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Assertive speech acts of persuasion in English presidential election speeches

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Abstract. Politics is a process of making decisions by the distribution of power and resources in order to put certain political, economic and social ideas into practice. For political messages to be delivered to the target community through political discourse, many strategies have been employed to fulfill the purpose of persuading to the audience. The study investigates the assertive speech acts of persuasion utilized in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election speeches. Adopting the speech act theory by Searle (1980), the study aims to uncover the features of assertive speech acts used by the two politicians for persuasion. The data was analyzed using descriptive qualitative method basing on quantitative information. The findings showed that the process of manipulation of the two politicians was fostered by assertive speech acts highlighting the illocutionary forces of asserting, affirming, avowing, denying, asserting not, and propounding. Through the illocutionary forces, both Trump and Clinton would like to communicate their different political stands and ideologies to persuade the audience to advocate them. Donald Trump spread his persuasion with more dominating frequencies of assertive speech acts than Hillary Clinton. Besides, they also demonstrated distinctively different illocutionary acts addressing different issues to serve their political purposes.

Keywords. presidential election speeches, persuasive strategies, ideology, political discourse

1. Introduction

According to Brown and Yule (1983), persuasion is considered as part of discourse analysis and discourse analysis concerned with the language used for communication and how address worked in linguistic message in order to interpret them. Accordingly, persuasion is also treated as the speakers' reflection of their rhetoric capacity and a way to induce their interlocutors (Sari, 2012). Effort to reach the negotiation and agreement would be unfortunately in vain unless speakers are able to communicate their message under the faithful aid of persuasion. In other words, under the pressure of political campaign, numerous proves and argutations to persuade the society for choosing their selves as well as the use of word choice or supporting dictions are needed to stimulate social and public advocacy. Without these factors, persuasion failures could be anticipated, resulting in the defeat of one side while paving way to the other side's triumph.

Political speeches are associated with one party communication, acting out the role of the addressee, descending power and influence (Kenzhekanova, 2015) by using specific

strategies which may affect the audience's ideology autonomy. In the seeking of power predomination in a large population, politicians have to resort to specific language devices and persuasive strategies to add in their utterance. In fact, in order for the aims and intentions to be reached through verbal communication and language, pragmatics need to be applied. Yule (1996) functioned speech acts as a pragmatic phenomenon in which actions are performed via utterances. Accordingly, political discourse also utilize language to demonstrate a wide range of activities to ultimately serve the purpose of persuasion. By conveying, requesting, asserting, threatening, pledging ..., politicians simultaneously make an attempt to reach an understanding with the audience, gain their advocacy and win their votes. In fact, the ultimate purpose of political speech would strikingly outstand to persuade audience the appropriateness of a certain course of action or the truth of a particular viewpoint, shaping the intended illocutionary effect that is intrinsically associated with the speech act of argumentation and persuasiveness, and nurturing the constructed political strategies.

All in all, persuasion used by politicians not only reveals potential distinctive language features need discovering to reach an in-depth insight into language functions and meanings in the field of politics. Seeing the importance and benefits of the study both in terms of language and discourse realizations, the researcher thrives on pursuing the study on *Assertive Speech Acts of persuasion in English Presidential Election Speeches*. In the light of the established theories and methodologies, the study attempts to build up the comprehensive picture of speech acts persuasion strategies in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election speeches.

As such, political speeches are expected to contain resources of speaker's expressions and intentions corresponding roughly to the objectives of this research on persuasion. Interestingly, in this research, the comparison reaching for the similarities and differences in the two politicians' use of speech acts to highlight persuasion is expected to generate intriguing findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous studies

Political discourse has been a prolific topic of many researches aiming at achieving an insightful analysis to understand more about the power of such discourse. The growing academic interest towards political discourse can be regarded as "social request" exposing and discovering not only the peculiarities of political thought and actions, but also those linguistic means employed by politicians in their discourse to impinge and control public opinion. Chilton (2004) discussed political actions as verbal action via speech act demonstration. However, he merely considered political discourse not as fundamental argumentative and deliberative in nature, focusing only on the ways in which the speakers represent reasons instead of touching the political view as action. Conversely, an approach was delivered by Fairclough, I. & Fairclough S. (2012) to particularly consider political discourse as attributive to the development of critical discourse analysis, highlighting political discourse as essentially a form of argumentation fostering more practical argumentation to entail eventual political decisions.

Regarding the area of persuasion in political discourse, Al-Trawneh, M. (2019) conducted a research on a critical discourse analysis of persuasion tactics, power distribution and the ideologies in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's presidential discourse but focusing on debates instead of political speeches in their presidential election campaign. Edward, Hutahaeon, Kurniawan and Hamuddin (2018) provided a study on language and power in presidential speech campaign discourse of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, portraying the

relationship between language and power regarding types and functions of speech acts or language use while by no means giving an in-depth insight into the utilization of speech act for persuasion in those speeches.

The study differentiates from other previous studies in the attempt to make a contrastive analysis on the features of persuasive strategies utilized by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's presidential election speeches, taking advantages of Searle's speech acts highlighting persuasion. The study highlighted the way in which Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump utilized speech acts in generating power and ideologies and eventually persuade the audience to vote for them.

2.2. Speech acts

The function of speech acts has illuminated the ability of language to do other things than just describe reality. According to Searle (1980), the theory of speech act starts with the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence, or other expression, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, etc... Characteristically, a speaker performs one or more of these acts by uttering a sentence or sentences, but the act itself is not confused with a sentence or other expression uttered in its performance. Such types of acts as those exemplified above are called illocutionary acts. In contrast with locutionary acts which are a description of what the speaker says, illocutionary acts focus on what the speaker does in uttering a sentence. Searle attempted to classify illocutionary acts into the following types: *Assertive, Directive, Commissive, Expressive, and Declaration.*

An utterance in context executes an act. In order to explore more about a particular act being performed via an utterance is to assume that underlying every utterance.

(U) there is a clause containing a performative verb (Vp) which makes the illocutionary explicit and accounts for the illocutionary force. This is known as performative hypothesis and the basic format of the underlying clause is shown below:

- (a) I (hereby) Vp you (that) U;
- (b) I *confess* that I stole the family jewels;
- (c) I *warn* you to stop teasing your sister;
- (d) I *promise* I will come to your birthday party....

In this clause, the subject must be first person singular ("I"), followed by the adverb "hereby", indicating that the utterance "counts as" an action by being uttered. There is also a performative verb (Vp) in present tense and an indirect object in second person singular ("you"). In order for a performative verb to have its performative sense, that means to actually perform the illocutionary act its names, it must (i) be positive, (ii) be present tense, (iii) have a first-person agent (performer of the action of the verb), and (iv) refer to a specific event.

View-points of linguists in terms of speech acts up to now have not reached absolute agreement. Austin's classification of speech acts is best seen as an attempt to give a general picture of illocutionary acts: what types of illocutionary act one can generally perform in uttering a sentence. John Searle inherits his ideas from Austin and elaborates on some of them, but develops the theory in his own fashion: the essence of it being that to perform an illocutionary act is to express an illocutionary intention. While each of these speech act theories has some merit, this article follows Searle's as his theory itself as well as its classification of speech acts best serve the aim of the study in revealing the pragmatic features highlighting persuasion in political speeches, particularly, in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's presidential election speeches. Especially, in this research, assertive speech act was put at

spotlight, uncovering the distinctively different illocutionary forces employed by the two politicians, and how differently these forces function in featuring persuasion in comparison between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's speeches.

3. Research and methodologies

The study was designed as the descriptive research using qualitative method since the collected data was targeted to yield the pragmatic features, narrowing to the assertive speech acts of persuasion employed by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's presidential election speeches in general and their illocutionary forces in particular. It was also descriptive in nature in the sense that this study was intended to describe how the language used in the political speeches of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in their presidential campaign manifested with quantitative information, namely, the frequency of the linguistic units that occur in the texts collected.

3.1. Data Collection

Among many political speeches of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, a certain number of speeches were reached. The researcher sourced the data for this research from an online source: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/2016_election.php which is a repertoire of speeches, statements, and press releases of American public office holders, both past and present. The politicians' speeches were narrowed to 35 thanks to the aid of computer software, the Research Randomizer.

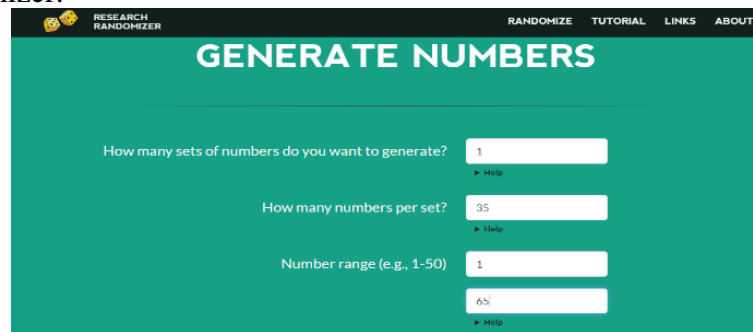


Figure 1. A snapshot of Research Randomizer Software)

All of the speeches chosen for the analysis were coded for the ease of analysis and classification. Speeches belonging to Donald Trump were coded as T, being arranged orderly from *T1* to *T35*. Likewise, *H1* to *H35* were the coded speeches of Hillary Clinton.

3.2. Data analysis

In this section, utterances collected from the speeches are analyzed and classified in accordance with assertive speech acts by Searle (1980).

4. Results and discussion

There are quite a large number of assertive speech acts found respectively in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's presidential speeches. These assertive speech acts were classified based on their illocutionary forces discovered in their speech utterances; they are: **asserting, affirming, pledging, avowing, denying, and propounding**. As can be seen from Table I, speech acts utilized by Trump were higher than Clinton's in all sub-types, with the highest differences in the frequencies of speech acts falling in asserting speech act (2910 instances of asserting speech acts found in Trump's utterances in comparison with 2186 instances in Hillary's). Rank the second and third in showing the big contrast in the instances of speech acts used by Clinton and Trump are denying and propounding speech acts (820 and 429 instances of denying and propounding speech acts found in Trump's speeches respectively in contrast with 236 and 138 of Clinton's counterparts). To reach more understanding of the speech acts applied by both

politicians, detailed analysis of these speech acts as well as the comparison of speech acts employed by the two politicians are discussed as follows.

Table I. Illocutionary forces of assertive speech acts used by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump

Assertive speech acts	Instances	
	Hillary Clinton	Donald Trump
Asserting	2186	2910
Affirming	1134	1211
Avowing	531	623
Denying	236	820
Asserting not	53	101
Propounding	138	429

4.1. Asserting

The act of asserting is another sub-function of the speech act of assertives. While Hillary Clinton asserts her dedicated service to the U.S., Donald Trump emphasized the necessity of making change to America.

(H3) *I've been involved in politics in one way or another for many years. It is not an easy business. It can get rough and I've built up some defenses. When it comes to public service, I'm better at the 'service' part than the 'public' part. But this is why I do it, and this is who I'm in it for: to make life better for children and families.*

(H4) *'Stronger Together' is not just our campaign slogan. It's the guiding principle for the future we need to build.*

(T1) *This campaign is not about me or any one candidate. It is about America. It is time for a change. We need a change.*

(T3) *remember Obamacare, "you're going to your doctor, you're going to keep your plan, over and over again, you're going to keep your doctor." It was a lie.*

In H3, the intention of asserting can be found. Clinton told the hearers about her long-rooted experience in politics, to finally assert her mission to prioritize service to people and *make life better for children and families*. In order to reach the final illocutionary force of asserting with the ultimate determination to become the type of person she aimed at, Clinton made use of a sequence of asserting acts, twisting different types of speech acts, with the later performing more prominently from the previous. Similarly, in H4, without the appearance of the performative verb of *assert*, the act of asserting is still considered very loud with Clinton's employment of denying act in the realm of assertive in the former sentence before confidently stating that *"stronger together"* is the *guiding principle for the future*. By this, Clinton highlighted her ideology of being *"stronger together"* (H4), building unity and bringing the sense of belonging among the Americans. Clinton added the auxiliary verb of imperative *"need to"* to make her urging message more strikingly prominent.

Donald Trump, on the other hand, employed speech act of asserting by clarifying the ultimate purpose of the campaign, confirming it to be neither a competition of either him nor any other candidate, but for the sake of America (T1). Various sub-types in the realm of asserting speech act were employed in a sequence. The former one served as act of denying while the later ones as asserting, being aided by repeated *"change"* to add more asserting force. Although performative verbs of asserting were absent from the utterances, the illocutionary force of asserting seemed strongly strengthened thanks to the continuous use of speech act

sequence. Trump eventually urged the transformation and opportunities for changing for everyone (T1). By that way, Trump could convince the listeners to be part of the making-change process for the whole America. Meanwhile, in T3, Trump also made use of asserting speech act to trigger criticism towards his opponent, accusing Obamacare of being a total “*lie*”.

4.2. Affirming- confident asserting

There are many utterances in which both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump implied illocutionary force of affirming.

(H2) I've worked across the aisle to pass laws and treaties and to launch new programs that help millions of people. And if you give me the chance, that's exactly what I'll do as president.

But on Wednesday night, Donald Trump did something no other presidential nominee has ever done. He refused to say that he would respect the results of this election. Now, make no mistake. By doing that, he is threatening our democracy.

(H20) Now, make no mistake. By doing that, he is threatening our democracy. He is basically saying hey, we've been around 240 years and we've always had peaceful transitions no matter who won or who lost

(T3) This is truly one of the most important elections, certainly in my lifetime. Because we are about to go -- we lose it, we are in the wrong direction, and maybe it's gone.

(T9) I will fight for their security. I will fight for their jobs.

The utterance in H2 represents an illocutionary force of affirming. As the utterance does not contain a performative verb, the act of affirming was said implicitly. The function of affirming was to assert confidently to the hearer that as a president, Hillary Clinton would follow “*exactly*” her proposed plan to provide people a great deal of benefits and interests by practical solutions, ranging from passing law and treaties to launching new programs... Meanwhile, H20, despite the absence of performative verb *affirm*, also implied Clinton’s act of affirming. She initially referred to Trump’s disrespect towards the results of the presidential election to be very strange, not serving as any precedent of other previous presidential nominees. Subsequently, Clinton repeatedly accused Trump’s viewpoints and thinking patterns of being such a threat to the democracy of America (H20)

When it came to Trump, the act of asserting was carried out when he stressed the importance of the presidential election (T3). Thanks to the employment of such adverbs as “*truly*”, and “*certainly*”, the illocutionary force of asserting is more outstanding. While “*truly*” was defined as emphasis of the fullest possible extent, “*certainly*” as an affirmation of what being stated. The double application of the two adverbs in one sentence made the intention of asserting reach the higher level of the speaker’s confidence in his utterance. Likewise, the later sentence elaborated by Trump’s statement of reasons also functioned as further addition to the asserting force being previously created. Besides, Trump’s act of affirming was also marked in T9. With the appearance of short sentences, repeated structures “*I will*”, together with the application of auxiliary verb “*will*”, Trump presented an affirmation on the implementation of his specific activities within his presidency. Significantly, the act of denying was putting in use right after the affirming ones, not only explicitly mirroring the illocutionary force in the realm of asserting but also functioning as Trump’s confirmation towards his plan and willpower in fulfilling that plan. Approaching by such, Donald Trump created a sense of protection towards the listeners and subsequently eased their worries and concerns, strategically convince people to be more inclined to take his side.

4.3. Denying – Assert not

The utterances which have illocutionary force of denying appear in both Clinton and Trump's speeches though they own different targets.

(H4) *I believe this, or I would not be standing here before you, I would not have run again for president, I would not deal with all the in-coming brickbats that are hurled my way if I did not in my heart believe with every fiber of my being that together we can build a future where, yes, love trumps hate.*

(T3) *Nobody would believe because it's so terrible, so terrible. And she comes across like this woman -- nice, easy -- but she's not. And -- and she's -- listen -- she's not a leader, not a leader. And she is a liar. Hey, hey -- 33,000 e-mails are gone.*

I mean, remember Obamacare, It was a lie.

(T8) *And the Democrats will not produce and all they have done is taken advantage of your vote. That's all they've done. And once the election is over, they go back to their palaces in Washington. And you know what? They do nothing for you.*

H4 reflects an indicating illocutionary device of 'not' which means a negation. Particularly, Clinton asserted the consistency of her belief and devotion to the Americans, and that she would never be negatively influenced by insults or attacks possibly pouring much obstacles on her as well as blocking her way. By the act of denying, Clinton differentiated herself from Trump visionally and strategically.

Meanwhile, Trump demonstrated illocutionary act of denying to offend Clinton. In T3, instead of locating a negative sentence with negative verb, the negative infinite pronoun "nobody" was employed regarding the absence of subject. In English, these negative words are themselves enough to give a negative meaning. With such arrangement, Trump explicitly asserted the terrible fact about Clinton who was seemingly a nice person but the reality told the opposite (33,000 mails disappeared suspiciously). In fact, Clinton was by no means a leader but *a liar*. The different sub-acts in the theme of asserting were used in a row, with affirming and denying act takes turn to demonstrate in the utterances, ultimately giving a conclusion on Hillary's characteristics. Trump continued blasting Hillary and her fellow Democrats by another sentence with negative form and auxiliary verb "will", denying the Democrats' success in fulfilling their commitment (T8).

4.4. Avowing

The act of avowing from Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's election speeches can be found in the following examples.

(H14) *Our diversity is one of our strengths. We have to listen to each other. We don't have to agree; that is not required. But we need to be respectful. We need to listen. And then we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work.*

(H9) *I could never have done that if I had had the kind of interest rates that so many young people now are facing. It's absolutely wrong, and it has undermined the fundamental right to pursue your dreams, to have that education, to get those opportunities that you so rightly deserve.*

(T19) *In addition, because of the incompetence of our leaders, we run massive trade deficits on an annual basis, now almost \$800 billion a year. Our country is broken. We have decaying infrastructure, failing schools, rising crime, a depleted military, an open border, and an economy that can't create full-time high-paying jobs.... This is not the America that was handed down to us, and it's not the America we want for our children... We cannot have another 4 years of Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton will be worse.*

In expressing the act of avowing, Hillary Clinton tended to use auxiliary verbs such as “*have to*”, “*need to*” despite the null appearance of performative verb of *avowing*. However, the act of *avowing* was still prominent with the her emphasis on the outstanding strengths of the Americans in their diversity as in H14. Or in H9, Clinton expressed the act of avowing by employing the adverb “*absolutely*” to reflect strong or extreme quality, meaning totally or completely (Collins online dictionary). This adverb had assisted the utterance in obtaining high degree of strength and show the disagreement being released. Clinton strongly asserted that the kind of interest rates faced by many people at the time being was not appropriate and “*absolutely wrong*” (H9) because it had been against the fundamental right and deprived opportunives from people. By reflecting her sympathy and mutual understanding with the citizens, she attempted to approach closer to the audience and win their votes.

Differently form Clinton’s usage of avowing, in the expressing of the same counterpart, Trump tended to use present tense, describing the current situation of America as well as the weaknesses of the country. By using loads of negative adjectives such as “*broken*”, “*incompetence*”, “*decaying*”, “*failing*”, “*depleted*” ... (H19) regarding deterioration, Trump asserted the “incompetence” of the country’s leadership, the poorly functioning and divided America with mounting riots, poor educational system, increasing number of criminals and evils nationwide, the exhausted armed force, unprotected border, and a shrinking economy failing to provide good job opportunities to the work force, ... All of these statements function as pre-sequence in the sequence of various speech acts employed, portraying the pessimistic reality and a deteriorating America which could be by no mean inherited by later generations “*It’s certainly not the America we want to pass down to our grandchildren*”. The adverb “*certainly*” employed has made the utterances seize higher degree of sureness and credence.

4.5. Propounding

Instances of propounding speech acts are presented as follows

(H7) *So let's raise our standards. ... Let's make it a priority in our curriculums, our classrooms, and the technology our students use. ... Then let's **make sure** kids who can communicate that way have the opportunity to do so. Third, we're going to partner with businesses and other stakeholders to ensure those living with a disability can get hired and stay hired.*

(T5) *Let's look back at the Middle East at the very beginning of 2009 before the Obama-Clinton administration took over. Libya was stable. Syria was under control. Egypt was ruled by a secular president and an ally of the United States. Iraq was experiencing a reduction in violence. The group that would become what we now call ISIS was close to being extinguished. Iran was being choked off by economic sanctions. Fast forward to today. What we have--and think of this--and the decisions made by the Obama/Clinton group have been absolutely disastrous. Libya is in ruins. Our ambassador and three other really brave Americans are dead. And ISIS has gained a new base of operations. Syria is in the midst of a disastrous civil war. ISIS controls large portions of territory.*

As in H7 Hillary Clinton was suggesting steps and ideas to be taken. Raising the sense of collaboration and unity, Clinton proposed everyone to raise standards, give priority in educational aspects, ensure the kids’ opportunity, enhance business partnership, maintain working benefits for the disadvantaged, ... In fact, Clinton implemented the act of asserting and execute an illocutionary intention by casting the optimistic future with loads of accomplishments, entailing the persuasion towards everyone to advocate her for being able to be part of that future as well as support her proposal.

Donald Trump also constructed an act of *propounding* in his utterances. In the context of T5 by using proposal “*let’s*” together with imperative sentence, Trump initially offered a suggestion to the listeners, asking them to recall the history of the Middle East before the Obama-Clinton administration. Trump then demonstrated *asserting* act by stating the past history of countries located in this area, for examples Libya, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran and the nearly none to existence of the ISIS-related groups during that time, making a comparison with the period of time after the point of early 2019, with the interference of Obama and Clinton into the Middle East. In contrast with the stable and good condition of these countries prior that point, theirs later became worse. To make the problem more prominent, Trump employed the illocutionary force of *claiming* to accuse Obama/ Clinton of making very *disastrous* decisions, eventually pushing these countries into difficulties and also other growing problems, the acceleration of ISIS as well as the increasing refugee crisis threatening both Europe and the United States...

5. Summary

The study has accomplished giving a picture of assertive speech acts utilized in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump’s presidential speeches. Both politicians took advantage of this type of speech act with its distinctive classifications of illocutionary forces of *asserting*, *affirming*, *pledging*, *avowing*, *denying*, and *propounding*. Specifically, Hillary Clinton tended to communicate her ideology of being a dedicated and devoted person to the U.S and Americans while Donald Trump emphasized the necessity of proceeding change and make America “*great again*”. When it came to affirming, the Democrat candidate showed her strong willpower in fulfilling the proposed plans and simultaneously insisted herself as being a capable president for the United State of America, supporting Obamacare, giving advantages for college students by offering loans; whereas, the significance of the on-going presidential election was considerably stressed by the Republican, entailing the promisingly protective and worrisome prospect for all Americans within his presidency. By the act of denying, Clinton differentiated herself from Trump visionally and strategically. Meanwhile, Trump strategically demonstrated illocutionary act of denying to offend his opponent. Clinton intentionally employed the illocutionary of avowing to generate the ideology of being “*strong together*”, globalization and mutual understanding among the citizens to boost the country’s ever-lasting strength, which was contrasting from Trump’s political stand when he continuously appealed to the fear of the obstacles hindering America once the Obama-Clinton administration was still in service. As propounding speech act is to put forward for consideration, it was seen that both politicians in this presidential race reflected their eagerness in giving suggestions and ideas realized in their presidential proposed plans. Trump particularly seemed inclined to indulge himself in much criticism, opposing the Obamacare healthcare system, blasting Clinton’s solutions regarding immigration and terrorism, attacking her proposal on education, and blaming Obama and Clinton’s failure in demonstrating outstanding leadership and maintaining peace for America and elsewhere. Utilizing different speech acts, both Clinton and Trump aimed to successfully communicate their ideologies and persuade the audience to advocate them and eventually win their votes to become the will-be-president of the U.S.

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