

## The Analysis of Modal Hedges Used by the Main Character of the Comic Big Nate from the Top

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on analyzing the modal hedges used on the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Peirce. The data of this study were taken by using the documentation method and note-taking technique from the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce in 2010. This comic is an American daily comic strip beginning in 1991. Based on the background, the research about analyzing modal hedges used on the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce was conducted on the following problem: First, What are the modal hedges used by the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce? Second, how are the modal hedges used by the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce? This study used the descriptive qualitative method. Thus, the data were obtained from the utterance of used the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce. Data analysis exposed several findings answering the formulated research questions.*

### Keywords

hedg; modal hedge; big nate



## I. Introduction

Communication is an essential context in human life socially. Fadilah & Habibah (2021) defines the term 'communication' as expressing the idea between one person to another, or in other words, the utterance between the speaker and listener. In communication, people use language to provide information, express thoughts and requests, express feeling commands, etc. In expressing ideas and feelings, people often use a statement containing hedges (Unola & Mardijono, 2013). In giving and receiving the information, the hearer and speaker could comprehend each other in a good approach that they carry out the rules of smooth communication. To achieve successful communication, they should follow the rules that organize how to communicate well (Napis, 2008). Communication is the process of delivering messages by someone to other people to tell, change attitudes, opinions or behavior either directly orally or indirectly through the media. In this communication requires a reciprocal relationship between the delivery of messages and recipients namely communicators and communicants (Hasbullah, et al: 2018).

Hedging consists of several categories, but in this paper, the writer will only discuss the modal hedges in the conversation in the comic Big Nate from the top by Lincoln Peirce. In the comic, some actors get the role of the main character and supporting characters. Both the main character and the supporting character play an essential role, but the main character has a special role that becomes the focus of attention of the story. The main character shows more commonly and is also more appeared than the supporting

characters (Fadilah & Habibah, 2021). Therefore, in this paper, the writer discussed the modal hedges contained in the conversation of the main character.

Lakoff (cited in Hardjanto, 2016) defines the term ‘hedges’ as “words whose meaning involves fuzziness— words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy”. Lakoff and Zadeh (cited in Fadilah & Habibah, 2021) stated that hedges are linguistic devices that control the degree of fuzziness in the communication of the conversation. The term “hedging” is also defined as a diverse area of linguistics studies engaged with linguistics characteristics like pragmatics, semantics, sense, and language values (Schoroder & Zimmer cited in Bashir et al., 2018). Hassan & Muhamed Said (2020) illustrate the term ‘hedging’ as the action of using linguistic devices as hedges definite context for specific communicative targets, such as imprecision, mitigation, politeness, etc.

Basically, the use of hedging has the means to illustrate the hesitation or self-confidence in what has been communicated (Septiarini et al., 2019). Lakoff (cited in Bashir et al., 2018) describes the argument on the pragmatics perceptions of hedges markers in his analysis on the hedging theory. He is mostly involved with reasonable properties of linguistic terms that are based on the speech act concepts. Based on his analysis, hedges play roles in performative conversations. Fraser (cited in Bashir et al., 2018) illustrates the theory of “hedged performative” as “hedging as a rhetorical strategy and necessary pragmatic competence of speakers”. Myers (cited in Hardjanto, 2016) states that “a sentence that looks like a claim but has no hedging is probably not a statement of new knowledge”.

Hyland (1998) implies that hedging can be applied to present new knowledge. According to Hyland (cited in Fadilah & Habibah, 2021), “A hedge is any linguistic means used to indicate either (a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth of an accompanying proposition or (b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically. This thing certainly can help speakers from saying incorrect or uncertain meaning or facts from the statement.” The purpose of hedging devices used in this conversation is to let the speakers’ sequence time consider what they will utter next because they reasonably doubt the words mentioned before, or it cannot prove the truthfulness of the statement itself (Septiarini et al., 2019). Carter & McCarthy (cited in Fadilah & Habibah, 2021) stated that in English especially, modality is frequently communicated through modal auxiliaries. The auxiliaries are commonly used to utter the degree of certainty and obligation. Perkins (cited in Hardjanto, 2016) states, “doing research on modality is very similar to trying to move in an overcrowded room without treading on anyone else’s feet”. Moreover, according to Lyons (1977: 452), the term ‘modality’ is involved with a speaker’s “opinion or attitude towards the proposition that the sentence expresses or the situation that the proposition describes”. Yu (cited in Fadilah & Habibah, 2021) differentiates four broad hedging types: performative (mental) hedges, pragmatic marker hedges, and quantificational hedges. The categories of modal hedges are as follows:

1. Modal auxiliary verbs: may, might, can, could, must, shall, should, will, would
2. Modal adjectives: possible, likely, probable
3. Modal adverbs: possibly, perhaps, probably, maybe
4. Modal nouns: possibility, chance

Furthermore, limited previous research has been done to evaluate modal hedges. Most of the research has been analyzing the movies, and not many researchers conducted research that is specifically about modal hedges. Besides, no researcher evaluates modal hedges in the comic. The writer’s investigation found examples of previous research related to modal hedges, for example, the research by Fadilah & Habibah (2021) about

modal hedges used on the main characters' dialogues in knives out movie written by Brian Johnson, modal verbs hedging in Nigerian Legal Discourse (Bashir et al., 2018), hedging through the use of modal auxiliaries in English academic discourse (Hardjanto, 2016), the hedges used by Ronnie Miller and Steve Miller during the summer holiday in the last song movie (Unola & Mardijono, 2013), hedging used in courtroom scenes appearing in the American movies (Hansri, 2018), hedges used in scientific EFL writings (Widiawati, 2018), modal hedges in EFL argumentative paragraphs (Hatipoğlu & Algi S., 2018).

However, no researcher analyzes the comic's modal hedges, particularly the research in the analysis used by the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Peirce. Based on the description above, this study aims to analyze the modal hedges used on the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce. Thus, the author organized two research questions:

1. What are the modal hedges used by the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce?
2. How are the modal hedges used by the main character of the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce?

## II. Research Method

A descriptive qualitative research methodology has been used in this study. Big Nate is a famous American comic that has been a daily comic strip beginning in 1991 and illustrated by Lincoln Pierce. The intended audience is primarily middle school students. The subject of this study is Nate Wright. He is eleven years old and a C-grade student in the sixth grade. He supposes himself as a self-described genius and a six-grade Renaissance man (Peirce, 2010). The genre refers to humor which describes more about Nate Wright in school life. The data source in this research was taken from Big Nate, the top comic written by Lincoln Pierce in 2010.

The research instrument plays an essential role in obtaining the data of this study, for it is a set of methods used to collect the data. Sherman and Webb (cited in Fadilah & Habibah, 2021), "Qualitative research is concerned with meaning as they appear to, or is achieved by persons in a live social situation.". The data used are taken from the dialogues uttered by the main characters in the comic Big Nate from the Top by Lincoln Pierce. The steps of data collecting were done by the following;

1. Reading the comic; was done to understand the story and decide which utterances would be used;
2. After the data was found, the writer underlined the modal hedges in the comic.
3. Collect the data and put it in the list.

Data analysis has been done by identifying the category of the modal hedges. After identifying the modal hedges, then the writer classified the utterances by the type of modal hedges based on the kinds. Then, the writer analyzed the sociolinguistics contexts based on the standard question by Fishman (Ariesta, 2015), Who speaks what language to whom and when? Thus, four things that need to be considered in analyzing Fishman's theory: the speaker, the topic of the conversation, the interlocutor, and speaking time. The last step was sorting the utterances based on the page of the category of modal hedges.

### III. Result and Discussion

The findings are based on analyzing engaging modal hedges taken from Nate Wright's utterance as the comic's main character. To answer the first research question, I found three categories of modal hedges: modal auxiliary verb, modal adverb, and modal noun. In modal auxiliary, it was found the utterances using *can/can't*, *could/couldn't*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, and *would*. Second, the use of modal adverb was found *maybe* and *perhaps*. In modal nouns, it was found *chance* in the utterance.

The use of modal hedges as politeness and communicative strategy presents the functional account of hedging in the conversation. There has been a tendency to expand the reference of modal *hedges* to politeness-related features of the conversation, such as dialog, discourse, debate, and diatribe. Moreover, the critical implication of the previous study's findings was the study of academic writing as one of the compulsory courses taught in Indonesian universities where English subject is still paid with low intention (Widiawati, 2018). Hedging is important to maintain the writers' academic credibility. In addition, hedging will help writers protect their reputation as scholars and minimize the damage which may arise.

Answering the second question concerning how the modal hedges are used by the main character of the comic *Big Nate from the Top* by Lincoln Pierce, the results and details presented in this chapter are divided into three major parts as follows:

#### 3.1 Part 1: Modal Auxiliary Verb

In the comic of *Big Nate from the Top*, there are some modal auxiliaries found in the conversation as like *can/can't*, *could/couldn't*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will* and *would*.

##### a. Can and Can't

The following are the conversations contained the modal auxiliary *can/can't*:

Table 1

Page	Nate Wright's Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
7	"Dad, do you have to tag along? <i>Can't</i> I shop for back-to-school clothes myself?"	Buying school's clothes	Nate Wright's Father	Holiday time (Before back-to-school)
18	"I <i>can't</i> help it! I'm hot"	Summer	Nate Wright's Father	Summer session
19	"I can't take much more of this I really <i>can't</i> ."	School's assignment	Nate Wright's friend	First day of back-to-school
23	"But why waste your time being nice to someone who <i>can't</i> stand you? What's up with that?"	A gift	Nate Wright's friend	First day of back-to-school
26	" <i>Can't</i> we leave someone at home"	Holiday	Nate Wright's Father	Summer

44	"Yup, and I <i>can't</i> wait to get elected! My allowance just doesn't go as far as it used to!"	President election	Gina	Afternoon
55	"Mr. Galvin? <i>Can</i> I interview you for school newspaper?"	Interview	Mr. Galvin	School time
69	"Think you <i>can</i> cover me, Francis? Ha!"	Running	Francis	Summer
92	"Coach John, I'm sick. I <i>can't</i> go to the nurse's office?"	Permission	Coach John	School time
94	"I <i>can't</i> help it"	Mr. John's class	Nate Wright's friend	School time
95	"Coach John is an absolute psycho! I don't think I <i>can</i> stand another day of him subbing"	Coach John	Nate Wright's friends	School time
97	" <i>Can</i> we do away with the "shirts vs. skins" think"	Sport	Nate Wright's teacher	Afternoon
98	"Dad, <i>can</i> I have a few bucks to buy hot lunch?"	Lunch	Nate Wright's Father	When Nate Wright was in the kitchen
99	"Me too, but we <i>can</i> ..."	Thanksgiving	Jeff	School time
104	"It's the feeling you can do no wrong! Like, in basketball, it's the feeling you <i>can't</i> miss a shot!"	Basket	Nate Wright's friends	When they were at sports field
104	"... and you really <i>can't</i> miss! Not when you're in the zone!"	Basket	Nate Wright's friends	When they were at sports field
114	"Mrs. Godfrey, <i>can</i> I be excused from class? My nose is bleeding."	Permission	Mrs. Godfrey	School time
128	"Hello, <i>can</i> I speak to chief meteorologist wink summers!"	Snow	Nate Wright's friends	Winter
142	"I <i>can</i> be anyone, dear boy"	Robbed	Nate Wright's friends	School time
142	"I <i>can</i> become almost invisible."	Robbed	Francis	School time
142	"Like all great detectives, I am a	Robbed	Francis	School time

	chameleon! I <i>can</i> change my identity at will”			
163	“Here, Gordie, you <i>can</i> leave your “femme fatality” with me!”	Femme fatality comic book series	Geordie	When they were at home
169	“I <i>can’t</i> believe you’re still eating your way through your Halloween candy”	Halloween	Nate Wright’s friends	After Halloween
180	“Those sorts of powerful emotions <i>can</i> be overwhelming!”	Love sickness	Jenny	School time
185	“I <i>can’t</i> create under these conditions.”	Gruffin	Nate Wright’s friends	School time
189	“I <i>can’t</i> help it! I grind my teeth when I’m stressed out!”	Grinding the teeth	Mrs. Godfrey	School time

#### b. Could/ Couldn’t

The following are the conversations contained the modal auxiliary *could/couldn’t*:

**Table 2**

<b>Page</b>	<b>Nate Wright’s Utterances</b>	<b>The Topic of the Conversation</b>	<b>The Interlocutor</b>	<b>The Time of Speaking</b>
21	“Um... right, but I <i>couldn’t</i> read your hand-writing.”	Writing a letter	Artur	School time
42	“Oh. Come on! I bet I <i>could</i> beat Gina!”	Gina for president	Nate Wright’s friends	School time
63	“Uh... that’s cool, Peter, but next time you say “James Joyce’s ulyssess”, <i>could</i> you turn your head in the other direction?”	Learn to read	Peter	School time
84	“Think we could get her back?”	Mrs. Esterhaus’ assignment	Nate Wright’s friends	School time
124	“How about a westiepoo? We <i>could</i> get a westiepoo!”	Dog	Nate Wright’s father	When they were at home
174	“Arthur! I didn’t know you <i>could</i> skate!”	Skate	Arthur	Winter
179	“ <i>Could</i> some lovely lass have slipped me a valentine the other day	A valentine	Mrs. Czerwick	15 February



	without me realizing it?			
198	“Because he <i>could</i> tell I’m a percussion prodigy!”	Music	Nate Wright’s friend	School time

### c. May

The following are the conversations consists the modal auxiliary *may*:

**Table 3**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
145	“ <i>May</i> I ask you a few questions?”	Money stolen	Jenny	School time
160	“ <i>May</i> I speak to your father, please?”	Mrs. Godfrey’s call	Nate Wright’s father	When they were at home

### d. Might

The following are the conversations consists the modal auxiliary *might*:

**Table 3**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
72	“Honest-shmonest! You’ve made us a target for ticked-off trick-or treaters! You <i>might</i> as well have spray-painted a bullseye on our house!”	Halloween	Nate Wright’s father	When they were at home
94	“I think I <i>might</i> actually prefer Mrs. Godfr-...”	Subtitute teacher	Nate Wright’s friend	School time
119	“I mean, you <i>might</i> as well just make us whittle our pencils!”	Pencil	Mr. Rosa	School time

### e. Will/Won’t

The following are the conversations contained the modal auxiliary *will/won’t*:

**Table 4**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
7	“You will make me buy something dorky!”	School’s cloth	Nate Wright’s father	Before back-to-

				school time
13	"I <i>will</i> take it."	School binder	Cashier	When they were in the bookstore
20	"I <i>won't</i> let him boss me around!"	Reading	Nate Wright's friend	When they were in the garden
28	"I <i>will</i> need lots of energy for the game, so I'm eating a twelve-pack of "power bars"!"	Sport	Nate Wright's coach	School time
30	"Once you see a little action, you <i>will</i> forget all about it!"	Football	Nate Wright's coach	School time
41	"You <i>will</i> never hear anyone use the expression "working like a cat"!"	Comparing the dog and cat	Nate Wright's friend	When they were in the field
43	"I guess I <i>will</i> just have to settle for treasurer."	President	Nate Wright's friends	School time
47	"What a shame I <i>will</i> not be running for student government!"	Student government	Nate Wright's friends	After school
47	"They <i>will</i> be deprived of my leadership!"	Leadership	Nate Wright's friends	After school
51	"I <i>will</i> tell you why, chester!"	Detention	Nate Wright's friend	School time
52	"Your report consists of three x-rays and a restraining order, so I'm guessing you <i>will</i> be here awhile."	Report	Mrs. Czerwicky	School time
53	"Chester, I already tried once! It <i>won't</i> do any good!"	Report	Nate Wright's friend	School time
70	"We <i>will</i> have some treats for you guys... well... um... shortly."	Trick or treat	Nate Wright's friends	When they were at home
103	"I don't think I <i>will</i> eat Turkey again as long as I live!"	Eating	Nate Wright's friends	After school time
144	"Never fear, Sheila! The culprit <i>will</i> be caught!"	Money stolen	Nate Wright's friends	School time
144	"I'm currently conducting an exhaustive investigation of Francis' locker, which <i>will</i> undoubtedly	Money stolen	Nate Wright's friends	School time



	yield a multitude of vital information!”			
146	“Believe you me, spitsy <i>will</i> find that cat!”	A cat	Nate Wright’s friend	Winter
147	“I’m not at liberty to discuss it, but suffice it to say my wardrobe <i>will</i> provide you with some clues about the matter!”	Reporting a disturbing incident	Mrs. Shipulski	School time
158	“I <i>will</i> throw down some killer yo mamas at the next person to come around the corner!”	Smackdown	Nate Wright’s friends	School time
163	“Don’t worry she <i>will</i> be in good hands!”	The new issue of ‘femme fatality’	Gordie	When they were at home
175	“Ooh! Let me take a look! I <i>will</i> give you my professional opinion!”	Valentine’s day	Francis	School time
178	“You know what, I think I <i>will</i> go sit down.”	Valentine’s day	Mrs. Czerwick	School time
203	“Well... I <i>will</i> just have to learn on the job.”	Photography	Nate Wright’s friends	School time
209	“A fortune is supposed to tell you. “One day you <i>will</i> be rich” or “today” will be your lucky day”! It’s supposed to predict the future!”	Fortune cookie	Nate Wright’s friend	When they were in the garden

#### f. Would

The following are the conversations contained the modal auxiliary *would*:

**Table 5**

<b>Page</b>	<b>Nate Wright’s Utterances</b>	<b>The Topic of the Conversation</b>	<b>The Interlocutor</b>	<b>The Time of Speaking</b>
25	“Well. That <i>would</i> depend on what day it was.”	Last day on earth	Nate Wright’s friend	When they were in the garden
25	“It <i>would</i> matter if it was a Sunday. Sunday’s my tv night.”	Last day on earth	Nate Wright’s friend	When they were in the garden
25	“Of course, if “family guy” was a rerun, that <i>would</i> be a different	Last day on earth	Nate Wright’s friend	When they were in the garden

	story.”			
46	“Not a lot of money! Just enough so I <i>wouldn’t</i> have to hold a bake sale!”	Running	Mr. Rosa	Before going home from school
57	“I thought the old gal <i>would</i> be dead by now!”	Mrs. Bigbee	Nate Wright’s friends	School time
63	“Listen, Peter, if we’re going to be ‘book buddies’, we <i>would</i> better get to work!”	Reading	Peter	After school time
67	“Dad, don’t you think you <i>would</i> better get ready?”	Trick-or-treaters	Nate Wright’s father	When they were at home
72	“Nice move, Dad. Only you <i>would</i> forget to buy Halloween candy!”	Halloween candy	Nate Wright’s father	When they were at home
76	“Mister, <i>would</i> you like to buy a wall hanging to support the junior woodchucks?”	The wall hanging	Nate Wright’s neighbor	When Nate’s visiting his neighbor’s house
127	“Yeah, it <i>would</i> be less painful.”	Snow	Nate Wright’s friend	Winter
162	I never thought I <i>would</i> say this, but... God bless global warming!	Global warming	Gordie	When they were at Nate’s house

### g. Shall

The following is the conversation contained the modal auxiliary *shall*:

**Table 6**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
140	“ <i>Shall</i> we discuss my fee?”	Robbed	Nate Wright’s friends	School break time

### h. Should

The following are the conversations contained the modal auxiliary *should*:

**Table 7**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
83	“It <i>should</i> come in handy...”	Chess	Nate Wright’s father	After school time
112	“So I <i>should</i> be able to accomplish great things	Education	Mr. Galvin	School time

	without any formal schooling!”			
195	“Listen, though, I don’t think you <i>should</i> wear that tweed blazer anymore, It just calls attention to how fate you are.”	Forecast last night	Nigh Wright’s friend	Morning

### i. Must

The following is the conversation contained the modal auxiliary *must*:

**Table 8**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
50	“But you <i>must</i> have done something, chester! You don’t det detention for no reason.”	Detention	Chester	School time

## 3.2 Part 2: Modal Adverbs

In the comic of *Big Nate from the Top*, there are some modal adverbs found in the conversation as like *maybe* and *perhaps*.

### a. Maybe

The following are the conversations contained the modal adverbs *maybe*:

**Table 9**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
106	“Okay, okay. <i>Maybe</i> , the whole universe is bit much.”	Dibs	Nate Wright’s friend	Before going to school
123	“Actually, you’re already pretty old so <i>maybe</i> ...”	Dog	Nate Wright’s father	When they were at home

### b. Perhaps

The following is the conversation contained the modal adverbs *perhaps*:

**Table 10**

Page	Nate Wright’s Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
30	“... or <i>perhaps</i> not.”	Football	Nate Wright’s coach	Sport time at school

164	"Days. <i>Perhaps</i> weeks."	Femme fatality	Nate Wright's father	When they were at home
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### 3.3 Part 3: Modal Noun

In the comic of *Big Nate from the Top*, there is some modal noun found in the conversation as like *chance*.

#### a. Chance

The following is the conversations contained the modal noun *chance*:

**Table 11**

Page	Nate Wright's Utterances	The Topic of the Conversation	The Interlocutor	The Time of Speaking
56	"Oh ho! A <i>chance</i> to mold young minds!"	Reading	Mrs. Bigbee	School time

By showing the utterances above, the modal hedges could be used to illustrate the degree of fuzziness in the transmission of the dialogue and show imprecision, mitigation, politeness, reluctance, and self-confidence. These statements are supported by Septiarni (2019), Lakoff and Zadeh (cited in Fadilah & Habibah, 2021), and Hassan & Muhamed Said (2020). In addition, it could be used to help explain whether something is a must, a possibility, a permit, a need, an obligation, and so on. The use '*can*' for expressing opportunity, permission, or ability. The word '*could*' for expressing ability in the past, polite permission, or possibility. The usage '*may*' for expressing permission or probability. The use '*might*' for expressing polite permission or possibility. The modal hedge '*must*' for emphasizing strong obligation or certainty. The use '*shall*' for showing a strong possibility or near certainty. The word '*should*' for emphasizing a logical conclusion, advice, or soft obligation. The usage '*will*' for indicating willingness or ability in the future. The use '*would*' for expressing willingness in the past, necessity, request, or soft obligation. Thus, these modal hedges are mostly used in everyday conversation.

## IV. Conclusion

The modal hedges found are auxiliary verbs, modal adverbs, and modal nouns. Modal auxiliary verbs consist of *can/can't*, *could/couldn't*, *may*, *might*, *will/won't*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, and *must*. In modal adverbs consist of *maybe* and *perhaps*. In modal noun consists of *chance*.

The most frequently used modal hedges by the main character in the comic *Big Nate from the Top* are auxiliary verbs, particularly '*can/can't*'. The implication of the findings plays an essential role in the study of discourse analysis as the compulsory subject taught in the in faculty of English Language Education in Indonesian Universities. Thus, the writer's awareness of using modal hedges is essential in conversation, considering it could help the speakers to lessen the impact of conversation on politeness constraints. In verbal communication, the hedges make a statement less forceful or assertive. The hedges in conversation moderate the speaker's claim in the conversation suitably.

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