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Collocations and Word-Combinations in English: Considerations, Classifications, and Pedagogic Implications

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Abstract

Language is a means of communication among people, and language fluency is influenced by how this language is acquired. The speed of articulation is affected not only by one's ability of retention but also by the amount of prefabricated chunks stored in the long-memory and retrieved when needed. Learning collocation, therefore, offers this advantage to know how to combine words in ready-made expressions, whereas the identification of collocational constraints can guarantee the straightforwardness of language used by non-native speakers. This paper, making use of an authentic text, aims to illustrate how constraints on word-combinations should be taught.

Key Words: *Collocation, colligation, constraints, fixity and opacity, alliteration, rhetoric, fixed expressions, metaphor, lexico-syntactic cohesion, semantic, syntactic, immutability, idiomaticity*

1.1 Definition of Collocation

The term collocation is used in widely different senses by linguists such as Moon (1998) to refer to syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of words. In one approach, Carter (1998: 51) argues that collocation is the frequent co-occurrence of words within a certain distance recognised to be four words to either side of the specified focal word or node. This view is known as the "***Frequency-Based Approach***" and it goes back to Firth (1957: 51). It has been developed further in particular by Halliday (1966: 148) and Sinclair (1997: 170). Nesselhauf (2004: 11), on the other hand, claims that collocation can be seen as a type of word-combination, most commonly as one that is fixed to some degree but not completely. This view is known as the "***Phraseological Approach***" and has been strongly adopted by researchers extensively working in the fields of lexicography and pedagogy such as Cowie (1981: 223). Sinclair (1997), moreover, asserts that it is possible for any English word to keep company with other words provided they relate to the same cluster like *snow* and *block*, or with different clusters but lying within the same lexical set like *street* and *language*.

1.2 Collocation Vs Colligation

Colligation, which is considered necessary for the study of collocation, is defined by Carter (1998: 58) as a recurrent combination of a dominant word followed by a grammatical word, typically a preposition such as *abide by* (V + P), *admiration for* (N + P), *adjacent to* (A + P).

"Pedagogical treatment of collocations, at least, would be seriously lacking if grammatical patterning were not included alongside lexical patterning and if such elementary distinctions were not made between them. A main difficulty in this interaction between lexis and grammar is accounting for the different degrees of fixity in the patterning (Carter, 1998: 61)."

Grammatical words, at the simplest, can be seen as the cement which holds the lexical words together, and it is the lexical words that carry most, though not all, of the content of a message.

1.3 Properties of Collocation

Collocations whether unrestricted, semi-restricted or restricted have certain characteristics that often distinguish them from free-word combinations. McKeown and Radev (2006: 3) argue that the *arbitrariness* of collocation captures the fact that substituting a synonym for one of the words in a collocational word pair may result in an infelicitous lexical combination. Native speakers may say *white paint* not **white milk* (the use of *white* with *milk* is a redundancy) and *warm greeting* not **hot greeting*. Moreover, Palmer (1984: 75) points out that some collocates are more arbitrary than others. For instance, native speakers of English may say:

Blonde hair	NOT	*blonde door	(even if the colour of the door is actually blonde)
Pretty girl	NOT	*pretty boy	(pretty relates to females rather than males)
Buxom woman	NOT	*buxom man	(buxom relates to females not males)
Tall people	NOT	*high people	(although tall and high are synonyms)

Aitchison (2003: 85) argues that the collocations that are associated with different forms reflect different meanings of the word itself. The collocates of the singular noun-form *arm*, for example, are all physical things as they relate to parts of the body like *left*, *right* while those of the plural noun-form *arms* are non-physical like *control*, *nuclear*, *treaty* because they significantly relate to *weapons*. In addition, Palmer (1984: 79) asserts that not all words that occur together frequently can form a collocation. Thus, the occurrence of *doctor* and *hospital* in an example like *a doctor works in a hospital* cannot create a reliable collocation. This is possibly because both *doctor* and *hospital* can be found to collocate more strongly with other items. Additionally, perhaps, that though such words occur in the same context, they do not necessarily follow the distance rule. Moreover, several authors like Aitchison, 2003; McKeown and Radev, 2006; and Palmer, 1984 argue that a word is known by the company it keeps. This keeping company is part of the meaning of a word. By looking at the linguistic contexts of words, different meanings can be distinguished, like the use of *chair* in these collocations: *he sat in a chair*; *the vice manager will chair the*

meeting; she holds a university chair; when he won the race, his supporters chaired him round the field.

1.4 Importance of Teaching Collocation

Most language teachers have experienced students with good ideas who often lose marks because they do not know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is central to what they are writing. As a result, they create longer, wordier ways of defining or discussing the issue, increasing the chance of further errors. A student may write; *His disability will continue until he dies* which can be easily substituted by; *He has a permanent disability*. In signalling the lexical approach, Lewis (2006) puts vocabulary acquisition in a central role in language acquisition. This centrality moved vocabulary to the forefront of language teaching. Nattinger (1980) and Schmitt and McCarthy (2005) claim that teaching vocabulary should be done through lexical phrases not individual words, and students' attention, on the other hand, should be focused on larger sequences of language, of which fluent discourse is made in order to acquire the sense of how words get together, through collocations, from the beginning.

"For a great deal of the time anyway, language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation and ... comprehension relies on knowing which of these patterns to predict in these situations. Our teaching therefore would centre on these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur (Nattinger, 1980: 341)."

1.5 Collocation and Language Fluency

Ellis (2005) and Lewis (2006) argue that fluency occurs because native speakers have a store of prefabricated and memorised lexical phrases, which they use skilfully in relevant situations with abnormal rate of articulation. They do not always rely on assembling strings of words on-line via syntactic rules. Moreover, stress and intonation also improve if language is met, learnt and acquired in chunks because quality input leads to quality output.

"Speaking natively is speaking idiomatically using frequent and familiar collocations, and the job of the language learner is to learn these familiar word sequences. That native speakers have done this is demonstrated not only by the frequency of these collocations in the language, but also by the fact that conversational speech is broken into 'fluent units' of complete grammatical clauses of four to ten words, uttered at or faster than normal rates of articulation. (Ellis, 2005: 128)."

1.6 Teaching Constraints

In teaching the constraints on word-combination in English, it is necessary to identify the nature of words and expressions in terms of fixity and opacity besides the internal paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations that govern the constructing of a collocation. Such constraints will be treated through an authentic text with sixteen selected collocations.

2.1 The Text

Cameron attacks Blair over terrorism fight

By George Jones / Graeme Wilson

(1.1) The united front in (1.2) the battle against terrorism was shattered yesterday as David Cameron accused the government of not doing enough to fight (1.3) Islamic extremism. Ministers immediately accused him of (1.4) "playing politics" with (1.5) national security. The Conservative leader, making his first political intervention since returning from holiday, (1.6) launched an outspoken attack on the government's security record (1.7) in the wake of the alleged attempt to (1.8) blow up transatlantic passenger jets. He praised the police and security services but called for an urgent rethink of the "bizarre" decision by Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, to (1.9) freeze (1.10) the Home Office budget for the next three years.

The Tory leader claimed that John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, was not (2.11) up to the job of leading the government during the crisis while Mr. Blair was in Barbados. The Deputy Prime Minister said: "David Cameron's remarks are almost (2.12) "beyond belief". At a time when

we should all stand united (2.13) in the face of alleged terrorist threats, he seeks to undermine that unity." But (2.14) fresh questions about Mr. Prescott's grip on the crisis were raised last night after Muslim Labour MPs said that he disclosed details of the (2.15) police investigation into the alleged plot during a meeting at No 10. He revealed that some of the 24 people arrested in recent terror raids – a man was seized yesterday – would not (2.16) face serious charges.

The Daily Telegraph, Wednesday, August 16, 06, V. No. 47,026, front page.

2.2 Brief Analysis of the Text

The text is a news story from a national daily newspaper, and is 226 words long. It discusses and evaluates the security measures taken by Blair's government to fight terrorism with reference to Islamic extremism, in particular. In response to an apparent plot to put bombs on planes, the Leader of the Opposition strongly attacked the government. From a stylistic point of view, this article is a florid piece of writing; however, the seriousness of the situation gives space for bombastic language using rhetorical strategies and metaphorical expressions. The overwhelming use of fixed and semi-fixed expressions enhances the idea that the country is facing a real threat which people of all parties should cooperate to stop by any means. In criticising Cameron's attitude, representatives of the government used strong language such as *playing politics* and *beyond belief*. The poetic feature of alliteration involved in these expressions added rhetorical force to the language and made them more memorable, and which probably contributed to their becoming fixed expressions in the first place. The language is functionally used to express blame and sometimes release from blame.

2.3 Reflections on Constraints

It is initially necessary to go through each of the selected collocations, firstly to provide a precise description on each of them in terms of the constraints that govern its formation, and secondly because these reflections has already governed my choice of the proposed activities through which these constraints are to be signalled to students in the classroom.

(1.1) the united front: This is a semi-fixed expression composed of (adjective + noun). It is immutable in that insertion and substitution are rarely possible. It is transparent in that the constituents of the expression show an appearance of consolidation and agreement against threats.

(1.2) the battle against terrorism: This is also a semi-fixed collocation composed of two nouns linked together by the preposition against. It is commonly known as the war on terror. It is transparent. The meaning of this expression is reinforced by its being joined with the united front because they relate to the same metaphor, which is a military one.

(1.3) Islamic extremism: Even though this seems to be a restricted compound-noun collocation, unfortunately, it has become a fixed expression in that the unwise individual practices of some extremists are mostly correlated with Islam. It has negative implications of violence and hostility.

(1.4) playing politics: This is a rhetorical collocation in so far as the contradiction between the rigorousness of politics and the recreation of playing creates a fascinating metaphor for conveying certain information in that somebody does not have an acute political vision or he works for gaining personal benefits. In addition, the alliteration this expression maintains reinforces its memorability. Playing politics is more effective than does not understand politics or is not clever at politics in that either of the latter expressions carries an explicit abuse whereas the implicitness involved in playing politics is more figurative in that it signifying one side of the conflict between political parties.

(1.5) national security: This is a compound-noun collocation composed of (adjective + noun). It is restricted and frozen in that changing either of its constituents such as *local security or *national safety seems to be infelicitous.

(1.6) launch ... attack: This is a frequent collocation composed of (verb + noun). It is restricted in that it is distinguished from the other synonyms start or initiate in that launch specifically carries military connotations, as it is possible to speak of launching a ship or a missile, such as a rocket. Insertion of a modifying adjective is possible without loss of the lexico-syntactic cohesion.

(1.7) in the wake of: This idiomatic expression varies syntactically according to the position of the noun it modifies, e.g. "There have been demonstrations on the streets in the wake of the recent bomb attack", and "The storm left a trail of destruction in its wake". Semantically, the original meaning of wake as it is used here is nothing to do with awake / asleep.

(1.8) blow up: This phrasal verb collocation is transparent. Syntactically, it can be transitive as in "The police arrested two terrorists who were planning to blow up the presidential palace", or intransitive (fused) as in "A policeman was killed when his car blew up". It allows tenses variation. Semantically, it is distinguished from its more formal quasi-synonyms explode and erupt in that erupt would probably be used for a volcano or for a person losing his/her temper, whereas explode is associated more with the sudden release of pressure and loose matter rushing out in all directions.

(1.9) freeze ... budget: This is an idiomatic expression composed of (verb + noun) with the possibility of noun insertion. It implies figurative meaning and indicates the intention not to increase the budget for a certain period. It conveys information. To limit the budget is not as expressive as the original idiom nor does it convey the same meaning, which is to keep something the same.

(2.10) Home Office: This is a fixed title particularly in the United Kingdom. It lexically differs from other equivalent the Department of the Interior in the United States and the Ministry of the Interior Affairs in other countries.

(2.11) to be up to the job of: This is a fixed expression with high immutability. It indicates that somebody is potentially skilful enough to run a certain job in spite of difficulties. However, it is almost always used in a negative context indicating that the person concerned cannot match the demands put on him or her: an image which unable to can seldom convey.

(2.12) beyond belief: This is a fixed expression. It is transparent. It cannot be substituted by behind belief. It modifies a preceding adjective or a noun. Semantically, it means that something is

unbelievable as in the huts they lived in were sordid and filthy beyond belief. It sometimes means too wonderful or too dreadful for the mind to grasp as in the sunset last night was of a beauty beyond belief. Using the expression to describe one's thoughts implies how the person is unrealistic and lacks complete understanding of the internal affairs of the society.

(2.13) in the face of (alleged attempt): This is a fixed expression. It is fairly transparent. Its common collocates are words relating to aggression, danger or threat. It often appears in situations such as he showed great courage in the face of danger. Semantically, any attempt to substitute face, for example with back or hand, would fail to convey the meaning simply because the danger, threat or whatever is personified as a human adversary whom one would meet face-to-face in battle.

(2.14) fresh questions: This is an example of unrestricted collocation. The collocation of fresh with non-physical nouns indicates that new or unfamiliar issues are raised and seriously discussed or a new era will start as in this is the opportunity he needs to make a fresh start. It is fixed in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. It cannot be substituted by *raw / unwilted questions.

(2.15) police investigation: This is a compound-noun semi-fixed expression. Its constituents can have other collocates such as police force / police court. It refers to a significant part of the police job to examine the facts of a crime to find the truth about it and how it happened.

(2.16) to face ... charges: This is a restricted collocation. It is transparent and idiomatic in meaning. It means to be put on trial for committing a crime or an offence. It is distinguished from its synonyms accuse, indict, prosecute in that it is more figurative, besides the word face can hardly be substituted by *encounter/expect charges.

2.4 Teaching Procedures

In practice, suggesting procedures for demonstrating the constraints on text collocations is not enough – at least for me as a teacher – and can hardly ever fulfil the purpose of increasing students'

awareness of the random use of lexical items in spoken and written discourse. In addition, working only on theoretical assumptions may not help gauge the effectiveness of the proposed activities, nor observe the problems that may arise as students begin to apply them. Hence, I decided to go further and apply these activities in the classroom. Depending on the task-based approach as an example of inductive language teaching, I implemented the proposed activities with my own students who were divided into five heterogeneous jigsaw groups in order to know how effective my teaching procedures are. Here are the activities:

- ***Activity 1: Word Prediction***

Students were given the title of the reading text and an accompanying list of words. They were asked to go through the list in groups selecting the words that can best collocate with the title, giving reasons for their choice and adding other items, they may have in mind as shown below:

terror	threat	government	minister
shelter	kill	humid	interior affairs
space	attack	security	battle
politics	accuse	raids	bomber
breezes	drugs	comfort	aggression

You may add other collocates you have in mind:

Having done this, the students were asked to read the text to confirm or deny their expectations/choices. From experience, this activity, besides its value as a pre-reading activity in activating background knowledge and arousing curiosity, provides opportunity for purposeful discussion of the words in terms of the relationships among them thereby increasing their knowledge of collocation and lexical range. Reading the text will also facilitate understanding the meaning of unfamiliar words since words should be manipulated in their natural context.

- **Activity 2: The Odd Man Out**

The text was displayed on an overhead transparency for all students. It was typed in a way that shows the sixteen selected collocations involved in the text in a colour font with other expressions which were put randomly. Working in groups, the students were asked to focus on the colour words/phrases and select the true collocations and leave the odd ones out filling in the table below:

Table (1) Collocations and non-collocations

Collocations	Non-collocation
1. plying politics	1. political intervention
2.	2.

What is important in this activity is not so much the correct answer but the discussion stimulated among students on the choice of the answers. This activity not only promotes students' ability to identify text collocations, but also the restrictions laid on the words that are to collocate.

- **Activity 3: Collocations Made Clear**

On another transparency, the students were asked to match the collocations they have chosen with the phrases that explain their meanings as in the table below. This activity aims to assert students' full understanding of the selected collocations because of the opacity involved in some of them.

Table (2) Collocations and their meanings

Collocations	Meanings
(1) Islamic extremism	() The Ministry of Interior in the UK
(2) the united front	() new issues that require investigation
(3) the battle against terrorism	() destroy by an explosion
(4) playing politics	() the war on terror
(5) national security	() abnormality of ideas attained by some Muslims
(6) launch ... attack	() Unbelievable
(7) blow up	() keeping budget unchanged for a period of time
(8) freeze ... budget	() start a military violence in order to kill others
(9) Home Office	() lacks an acute political vision
(10) beyond belief	() people acting in unison sharing the same opinions
(11) fresh questions	() the internal precautions taken to protect the country

• **Activity 4: Classification and Description of Collocations**

In order to identify the constraints on word-combinations in the text, ten collocations were displayed on a transparency for students to discuss. A starting point for doing so was to specify the types of collocations and describe their constituents. The example below illustrates:

Table (3) Classifying and describing collocations

No.	collocation	Type	Description
0	Islamic extremism	fixed expression	compound noun
1	the united front		
2	the battle against terrorism		
3	playing politics		
4	national security		
5	launch ... attack		
6	blow up		
7	freeze ... budget		
8	Home Office		
9	beyond belief		
10	fresh questions		

- **Activity 5: Signalling the Paradigmatic Constraints**

The students, in implementing this activity, were given multiple-choice questions in which they were asked to choose the collocation that best completes the meaning justifying their choices in terms of the semantic meaning of words. Here are some samples:

Table (4) Signalling the paradigmatic constraints

1. Two terrorists were caught red handed planning to _____ the central bridge yesterday.			
a. blow into	b. blow over	c. blow up	d. blow off
2. Susan's insistence to marry Jeff is _____ belief.			
a. behind	b. under	c. below	d. beyond
3. Due to the lack of funds, salaries have been _____ for the current year.			
a. frozen	b. limited	c. reduced	d. cancelled
4. The _____ in the UK is quite alert to warn people against any alleged threats.			
a. Ministry of interior	b. Home Office	c. Interior Office	d. Domestic Office
5. NASA is going to _____ another spaceship to the moon for exploration purposes.			
a. start	b. launch	c. fly	d. throw

Students in choosing and justifying the appropriate answer were encouraged to discuss why the other distracters are not agreed or possibly convey the same information. After many errors and trials, they managed to provide a brief explanation for each item. Choosing blow up in sentence 1 matches with the swiftness implied by such tactics, whereas the other options mismatch the meaning of the sentence. In sentence 2, beyond belief cannot be substituted by *behind belief because behind refers to the physical position of someone or something with the opposite of in front of. Freezing salaries in sentence 3 does not mean reducing them. It means the inability to increase salaries at the current time because of financial difficulties. Knowing that Home Office is a fixed title in the UK, they were asked whether they have fixed titles related to their country similar to those in the UK. They found that the Red Crescent Society is a prominent parallel to the Red Cross Society in most foreign countries. In sentence 5, they found that spaceships/missiles/shuttles are

always launched rather than thrown, flown or started. Going through these constraints, the students showed great satisfaction that words do not co-occur randomly in English.

- **Activity 6: Signalling the Syntagmatic Constraints**

Teaching syntagmatic constraints helps students identify that some fixed expressions are so frozen that they hardly ever accept insertion or substitutions as shown in the three examples below:

Example 1: The students were given different substitutions of the expression the united front and were asked to explain why these expressions seem unfamiliar to native speakers of English:

the unit front in the battle against terrorism ... the front is united in the battle against terrorism ... the united confrontation in the battle against terrorism ...

Students' first reaction was that the original expression composed of adjective + noun cannot be substituted by noun + noun as in the first example because the word unit here cannot work as an adjectival such as sand dunes or leather jacket. In example two, such a collocation was rejected by students because not all collocations can be passivised as in the unlikely *cats and dogs are being rained, whereas others are not so frozen and passive is possible as in a brick has been dropped. The use of confrontation in the third sentence does not convey the same information as front in that the former refers to a situation where there is an angry disagreement between people having different opinions, and this contradicts the sense of consolidation of the community implied by the latter – front – in the face of a serious disaster.

Example 2: The students were given various substitutions of the expression in the face of to signify how they are different from the original one as shown below:

on the face of it	pull a face at	have the face to do
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Making use of Hornby (2004) and Waite (2001), the students were asked to work independently to find out how substituting prepositions or adding certain verbs changes the entire meaning of the expression. They found out that the first is an informal expression indicating that something seems good according to its external makeup as in: on the face of it, it seems like a great deal. Pull a face at shows one's ability to produce an expression on the face to show dislike to someone in order to make others laugh as in: what are you pulling a face at now? The last expression have the face to do was found as an informal British expression used to show one's aggression to act rudely and disrespectfully with others without being ashamed or embarrassed.

Example 3: Students working in groups were asked to make at least three possible substitutions of the original expression be up to the job of (ing). Here were their findings:

... will be up to the job of
... was up to the job of
... has been up to the job of

The students were able to produce three different tense forms of the expression making use of the future, the simple past and the present perfect respectively. Feeling happy because of the flexibility of the expression to accept tense modifications, they were asked to exemplify their findings in order to confirm their understanding. They wrote:

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The nominated Foreign Minister has many potential and I think he will be up to the job of improving the external relations.2. Churchill was up to the job of leading the country during the World War II.3. The Minister of Interior resigned because he has not been up to the job of overcoming riots. |
|---|

- **Activity 7: Checking and Evaluating**

In order to check students' understanding of how constraints on collocations work, they were asked to look up all the relevant collocations of the two words: wake and grip in their dictionaries, providing a simple meaning for each one, and using them in meaningful examples if possible.

2.5 Learners' Difficulties with Collocation

Collocational mismatches are frequent in the language production of non-native speakers of English, firstly due to the lack of frequent exposure to such expressions, and secondly because not all word-combinations can easily be justified. Here are examples of the difficulties most non-native speakers in general and students in particular have. According to Carter (1998: 74), particular difficulties result from collocations, which are relatively opaque semantically. Thus, explaining amicable as a synonymous of friendly does not explain why amicable divorce is collocationally acceptable but *friendly divorce is not, nor why fat paycheque cannot be substituted by obese paycheque, without producing comic results. Indian Jungle but not *African Jungle is another unjustified constraint, in this case relating to the etymological origin of the word.

Unusual collocations may be seen if an inappropriate equivalent is chosen. An example of this is presented by Palmer (1984: 72) when the translator of a Spanish guidebook writes the house is garnished with a few walnut trees instead of the house is adorned with a few walnut trees because garnished is usually applied to food. Collocational discrepancies between languages, moreover, create the same difficulty in machine translation because the counterparts of a clear road, for instance, and a heavy drinker in English are respectively a free road and a strong glass in Greek.

Collocations surprisingly are not the same among all Englishes. Seidle and McMordie (1978: 6) point out that American and British English exhibit arbitrary differences in similar phrases. Thus, the Americans often say set the table and make a decision, while the corresponding

British phrases are lay the table and take a decision. Pawley and Syder (1983: 192) also argue that metaphors represent another difficulty in understanding collocation. The higher the degree of metaphoricity of fixed expressions, the more complicated they are. Examples of this are: spill the beans meaning reveal a secret, inherit the earth meaning to become rich, and kick the bucket, which means (die). Palmer (1984: 76) points out that some individual words cannot collocate with certain groups of words. Thus, though die and pass away are synonyms, it is collocationally acceptable to say the rhododendron died, but not the rhododendron passed away. This restriction is due to the different ranges of lexical items.

3. Conclusion

Learning collocation is learning how to communicate idiomatically. The storage of collocations enables non-native speakers to add a special flavour to their speech. Promoting this skill in the classroom requires teaching vocabulary in chunks and meaningful contexts; whereas students' identification of the most important collocations of the focal word enhances this idiomaticity. To achieve this, I tried to make use of the authentic text to raise students' awareness of collocations and the constraints that govern word-combinations in English, and how risky it is to isolate words from their natural contexts. It is because words cannot operate as independent and interchangeable parts of the lexicon, but as parts of a lexical system. This notion is asserted in activity one where students read the text for gist before they work on collocations. These collocations were made clear and the students worked to try many syntagmatic and paradigmatic substitutions to check whether their findings semantically and syntactically match with or contradict the original expression. Having done this, I managed to see how the students worked, modify the activities when necessary and observe the difficulties students encountered while working on constraints. Nevertheless, whatever effective the method applied by teachers to present collocation is, can non-native speakers of English acquire the same degree of automatism in using collocations in the same way as competent native speakers of English? This is a point that would need to be explored in a further essay.

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