* be the Focus of an *It*-Cleft?

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1 The Problem of *It*-lessness

The puzzle I wish to address in this report is the reason why *it*-clefts cannot take *it* as focus constituent¹.

In addition to a number of other constituent types, it is well known that a variety of kinds of noun phrase are acceptable as the clefted constituent of an *it*-cleft. For example, Hedberg [1990:80] gives examples of pronouns and proper names, as in (1a), definite descriptions as in (1b), specific indefinites as in (1c), generics as in (1d), and cardinal partitives as in (1e):

- (1) a It was **she/Jane** who found the body.
- b It was **this/that/the woman** who found the body.
- c It was **a certain/this (one) woman in my class** who found the body.
- d It is never **the victim** who finds the body.
- e It was **one/two of the students in my class** who found the body.

A strange exception to the range of permissible NPs, however, is the pronoun *it*, as has also been noted by Declerck [1988:14]. The unacceptability of the following examples will demonstrate:

- (2) a Her dog was in the garden. *It was **it** that found the body.
- b He threw a cricket ball. *It was **it** that broke the window.

We can state straight away that this exception cannot be accounted for by any restriction on clefted pronouns, since the acceptability of a range of other pronominal forms in *it*-clefts is attested both synchronically and diachronically. Akmajian [1970] has listed a range of pronominal clefted constituents in three dialects of American English;

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Geluykens [1984] and Hedberg [1990] among others have also noted their appearance. The following examples are from the study reported in Delin [1989]:

- (3) It was **he**, too, who instituted the office of High Commissioner, so that the crown could keep a good eye on the proceedings [LOB f29 174]
- (4) It was **they** who went to the great farewell dinner in London [LOB g27 146]

Hedberg [1990:195-6;207] provides these further examples from her corpus of written and spoken texts:

- (5) a Wimsey: Mr. Borne. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. How can I help you?
Borne: I think it's **I** who can help you.
- b The barrister jumped up and pulled out a chair for her. And then Wexford understood it was **she** he had seen. It was **she** who had been coming down the corridor when he turned away from the window ...

Geluykens [1984] has the following:

- (6) C: And it's much better in mathematics than in grammar I think
A: But it's **us** that's lifted it from them, not vice versa

It is fair to note at this point that, in distributional terms, *it* would in general be predicted to be the rarer form (cf. Schiffman [1984]²). Even taking this restriction into account, however, we would still expect *it* to appear in a number of cases.

The restriction on *it* alone seems to be unique to *it*-clefts: *wh*-clefts do not accept any anaphoric pronouns³ as head due to considerations of information structure (cf. Prince [1978], Declerck [1988], Delin [1989]). Declerck [1988:234] explains that for processing reasons a short and anaphoric clefted constituent will be placed before the cleft clause, which would result in a strong preference for a reverse *wh*-cleft such as (7a) over a *wh*-cleft such as (7b) where a clefted pronoun is in question⁴. His example is as follows:

- (7) A: Why do you like Paris so much?
 - a B: Because that's where I met my future wife.
 - b B: *Because where I met my future wife is that.

²Schiffman observes a general asymmetry between the appearance of pronominal *it* and *that*: *it*, she notes, is in general far less frequent. She attributes this asymmetry to a difference in the kinds of antecedent each pronoun prefers: if the antecedent has clausal structure (e.g. is sentential), *that* is far more likely to be used than *it*. In cases where the antecedent is lexical, however, *it* and *that* are equally likely to appear. *It* is therefore much more restricted in general: if the antecedent is clausal, *that* is vastly preferred; if it is lexical, *that* is equally preferred.

³With the possible exception of cataphoric *this*: see Declerck [1988:235].

⁴Note that deictic pronouns are possible. These are capable of carrying new information and therefore need not conform to the constraint that they be placed first in the sentence. Deictic interpretations of the examples in (8) are therefore acceptable.

Note that (7b) is not improved by the substitution of *there* for *that*. Declerck's constraint accounts for the preferability of the (a) examples in (8), over the pronoun-clefted-constituent *wh*-cleft examples in the (b) cases:

- (8) a He was the one who instituted the office of High Commissioner.
b ?The one who instituted the office of High Commissioner was him.
c I am the one who can help you.
d ?The one who can help you is me.
e That/this is what I mean.
f ?What I mean is this/that.

Reverse *wh*-clefts are of interest because they, alone among the clefts, can take *it* as clefted constituent. This is predicted by Declerck's informational constraint, too: a short and anaphoric element should be placed prior to the long *wh*-clause. Declerck notes [1988:222] that reverse *wh*-clefts are 'the only type of cleft in which *it* can be found as the destressed form of *that*'. He gives the example in (9a). Note that this cannot be inverted to form the *wh*-cleft in (9b):

- (9) a It's what I have always wanted.
b *What I have always wanted is it.

For informational reasons, then, the *wh*-cleft does not tolerate *it* or other anaphoric pronouns, since reverse *wh*-clefts which conform more closely to principles of considerate communication are available in their stead. Many independent studies of information processing suggest that it is preferable to place the pronominal element close to its antecedent wherever possible (see for example Clark and Clark [1977] for a summary). It seems clear, however, that no similar informational argument can be advanced to explain the constraint on *it* in *it*-clefts, for two reasons. Firstly, the structure of the *it*-cleft—that is the position of its clefted constituent relative to the cleft clause—seems to allow adequate conformity with the principle of placing short anaphoric constituents prior to the longer cleft clause. Secondly, even if some argument could be advanced that the *it*-cleft is badly formed from an informational point of view for carrying pronominal clefted constituents, the informational constraint would not single out only *it* from the range of pronouns and declare the rest to be acceptable. Something further is needed to differentiate *it* from the rest of the set of acceptable pronouns.

In addition to the data from corpus study and grammaticality judgements, diachronic evidence is available to support the generalisation that *it* does not appear in *it*-clefts. Ball [1991] and p.c., in her study of the development of the *it*-cleft from Old English to Late Modern English, finds no occurrences of *it* as clefted constituent either in the modern-day *it*-cleft or in any of its ancestors. This is in spite of the fact that the paradigm of personal pronouns as clefted constituents can be considered complete around the 15th century, with objective case pronouns (e.g. *it was me*) appearing in the 16th (Ball [1991:274]).

From its non-appearance in a range of corpora, then, and from its unacceptability

in synthesised examples, it seems clear that *it* cannot be the clefted constituent of an *it*-cleft.

2 Stressed and Unstressed Forms: *It* versus *That*

From several different points of view, *it* and *that* are often seen as variants of or alternatives to one another as pronominal forms. Pronominal *that* does indeed appear as clefted constituent in *it*-clefts, and these examples are relatively plentiful. For example:

- (10) He'd rushed to the surgery and was breathing heavily. But it wasn't that which disturbed me. [LOB f33 102]

Declerck [1988:14] explains the non-appearance of *it* in *it*-clefts by means of a distinction between *it* and *that* as the respective 'stressless' and 'stressed' version of the same item. He explains the distribution as follows:

The fact that the focus of a specificational sentence must be intonationally prominent concurs with the fact that, when an item has both a stressed and an unstressed form, only the stressed form will occur in the focus. Thus, the pronoun *it*, which is known to be the 'stress-reduced' anaphoric form of *that* (Kuroda 1968: 250-251), cannot be substituted for *that* in *It is that that I don't understand*.

[Declerck 1988:14]

This explanation is appealingly simple. Declerck's hypothesis requires two things: that clefted constituents must be intonationally prominent, and that *it* cannot take intonational prominence. It is possible to show, however, that neither point is correct.

Taking the case of intonational prominence on clefted constituents first, we know that *it*-clefts regularly appear without such prominence. As Hedberg [1990:200] remarks, 'it has not gone unnoticed in the literature that the prosodic center of a cleft sentence sometimes falls on the cleft clause instead of on the clefted constituent'. She cites Halliday's [1967] example:

- (11) A: What utter confusion!
B: Yeah, but I'm not going to complain to anyone.
A: I should hope not. It's you who were to blame.

Unstressed clefted constituents have also been noted by Chomsky [1971], Schmerling [1971], Prince [1978], Geluykens [1984], Bolinger [1986], and Delin [1989]. Declerck [1988:221] has a class of 'unaccented-anaphoric-focus' clefts, which display just this property. He places the following examples (from Prince [1978]) in this category:

- (12) a However, it turns out that there is independent evidence for this rule and it is to that evidence that we must now turn.
- b But why is everybody so interested in uranium? — Because it is uranium that you need to produce atomic power.

While it is clear what Declerck means, it is rather strange to be applying the term ‘unaccented’ to written examples. Relevant examples from speech are available from elsewhere, however. The following is from Geluykens [1984], his example C22:

- (13) a: did you meet Fuller?
 b: Yes, it was he who INVITED me and it a very pleasant day

As Bolinger [1986] has remarked, ‘clefting is basically independent of accent’. It would be strange to suggest, then, that the clefted constituent is obligatorily ‘prominent’ by virtue of its position in the cleft.

The second problem for Declerck’s suggested explanation for *it*-lessness in *it*-clefts is the fact that *it* can be made intonationally prominent by means of stress, as the following (attested) data shows:

- (14) S: Judy, is there any more soap?
 J: If you look in the basket there’s that purple one
 S: I thought you were drying some out on the window. What happened to IT?
 J: That’s it
 S: Oh, so it is

Becky Passoneau (p.c.) has also pointed out to me the ordinariness of stressed *it* in the utterance *that’s IT!* Stressed *it*, and stressless clefted constituents, show that an alternative explanation for the non-appearance of *it* is required.

3 Can *It* be Contrastive?

A potential explanation for *it*-cleft *it*-lessness is based on the assumption that the clefted constituent obligatorily takes on a more or less contrastive role. It might be suggested that *it* is too ‘weak’ an element to perform such a function, and therefore must be excluded from the range of cleftable constituents.

Note that this is a different claim from that relating to stressability of *it*, since we are now in the position to make a clear distinction between the phenomenon of contrastiveness on the one hand, and accent, as one of its indicators, on the other. It is clear from the clefts data, and from several discussions of contrast (cf. for example Chafe [1976], Bolinger [1986]) that contrast does not depend on accent, and accent does not depend on contrast. Bolinger [1986] uses clefts as tests for contrastive status independently of their accent placement.

Extreme versions of the ‘clefts are contrastive’ view, for example that held by Rochemont [1986], suggest that a strongly contrastive reading is obligatory for all clefts. Others, however, have shown that a continuum of contrastiveness exists, and that clefts may be more or less contrastive, depending on a variety of factors. Bolinger [1986] is a recent exponent of the continuum view for clefts⁵.

Borkin [1984] also subscribes to the continuum view of contrast for clefts. She observes:

The shape of the cleft is very good for the contrastive purpose of singling out one of a limited set of candidates to properly complete a proposition. However, the less limited the set of alternatives, and the less attention directed by the author/speaker to the uniqueness of the preferred completor, or to the nature and limits of the range of alternatives, the less contrastive is the effect of cleft structure.

Borkin [1984:127]

She illustrates this continuum by means of the following examples, which show decreasing contrastiveness:

- (15) Among the butterworts some enzymes ...are secreted by the stalked glands whose sticky exudate captures the insect prey, but *it is the stalkless glands at the surface that furnish the main outflow of digestive fluid* (*Scientific American*, February 1978, p112)
- (16) Finally the membrane is plunged into another solvent, such as water, that rapidly precipitates all of the remaining polymer. *It is this quenching that forms the pores in the membrane*, as the rapid precipitation leads to the clumping or coagulation of the polymer. (*Scientific American*, July 1978, p112)
- (17) This type of decision-making is difficult to reproduce in a computer program because it relies heavily on human judgement. *It is this difficulty, however, that makes the programming of poker an attractive problem for computer scientists.* (*Scientific American*, July 1978, p144)

Borkin notes that the phrase *the stalkless glands at the surface* in the first example is being contrasted with *the stalked glands*, giving a minimal set of alternatives. In the second example, however, the range of alternatives is not clear, a position that is even more pronounced in the third example: this third cleft ‘simply underscores the noteworthiness of the fact that the focussed element should complete the defocussed proposition’ [1984:127].

If we are to assess the contrastibility of *it*, we need to understand the conditions required for contrast to be established. Werth [1984] sets out the conditions for contrastiveness as follows:

⁵Although see his [1961] paper for an exposition of the continuum view in general.

On the one hand, Contrastive items cohere with an antecedent (the anaphoric property); on the other hand, they deny identity with that antecedent (the negative property).

[Werth 1984:137]

The basis upon which contrastive items ‘cohere with an antecedent’, Werth explains, is in terms of membership in some contrastive set with them: there must be more than one element in the set, and they must share some semantic content. This shared content may be constructed *ad hoc* on the basis of what is being talked about at the time (a junk-shop collection of objects) , or may be seen to belong more clearly to the objects themselves (that they are all in some ‘natural class’, such as people, or dogs, or research papers) ⁶.

It might therefore be supposed that an explanation of the lack of *it* could be constructed on the basis of the lack of contrastiveness of that element: it has very little, if any, descriptive content, which might suggest that it was unable to form contrastive relationships of even the weak kind required by some clefts. However, situations can be found in which the conditions for contrastiveness and the conditions for the use of *it* are both met. Consider again the example from (16) above, repeated in (18):

- (18) S: Judy, is there any more soap?
J: If you look in the basket there’s that purple one
S: I thought you were drying some out on the window. What happened to IT?
J: That’s it
S: Oh, so it is

It seems clear that these conditions for contrast are met by the contrastive *it* in (18). In the example, S is constructing a contrastive set out of (what he assumes to be) two distinct soaps: *the purple one* (offered by J), and *the one you were drying out on the window*.

An independent condition on the felicitous use of *it* is that it must have a unique referent at the time of use (as must any referring expression). In the example, this condition is met on the straightforward expedient of recency: it picks the most recent appropriate expression, helped by the fact that the most recent antecedent is also the one within S’s own utterance, which is therefore more salient for him than the potential antecedent offered by J.

In order to test the uncleftability of *it* further, we could construct a situation in which the conditions for contrast and the conditions for felicitous *it* are both met, and try to cleft the result. In building our contrastive set, we can fully disambiguate the possible

⁶Note that these conditions also differ very little from the description of taxonomic antonymy in Leech [1974], where the taxonomy is built on the basis of shared semantic structure, while the differentiation between its elements is achieved by ‘incompatibility’ of semantic features leading to mutual exclusivity.

referent of any subsequent *it* by having one male, one female, and one neuter referent, as in the context sentence in (19):

- (19) If I was scared when it got dark, Mary, John or the dog would always come out with me.

However, considerate pronominalisation requires that members of the group be separated out explicitly before a singular pronoun can be used to refer to them, even when no ambiguity would result:

- (20) a ?The first night, I went out with *her*.
b ?The first night, I went out with *him*.
c ?The first night, I went out with *it*.
- (21) a Mary seemed the best bet, so the first night, I went out with *her*.
b John seemed the best bet, so the first night, I went out with *him*.
c The dog seemed the best bet, so the first night, I went out with *it*

Having established contrast felicitously using all three pronouns, compare the following clefted versions:

- (22) a Mary seemed the best bet, so the first night, it was *her* I went out with.
b John seemed the best bet, so the first night, it was *him* I went out with.
c ?The dog seemed the best bet, so the first night, it was *it* I went out with.

On the basis of this data, I would suggest that the problem for *it* with *it*-clefts is not contrast-related.

4 Towards an Explanation

So what are we to conclude is the reason for the constraint on *it*? In this section, I would like to sketch an explanation which, although partial in nature and requiring further investigation, suggests an interesting perspective on the semantics of *it*-clefts. The explanation has main ingredients:

- on the basis of the analysis of English stative *be* offered by Williams [1983] and Partee [1986] following, an analysis of the clefted constituent as semantically predicative rather than referential; and

- the further requirement of *it*-clefts that this predication is sufficient to identify rather than merely describe a referent, which *it*, alone among pronouns, is not capable of doing.

4.1 English Stative *Be*

Williams [1983] suggests that stative *be* takes two arguments, on referring and one predicative, and that these can appear in either order. Partee [1986] fleshes out this suggestion and argues that the ordering distinction can be made to characterise the difference between two types of pseudo-cleft sentence: the specificational, and the predicational. It is generally agreed that the latter type is not properly a pseudo-cleft. For example, there is both a specificational (i.e. cleft) and a predicational reading for a sentence such as the following:

(23) What John is is unusual.

The specificational reading results if the clefted constituent—in this case *unusual*—serves to predicate some property of John, i.e. that he is unusual. The predicational reading, however, is different: in this case, the cleft clause is interpreted as referring to *what John is*—for example a rhesus negative, an astronaut, or a father of eleven—and predicating unusualness of that thing. In the former case, the *wh*-clause of the cleft simply specifies that John has some property, and the cleft head identifies it; in the latter case, the same clause refers independently to some known property of John's, and the clefted constituent predicates something of that. In the first, specificational case, then, the *wh*-clause is predicative and the clefted constituent referring, while the reverse is true for the predicational case.

On the analogy with *wh*-clefts, it has been suggested (e.g. Ball [1977], Declerck [1988], Hedberg [1990]) that a similar distinction is available for *it*-clefts, on the basis that, as copular constructions, they should display the same ambiguities. So, for example, we can suggest a specificational and a predicational reading for the following sentence:

(24) It's a long road that has no turning.

On the specificational reading, this sentence might be able to answer a question such as (25a) or (25b):

- (25) a What is it that has no turning?
 b What kind of road has no turning?

In the specificational case, according to an analysis such as Hedberg's [1990], the clefted constituent is the referential argument to the copula, while the predicative content is formed out of a discontinuous constituent consisting of the cleft pronoun plus the cleft clause. These two constituents are treated as being co-specificational, and 'viewing the cleft pronoun *it* as a pronominal allomorph of the definite determiner

the' [1990:101]. The predicational reading of (23) can be captured by paraphrase such as those in (26):

- (26) a The road that has no turning is a long road.
b If a road has no turning, it's a long road.

In this case, the cleft pronoun is treated as referential⁷, with the clefted constituent acting as the predicative argument.

4.2 Cleft Pronoun as Referential Expression

I wish to argue that, despite the alternative semantic descriptions that have been offered for the two readings (specificational and predicational) of the *it*-cleft, there is some merit in an analysis that accords the same structure to both. My argument hinges on the role of the cleft pronoun in introducing a discourse referent, which is the position advanced in the literature for predicational *it*-clefts alone. I would wish to extend this analysis to suggest that the introduction of a discourse referent happens in every case, whether the ultimate interpretation of the sentence accords it a predicational or a specificational reading.

There are two main reasons why a referential assumption seems to be in order. Firstly, at the point of processing the *it* of any *it*-cleft, either predicational or specificational, the reader/hearer has no means of deciding whether to accord *it* referential or non-referential status, if indeed there is a choice between them. Empirical study would be required to decide whether they choose a uniformly referring, uniformly predicating, or alternating strategy, and what factors this depends on. I would suggest that an all-predicative assignment strategy is unlikely, however, based on the premise that *it* is usually an ordinary referring pronoun, and a predicative analysis would require the introduction of a predication that is, at the time of processing, devoid of content and unrelated to any discourse element.

Secondly, while *it* as a referring pronoun is uninformative, there is a group of constructions, known as *th*-clefts (cf. Ball [1977]), which have a more contentful element as cleft pronoun. The assumption of a referential cleft pronoun allows us cater for uniformly not only for *it*-clefts, then, but also for examples such as (27) (cf. Ball [1977]):

- (27) a Those are nice shoes you're wearing.
b That's a fast car he drives.
c These are my students you're talking about.

As Hedberg [1990] has shown, the choice of whether the less informative *it* or the more informative deictic pronouns of the *th*-clefts is chosen as cleft pronoun depends on how

⁷Bolinger [1972] and Borkin [1984] have also advanced arguments for a referential analysis of the cleft pronoun in specificational sentences. They do not address predicational cases, however.

much is already known about the intended referent. This would support the view that the cleft pronoun is referential: if a continuum exists between the choice of *it* or the choice of another pronoun on the basis of shared knowledge, it does not seem appropriate to reflect this distinction in terms of a qualitative semantic distinction such as predicative/referential.

The function of the *it*-cleft pronoun, then, is to introduce a discourse marker, about which no other information is known. In the case of *th*-clefts, with more informative pronouns such *this*, *these*, *those*, more information can already be predicated of the pronoun's referent: at least singular/plural and proximal/distal are encoded by the pronoun alone, but they may be able to pick out a unique referent with no further information required. Importantly, however, the distinction in degree of informativeness of the initial pronoun leads to differing constraints being imposed on the role of the clefted constituent. In cases where the pronoun is minimally informative, the clefted constituent must provide an IDENTIFYING PREDICATION which allows the hearer to identify a referent to attach to the discourse marker introduced by the pronoun. In the case of the *th*-cleft, the referent can almost certainly be identified on the basis of the cleft pronoun alone. This has the result of rendering the identificational aspect clefted constituent redundant, and directing attention to the part of that constituent that predicates something further of the referent (for example, that the already-identified shoes in (27a) are *nice*).

This analysis allows us to capture the intuition that sentences are processed left to right, and that cleft constructions of all three types mentioned above begin with an element that is usually used for a referential function. In each case, we analyse the cleft pronoun as introducing a referent, which is subsequently identified by the predicative cleft head. Once this referent is introduced and identified, further properties can be predicated of it—this is the job of the cleft clause. We therefore have no need to analyse the cleft pronoun and the cleft clause as a single discontinuous predicative constituent, as suggested by Hedberg [1990], and can treat cleft pronouns as a continuum of more or less informative referring expressions.

4.3 Identifying Predicates and *It*

The uninformativeness of the cleft pronoun on *it*-clefts, as I described above, places a constraint on the informativeness of the clefted constituent. As a pair, the cleft pronoun and the clefted constituent must enable the hearer or reader to identify a unique referent, and in *it*-clefts, the predicative clefted constituent must supply the complement of necessary information. I wish to suggest that this explains the constraint on the appearance of *it*: on its own, *it* contains no further distinguishing semantic information that would further the identification of the discourse referent already postulated by the appearance of the initial cleft pronoun. As a cue to picking out a referent, then, it merely duplicates the function of the cleft pronoun. More information is therefore required in order to identify the referent of initial *it*. All other pronouns *do* supply more information: even the minimally-informative *he* and *she* contain number and gender information, which renders them more informative than the cleft pronoun of the *it*-cleft.

The constraint that the predicative argument borne by the clefted constituent must be identifying captures a further constraint on clefted constituents: in general, straight adjectives and quantified expressions are unacceptable in *it*-clefts:

- (28) a ?It's nice that John is.
b It was all the boys that came.

Hedberg [1990] has pointed out that not all quantified expressions are unacceptable, and it seems that both these and straight adjectives are possible *in contexts where they can act as identifying predicates*, as in the following:

- (29) a A: Did you ask for hot or cold?
B: It was hot I asked for, thanks.
b A: Did they all come, or just some?
B: It was all of them that came.

That is, in more constrained contexts in which the predicate is sufficient to pick out a referent, adjectives and quantified expressions are possible. The constraint on *it* remains, however: unlike *he* and *she*, *it* has no paradigm of opposites it is capable of entering into (cf. Werth [1984:137]).

On the analysis I suggest, then, the predicational/specificational distinction in *it*-clefts, is not denied, but reduced to informational factors. If it is possible for the hearer to identify the intended referent on the basis of the cleft pronoun alone, the information in the clefted constituent will simply be predicated of that element. If this is not the case, the predicate borne by the clefted constituent will be used to identify the intended referent. In both cases, a more or less fully specified discourse referent will be introduced by the cleft pronoun.

Apart from its homogeneity across sentence types, this analysis provides a potential explanation for a preference that exists for reverse *wh*-clefts like (30a) over -clefts like (30b):

- (30) a This is what I mean.
b It is this that I mean.

The reverse *wh*-cleft is simply a referring expression followed by a predication, while the *it*-cleft is considerably more indirect: refer to abstract discourse entity, identify it, then predicate further properties of it. The reference-predication analysis of the reverse *wh*-cleft, finally, allows it to feature ordinary referring *it* as clefted constituent, as in (31):

- (31) So I chose the red one, because it was what I wanted.

As I noted above, this analysis of *it*-clefts is initial and schematic, and many more avenues remain to be explored before its value can be fully assessed. It is interesting,

however, to note that the introduction of a discourse referent on encountering pleonastic *it* provides us with a potential avenue for a treatment of a related class of phenomena, namely sentences like *it's raining*⁸.

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⁸I am grateful to Dr. R. Cann for pointing this out to me.

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