

On Visser's Effects, Control, and Weak Implicit Agents

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1 Introduction

This paper examines sentences in which control interacts with passivization either in the form of a personal passive, such as the French example in (1), or an impersonal passive, as in (2).

- (1) Le jeu a été joué [en PRO tirant le levier sur le côté de la machine].
the game has been played while pulling the lever on the side of the machine
'The (slot) game was played by pulling the lever on the side of the machine.'
Parallel English data first observed in Roeper (1983, 1987)
- (2) Il a été proposé/décidé [de PRO fonder une nouvelle nation].
it has been proposed/decided of to found a new nation
'It was proposed/decided to establish a new nation.'
Parallel English data first observed in Manzini (1983:427)

Landau (2013) and van Urk (2013) argue that these types of sentences support their two hypotheses in (3a-b), namely, that the understood subject of a passive verb is syntactically projected as a weak implicit argument (WIA), and that the reference of PRO in contexts of obligatory control (OC) is primarily determined by Agree and predication.

- (3) a. The understood thematic subject of a passive verb is syntactically projected, as originally suggested in Government-Binding (GB) terms in Roberts (1987), but, more recently, in Minimalist terms in Landau (2010, 2013) and van Urk (2011, 2013).
b. The referent of obligatorily controlled PRO (PRO_{OC}) is primarily determined by the computational system, as originally proposed in transformational terms in Rosenbaum (1967) and more recently, in Minimalist terms, in Landau (2010) and van Urk (2013).

In this paper, I will use the same types of data to argue in favor of the opposing views in (4a-b), namely, that the understood subject of a passive verb is not syntactically projected and that the reference of PRO is determined at Logical Form (LF) by a Bare Output Condition (BOC).

- (4) a. The understood thematic subject of a passive verb is syntactically implicit, as originally argued in GB terms in Williams (1985, 1987), Chomsky (1986), Rizzi (1986), Brody & Manzini (1987), Roeper (1987), and others, and, in Minimalist terms, in Bruening (2013).
b. The referent of PRO is determined at the syntax-semantics interface by some version of a Theory of Control, as originally suggested in transformational terms in Chomsky & Lasnik (1977), and, in Minimalist terms, in Reed (2014).

The discussion proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines key aspects of the theories of control and passivization assumed by Landau, van Urk, and myself, the goal not being to exhaustively compare and contrast the two approaches, but rather to make it clear where we are in agreement and where we are not. Section 3 then examines five areas in which these two theories make opposing empirical predictions. Section 4 provides a very brief summary of the findings.

2 Points of Agreement and Contention

The analyses of control developed in Landau (2010, 2013), van Urk (2011, 2013), and Reed (2014)

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share a number of features that make these theories much more similar to each other than they are to alternative movement or implicit argument approaches to control. More specifically, we agree on each of the three points summarized in (5). Given space constraints, the focus in this section will be on just the second and third hypotheses. Namely, (5b) makes it clear that we share the view that PRO_{OC} is the “default,” found in any syntactically transparent context, while non-obligatorily controlled PRO (PRO_{NOC}) is attested “Elsewhere.” Importantly, and as is indicated in (6a-b), what constitutes a transparent or an opaque domain does differ under the two theories. While Landau and van Urk assume that an embedded ForceP/CP does not create an opaque domain, I assume that it does.

(5) a. **PRO is licensed by specific bundles of features (Chomsky & Lasnik 1995).**

Landau (2000, 2013) and van Urk (2013):

PRO is licensed by any T that is not associated with interpretable [+T, +Agr] features.

Reed (2014: Ch. 6):

Following Bowers (2002), PRO is licensed only if there are no functional heads with unvalued phi-features that would have to undergo Agree with an inherently phi-associated nominal (which PRO is not).

b. **The computational system determines the relative distribution of obligatory and non-obligatory readings of PRO (Chomsky 1980: 33).**

Landau (2013), Reed (2014), and van Urk (2013):

PRO_{OC} is the “default,” found in syntactically transparent contexts.

PRO_{NOC} is attested “Elsewhere,” i.e., in syntactically opaque contexts or in structurally ambiguous contexts in which the OC derivation results in semantic anomaly.

c. **The reference of PRO_{NOC} is determined by pragmatic factors that include logophoricity (Williams 1992), topicality (Bresnan 1982), and genericity (Postal 1970).**

(6) **Contrasting Views of Syntactic Opacity: The Status of ForceP**

Landau (2013) & van Urk (2013):

NOC readings only arise whenever predication and Agree are either both structurally blocked or when their operation results in semantic anomaly. I.e., ForceP does not create an opaque domain for predication or Agree.

Reed (2014):

The Bare Output Condition (BOC) in (7) determines the antecedent of PRO_{OC}. I.e., ForceP does create an opaque domain.

- (7) By default, PRO must take as its antecedent a c-commanding implicit or explicit argument within the superordinate clausal domain that immediately dominates the clause in which it appears, with lexical specifications ruling out potential antecedents and ForceP constituting a phase that “closes off” the search space. If there are no c-commanding potential antecedents or the search space is closed off by ForceP, PRO is assigned the index *arb* and its phi-feature specifications are logophorically determined. Reed (2014:302)

It is important to bear in mind that Landau and van Urk are firmly committed to the view that control complement clauses uniformly take the form of ForceP (formerly, CP).¹ For one thing, this is what allows them to accommodate Partial Control (PC) in examples like (8a). Namely, the head of ForceP, which is unspecified for number, “mediates” the control relation and this is what allows PRO to differ in semantic number from its controller.² As will be made clear in Section 3.4, indirect questions further entail this assumption under their system.

¹ In more recent work, Landau (2015) modifies this assumption slightly, analyzing Exhaustive Control in terms of FinP complementation coupled with predication and Partial Control in terms of ForceP/CP complementation and binding. Although I will not explore this more recent version of Landau’s theory here, the criticisms advanced in this paper appear to apply equally to it.

² For critical discussion of this and other approaches to Partial Control, see Authier & Reed (to appear).

- (14) Cindy told Tim [that [PRO_{NOC} undressing herself/himself/themselves/*myself in public] was a very bad idea.

This section will conclude with a second area in which there is disagreement between the two approaches to control under discussion – namely, in how Landau, van Urk, and I view the syntactic status of the understood thematic subject of a passive verb. While Landau and van Urk propose that this argument is syntactically projected, in the fashion indicated in bold in (15a), I assume that it is not, as indicated by the lack of a syntactically projected implicit argument in (15b). In fact, I go even further and follow Parsons (1990), Lasersohn (1993), Bruening (2013), and others in assuming that the passive morphology “deletes” this argument from a verb’s argument structure at LF, although it does remain interpretively available either because of existential binding, as Bruening suggests, or because of MPs of the type in (16), as Lasersohn (1993: 159) has argued.

- (15) a. Il a été **IMP** décidé [de PRO fonder une nouvelle nation].
 b. Il a été décidé [de PRO fonder une nouvelle nation].
 it has been decided of to.found a new nation
 ‘It was decided to establish a new nation.’
- (16) $\forall e[\text{ATOM}(\mathbf{decide}, e) \rightarrow \exists x \text{ AGENT}(x, e)]$

To summarize, the discussion thus far has shown that Landau, van Urk and I disagree on two key points: the opaque vs. transparent status of ForceP and the projection or non-projection of the understood agent of a passive verb. In the next section, we turn to five areas in which these differences make opposing empirical predictions.

3 Further Examining the Interaction of Control with Passivization

3.1 Reconsidering Visser’s Effects

Evers (1975) was the first to observe in relation to Dutch that subject control verbs can undergo impersonal passivization. In other words, impersonal passives are exempt from Visser’s Generalization (Visser 1973), as made clear by the contrast between the impersonal and personal passives in (17,b).

- (17) a. Il a été décidé [de PRO fonder une nouvelle nation].
 it has been decided of to.found a new nation
 ‘It was decided to establish a new nation.’
 b. *Paul a été menacé [d’PRO intenter un procès contre lui].
 Paul has been threatened of to.begin a case against him
 *‘Paul was threatened [PRO to initiate legal proceedings against him].’

Landau and van Urk account for this contrast in terms of Agree. They associate (17a-b) with the structures in (18a-b). (18a) is said to be grammatical because the matrix T does not have to undergo Agree with the expletive NP, it undergoing merge only to satisfy the EPP. This leaves T free to agree with the implicit agent and since that is also the semantically designated controller, the result is well formed. In personal passives like (18b), however, the matrix T must agree with the overt NP in its Spec in order for that nominal’s case requirements to be satisfied. This means that that argument is the syntactically designated controller and the result is semantic ill-formed. In short, Landau and van Urk account for Visser’s effects by assuming that both types of passives involve OC.

- (18) a. Il a été IMP_x décidé [_{ForceP} de PRO_x fonder une nouvelle nation].
 it has been decided of to.found a new nation
 ‘It was decided to establish a new nation.’
 b. *Paul_y a été IMP_x menacé [_{ForceP} d’PRO_y intenter un procès contre lui].
 Paul has been threatened of to.begin a case against him

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*'Paul_y was IMP_x threatened [_{ForceP} PRO_y to initiate legal proceedings against him].'

I account for the same facts, but in different terms, associating (18) with the structures in (19).

- (19) a. Il a été proposé/décidé [_{ForceP} de PRO_{NOC} fonder une nouvelle nation].
 it has been proposed/decided of to found a new nation
 'It was proposed/decided [_{ForceP} to PRO_{NOC} establish a new nation...]'
- b. *Paul_y a été menacé [_{FinP} d'PRO_y intenter un procès contre lui].
 Paul has been threatened of to begin a case against him
 *'Paul_y was threatened [_{FinP} PRO_y to initiate legal proceedings against him].'

Example (19a) is grammatical because the BOC in (7) specifies that ForceP precludes any c-commanding NP from serving as PRO's antecedent. A configuration of NOC results and the reference of PRO is determined by logophoricity. Since verbs equivalent to *propose* and *decide* clearly designate their thematic subjects as logophoric centers, PRO is understood to refer to the agent of the passive verb. In contrast, (19b) is ungrammatical because the BOC in (7) designates FinP complement clauses as contexts of OC. Therefore, in this case, PRO must take as its antecedent the only c-commanding NP that is available – the NP *Paul*, which results in semantic ill-formedness. In short, I agree that personal passives involve OC, but take issue with the claim that impersonal ones do as well.

Fortunately, it is possible to determine which view is correct. If impersonal passives involve NOC, then it should be possible to construct atypical pragmatic contexts in which the logophoric center cannot plausibly serve as the controller and, in these cases, one should find the three signature characteristics of NOC summarized in Landau (2000, 2013). Namely, impersonal passives should allow arbitrary control, long distance control, and license strict readings under VP-Ellipsis. The Dutch and French examples below in (20-23), as well as their English translations, collectively show that these predictions are borne out. First, the Dutch impersonal passive and its English translation in (20) are clearly associated with an arbitrary reading. As one would expect, these examples of NOC contrast in this respect with the sentence involving OC in (21).

- (20) Ik benaderde de selectiecommissie met de vraag hoe mijn foto
 I contacted the selection.committee with the question how my photo
 aan te leveren. ?Er bleek dat er (door het comité) de voorkeur
 prt to supply there turned-out that there (by the committee) the preference
 aan gegeven wordt [om deze aan te leveren in jpeg.
 to given is COMP these prt to supply in jpeg
 'I contacted the selection committee about how to submit my photo.
 It turns out that it's preferred (by the committee_x) [to PRO_{arb} submit in jpeg].'
- (21) The committee_x prefers [to PRO_{x/*arb} submit photos in jpeg].

The data in (22a-c) next show that impersonal passives can allow long distance control. As expected, PRO_{OC} in (23) differs from PRO_{NOC} in this respect as well.

- (22) a. Il n'a évidemment pas été décidé par les colons_x [de PRO_{NOC=y} les_x
 it neg.has obviously not been decided by the colonists of them
 taxer à ce point]. C'est bien sûr la royauté qui en a décidé ainsi.
 to.tax to that point it is well sure the royalty that of.it has decided so
 'It was obviously not decided by the colonists_x [to PRO_{NOC=y} tax them_x at such
 a rate]. It was the Crown_y.'
- b. Il a été décidé par la direction_x [de PRO_{NOC=staff} ne plus
 it has been decided by the management of Neg no.longer
 utiliser nos ordinateurs pour faire du shopping.
 to.use our computers for to.do of.the shopping
 'It has been decided by management [PRO_{NOC=staff} to no longer use computers
 to shop].'

- c. Verbolgen zakenvrouw aan haar telefoon in Chicago:
 irate businesswoman on her telephone in Chicago
 Waar ben je? Er was door mijn secretaresse
 where are you there has.been by my secretary
 geregeld [om elkaar hier in Chicago te ontmoeten].
 arranged COMP each.other here in Chicago to meet
 ‘Irate businesswoman on her phone in Chicago: Where are you? It was arranged
 by my secretary_x [to PRO_{NOC}=speaker+listener meet here in Chicago!’
- (23) The colonists_x obviously did not decide [to PRO_x tax *them_x/themselves_x
 at such a rate]. It was the Crown.

Finally, (24) shows that impersonal passives can license strict readings under VP-Ellipsis. In this respect, again, PRO_{NOC} contrasts with PRO_{OC} in (25).

- (24) It was proposed by Hillary Clinton_x [to PRO_x be the 2016 Democratic
 candidate] and it was by the Democratic National Committee too.
 (associated with a strict reading equivalent to *It was proposed by the DNC that
 Hillary Clinton be their candidate in 2016.*)
- (25) *Hillary Clinton_x proposed [to PRO_x be the 2016 Democratic candidate] and
 the Democratic National Committee did too.

In short, the BOC approach to control achieves improved coverage with respect to impersonal passives. By making antecedent selection in control structures sensitive to the ForceP/FinP distinction, it can explain why PRO must refer to the understood agent of the passive verb in typical pragmatic contexts, but may refer to other individuals in atypical ones.

3.2 A Syntactic Constraint on Impersonal Passivization

Turning to a second issue the Landau/van Urk approach faces with respect to impersonal passives, we next observe that their analysis in (18a) immediately extends to, and hence over-generates, a large number of sentences of the type in (26):

- (26) a. *Il a été refusé [de PRO discuter du problème].
 it has been refused of to.discuss of.the problem
 *‘It was refused/declined to comment on the issue.’
- b. *Il a été adoré [PRO danser toute la nuit].
 it has been loved to.dance all the night
 *‘It was loved to dance all night long.’
- c. *Il a été oublié [d’amener le vin].
 it has been forgotten of to.bring the wine
 *‘It was forgotten to bring the wine.’

The BOC approach accounts for these restrictions if we assume that the verbs in (26) contrast with those in (19a) in selecting for an infinitival FinP (not ForceP) complement clause. That is, the BOC in (7) states that any time a matrix verb selects a complement clause “smaller than” ForceP, a c-commanding NP in the matrix clause must be designated as controller. In the case of passives, I assume that the thematic subject is entirely unrepresented at LF, so it cannot ever be selected. This means that only the expletive NP can. Semantic ill-formedness results, since, as Safir (1985: 33-38) was the first to observe in relation to the examples in (27), PRO is inherently non-expletive.

- (27) a. [Before PRO_{NOC} making a big decision], every option should be considered.
 b. *[PRO_{NOC} being obvious that John won’t be returning], we can leave.

In sum, the restricted nature of impersonal passivization in languages like French and English

supports the hypotheses that ForceP creates an opaque domain and that the understood agent of a passive verb is not represented at LF.

3.3 On an Unexpected Parallel between PRO_{OC} and Overt Bound Pronouns

It was observed above that Landau and van Urk make crucial reference to the syntax of control to account for the absence of a Visser's effect in impersonal passives (18a) and the existence of one in personal ones (18b). Namely, agreement of the matrix T with *Paul* in (18b) precludes T from agreeing with the implicit agent, resulting in semantic ill-formedness. This control-based account of Visser's Generalization (VG) leaves unexplained the fact that overt pronouns, like French *on* in (28), appear to be subject to the same constraint since this pronoun is equally unable to take an understood passive agent as its antecedent. In this case, obviously, no appeal can be made to the syntax of control.

- (28) *Paul a été IMP_x assuré [qu'on_x le dédommagerait].
 Paul has been promised that one him.ACC would.compensate
 *'Paul was IMP_k promised [that they_k would compensate him].'
 (cf. Someone_k promised [that they_k would pay him by Friday].)

Before exploring how the BOC approach can handle this, consider first the well-known fact that other types of implicit arguments, such as the implicit object of *signal*-type verbs in (29a,b) are not subject to this restriction. These WIAs can serve as antecedents to overt pronouns and PRO:

- (29) a. Jean a fait signe IMP_k [qu'on_k devait partir].
 Jean has made sign that one should to.leave
 'John signalled IMP_k [that we_k should leave].'
 b. Jean a fait signe IMP_k [de PRO_k partir].
 Jean has made sign of to.leave
 'John signalled IMP_k [PRO_k to leave].'

Interestingly, the implicit agent of the impersonal passive in (30) also contrasts with that of personal passives in this respect:

- (30) Je croyais qu'il avait été IMP_k décidé [qu'on_k se réunirait
 I believe that it has been decided that one ourselves to.meet
 à Chicago cette semaine pour signer le contrat].
 in Chicago this week for to.sign the contract
 'I believe that it was IM P_k decided/agreed/arranged [that we_k would meet
 in Chicago this week to sign this contract].'

These patterns remain mysterious under Landau and van Urk's analysis, however, they are expected under the BOC approach. First, if one assumes, contra (28) and (30) above, that the WIA of a passive is not represented at the LF, then one would expect it to be equally inaccessible to the theories of binding and control since both are BOCs. This, then, explains why the implicit agent cannot serve as PRO's antecedent in (18b) or as *on*'s antecedent in (28). On the other hand, the BOC in (7) treats the implicit object associated with verbs in the active voice as being available (although unprojected) at LF. That is, it has been known since Williams (1985) that this type of implicit argument is available to the theories of binding and control. His sentence in (31), for example, shows that these arguments trigger Condition C violations, the implicit object of *promise* (represented by the index on *promised*) being unable to refer to the same individual as the R-expression *the doctor*. In short, the syntactic availability of the implicit arguments in (29a-b) accounts for the fact that they can serve as antecedents for an overt pronoun or PRO.

- (31) *Mary went to the doctor's office, and she promised_k that the doctor_k would not see her again until she was really sick.

Turning to the grammaticality of (30), this follows from the fact that, the understood agent of a passive, while syntactically unavailable at LF, nonetheless remains interpretatively available via MPs or existential binding. A pronoun can, therefore, be pragmatically understood to refer to that individual, in a fashion akin to PRO in examples like (19a). This option is, however, contingent upon the understood agent been clearly designated as the logophoric center. This explains, e.g., why this option is available for verbs of saying, knowing, thinking, etc., as in (30), but not for one like *promise* in (28). Interestingly, however, even verbs like *promise* can allow accidental co-reference if the context is properly built up, for example, by the introduction of an overt *by*-phrase, as in (32) below.⁴

- (32) ?John was promised by Sue_x [_{ForceP} that she_x would bring the money today].
(versus *John was promised by Sue_x [_{FinP} to PRO_x bring the money today].)

3.4 On Unexpected WIA Control in Indirect Questions

Landau (2013:159-160) argues that indirect questions offer strong support for his assumptions summarized in (3a-b). Namely, the matrix subject in (33a-c) is syntactically available; therefore, it must serve as the controller of PRO, which leads one to expect the Condition B violation in (33a), the impossibility of long-distance control in (33b), and the absence of a strict reading in (33c).

- (33) a. John_i wondered [_{ForceP} who PRO_i to introduce himself/*him_i to].
b. *I_k thought that they_i wondered [_{ForceP} how PRO_i to feed myself_k].
c. John_i remembered [_{ForceP} when PRO_i to leave], and Bill did too.
(Does not allow a strict reading equivalent to *Bill also remembered when John should leave.*)

However, Landau (2013:183) also makes the paradoxical observation that the same constructions are problematic for his and van Urk's approach to the Visser's effect in (18b) since, in indirect questions like (34), agreement of *was* with *Mary* should preclude *was* from agreeing with the WIA, making *Mary* the controller of PRO. Native speakers, however, report the opposite.

- (34) Mary_i was [_{VP} IMP_k asked [_{ForceP} where PRO_{*i/k} to throw the trash]].

The BOC approach accommodates this range of data since it does not assume uniform ForceP complementation. Namely, examples like (19b) are analyzed in terms of FinP complementation, which the BOC identifies as a context of OC by the argument in surface subject position. However, the presence of a *wh*-element in (34) indicates that indirect questions involve ForceP complementation, which the BOC treats as a context of NOC. In other words, ForceP bars *Mary* from serving as the controller and PRO's reference is logophorically determined, referring, as usual, to the logophoric center – the understood subject of *ask*. As one would expect, pragmatic control by the implicit agent is only a tendency since it is possible to construct atypical contexts that preclude it, resulting in the absence of a Principle B effect in (35a), licit long distance control in (35b), and a strict reading under VP-Ellipsis, in (35c).

- (35) a. Ton bébé_x ne risque pas de savoir [_{quand} PRO_{NOC=z} le_x nourrir].
your baby Neg is.likely not of to.know when him.acc to-feed
C'est toi_z qui le sait.
it is you who it/acc knows
'Your baby_x doesn't know [_{ForceP} when to PRO_{NOC=z} feed him_x]. You_z do!
b. I_z think that my mom_x has figured out [_{ForceP} where to PRO_{NOC=z+} go on
our honeymoon].

⁴ Benjamin Bruening (p.c.) has pointed out to me that pseudoclefting is another means of facilitating accidental co-reference in the case of overt pronouns, but not PRO:

- (i) That they would pay him on Monday is what John was promised.
(ii) *PRO to pay him on Monday is what John was promised.

- (35) c. Speaker A: I know I'm the only one who can do anything about this situation, but I just don't know [_{ForceP} what to PRO to do].
 Speaker B: I don't either. (Allows a strict reading equivalent to *I don't know what you (= Speaker A) should do either.*)

3.5 Apparent Weak Implicit Agent Control in Temporal Adjuncts

Let us conclude this empirical discussion with Landau's treatment of Roeper (1983, 1987) inspired-examples like (36), which he analyzes as involving NOC. More specifically, OC is assumed to be blocked in temporal adjuncts because predication, the only mechanism that can derive OC into an island, produces semantically anomalous results since a slot machine is unable to pull a lever.

- (36) The (slot) game was IMP played [by PRO_{NOC} pulling the lever on the side of the machine.]

The problem with this analysis is that it fails to capture the fact that PRO in (36) must refer to the implicit agent of the passive verb. I.e., the person(s) who played the slot machine clearly must be the same individual(s) who pulled the lever. This is unexpected since it is usually possible to construct contexts in which the two are distinct, as is true of (37):

- (37) While PRO_{NOC≠IMP} eating fries, I suddenly realized that the game had already been played.

The apparent OC by the implicit agent in (36) follows from the BOC approach if we follow Williams (1985) and Lasnik (1988) in assuming that there is an event control derivation for *while*-type adjuncts. In other words, not only can the main clause surface subject be targeted as a potential controller for PRO, but so too can the event denoted by the TP meaning *the game was played* since it also c-commands PRO. Sentence (36) is, therefore, licit on the event control reading because we know that there are events of slot machine playing that typically involve pulling a lever, just as Williams observes that there are events of game playing that typically involve drinking or being naked. They are "drinking games" or "nude games" in a metaphorical sense.

If this approach to (36) is correct, then the fact that PRO must refer to the understood agent of *played* can be attributed to the interpretative availability of that argument via, e.g., a MP like (16). That is, if it is actually the event of game playing that serves as the controller of PRO, then it logically follows that the understood agent of that event must use the lever while playing it. Such an analysis also explains why sentences like (36) contrast in grammaticality with structurally parallel ones of the type in (38), also due to Roeper. Namely, we adopt Williams' suggestion that the event control reading of (38) is ill-formed because one cannot imagine a game that is typically played while angry at a guy named Bill: There are no "angry at Bill" games.

- (38) *The game was played [PRO mad at Bill].

4 Against Control by Weak Implicit Agents

To summarize, Landau and van Urk examine sentences in which passivization interacts with control in order to argue in favor of their view that the implicit agent of a passive undergoes Merge in the computational system and, by virtue of that fact, takes part in Agree and predication, which are assumed to determine PRO's reference. In this paper, I have used a wider range of the same types of facts to argue in favor of the diametrically opposed views that the agent of a passive is syntactically unrepresented and that control is best handled in terms of a BOC applying at LF.

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