TEXT, IMAGE, IDEOLOGY

Picturebooks, lies and mindreading

María Cecilia Silva-Díaz*
Gretel Research Group, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Abstract
Children’s literature is rife with lying characters. The identification and fabrication of lies both in the actual world and in literature involves socio-cultural factors (including ethical and ideological factors), discursive factors (semantics and pragmatics) and cognitive factors (related with the development of Theory of Mind). This latter factor may account for the coincidences between the development of the ability to produce and identify lies and the development of narrative in children suggested in this paper. The first part offers examples of how different ideological contexts have conditioned the reception and production of the cautionary fable “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” in its classical version and in the version of Tony Ross’s picturebook. The second part analyses several portrayals of characters lying in picturebook narratives (by Eva Eriksson; Jenny Wagner and Ron Brooks; and Rindert Kromhout and Annemarie van Haerigen), showing how the interplay of words and images helps the reader recognise lies, characters’ intentions and unreliable verbal statements, and providing arguments for the role of fiction in socialisation and, specifically, for the role of picturebooks in training mindreading. Cognitive science (developmental aspects of Theory of Mind), cognitive criticism, narrative theory and picturebook theory are used as a framework to understand the demands that the identification of lies places on the implied readers of these stories and, consequently, the opportunities these stories provide to children to develop literary reading and intersubjective social skills.

Keywords: picturebooks; cognitive poetics; theory of mind; lying; narrative learning

Is it possible that literary narrative trains our capacity for mindreading and also tests its limits?
Lisa Zunshine 2003, 268

LIES AND LIARS
It would appear that we lie far more than we think we do. An experiment performed by professor Feldman1 revealed that, when engaged in conversation with a stranger, adults lie an average of three times every 10 minutes.2 Children are no exception and begin to lie from a very early age. Almost all studies agree that from the age of four the majority of children lie (Lee 2013; Talwar and Lee 2002, 2008), even if it is only to conceal some misdeed, as many literary characters do.

In fact, in the history of children’s literature, there are a significant number of characters who lie (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer 2011) often with an openly moralising intention, sometimes as a plot development factor and very often with both purposes. Picturebooks are no exception and they are full of liars. Obviously many of the narratives for children where characters lie were created with a cautionary aim in mind, or at least they sought to favour an ethical awareness. This paper analyses several aspects involved in the portrayal of lies in children’s picturebooks. In the first part of the paper, the focus is on the ideological aspect of the stories, with examples of variants in the production and reception of a text that explicitly warn of the dangers of lying. The second part lays out the theory foundations for the analysis, specifically, the development of the ability to identify lies in relation with the development of narrative in children. Lastly, the analysis outlines the cognitive challenges involved in the identification of lies, both in the actual world and in literature, and the way multimodality in picturebooks helps readers to detect lies.

For the purposes of this paper, the concept of “lie” is defined as “saying something one knows to be false with the intention of deceiving.” Everyday language assumes that to lie is simply to knowingly

*Correspondence to: Maria Cecilia Silva-Díaz, Carbonero y Sol 30, 28006, Madrid. Email: cecilia.silvadiaz@gmail.com

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say something that is false, but this is not always the case. Lying does not require what is said to be false; it requires whoever says it to believe it to be false. What is important, in fact, is the intention to deceive: “With regard to the speaker’s intention to deceive, it does not matter what actually is the case, it only matters what the speaker believes to be the case” (Meibauer 2005, 1377).

To be even more specific, for a lie to exist, four conditions need to be met: that a person makes a statement (statement condition); that the person believes the statement to be false (untruthfulness condition); that the untruthful statement be made to another person (addressee condition); and that the liar wants the other person to believe the untruthful statement to be true (intention to deceive addressee condition).

By focusing on what we may refer to as a strict concept of “lie,” I have left out of the scope of analysis other types of deception, such as deception by which a person is caused to believe a false belief, known to be false by the person originating the belief, but which is not considered to be a lie. For example, if I hide in my house and decide not to open the door to an unwelcome visitor, I am deceiving him or her—making that person believe there is nobody at home—but I am not lying.

Opting for a strict concept of what constitutes a lie proved to be necessary in order to focus on the object of study but it obviously imposes limitations by leaving out other various types of deceit that are present in many narrations, for example, the “trickster” character, or the untrustworthy narrator.

THE BOY WHO CRIED WOLF: LYING, LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

In his famous Lectures on Literature, Nabokov claims that literature was not born on the day a boy came running out of Neanderthal valley crying, “Wolf! Wolf!” with an enormous grey wolf snapping at his heels. Literature was born on the day a boy came crying, “Wolf! Wolf!” with nothing whatsoever following him. For Nabokov, the art of narration lies in the invention of this non-existent wolf; in other words, in a lie. According to the writer, all fiction writers are part liar, part narrator and part teacher, but their art resides, above all, in knowing how to lie.

Indeed, literature and lying are closely related. Both the act of creating fiction and the act of lying imply the creation of a second order which coexists with a first order reality, whether the factual world—in the case of literature—or what is believed to be true—in the case of a lie. It is something of a paradox that, as Nabokov states, the story that initiated the art of lying in literature is precisely the same one that formed the basis for the most famous educational fable to contain an explicit moral lesson against lying: “There is no believing a liar, even when he speaks the truth” pronounces Fable 210 in the Perry Index (Perry 1965).

For centuries, Aesop’s fable “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” has been told to children in order to warn them of the consequences of telling lies. However, since socio-cultural factors (including ethical and ideological concerns) naturally evolve, many readers will feel that the punishment is unnecessarily harsh by today’s standards and will go so far as to consider leaving aside the moral lesson. It is even possible to empathise with the little shepherd, who lies as a means of contending with loneliness and boredom. Elizabeth Gaufberg (2011), Professor of Medicine and Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, tells an amusing anecdote which exemplifies the discomfort that the outcome of this fable may produce in today’s readers:

My daughter Eva was in kindergarten, she told me a story that she had heard in class that day. It was the classic Aesop fable of ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’, and apart from some embellishment about how terribly bored the poor boy was tending sheep all day, her rendition was pretty much true to form. When she got to the part where the wolf devours both sheep and shepherd, she simply stopped. I couldn’t help but ask, ‘So Eva, what’s the moral? Did you learn anything from the story?’ She was silent for a few seconds, and then replied, ‘Yes. What I learned is that no matter how many times your kids trick you, you should still believe them!’ (97)

Probably guided by empathy, Eva develops her own reading of the story by justifying the behaviour of the boy as a consequence of boredom, reinventing the moral which for generations has warned of the terrible consequences of telling lies. By setting the shepherd up as a victim of negligence on behalf of the adults, she displaces the implied reader, avoids placing herself as a recipient of the story, and places the parents in that position instead. Eva’s comment is an excellent example of how the reader’s engagement with a story can vary and in this case, seems to be very conditioned by changes in the cultural context where the reception of the story takes place. Tony Ross’ picturebook, The Boy Who Cried Wolf (1985), defies the severity of the moral tale by using distantiating humour
based on exaggeration and parody. The severe tone of the original fable gives way to a parodic tone which is principally achieved through the use of comic and irreverent imagery.

The images place the story in the contemporary world and the characterisation is antagonistic: the boy is poor, gullible and a little unpleasant, while the wolf is wealthy, elegant and well-mannered. The cover shows the contrasting appearance of the two main characters; however, both the wolf and the boy are egotistical and have no qualms about seeking personal pleasure, but the same can be said of the parents: the grandmother bolts on perceiving the threat of the wolf, leaving the child alone.

Adults derive sadistic enjoyment from seeing the wolf about to eat the boy, reminding him of the moral lesson instead of coming to his aid: “You shouldn’t have told so many lies, said the grown-ups sternly.” In the end, however, the story gets turned around. The wolf decides to leave the boy alone and devours all the adults instead.

Both the moral and the power relationships are subverted when the adults who articulate the moral are punished. But that is not the end: after devouring the adults, the wolf devours the child as well. The unbridled violence appears to defy any moral discourse when in the end only the stylish, ravenous wolf is happy. However, the story may also be read inversely, where both the selfish,
following his natural instincts. In any case, the wolf’s exaggerated appetite and the lack of empathy towards the child and his parents allow the implied readers to distance themselves and enjoy the wolf’s feast, because, in certain ways, his victims deserve being punished.

Reinterpretations of the fable in the form of readings, or retellings, of this cautionary tale about lying serve to question the moral of the tale, resignify the story and demonstrate the different positions the reader may adopt in order to relate to the character of the lying boy: from one of empathy, like Eva, the girl of the anecdote, showed in her reading, to one of distance, as shown in Ross’s retelling, thereby evidencing the manner in which narrative resignification processes are closely linked to the ideology and social values of the era.

LEARNING TO LIE AND NARRATIVE LEARNING

Obviously, one would hope that a child’s ethical concept of lying would condition their fabrication of lies, though this concept may differ from culture to culture and evolve with age. However, and aside from the ethical factor, the fabrication of lies among children is conditioned by the cognitive factor. With regard to cognition, it has been observed that the fabrication of lies depends, on the one hand, on executive functioning, in other words, on the higher order psychological processes involved in goal-oriented behaviour such as self-regulation, inhibitory control, planning, working memory and strategy employment (Gombos 2006; Lang and Perner 2002) and, on the other hand, on the relationship between the telling of lies and the development of an ability to read the minds of others, in other words, the ability to identify the mental states of other people by their behaviour, otherwise known as Theory of Mind.

Cognitive research into the development of children’s ability to fabricate lies has focused on aspects such as the intention with which children lie, the age at which they begin to lie and their ability to lie consistently (Lee 2013). The majority of these studies point out the close relationship that exists between the fabrication of lies and Theory of Mind. Lying is related to Theory of Mind in that it implies both consideration of the beliefs of others and intentional action designed to create belief. Consistent lying requires, at the very least, the development of a second-order belief such as, “I believe that you believe,” which, in the case of lying, translates to “I want you to believe.”

According to specialists (Lang and Perner 2002; Lee 2013), the capacity for lying is not only related to the comprehension of the minds of others, but also to the comprehension of the person’s own intentions and the development of self-control. With subtle differences, and some questions as to the types of experiment, which have not been performed in natural situations, experimental studies coincide in concluding that the evolution of the capacity for lying is gradually perfected with age and that these aspects are very closely related.

At the age of 2–3, children are capable of making affirmations that are deliberately false. It is unclear whether these affirmations are intended to deceive or if they are forms of word play or wish fulfilment. In any case, some researchers (Talwar and Lee 2002) consider them to be rudimentary forms of intentional verbal deception. This type of affirmation is linked to forms of pretence. Children’s experience of separation between language and reality and their awareness that language may be used to invoke non-existent realities is one of the most important steps from the perspective of the development of a reader of literature (Colomer 2010, 20–2). Some researchers believe that the pretend play games children begin to engage in at this age already contain the seed for developing a Theory of Mind even before they begin to comprehend the mental representations of others (Austingon 1996; Davies, Woolley, and Bruell 2002; Saracho 2014).

Between the ages of 3 and 4, true lies emerge and are very frequent. At this age, the majority of children are ready to lie when necessary. This second stage in the production of lies coincides with a significant change in the development of a Theory of Mind (Talwar and Lee 2002). Studies show that children who lie intentionally have developed what is called a first order belief understanding, this being a first step towards the development of a Theory of Mind. This means that they are capable of separating their beliefs from the beliefs of others as has been shown in the now classic psychology school tests. However, most children at this stage find it hard to maintain the lie in a consistent manner (suffering from what is known as semantic leakage control) (Lee 2013).

Towards the age of 7–8, a third level of elaboration of lies appears. At this level children are fully versed in the art of lying. They are capable of controlling their gestures and expressions in order to consistently maintain the lie they have told.
in previous statements. From a cognitive point of view, this ability appears to be related to the development of what is called second order belief, a cognitive skill that consists in thinking what the other person is thinking.

The ability to lie continues to develop over the years, and between the ages of 7 and 12, all children have the ability to lie and maintain their lies. One piece of information that may cause surprise is that from this stage on the tendency to lie diminishes, teenagers being more honest than children.

These developmental stages that give rise to the elaboration of consistent and coherent lies do not seem to be very different from those proposed in studies on the development of the narrative ability in children of these ages, as in the now classic study of Arthur Applebee (1978). Lying and telling stories have much in common. For example, the second stage of lying, coincides with the type of story Applebee calls an “unfocused chain” in which “the head bears little relation to the tail” (Applebee 1978, 63), due to the fact that the common attribute that links the statements is constantly changing. To be consistent with lies requires being able to maintain two conflicting beliefs over a long period of time without changing the focus (semantic leakage). The two beliefs, their own and that which they wish to make the receiver believe: (what they really did and what they said they did) exist in parallel. Small children know how to lie, but it is difficult for them to be consistent with their lies. On the other hand, in the next stage, when children are capable of maintaining a lie, the structure of the lie in relation to later statements is similar to the narrative structure Applebee calls “focused chains.” The children in this stage can maintain the coherence by centering the statements on the belief that they want to transmit to the other person and chaining them (maintaining the consistency and the causal logic).

Pretence, looking for consistency and coherence, considering one’s own and other people’s mental states, intention–prediction, feeling empathy: all these cognitive aspects involved in the development of lying bear a strong relationship with the reception of fiction. This is of course only an inference and would require studies in order to relate the cognitive processes involved in identifying and producing lies with those of reading and telling stories.

READING AND MINDREADING

It appears that we use Theory of Mind not only to understand the behaviour of real people, but also that of literary characters, even though we are aware that they have a different ontological status. According to cognitive poetics critic Lisa Zunshine (2004), “[l]iterature pervasively capitalizes on and stimulates Theory of Mind mechanisms that had evolved to deal with real people, even as on some level readers do remain aware that fictional characters are not real people at all” (131).

A large part of the pleasure of literature lies in the possibility of “trying on” mental states as Zunshine explains (Zunshine 2004, 132). This trying-on of clothes in the changing room allows for what literary critics had intuited a long time ago, a way in which literature offers us vicarious experience: feeling empathy and at the same time keeping our distance from the position that the narrative assigns us (Nikolajeva 2010). Maria Nikolajeva (2012a) explains how the double-coded narrations in picturebooks stimulate the development of a Theory of Mind and contribute to the socialisation of children through vicarious experiences and how literary texts for young readers can expose them to ethical options (Nikolajeva 2012b).

The findings of cognitive science regarding children’s ability to identify lies and the incorporation of Theory of Mind in fictional reading offered by cognitive criticism provide new insight into what had previously only been intuited: that the identification of lies in narratives by a child reader may present degrees of complexity for less expert readers.

In real life, and in literature as well, Theory of Mind can reach extraordinary degrees, as for example in this sentence: “I think that you believe that he thinks that she does not believe that he is ill.” Cognitive research shows that from the fourth level of belief onwards, people find it difficult to manage the information. Narratives where characters lie engage the reader’s Theory of Mind, so it would be expected, especially in those aimed at children, that they maintain levels of belief within manageable ranges and within a growing complexity related with the development of readers’ Theory of Mind. As Nikolajeva states: “for a novice reader mind-reading requires more effort, but (…) may be more rewarding” (Nikolajeva 2014, 78). Bettina Kümmeling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer have pointed out that picturebooks where characters lie lay the groundwork for later
understanding of lying characters (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer 2013, 154).

Molly (Malla in original Swedish) is the main character of the story told and illustrated by Eva Eriksson Molly Goes Shopping (2003). She is sent grocery shopping and does not bring what she should have bought. Once back home, she lies to her grandmother in order to conceal her slip: “Beans! That’s what I said. I said I wanted beans but she gave me potatoes anyway.” Grandmother seems furious: “She gave you potatoes even though you asked for beans? What kind of person is she!”

As Molly sees her grandmother has believed her, she maintains the lie: “Yes, she was so dumb that person. ‘I don’t want potatoes’, I said, ‘I want beans’. ‘No you are getting potatoes’, she said.”

The reader knows what has happened before in the story and, by using this information, is expected to infer that Molly is lying and keeping up a lie. Recognising the lie implies mistrusting the words of the character and recognising them as false. The reader needs to consider intentionality (Molly’s intention to make her grandmother believe that it was the shop assistant that has made the mistake because she does not want to admit that she was not able to run the errand correctly), and also has to take into account Molly’s double belief (the double belief being that what Molly says is not what she knows, but what she wants her grandmother to believe). In order to do this, the reader requires the cognitive ability known as false-believing, in other words, thinking that the other person believes something different from you: “Although Molly and I know what happened, the grandmother thinks that the shop assistant gave her potatoes.”

A more advanced reader could even think that the grandmother in fact knew that Molly was lying, but chose to pretend to believe the lie in order to teach her a lesson. From an ethical point of view, there is much more understanding towards the little liar than in Aesop’s fable.

Moreover, children’s picturebooks in which characters lie train the development of a Theory of Mind in a second sense (different from that of identifying the lie). This consists in using Theory of Mind in order to plausibly explain the behaviour of a character as it is represented in the pictures.

Grandma has gone to the store to complain to the clerk. When she is back Molly hides under the table Although the text neither mentions the behaviour nor explains the emotion, the reader
can interpret it from a limited number of possibilities within the story: Molly hides under the table because (1) she is ashamed that her grandmother has found out that she told a lie, (2) she feels guilty about having lied, or (3) she is frightened that her grandmother will punish her for having told a lie. It is unlikely that the reader might interpret the behaviour very differently, say, that Molly is under the table because she has lost a potato.

In all fictional works, the reader must enter into an intersubjective game and activate their Theory of Mind if they want to explain the behaviour of the character through their motivations, thoughts and intentions. Theory of Mind allows us to attribute beliefs, thoughts and intentions to the behaviour of the characters, even when they are not expressed in the text (Zunshine 2004). As poetical of cognition critics have explained, readers associate the behaviour of a character with their mental state. However, when the behaviour of a character consists in affirming something that we know is false, attributing a mental state to the person who is lying—their motivations, beliefs and thoughts—implies that the reader, instead of associating, actually separates the behaviour from the state of mind. In other words they must consider what the person says, identify it as false and distinguish between what they say and what they believe. In stories in which characters lie, Theory of Mind has a double function and an additional degree of complexity similar to the reception of irony (Kümmerling-Meibauer 1999).

**LIES AND PICTUREBOOKS: THE LIE DETECTORS**

For young children, detecting a lie can be difficult, because it implies knowing that what language says is not necessarily true. Picturebooks provide exceptional help in developing this skill, thanks to their double language and the help given by the pictures. Thus, a common strategy that picturebooks use to help the reader identify statements that try to trick you is to use the illustrations as a type of “visual lie detector,” in other words as visual evidence that challenges the statement. Thus in the book *Little Donkey and the Birthday Present* (2001) by Rindert Kromhout and Annemarie van Haeringen, Little Donkey is so delighted with the kite that he chose as a present for his friend Jackie that he hides it in order to keep it. When it is time to go, his mother asks him for the present and Little Donkey says he has lost it. Little Donkey thinks it is a shame his mother has found the kite after having hidden it so well.

With this strategy, the text relates what the liar wants the other person to believe while images reveal he is lying. The interanimation of words and images helps show two aspects of a lie on the same page: the actual facts and the deceiving words of the character.

The same strategy, but with a higher level of complexity, is used in *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, by Jenny Wagner and Ron Brooks (1979). John Brown lives with Rose and doesn’t want any competition, when Midnight Cat appears. Therefore, he pretends he has not seen the cat as it is shown in the dialogue between John Brown and Rose: “Oh, there, said Rose. I think it’s a cat.” “I don’t see any cat,” said John Brown. “I’m sure it’s a cat. Go and give him some milk.” “There is nobody there,” said John Brown.

There is no lie in John Brown's first statement: “I don’t see any cat.” He really does not see a cat due to the fact that his head is turned in the other direction. Theory of Mind, however, allows us to interpret his behaviour in terms of beliefs and intentions. John Brown turns his head because he has seen the cat, but he wants Rose to believe that he hasn’t seen it. In this case, the gap...
between images characteristic of the picturebooks (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001; Van der Linden 2007) hides the probable moment in which the dog has seen the cat, just before he turns his head the other way: John Brown tries to trick Rose because he feels jealous. In this appraisal, the interpretation of emotions and the identification of deceitful behaviour come together.

The reader may think that in the second statement, “There is nobody there,” John Brown is lying, because everything points to the fact that he knows the cat is in the garden. To reach this conclusion, the reader must use Theory of Mind applied to a highly cognitive emotion, jealousy, in order to explain the ultimate intention that lies behind the lie: although he knows there is a cat...
in the garden, John Brown lies in order to make Rose believe there is no one there. John Brown lies because he thinks that when the cat arrives, Rose will love the cat more than him. The intentions and emotions that guide the actions in this tale are neither explained in the text nor in the illustrations. They must be interpreted by the reader. As Nikolajeva puts it: “Multimodal narratives frequently make use of ambiguity created in the interaction between media when conveying a character’s emotional state” (Nikolajeva 2014, 95).

A different strategy to help identify lies can be found in another of the “Little Donkey” books. Mummy has gone out and Little Donkey has stayed at home with Hen. Every time Hen tells him he can’t do something, Little Donkey replies that his mother always lets him. Young readers can use their own experience of the variation of permissiveness between adults that look after children, to know that Little Donkey is lying in order to try to get the inexperienced Hen to let him do what he wants.

However, textual reinforcement uncovers Little Donkey’s tactic. When his mother arrives home and tells him to go and have a bath, Little Donkey replies that he will not do so because the babysitter always lets him go to bed without a bath. The reader knows what has happened between Hen and Little Donkey, and thus knows that the statement is false. Recognising the falsity allows the reader to detect the first lies by contrast, in the event that they have not already done so thanks to the reiteration. Thus in this case, the lie has not been pointed out through the images, but by a reversal in the plot.

**Conclusions**

We have seen that detecting and judging lies that appear in storybooks requires not only an ideological and ethical component, but also the development of a Theory of Mind and an engagement with the text through empathy with the characters. The discursive capacities of the picturebook as far as the relationship between text and image as well as the sequencing with gaps gives us help and conditioning factors to detect lies in more or less complex situations. Literature and, specifically, picturebooks can help children in their process of identifying lies and shedding light on the intentions hidden behind lies.

The ability to identify lies seems central to social interactions and picturebooks can be a training field for it. We have also seen that picturebooks help train interpretative skills that are necessary for reading fiction. We thought that narratives for
children where the characters lie contribute to socialisation and favour an ethical awareness, and we found proof of this in that there are many stories where characters lie. However, Cognitive poetics has offered new perspectives to children’s books criticism, specifically in this case, aspects related to the production of text that help children train their mind-reading abilities when they identify lies and also aspects related with the way reader’s engagement with texts may vary according to the historical context and readers’ experience. These new perspectives place emphasis and better explain the socialising function of literature when it allows us to experiment and develop the necessary intersubjective skills.

It would be interesting to analyse other types of narratives that deal with lying and deception such as the trickster character or unreliable narrators within a cognitive framework. I am sure that the crosspoint between children’s literature studies and cognitive studies will allow us to delve deeper into the relationship between Theory of Mind and studies on the production and reception of fiction written for children. Cognitive poetics has given different perspectives on the relationship between literary experience and the actual world. In particular, cognitive criticism has shown how fiction can help readers develop their Theory of Mind. Inversely, the use of literature and the experience and evidence brought by professionals working with children reading stories could be very productive to cognitive research.

Notes
1. Dean of the Amherst College of Social and Behavioral Sciences of the University of Massachusetts.
2. As explained in the radio programme, “Why Factor” (BBC World) and in an interview on his website.
3. Some studies conclude that socialisation to the rules of one’s culture influences children’s willingness to lie accordingly (Lee 2013, 94).
4. Empirical research by Talwar and Lee (2008) suggests that when evaluating a lie, younger children pay more attention to the factuality of a statement and the adherence or violation of rules (e.g. promise keeping or breaking) to make their moral evaluations, whereas older children consider the character’s intention to deceive itself to make their evaluation.
5. The experiment has been performed numerous times in schools of psychology. For example you have two boxes: one of Smarties and the other of Band-Aids. The researcher has placed the Band-Aids in the Smarties box and asks the child what they think is in the box. The child replies “Smarties.” The researcher opens the box and shows the child that in fact it contains Band-Aids. Next another person or a hand puppet appears on the scene. The researcher asks, “Where do you think X will look for the Band-Aids?” The majority of children over three reply “in the Band-Aid box” even though they know that in fact they are in the Smarties box.

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