Copular Constructions and Their Role in Meaning Negotiation in Trending Online Political Discussions

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Abstract

Copular constructions are central to expressing evaluation, identity, and relational meaning. In online political discussions, especially on social media, these structures help users negotiate stances and frame opinions as facts. This study examines the frequency and roles of copular constructions in online political discussions, focusing on three Reddit posts about the Anti-Political Dynasty Bill in the Philippines. Using Higgins' (1979) typology and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the research analyzed seventy-three copular constructions extracted from Reddit. The findings show a high frequency of copular constructions, especially in argumentative and evaluative comments. Ascriptive constructions are the most common, followed by equative and locative forms. The analysis reveals that these constructions serve more than grammatical functions; they are important tools for negotiating meaning. Ascriptive forms let users present personal evaluations as inherent traits of political figures. Equative forms frame interpretations as authoritative definitions, while locative forms tie abstract arguments to real procedural or spatial contexts. The study concludes that copular structures are essential for expressing ideologies in digital civic spaces. It suggests shifting toward a functional-discourse approach in English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines, highlighting how relational processes can help develop critical language awareness and argumentative skills among Filipino learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Copular constructions are a small unit of linguistics that serves as a link between the subject and the complement. It typically follows this pattern: *subject + copula + complement.* Crystal (1997) explains the concept of copula as a verb that has little independent meaning and whose main function is to relate other elements of clause structures, especially the subject and complement. Copular expressions like *is, are, was, were,* and *be* are often the first structures students learn, yet they are often underestimated for their essential role in sentences and in conveying meaning.

Copular constructions such as ascriptive, equative, and locative serve as building blocks for how people establish facts, identities, and narratives. For instance, in political

discussions, people naturally share opinions, evaluations, and arguments on certain topics, but if these discussions take place in media such as Reddit, where users get to discuss timely issues, it is important to study how these discussions are led by analyzing the use of copular constructions and how they build meaning semantically and pragmatically in online discourse. Hence, this study examines the copular verbs used in user-generated comments on the Anti-Political Dynasty Bill, in light of the growing interest in language use in online political communities such as Reddit. This study attempts to explain how users create meaning, assign evaluations, and build identities within political speech by classifying copular constructions into ascriptive, equative, and locative categories. This research aids in understanding how language choices in social media conversations represent stance-taking and meaning-making processes.

This study integrates Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL; Halliday, 1994), Higgins' theory of copular verbs (1979), and Generative Grammar (Chomsky, 1965) to analyze political discussions on Reddit. Halliday's SFL provides the foundation, classifying copular constructions as Relational Processes and subdividing them into attributive (ascriptive), identifying (equative), and circumstantial (locative) types. Higgins's classification further explains how these constructions strategically convey stance and ideological positioning. Together, these theories clarify how digital political discourse functions as both a structured system and a social interaction, emphasizing the role of copular constructions in online communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics views language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts. Within SFL, copular constructions fall under relational processes, which assign attributes, identities, or circumstances to participants in a clause. Relational clauses are particularly significant in evaluative and ideological discourse because they present judgments as states of being rather than opinions. In political discourse, statements such as "The government is corrupt" function as relational clauses that naturalize evaluation. The theoretical framework supports the present study by allowing copular constructions in Reddit political discussions to be analyzed not merely as grammatical forms, but as meaning-making devices. SFL thus provides a functional lens for interpreting how copular clauses construct political reality and stance.

Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), copular constructions operate in two ways: *attributive,* which assigns a quality to a carrier*, and identifying,* which defines a token in terms of a value. While Higgins outlines a broader typology of copular constructions, this study focuses on ascriptive, equative, and locative types, the latter of which SFL classifies as Circumstantial Relational Processes because they are key to negotiating meaning in political discussions. Ascriptive (Predicational) constructions enable speakers to negotiate evaluations by presenting political opinions as inherent traits of a subject. Equative

(Identificational/Specificational) constructions negotiate identity and authority by establishing definitions and clarifying referential confusion. Locative (Circumstantial) constructions, in turn, ground the conversation by negotiating the spatial, temporal, and conceptual placement of power and policy. By focusing on these three copular types, the study demonstrates how speakers move from simple descriptions to actively shaping political reality through the use of relational participants.

2.1.2. Higgins' Typology of Copular Constructions

Francis Higgins' typology classifies copular clauses into ascriptive, equative, and identificational types. This framework explains how copular constructions either assign attributes, equate two entities, or identify participants within discourse. The typology is especially useful for analyzing political statements that label individuals, institutions, or ideologies. The present study adopts this framework to systematically categorize copular constructions found in Reddit political discussions. By doing so, the study ensures analytical consistency and theoretical grounding.

2.1.3. Generative Grammar and Copular Structures

Generative grammar, as developed within the Chomskyan tradition (Chomsky, 1965, 1975), treats copular constructions as structurally complex clauses involving predication and syntactic movement. Recent generative studies emphasize the role of copular clauses in encoding identity and reference at the sentence level (Delfitto & Fiorin, 2024; Hartmann & Heycock, 2021; Khatatneh, 2023). This perspective supports formal analysis of copular constructions as stable grammatical units that persist across discourse types, including informal online contexts. Generative grammar contributes to the present study by providing a structural explanation for how copular clauses are formed and interpreted. When combined with functional approaches, it allows a more comprehensive understanding of both form and function. Thus, generative grammar complements SFL and Higgins' typology in the analysis of Reddit political discourse.

The structural characteristics of copular constructions are also taken into account by formal linguistic techniques. Copular clauses are examined as syntactically complicated predicational structures that encode identity and reference relations at the sentence level in generative grammar (Noam Chomsky, 1975, 1965). It has been demonstrated that the distinction between predication and equation affects discourse function and interpretation, especially in evaluative circumstances (Geist, 2007). Recent work on argument structure shows how copular clauses systematically link subjects and predicates to encode attribution, identity, and location (Kampanarou, 2023). Corpus- based research confirms that copular constructions are particularly common in explanatory and stance-taking registers (Biber et al., 2021). When combined, these viewpoints provide a solid theoretical framework for examining copular constructions as discourse techniques that are both structurally sound and highly effective.

While these generative and functional frameworks establish the structure and meaning of the copula, realizing these linguistic features is most important in the ever-changing world of digital civic engagement. In online political discussions, where communication is often fast, evaluative, and highly polarized, the copular construction serves more than just a grammatical role; it becomes a strategic anchor for expressing opinions. Shifting from formal syntax analysis to the study of social media is essential because platforms like Reddit offer a unique "linguistic laboratory." In these spaces, the structure of the copula enables users to move past hesitant language and present their subjective critiques as objective, stable facts. Therefore, understanding the formal properties of the copula gives a necessary foundation for examining how it is used in the ideological negotiations common in online political commentary.

2.2. Political Discourse and Language Use in Social Media

Building on the idea of the copula as a strategic resource, existing research on social media demonstrates that online political discourse relies heavily on declarative and aggressive language to persuade audiences and establish ideological views, according to research on political communication on social media. Even when grammatical form is not the main focus of research, many examinations of online interactions demonstrate the critical role definite statements play in forming shared values and influencing opinion (Monti et al., 2022). On the other hand, political groups rely heavily on categorical and defining statements to express in-group and out-group distinctions; such statements involve labelling and identity constructions (Rim et al., 2023). These studies reveal that sentence-level linguistic features matter in political discourse, and copular constructions are frequently used for labelling.

Reddit's high levels of appraisal, polarization, and emotional intensity make it an especially useful platform for political discourse analysis (Xu et al., 2025). According to studies, linguistic homogeneity within communities strengthens echo chambers and group identity (Cirulli et al., 2025), while political interactions on the platform often rely on straightforward, conclusive claims to maintain ideological alignment and polarization (Colacrai et al., 2024). Political messaging often portrays opinions as factual truths, highlighting language as a subtle yet effective tool of persuasion, according to analyses of Reddit's debating culture and broader government communication on social media (Hansson, 2025; Messerli, 2025).

2.3. Grammar, Structure, and Meaning in Online Discourse

Research on digital communication in online settings shows that it promotes more forceful yet simplified linguistic patterns that reflect communicative objectives, including identity creation, stance-taking, and evaluation. Accordingly, syntactic decisions systematically adjust to platform-specific practices, with declarative and relational constructions becoming more common (Sikorska et al., 2025). These results refute the idea that online language use is grammatically flawed and instead emphasize its patterned and useful nature.

Additional research underscores the central role of grammar in encoding opinions and attitudes in online political conversation. Studies on young adults' social media use show that relational and evaluative phrases are frequently employed to convey stance and opinion (Adalia et al., 2025), while sentiment-focused research shows that appraisal is often embedded within grammatical structures rather than expressed solely through lexical choice (Gnanapriya, 2025). Moreover, event-driven analyses of Reddit speech reveal that grammatical patterns change in tandem with political intensity, indicating that language dynamically adapts to socio-political context (Tufa et al., 2024). Together, these findings support a targeted analysis of copular constructions as essential grammatical tools for creating identity, meaning, and assessment in online political discourse.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design with quantitative support through frequency counts. This design was appropriate for examining both the forms and functions of copular constructions in naturally occurring discourse.

3.2. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative linguistic analysis based on established copular classification frameworks. The analysis identified copular clauses and interpreted their semantic and pragmatic functions within political discussions.

3.3. Data Gathering Procedure

The data for this research were gathered from political conversations on Reddit, specifically from user comments about the Anti-Political Dynasty Bill. This topic was intentionally chosen from the numerous political matters discussed on the platform because it consistently sparked significant public engagement, critical analysis, and debate over definitions. Conversations related to the Anti-Political Dynasty Bill often required participants to attribute characteristics, articulate political stances, and place institutions and individuals in discursive roles that are typically expressed through copular constructions. By limiting the dataset to a single political issue, thematic consistency was ensured, which facilitated a more structured linguistic examination.

This study selected three Reddit posts regarding the Anti-Political Dynasty Bill from the r/philippines subreddit. The posts have at least a hundred comments. All contributors were Filipino users, as confirmed by the community focus and contextual references. Data collection occurred on December 11 and 12, 2025, with all comments gathered within 24 hours of each post's publication. This strict temporal boundary ensured consistency and minimized variability from prolonged discussions or later revisions.

The dataset includes only comments written primarily in English. To maintain linguistic consistency, sentences containing Filipino/Tagalog terms, code-switching, or

mixed-language structures were excluded. Furthermore, offensive or profane language was removed to focus the analysis on meaningful political discourse.

From the remaining data, sentences containing copular constructions were manually extracted. The analysis included only clauses where the verb *be* functioned as a true copula— linking a subject to an attribute, identity, or locative complement. Existential constructions and instances where *be* served as an auxiliary or lexical verb were excluded. This systematic process produced a focused dataset suitable for qualitative analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative linguistic analysis alongside descriptive frequency counts. After initial screening, the sentences are segmented into clauses, including only those where the verb *be* functioned as a true copula. Clauses were extracted from the comments of three distinct posts. In the following analysis, the notation Post 1 (1) refers to the first comment within Post 1 that contains a copular construction. Because comments vary in length, a single comment may have one or more individual copular clauses. The process excluded auxiliary and existential uses. Each clause was then classified as ascriptive, equative, or locative based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and Higgins' typology.

Ascriptive constructions identified attributes or evaluations, while equative constructions established identity, and locative constructions linked subjects to spatial or metaphorical locations. Finally, these were examined within their discourse contexts to determine how they negotiated meaning, specifically in expressing evaluation, asserting factuality, and defining political positions. Frequency counts determined the total number of constructions and the most prevalent copular type.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results of the analysis of copular constructions found in selected Reddit discussions on the *Anti-Political Dynasty Bill* and discusses their implications for understanding meaning negotiation in online political discourse. The findings are organized according to the study's research questions and are discussed in relation to existing linguistic assumptions about copular usage. Quantitative counts are used descriptively to support qualitative interpretation.

4.1. Frequency and Distribution of Copular Constructions

The analysis identified 73 copular constructions across all three Reddit posts. The distributions of these constructions were unequal, with longer and more argumentative comments containing several copular constructions. The result is substantiated by the statistical frequency observed within the dataset.

Table 1 presents the types of copular constructions and their distributions across the three Reddit posts analyzed in this study. Post 1, titled *Proposed Anti-Political Dynasty Bill Doesn't Apply to Congressmen*?, has 19 copular constructions out of 78 comments, while Post 2, titled *Unpopular Opinion: An Anti-Political Dynasty Law won't fix corruption. It will just create a new era of Puppet Mayors*, has 18 copular constructions out of 36 comments.

Post 3, titled *"Anti-Anti Political Dynasty Bill," has 36 copular constructions across* over 87 comments.

Table 1

Types of Copular Constructions

Post	Types of Constructions			Total
	Ascriptive	Equative	Locative	
1	10	7	2	19
2	15	3	0	18
3	27	6	3	36
Total	**52**	**16**	**5**	**73**

As shown in Table 1, the ascriptive copular construction is the dominant type used by Reddit users in their political discourse. The distribution of copular construction types indicates that Reddit users who engage in political discourse rely primarily on ascriptive constructions to critique existing political mechanisms, employ locative constructions to anchor power relations spatially, and use equative constructions to articulate prescriptive policy solutions. The notably frequent presence of copular constructions reinforces corpus-driven observations that relational clauses are common in evaluative and explanatory discourse (Biber et al., 1999). Despite the informal and user-generated nature of Reddit discussions, the prevalence of copular constructions supports generative grammatical theories that propose copular structures maintain stability across various discourse types and communication settings (Kampanarou, 2023). This finding supports Higgins' argument that predication is crucial in evaluative discourse (Higgins, 1979). It also supports Halliday's view that relational clauses serve as ideological tools rather than neutral grammatical structures (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Extract 1 shows ascriptive constructions from the three Reddit Posts. Ascriptive copular constructions dominate online political discussions because they are the primary way to express opinions and institutional critiques. By using the copula to assign roles and status, as seen in **Post 1 (1)**, where a relative is called a "congressman/woman," and in **Post 1 (6)**, where a spouse is labeled a "party list rep," speakers position individuals within political hierarchies. These constructions are vital for conveying judgments about effectiveness. This is evident in **Post 2 (6)**, where institutions are labeled "weak," and in **Post 3 (14)**, where a mayor's disqualification is termed "useless."

Extract 1

Post 1 (1): *Based on my understanding of the wording you wouldn't be able to run for Congress in a district your relative **is** already congressman/woman but it wouldn't stop*

your family from dispersing across multiple districts in a province and holding all the congressional seats. (ascriptive)

Post 1 (6): *…….and the other the wife **is** a party list rep. (ascriptive)*

Post 2 (6): *Institutions **are** weak.* (ascriptive)

Post 3 (14): *DQing a mayor **is** currently useless since his/her spouse can act as replacement.* (ascriptive)

Post 2 (4): *Well, that's because eliminating/minimizing corruption **is** a socioeconomic problem (ascriptive)*

Post 2 (5): *An anti-dynasty law **is** a political answer.* (*ascriptive*)

Post 3 (2): *Proposed by Congressman Sandro Marcos, whose grandfather **was** president, dad **is** president, and aunt **is** a senator. (ascriptive, ascriptive, ascriptive)*

Furthermore, ascription helps clarify complex issues. In **Post 2 (4)**, corruption is described as a "socio-economic problem," and in **Post 2 (5)**, an anti-dynasty law is identified as a "political answer." Finally, the repeated use of these constructions in **Post 3 (2)**, where several family members are assigned titles like "president" and "senator," transforms basic grammatical descriptions into a strong critique of political dynasties. Therefore, ascriptive copular constructions are vital in political discussions since they link factual subjects with the speaker's personal views.

4.2. Role of Copular Constructions in Meaning Negotiation

Copular constructions serve as essential grammatical tools for negotiating meaning and position in political discussions on Reddit. These constructions were analyzed as Relational Processes within M.A.K. Halliday's SFL framework, which considers such clauses essential for constructing interpersonal and ideological meaning. By choosing among ascriptive, equative, or locative forms, speakers can normalize political assessments, a trend noted in research on online political discourse (Monti et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2025).

4.2.1. Ascriptive constructions enable speakers to present evaluations as inherent qualities of political actors and institutions.

Ascriptive copular forms frequently assign qualities or roles to political leaders, organizations, and policies. This representation portrays evaluations as fundamental traits instead of subjective views. Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), ascriptive constructions function as Attributive Relational Processes where a Carrier (a political entity) is linked to an Attribute (an evaluation). Since this structure is typically non-reversible, it attaches a characteristic to the subject. This makes the speaker's judgment appear as an inherent quality rather than a matter of opinion. This is the predominant form found in the data, primarily employed to criticize the essence of legislative bills and political dynasties.

Extract 2 shows how ascriptive copular constructions appeared in political discussions on Reddit. In **Post 2 (6),** the speaker views institutional capacity as a stable, inherent state.

By presenting "weakness" as an attribute of the carrier "Institutions," the comment encourages the reader to see corruption as a structural issue rather than a personal one. In **Post 2 (7),** it assigns a negative social condition to a general group to support a systemic critique. In **Post 3 (2),** it uses three consecutive ascriptions to categorize family members into roles. While straightforward in structure, the cumulative attribution critiques political dynasties by framing their power as an inherent family status. In **Post 3 (36),** it connects the subject (the bill) to an evaluative adjectival predicate. It downplays the intent of the legislation by attributing the quality of "performative" to it, which shifts its value to mere theater.

Extract 2

Post 2 (6): *Institutions **are** weak. (ascriptive)*

Post (7): *The average voter **is** functionally illiterate. (ascriptive)*

Post 3 (2): *Proposed by Congressman Sandro Marcos, whose grandfather **was** president, dad **is** president, and aunt **is** a senator. (ascriptive)*

Post 3 (36): *That version **is** just performative. (ascriptive)*

Therefore, ascriptive constructions serve as the main tool for normalization in political discourse. By labeling a critique, such as "weak" or "performative," as a simple trait, speakers shape a reality in which their judgment becomes a basic feature of the political entity itself.

4.2.2. Equative constructions allow users to frame interpretations as authoritative definitions

Equative copular structures, while less common, serve a specific role by presenting interpretations as definitions or necessities rather than mere opinions. In this research, equative structures align with SFL's Identifying Relational Processes, where a token is equated with a value. These constructions are employed to fix meaning and limit interpretational options, enabling users to assert their perspectives as factual definitions. Extract 3 presents examples of equative copular constructions used in the posts.

Extract 3

Post 1 (3): *This **is** the Bill filed by Speaker Bojie and rep Sandro Marcos. (Equative)*

Post 1 (15): *It's [It **is**] the only way this will go through. (Equative)*

Post 2 (3): *"...don't get your hopes up that this bill **is** the silver bullet." (Equative)*

Post 3 (10): *"What we truly need **are** laws that will strengthen political conflicts..." (Equative)*

Post **1 (3)** equates the topic under discussion with its specific, factual identity. It allows the speaker to be assertive about facts to ground the negotiation. **Post 1 (15)** equates a perceived flaw or loophole with the only possible path to legislation. **Post 2(3)** negates an expected identity between the bill and a complete solution to manage expectation. **Post 3 (10)** is a pseudo-cleft construction that identifies an abstract requirement (value) with a specific solution (token). It is definitional and specifying, framing the speaker's policy preference as the only logical answer.

Hence, equative constructions are the ultimate tools of definitional authority. By using these structures, speakers move from describing a situation to "equating" their specific policy solution or interpretation with the only possible reality, effectively excluding alternative interpretations from the negotiation.

4.2.3. Locative constructions ground abstract arguments in institutional or procedural contexts

In this study, Locative constructions are treated as Circumstantial Relational Processes within SFL. In political discourse, they are vital for "grounding"—moving the argument from abstract ideas to specific physical, hierarchical, or procedural spaces. They answer "where" power lies or "where" a process currently stands, which is essential for negotiating the feasibility of political change.

Extract 4 shows locative constructions. In **Post 1 (10),** locative construction implies the current procedural stage of the bills, grounding the discussion in legislative reality. **Post 3 (16)** foregrounds spatial and situational placement. By anchoring political power to a specific location, "in Cavite", the speaker negotiates the boundaries of where certain dynasties operate. **Post 3 (26)** links the subject to their affiliation or origin, grounding the argument in social context. **Post 3 (28)** expresses the location or placement of cities within a political hierarchy to define their legal boundaries.

Extract 4

Post 1 *(10): "...most of them **are** still in early or in committee stages." (locative)*

Post 3 *(16): There **are** 3 families in Cavite holding the seats of power. (locative)*

Post 3 *(26):* We need more people that **are** not from a Dynasty/Political Family. (*locative*)

Post 3 *(28): "Component cities should **be** under the level of province..." (locative)*

Overall, the analysis shows that locative constructions function as powerful grammatical resources for legitimizing political claims by situating them in recognizable institutional, spatial, and social realities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the use of copular constructions in Reddit political discussions on the Anti-Political Dynasty Bill, focusing on their frequency, functions in meaning negotiation, and dominant types. Guided by Higgins' typology of copular clauses, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and generative grammatical perspectives, the analysis yields two major conclusions aligned with the findings.

First, the findings establish that copular constructions occur frequently in Reddit political discourse. A total of 73 copular constructions were identified across the three discussion threads, with multiple copular clauses often appearing within single comments. This demonstrates that even in informal, user-generated political discussions, copular constructions remain a stable and productive grammatical resource. Also, it firmly establishes that ascriptive copular constructions are the most frequently used type, followed by equative constructions, with locative constructions occurring least often. This distribution indicates that Reddit political discourse prioritizes evaluative predication over categorical identification or spatial anchoring. The dominance of ascriptive constructions supports theoretical claims that predicational relations are central to evaluative discourse and challenges models of political discourse that emphasize lexical choice or sentiment while underestimating the role of grammatical structure.

Second, the study shows that copular constructions function as key tools for negotiating meaning and stance. Ascriptive constructions enable speakers to present evaluations as inherent qualities of political actors and institutions, equative constructions allow users to frame interpretations as authoritative definitions, and locative constructions ground abstract arguments in institutional or procedural contexts. These functions confirm that copular constructions are not merely grammatical necessities but active resources for ideological positioning and evaluative meaning-making in political discourse.

5.1. Recommendations

Based on the study's results, it is recommended that English language teaching in the Philippines shift from a purely formal approach to a discourse-functional grammar framework. Instead of teaching copular verbs as simple "linking verbs" in isolation, teachers should use targeted activities that show their ideological power in civic discourse.

First, to address the dominance of ascriptive constructions in critiques of political systems, teachers can run a "Neutralization Workshop." In this activity, students will identify evaluative ascriptive clauses in political headlines or Reddit comments (for example, "The bill is performative") and rewrite them as neutral, non-copular descriptions of specific actions (for instance, "The bill requires three public hearings"). By comparing the two versions, students can discuss how the copula lets a speaker frame a subjective opinion as an inherent, objective quality of a policy.

Next, to explain the equative construction's role in establishing definitional authority, teachers should create a "Definitional Challenge." Students will analyze "Identifying Relational Processes" in policy-driven texts—such as the claim that a specific bill "is the only way"—and brainstorm alternative "Values" for that "Token." This exercise shows how

equative structures can limit interpretation options and push one viewpoint as the only factual reality.

Finally, to tackle locative constructions, a "Power Mapping" exercise is suggested. Students can extract locative clauses from news reports about regional governance—like the study's finding that seats of power are "in Cavite"—and visually map these "Circumstantial Relational Processes" on a chart. This activity helps students grasp how language links abstract political ideas to specific physical and institutional spaces, thus connecting arguments to reality. By incorporating these practical strategies, Filipino learners can move beyond just grammatical accuracy and develop a critical awareness of language, making them more thoughtful participants in democratic online discussions.

Teacher training programs in the Philippines should include discourse functional grammar in courses on writing and critical literacy. Aligning grammar instruction with the national basic education standard and higher education goals helps learners become skilled communicators and engaged citizens. Future local studies could examine how teaching copular constructions improves Filipino students' argumentative skills and their participation in democratic discourse.

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