



THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEMANTIC VALUES OF THE VERB *CAIR*: AN ENUNCIATIVE ANALYSIS FROM A CULIOLIAN PERSPECTIVE

A CONSTRUÇÃO DE VALORES SEMÂNTICOS DO VERBO CAIR: UMA ANÁLISE ENUNCIATIVA EM PERSPECTIVA CULIOLIANA

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the semantic-enunciative functioning of the verb *cair* in Brazilian Portuguese, seeking to demonstrate that the diversity of values associated with this lexical unit does not correspond to isolated senses, but rather to contextually stabilized actualizations of a single operative principle. The theoretical framework is grounded in Antoine Culioli's Theory of Predicative and Enunciative Operations (1990, 1999), according to which meaning is not given in a fixed way, but is constructed through language operations. In the same direction, the study engages with Franckel and Paillard (1998, 2007) by articulating semantic variation and invariance, and with Romero (2011) regarding the relevance of epilinguistic activity to linguistic analysis. Methodologically, this is a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive study based on utterances constructed by the authors and organized through controlled contrasts involving subjects, complements, and prepositional phrases, in order to highlight shifts in semantic value. The results indicate that the verb *cair* functions as an operator of transition between states, marking, across different domains, the loss of stability, support, control, intensity, or availability. Thus, uses such as sports relegation, bank crediting, temporal coincidence, scalar decrease, subjective yielding, and technological deactivation reveal an operative coherence underlying the apparent semantic dispersion.

Keywords: verb *cair*; enunciative semantics; predicative operations; semantic variation; invariance.

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RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o funcionamento semântico-enunciativo do verbo **cair** no português brasileiro, buscando demonstrar que a diversidade de valores associados a essa unidade lexical não corresponde a acepções isoladas, mas a atualizações contextualmente estabilizadas de um mesmo princípio operatório. A fundamentação teórica ancora-se na Teoria das Operações Predicativas e Enunciativas, de Antoine Culioli (1990, 1999), segundo a qual o sentido não é dado de forma fixa, mas construído nas operações de linguagem. Nessa mesma direção, o trabalho dialoga com Franckel e Paillard (1998, 2007), ao articular variação e invariância semântica, e com Romero (2011), no que concerne à relevância da atividade epilinguística para a análise linguística. Metodologicamente, trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, descritivo-interpretativa, baseada em enunciados construídos pelos autores, organizados a partir de contrastes controlados entre sujeitos, complementos e grupos preposicionados, de modo a evidenciar deslocamentos de valor semântico. Os resultados indicam que o verbo *cair* funciona como operador de transição entre estados, marcando, em diferentes domínios, a perda de estabilidade, sustentação, controle, intensidade ou disponibilidade. Assim, usos como rebaixamento esportivo, crédito bancário, coincidência temporal, diminuição escalar, cessão subjetiva e desativação tecnológica revelam uma coerência operatória subjacente à aparente dispersão semântica.

Palavras-chave: verbo cair; semântica enunciativa; operações predicativas; variação semântica; invariância.

1. INTRODUCTION

Describing the semantic functioning of polysemous verbs remains one of the most sensitive issues in studies of meaning, especially when one seeks to avoid both the atomization of uses into discrete senses and the reduction of all of them to an excessively generic abstraction. In the case of the verb *cair*, this difficulty becomes particularly evident: in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), the same lexical unit may occur in utterances in which values as distinct as *to collapse*, *to be relegated*, *to be credited*, *to coincide*, *to decrease*, *to yield*, *to lose connection*, and *to be suspended* become stabilized. For this reason, the study of *cair* constitutes a productive terrain for a semantic-enunciative approach that treats meaning not as fixed content given in advance, but as the result of language operations, as proposed by Culioli (1990, 1999).

It is precisely within this framework that the Theory of Predicative and Enunciative Operations (TOPE), developed by Antoine Culioli, is situated. Rather than conceiving





language as an inventory of forms associated with stable meanings, this perspective privileges language activity and the procedures through which the enunciator constructs, adjusts, and stabilizes values in specific situations (CULIOLI, 1990, 1999). From this standpoint, the problem is not to ask “what is the true meaning” of the verb *cair*, but to understand how different effects of meaning are produced from the same verbal form, and which operations make it possible to move from one value to another.

On the basis of this orientation, the article is organized around the following research questions: (i) how can the diversity of semantic values associated with the verb *cair* in Brazilian Portuguese be explained in the light of TOPE? (ii) is it possible to identify, beneath this diversity, a relatively invariant principle of functioning? (iii) which cotextual markers and which enunciative configurations contribute decisively to the stabilization of each value? As a provisional answer to these questions, the central hypothesis advanced here is that the different uses of *cair* do not correspond to merely disconnected senses, but rather to contextualized actualizations of a more abstract functioning linked to the passage from an initially stabilized configuration to another configuration marked by loss of support, lowering, incidence, capture, decrease, or deactivation. This formulation is grounded in the recurrent understanding, within the Culiolian tradition, that variation does not invalidate the identity of the form; on the contrary, it is through variation that this identity becomes describable (FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998).

The general objective of this study is therefore to analyze the semantic-enunciative functioning of the verb *cair* in a set of constructed utterances in Brazilian Portuguese, seeking to identify the operations that sustain its different values.

The relevance of this study lies in two main points. On the one hand, it contributes to the theoretical discussion of lexical identity and semantic variation by showing that verbal polysemy can be described more rigorously when one starts from language operations rather than merely from lexicographic paraphrases (CULIOLI, 1990; FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998). On the other hand, it offers an important analytical exercise for the circulation of TOPE within the field of linguistic studies in Portuguese, especially in investigations that seek





to articulate fine-grained utterance description, semantic reflection, and interpretive formalization (ROCHA; VILELA, 2022).

From a methodological standpoint, this is a qualitative study of a descriptive-interpretive nature, based on utterances constructed by the authors of this paper. This choice does not in itself constitute a limitation, since, within the Culiolian tradition, analytical work does not depend exclusively on extensive corpora, but on the constitution of observables that make it possible to test, through contrast and glossing, the functioning of a linguistic form (CULIOLI, 1990, 1999; ROMERO, 2011). The utterances were produced in a controlled manner, with minimal variation in subjects, complements, and prepositional phrases, in order to bring semantic changes into view.

In addition to this introduction, the article includes a section on the theoretical framework, in which the central concepts mobilized are made explicit; a methodological section, which defines the status of the data and the analytical procedure; a results and discussion section, devoted to the analysis of the selected utterances; and, finally, the conclusions, in which the initial hypotheses are revisited and the main findings are synthesized.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

TOPE is grounded in a conception of language according to which linguistic facts cannot be reduced to a static relation between form and content. In Culioli (1990, 1999), meaning is conceived as the effect of operations, that is, as the result of activities of location, adjustment, determination, and stabilization carried out in and through enunciation. Thus, the utterance is not the mere externalization of a pre-formed meaning; it is the site where relations are constructed among representations, linguistic forms, and conditions of interpretation.

Within this perspective, the notion plays a determining role. Notions are not equivalent to dictionary definitions or to rigidly delimited concepts; rather, they correspond to complex systems of representation marked by a certain degree of plasticity and susceptible to





different actualizations (CULIOLI, 1990). This means that a lexical unit such as *cair* does not carry a full and univocal meaning from one occurrence to another. On the contrary, it participates in multiple local stabilizations, whose value depends on the predicative operations at work and on the domain in which the utterance is anchored.

This conception leads to a decisive theoretical consequence: semantic variation should not be understood as the mere disorder of the lexicon, but as a manifestation of the very functioning of language. Franckel and Paillard (1998) show that linguistic description must articulate variation and invariance. Rather than opposing these two dimensions, the task is to investigate how a plurality of values can be traced back to a principle of functioning that is abstract enough to account for observable diversity. In other words, the central issue is not to list uses, but to understand what, within them, remains operatively recognizable.

This point is particularly important for the analysis of verbs. In many cases, the verb does not preserve, from one occurrence to another, a “content core” that can easily be paraphrased in ordinary language. What remains is rather an orientation of functioning, perceptible only when utterances are examined contrastively (FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998). For this reason, glossing should not be taken as a permanent definition, but as a provisional instrument of analytical approximation. To say that, in a given utterance, *cair* means “to be relegated,” “to be deposited,” or “to lose connection” is only a first step; the more important theoretical move consists in showing how these glosses derive from specific enunciative relations.

In this context, the notion of *repérage*, that is, relational location, also becomes fundamental. One term is interpreted as a function of another; one state is apprehended in relation to a prior state; one occurrence is situated within a given domain (CULIOLI, 1999). Thus, when one says that “the temperature fell,” the utterance does not simply refer to a physical fall, but to a modification along a thermometric scale; when one says that “the internet fell,” what is constructed is the passage from a regime of availability to one of unavailability. In both cases, there is a reconfiguration of a state, but this reconfiguration can be interpreted only because the cotext directs the relevant domain.





Accordingly, cotext and context do not function as mere interpretive “ornaments” added to a lexical meaning already in place. They participate in the very construction of value. The choice of subject, preposition, complement, and relevant referential domain contributes to stabilizing one interpretive path while blocking others (FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 2007; ROCHA; VILELA, 2022). This is precisely why small formal alterations may produce relevant semantic shifts: not because the verb changes identity with each use, but because its identity can only be apprehended through the variations that actualize it.

Still within this tradition, epilinguistic activity deserves emphasis. As Romero (2011) points out, reflecting on language does not mean merely formulating explicit metalanguages, but also mobilizing, often implicitly, kinds of operational knowledge that guide the production and interpretation of utterances. In semantic-enunciative analysis, this dimension is important because the researcher works precisely with contrasts, reformulations, substitutions, and glosses that make part of this knowledge of language visible.

In light of these considerations, the hypothesis guiding the analysis in this article is that the verb *cair* displays an operative identity that can be formulated, in general terms, as the marking of a non-neutral passage between two states, in which a prior configuration of stability, support, control, or availability is lost, with the consequent reinscription of the occurrence in another domain. This formulation is consistent with the principle proposed by Culioli (1990, 1999), according to which meaning cannot be reduced to fixed lexical content, and also with Franckel and Paillard’s (1998) concern with describing the interplay between formal stability and interpretive variability.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and interpretive in nature and is aligned with a tradition of linguistic analysis that privileges the constitution of enunciative observables rather than the simple extensive compilation of occurrences. In line with the Culiolian perspective, the focus





does not lie on the statistical frequency of uses, but on the operations that make the stabilization of certain values of meaning possible (CULIOLI, 1990, 1999).

The data analyzed were constructed by the authors of this article. They therefore consist of a set of utterances elaborated for heuristic purposes, based on the researcher's linguistic competence as a speaker of Brazilian Portuguese and on his epilinguistic activity regarding the language. This methodological choice was adopted because it makes it possible to control specific linguistic variables and to observe more clearly the impact of certain lexical and syntactic alterations on the functioning of the verb *cair*. In this sense, the construction of utterances should not be understood as subjective improvisation, but as an analytical procedure compatible with an approach that takes language as an activity of value construction and recognizes the relevance of epilinguistic knowledge in analysis (CULIOLI, 1990; ROMERO, 2011).

The constitution of the empirical material followed three main criteria. The first was analytical productivity: only utterances that made a relevant semantic contrast visible were selected. The second was controlled variation: whenever possible, the analysis worked with pairs or series of utterances in which the modification of one element, subject, complement, prepositional phrase, or domain of reference, produced a significant interpretive shift. The third was diversity of domains, so as to encompass physical, sports-related, temporal, affective-moral, technological, and discursive uses of the verb.

The analytical procedure unfolded in four interconnected stages. In the first, each utterance was examined in its basic predicative configuration, with attention to the nature of the subject, the verbal form, and the prepositional phrases associated with the verb. In the second, a provisional gloss of the value stabilized in each case was proposed. In the third, the utterances were compared with one another in order to identify similarities and differences in functioning. In the fourth, an operative invariance capable of explaining the set of occurrences under examination, without erasing the diversity of uses, was formulated. This path is consistent with the analytical gesture advocated by Culioli (1990, 1999), for whom linguistic





description must construct, on the basis of observable variations, principles of functioning that are not reducible to simple lists of meanings.

It is also important to stress that this study does not seek to provide an exhaustive description of all possible uses of *cair* in Portuguese, but rather to construct a hypothesis of functioning from a delimited set of observables. Its aim is less lexicographic than operative: what matters is to describe how meaning is organized in each case and what type of relation can be identified among the different values produced, in accordance with the theoretical-methodological orientation of TOPE (FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998; ROCHA; VILELA, 2022).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the selected utterances supports the claim that the verb *cair* does not operate through mere dispersion of meanings. On the contrary, what can be observed is the reiteration of a more abstract functioning whose realization depends on the domain of reference activated by the utterance. This finding is consistent with Culioli's proposal (1990, 1999), according to which the identity of a linguistic form cannot be sought outside its variations in use, but must be reconstructed from them.

4.1 Loss of support and lowering

Let us first consider the utterance “O Vasco não caiu” (“Vasco did not fall”). Outside a shared discursive frame, the construction is relatively indeterminate; however, in a sports context, it stabilizes as “Vasco were not relegated.” The decisive point here is that negation does not eliminate the semantic operation of *cair*; it maintains it on the horizon of expectation while blocking its actualization. The utterance therefore presupposes a scenario in which the club was under threat of moving from one division to a lower one. This reading shows that the





verb does not need to refer to physical falling in order to preserve a feature of loss of support or maintenance at a given level.

When this utterance is compared with “O Vasco não caiu da cadeira” (“Vasco did not fall from the chair”), one can see that the change in the prepositional phrase completely reorients the relevant domain. In the first case, *cair* concerns the loss of competitive status; in the second, the loss of physical support. The verbal form is the same, but the type of support involved is different: in the sports scene, support is institutional and classificatory; in the bodily scene, it is material and spatial. This difference confirms Franckel and Paillard’s observation (1998) that variation does not result from a simple chaotic multiplication of meanings, but from the way in which the form is reinscribed in distinct domains of functioning.

This observation becomes even clearer if the first utterance is brought closer to “A calça dele caiu porque o cinto estava frouxo” (“His pants fell because the belt was loose”). Here, the operation is explicitly one of loss of support. The belt, which should have kept the garment in a stable position, fails; as a consequence, the pants change position. In all these cases, albeit by different routes, *cair* marks the rupture of a previously supported configuration: the team ceases to remain in a division, the body nearly ceases to remain on the chair, the pants cease to remain fastened to the body. The difference among the utterances, therefore, does not invalidate the hypothesis of invariance; on the contrary, it helps refine it, in keeping with the articulation between variation and invariance defended by Franckel and Paillard (1998).

4.2 Incidence, fitting, and reinscription

In “O dinheiro caiu na conta” (“The money fell into the account”), the verb no longer refers, in any salient way, to an observable downward physical movement. The value that becomes stabilized is that of credit, entry, or the making available of a monetary amount in a bank account. The prepositional phrase *na conta* is decisive because it defines an institutional





and technical domain in which *cair* ceases to mean simply “to descend” and comes to designate the inscription of an amount into a specific financial destination. This analysis can be illuminated by the attention Franckel and Paillard (2007) give to the relational role of prepositions and prepositional phrases in the stabilization of values.

The comparison with “O dinheiro caiu na areia” (“The money fell onto the sand”) makes this mechanism visible. By replacing *na conta* with *na areia*, the utterance leaves the banking domain and returns to a material frame in which the money is interpreted as a physical object that loses height and touches a surface. What changes, then, is not simply the “complement”; what changes is the universe of operations that makes the value interpretable. In Culiolian terms, there is a change in the domain of location and, consequently, in the mode of semantic stabilization of the occurrence (CULIOLI, 1999).

Something similar occurs in “A festa caiu no dia do meu aniversário” (“The party fell on my birthday”). In this case, *cair* means neither to collapse nor to be credited, but rather to occur on or coincide with a date. The occurrence “party” is located in relation to a specific temporal landmark. The verb thus constructs a relation of fitting between event and calendar. In “A festa caiu na boca do povo” (“The party became the talk of the town”), by contrast, the value ceases to be temporal and becomes discursive: the party becomes a public topic, spreads, circulates verbally. Despite the difference between *dia do meu aniversário* and *boca do povo*, there is an important common feature in both cases: the occurrence is reinscribed in a domain of incidence, whether temporal or discursive. This observation reinforces the idea that the verb is actualized in different spaces of reference without losing its general relational orientation (CULIOLI, 1999; FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 2007).

These data show that the invariance of *cair* cannot be formulated solely in terms of physical verticality. In several uses, the verb marks rather the idea of incidence upon an interpretive support. This support may be a bank account, a date, or the social space of public commentary. The movement is not necessarily spatial; it is above all relational, which confirms the pertinence of an enunciative reading of semantic variation (CULIOLI, 1990; ROCHA; VILELA, 2022).





4.3 Scalar decrease and reconfiguration of intensity

In the utterances “A temperatura caiu durante a noite” (“The temperature fell during the night”) and “A temperatura do jogo caiu” (“The temperature of the game fell”), variation is organized around the same schema of decrease, although in different domains. In the first, the subject refers to a measurable meteorological magnitude; in the second, the phrase *do jogo* shifts the value of *temperatura* toward the figurative field of the match’s intensity, rhythm, tension, or collective excitement.

What is particularly interesting about these utterances is that they reveal a highly productive functioning of the verbal unit. In both, *cair* constructs the passage from a higher degree to a lower one. The difference lies in the type of scale involved: in the first occurrence, it is a physical and thermometric scale; in the second, an affective-interactional scale associated with the course of the game. Thus, the verb is articulated not only with entities, but also with parameters of intensity. This kind of observation is consistent with Culioli’s proposal (1990) that the value of a form is not exhausted by its lexical content, but depends on the network of relations constructed in the utterance.

This set is important because it demonstrates that the semantic operation of *cair* can be recognized even when there is no suggestion whatsoever of concrete displacement in space. Here, the fall is instead a scalar reduction. Once again, therefore, the identity of the verb can only be apprehended if description moves beyond the search for fixed lexical content and begins to observe the kind of transition constructed between states, as defended by Franckel and Paillard (1998).

4.4 Capture, yielding, and loss of control

The utterances “Ele caiu na tentação de comer doce” (“He fell into the temptation to eat sweets”) and “Ele caiu na lábia do vendedor” (“He fell for the salesman’s smooth talk”) introduce a functioning in which *cair* marks the subject’s yielding to a force that destabilizes





him. In the first case, the force is configured as temptation; in the second, as persuasion. In both, there is a subject who ceases to sustain a prior position of resistance and moves into a new position marked by adherence, submission, or capture.

The phrase *na tentação* directs interpretation toward the moral or volitional field. The utterance suggests that the subject had been in a position in which restraint was desirable, but ultimately failed to maintain it. In *na lábia do vendedor*, by contrast, the vector of destabilization is external to the subject and takes the form of persuasive speech. What is particularly interesting here is that the difference between the internality and externality of the triggering force does not dissolve the operative kinship between the cases: in both, *cair* marks a passage from resistance to consent. In Culiolian terms, this passage can be described as the reconfiguration of an initially stabilized state into another state produced by a new relation of subjective and predicative location (CULIOLI, 1999).

In this way, the verb participates in a metaphorical configuration, but this metaphor should not be treated as mere ornamentation. What it reveals is the possibility of extending the operation of loss of support to subjective and interactional domains. The subject “falls” because he no longer remains in the prior position. In enunciative terms, this means that the value of the verb is stabilized in the relation between an initial state of containment and a subsequent state of yielding. Such a reading is in harmony with the idea that the linguistic form preserves an operative orientation across diverse actualizations (FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998).

4.5 Deactivation and rupture of functioning

Finally, let us consider the utterances “Os créditos acabaram e minha internet caiu” (“My credits ran out and my internet fell”) and “A conta do Instagram do Francisco vai cair” (“Francisco’s Instagram account is going to fall”). In both cases, *cair* does not refer to physical movement, temporal coincidence, or bank crediting. What is constructed is a value of interruption or deactivation of a regime of functioning.





In the first case, the internet ceases to operate: the service that was previously available becomes unavailable. The prior mention of the depletion of credits functions as an explanatory condition that anchors the technological reading of the verb. In the second, the social media account is projected into a state of suspension or removal. Here, the verb is interpreted within contemporary digital and institutional practices, in which an account “falling” is equivalent to ceasing to be active, accessible, or authorized. These occurrences show, once again, that the verb adjusts itself to specific domains of reference without losing its orientation toward rupture between an initial state and a subsequent one (CULIOLI, 1990, 1999).

The most relevant aspect of these utterances is that both preserve the idea of the abrupt passage from a stabilized state to another state of functional absence. The internet was available; it ceases to be so. The account was active, or could remain active; it ceases to be so, or tends to cease to be so. This is therefore another realization of the same general orientation: rupture of continuity and reinscription of the occurrence into another regime of functioning. From a theoretical standpoint, this reinforces the hypothesis of an operative invariance that should not be confused with superficial semantic uniformity (FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998).

4.6 Interpretive synthesis

Taken together, the utterances examined here make it possible to propose that the verb *cair* functions in Brazilian Portuguese as an operator of marked transition between two states, in which an initial state of support, maintenance, control, intensity, inscription, or availability is replaced by another state of lowering, incidence, decrease, capture, or deactivation. This does not, of course, mean reducing all uses to a single gloss; rather, it means recognizing an operative orientation capable of explaining why values so distinct can still be perceived as belonging to the same lexical unit. This formulation converges with the





proposal of Culioli (1990, 1999) and with the reading of Franckel and Paillard (1998), for whom the identity of the form can be reconstructed from the regulated diversity of its uses.

To that extent, the analysis confirms a thesis central to Culiolian Enunciative Semantics: the identity of a form is not defined outside its variations, but through them. The verb *cair* does not have a simple “central meaning” from which the others would be mere deviations; what it displays is a capacity to stabilize different values from the same orientation of functioning, always dependent on the relations constructed by the utterance (CULIOLI, 1990; FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998).

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis developed in this article has made it possible to demonstrate that the diversity of semantic values of the verb *cair* can be described more rigorously when an enunciative perspective grounded in Culiolian theory is adopted. Instead of treating each occurrence as an isolated sense, the study sought to show that the different uses are organized around a more abstract operative identity, one that can only be recognized when the predicative and enunciative configurations in which the verbal form is actualized are observed contrastively, as suggested by Culioli (1990, 1999) and Franckel and Paillard (1998).

The analyses indicated that the verb *cair* is recurrently associated with the marking of a passage between states, generally involving the loss of a prior configuration of stability or maintenance. This passage takes on different realizations depending on the activated domain: it may correspond to the loss of physical support, sports relegation, the inscription of a value into an account, the temporal incidence of an event, discursive dissemination, scalar decrease, yielding to a persuasive force, or the deactivation of a technical system. The heterogeneity of the effects of meaning, far from invalidating the hypothesis of invariance, was precisely what made it possible to formulate that hypothesis more accurately, thereby reaffirming the importance of describing language on the basis of its operations of meaning construction (CULIOLI, 1990, 1999).





From a theoretical standpoint, the study reinforces the productivity of TOPE for the treatment of semantic variation, insofar as this approach makes it possible to articulate form, operation, and context without reducing meaning either to a fixed lexical essence or to unrestricted indeterminacy (FRANCKEL; PAILLARD, 1998; ROCHA; VILELA, 2022). From a methodological standpoint, the work also shows the relevance of using utterances constructed by the researcher, provided that their status is made explicit and that the analysis is organized through contrast, glossing, and control of relevant variables, which is consistent with the place attributed to epilinguistic activity by Romero (2011).

Naturally, this article does not exhaust the functioning of the verb *cair* in Portuguese. Future investigations may expand the set of observables, incorporate attested usage data from corpora, and explore in greater detail the relation between this verb and certain prepositions, crystallized expressions, or specific discourse genres. Even so, the results obtained here already authorize the claim that the apparent semantic dispersion of *cair* conceals a relevant operative coherence, the description of which becomes visible when the analyst privileges the modes of meaning construction rather than merely their surface products.

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