

Beyond Fluency: Diagnosing Reading Comprehension Difficulties in a Banjar–Indonesian Bilingual Elementary School Student

Ayu Anindia Hizraini¹, Ali Ridho², Rofi Shafwan³
^{1, 2, 3} Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Kalimantan Selatan, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Reading fluency is often assumed to signify successful reading development, yet students who read accurately may still struggle with comprehension. This qualitative case study diagnosed the reading comprehension difficulties of an Indonesian–Banjar bilingual fifth-grade student who demonstrated proficient oral reading fluency but persistent comprehension deficits, while identifying the underlying linguistic and environmental factors. Data was gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the students, teachers, and parents, and document analysis. Credibility was established via source and technique triangulation, and data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative model. The findings revealed that despite adequate decoding skills, the participant experienced marked difficulties in identifying main ideas, inferencing, understanding vocabulary, answering critical questions, and retelling text. Limited Indonesian vocabulary, the dominance of the local Banjar language in daily communication, and a lack of cognitive reading strategies emerged as the primary contributing factors. Interpreted through the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, and Sociocultural Theory, these results demonstrate that comprehension deficits can persist alongside fluent decoding when linguistic comprehension and strategic reading behaviors are underdeveloped. Consequently, supporting bilingual learners requires explicit vocabulary instruction, systematic strategy training, and robust school–family collaboration.

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Corresponding Author:

Ayu Anindia Hizraini,

Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Kalimantan Selatan, Indonesia

Email: ayuanindia232@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is central to primary education, serving as the cognitive foundation for academic learning and critical thinking (Lampi et al., 2025; Razaq et al., 2022; Satriani et al., 2022; Song et al., 2025). However, a persistent paradox in literacy instruction is the phenomenon of "poor comprehenders"—students who master word decoding and read text fluently yet fail to extract meaning, infer implicit ideas, or

summarize content (Bonifacci et al., 2023; Hoover, 2024). While international assessments like PISA highlight widespread comprehension deficits (OECD, 2023; Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023), conventional classroom evaluations frequently misdiagnose reading ability by conflating oral reading fluency with genuine comprehension. This diagnostic blind spot is particularly critical in upper elementary education, where texts shift from simple narrative decoding to complex, domain-specific conceptual learning.

To unpack this discrepancy, theoretical frameworks such as the Simple View of Reading (SVR) (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (McCandlish, 2024) conceptualize reading comprehension as the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension. Although recent extensions of SVR demonstrate that linguistic comprehension predicts reading success even when decoding skills are well-developed (Kargiotidis et al., 2026; Lee & Lee, 2025), these cognitive models often treat language development in isolation from the learner's sociocultural ecology. Vygotsky's sociocultural paradigm posits that cognitive and linguistic capabilities are deeply mediated by cultural tools and immediate communicative environments (Akmar Muhamad Nasir & Ab Rashid, 2026; Chen, 2026; Nawaz et al., 2024; Rosborough & Wimmer, 2023). Consequently, when a substantial linguistic gap exists between a learner's primary home language and the school's instructional medium, cognitive resources allocated to text comprehension can become severely constrained (Fethi & Józsa, 2026; Wang & Reynolds, 2024).

This linguistic mismatch is acutely pronounced in Indonesia's multilingual landscape, where regional languages function as the primary home language while standard Indonesian serves as the medium of formal instruction. In the context of Banjar-speaking elementary learners, students frequently navigate a complex dynamic: while Banjar and Indonesian share lexical overlap as Malayo-Polynesian languages, their subtle structural, semantic, and pragmatic differences create hidden hurdles for deep text comprehension. While students may achieve accurate phonological decoding in Indonesian due to orthographic transparency, their underlying semantic networks remain anchored in Banjar (Nugraheni & Hasan, 2026). Existing studies either focus on broad quantitative correlations of bilingual reading achievement (Lee & Lee, 2025) or highlight general main-idea deficits without accounting for regional-language dominance (Zahroh & Kirani, 2024). There remains a critical empirical gap in qualitatively diagnosing how home-language dominance, constrained vocabulary depth, and strategic reading behaviors interact at a micro-level within a fluent bilingual decoder (Talwar et al., 2023; Taye & Lodebo, 2026; Truong, 2024).

Rather than relying on large-scale quantitative metrics that obscure individual diagnostic mechanisms, an in-depth qualitative case study is essential to capture the nuanced processes of reading breakdowns. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the diagnostic profile of a fifth-grade Banjar-Indonesian bilingual student who demonstrates accurate reading fluency but severe comprehension failure. Preliminary classroom observations and diagnostic interviews revealed that while the participant reads grade-level texts fluently, daily home communication is strictly

conducted in Banjar, resulting in limited academic exposure to Indonesian outside the classroom. By integrating SVR, Scarborough's Reading Rope, and Sociocultural Theory, this study provides a multi-layered diagnostic analysis of how linguistic dominance and environmental exposure shape real-time comprehension failure.

Specifically, this study addresses three central research questions:

1. What specific diagnostic patterns of reading comprehension difficulties characterize a fluent Banjar–Indonesian bilingual decoder?
2. How do vocabulary limitations, reading strategy deficiencies, and home-language dominance individually contribute to these comprehension difficulties?
3. How do these cognitive, linguistic, and environmental factors interactively impede the learner's overall reading performance?

By addressing these questions, this study offers theoretical contributions to bilingual literacy research and provides actionable diagnostic benchmarks for educators managing language transitions in multilingual classrooms.

2. METHOD

This study employed an in-depth qualitative single-case diagnostic design to examine the micro-mechanisms of reading comprehension breakdown in a bilingual elementary context. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, a qualitative case study allows for a thick, contextually embedded diagnosis of how cognitive, linguistic, and environmental factors interact within a specific learner's literacy development (Miles et al., 2014). The investigation was conducted at a public elementary school in South Kalimantan, Indonesia, during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year—a region where Banjar functions as the primary home language and Standard Indonesian serve as the exclusive medium of instruction.

The participant was selected through purposeful sampling based on a two-stage diagnostic screening procedure designed to isolate "poor comprehenders" (i.e., learners with intact phonological decoding but marked linguistic comprehension deficits). From an initial teacher recommendation of fifth-grade students exhibiting reading difficulties, the participant—assigned the pseudonym SAP (11 years old)—was screened using standardized classroom reading tasks. SAP met two specific inclusion criteria:

- Adequate Oral Reading Fluency: SAP demonstrated a reading speed of 95–105 words correct per minute (WCPM) on grade-level Indonesian narrative texts, exceeding the local fluency threshold with minimal phonological error.
- Severe Comprehension Deficit: Despite fluent oral delivery, SAP scored consistently below 40% on post-reading comprehension assessments, particularly in vocabulary definition, inferential questioning, and text summarization.

To triangulate observational data and reconstruct SAP's linguistic ecology, two key supporting informants were recruited: SAP's homeroom teacher (Informant T) and SAP's mother (Informant P).

Data were collected over an eight-week period through four complementary techniques. First, structured classroom observations (10 sessions, 45 minutes each) were conducted during Indonesian literacy periods, focusing on SAP's real-time reading

behaviors, self-correction, strategy use, and task engagement. Second, semi-structured diagnostic reading tasks were administered directly to SAP using three grade-level texts (two narrative, one expository; 250–300 words each). Following each reading session, SAP completed immediate oral retellings and answered a mix of literal, inferential, and critical questions. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with SAP (3 sessions, 20–30 minutes), the teacher (2 sessions, 45 minutes), and the mother (2 sessions, 60 minutes). Interviews with SAP and the mother were conducted bilingually (Banjar–Indonesian) to ensure psychological comfort and nuanced data capture regarding home language exposure. Fourth, document analysis was performed on SAP’s literacy workbooks, test scripts, and written homework from the preceding academic term.

Table 1. Data Collection Matrix and Diagnostic Operationalization

Data Source	Primary Technique	Diagnostic Focus	Target Data Output
Participant (SAP)	Diagnostic Reading Tasks & Observations (10 sessions)	Decoding rate (WCPM), oral reading fluency, self-monitoring, and strategy usage during text processing	Observational field notes, reading fluency logs, strategy utilization checklists
Participant (SAP)	Semi-structured Bilingual Interviews (3 sessions)	Self-perceived reading difficulties, vocabulary recognition, and internal translation strategies	Audio-recorded transcripts, diagnostic task responses
Classroom Teacher	Semi-structured Interviews (2 sessions)	Instructional context, academic performance history, and observed classroom comprehension gaps	Audio-recorded transcripts, pedagogical evaluation notes
Mother (Informant P)	Semi-structured Home Environment Interviews (2 sessions)	Home literacy environment (HLE), language dominance (Banjar exposure), and out-of-school literacy support	Audio-recorded transcripts, language dominance profiles
Student Work Artifacts	Document Analysis (15 diagnostic worksheets)	Error patterns in vocabulary identification, main-idea extraction, and written inferential responses	Categorized artifact analysis sheets, error pattern coding schemes

Data analysis followed the interactive model of [Miles et al. \(2014\)](#)—encompassing data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification—integrated with an *a priori* theory-driven coding framework. Raw data (field notes, interview transcripts, task outputs) were imported into qualitative analysis software and coded deductively using themes derived from the Simple View of Reading (SVR), Scarborough’s Reading Rope, and Sociocultural Theory, alongside inductive codes emerging from the data.

The coding taxonomy was organized into four primary analytical domains:

- Linguistic Comprehension Deficits: Codes related to semantic depth/breadth, structural sentence processing, and vocabulary gaps in Standard Indonesian.

- Strategic Behavior & Monitoring: Codes capturing the presence/absence of active comprehension monitoring, predicting, inferring, or reliance on superficial word-decoding.
- Linguistic Interference & Exposure: Codes identifying home Banjar usage, code-switching, structural/lexical overlaps, and lack of Indonesian print exposure.
- Sociocultural Mediation: Codes mapping home literacy practices, parental scaffolding, and instructional alignment.

To ensure methodological trustworthiness, several credibility strategies were implemented. Source and technique triangulation were applied by cross-verifying findings across SAP's performance data, teacher accounts, and parental reports. Member checking was conducted by reviewing interview summaries and key diagnostic interpretations with the classroom teacher and SAP's mother to validate narrative accuracy. Furthermore, an audit trail documenting all raw data, codebooks, and analytic memos was maintained to establish auditability. Ethical clearance was secured prior to data collection; written informed consent was provided by the mother, oral assent was obtained from SAP, and strict anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Data analysis identified that while SAP demonstrated proficient oral reading fluency and word decoding accuracy, severe reading comprehension breakdowns occurred during tasks requiring deeper semantic integration, text synthesis, and inferential reasoning. Rather than stemming from a single cognitive deficit, these difficulties resulted from a cascading interaction among constrained Indonesian academic vocabulary depth, an absence of metacognitive reading strategies, and a home linguistic environment overwhelmingly dominated by the Banjar language. The analytical codebook and diagnostic evidence mapping across sources are synthesized in Table 2.

Table 2. Qualitative Diagnostic Coding Matrix and Multi-Source Evidence

Analytical Domain	Theoretical Code (SVR / Sociocultural)	Diagnostic Benchmark & Work Artifact Evidence	Representative Interview Excerpt	Diagnostic Interpretation
Oral Reading Fluency	Word Decoding Competence (SVR Decoding)	Oral reading speed: 98 WCPM; 96%-word accuracy on Grade 5 expository text	"SAP reads smoothly without stumbling, but when asked what the paragraph means, he freezes." (Teacher T)	Decoding is highly automated and intact; fluency conceals underlying linguistic comprehension failure.
Linguistic & Semantic Depth	Lexical Depth & False Friends (SVR Language)	Misinterpreted pemerintah as "ruler" and kemarau as "dry dust"; 20% score on vocabulary mapping tasks	"I can read the words easily, but I don't know what they mean in Indonesian." (SAP)	Shallow Indonesian vocabulary breadth/depth limits text-proposition construction.

Analytical Domain	Theoretical Code (SVR / Sociocultural)	Diagnostic Benchmark & Work Artifact Evidence	Representative Interview Excerpt	Diagnostic Interpretation
Strategic Text Processing	Metacognitive Monitoring (Reading Rope)	Single-pass linear reading; zero re-reading instances on ambiguous passages	"I just read from start to finish once. If I don't get it, I guess from one word." (SAP)	Absence of active comprehension monitoring and repair strategies (passive reading).
Linguistic Environment	Home Language Exposure (Sociocultural)	90%+ daily communication in Banjar; zero access to Indonesian print media at home	"We speak Banjar all the time at home. Indonesian is only for school assignments." (Parent P)	Severe mismatch between home L1 (Banjar) and school L2 instructional medium (Indonesian).

Discrepancy Between Oral Fluency and Text Comprehension

Diagnostic oral reading assessments confirmed that SAP possesses well-developed phonological decoding skills. When reading a 265-word Grade 5 expository text on natural conservation (*Pelestarian Ekosistem*), SAP achieved an oral reading rate of 98 Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) with an accuracy rate of 96%, easily surpassing the benchmark for oral fluency. Phonological execution was fluid, with minimal hesitation or mispronunciation.

However, immediate post-reading tasks revealed a sharp breakdown in text representation. On a 10-item comprehension test (comprising 4 literal, 4 inferential, and 2 evaluative questions), SAP scored only 30%. While literal retrieval items were occasionally correct when target words matched the text verbatim, SAP failed completely on inferential and summarization tasks. As Informant T noted: *"SAP is a deceptive reader. Visually and auditorily, he sounds like a top reader in class. But the moment you ask him to explain the text in his own words; he simply repeats the first sentence of the paragraph."*

Vocabulary Depth Deficits and L1 Banjar Interference

Document analysis of SAP's diagnostic worksheets demonstrated that vocabulary failure was the primary bottleneck to linguistic comprehension. The difficulty was twofold: a lack of exposure to Indonesian academic registers and structural/semantic interference from L1 Banjar.

A key diagnostic instance occurred during a task based on an expository text regarding drought management (*Penanggulangan Bencana Kemarau*).

- Target Text Segment: *"Pemerintah daerah mengimbau masyarakat untuk menghemat penggunaan air bersih selama musim kemarau panjang."*
- SAP's Written Summary: *"Orang-orang harus diam di rumah karena ada debu kering."*

When interrogated during the diagnostic interview, SAP revealed that he confused *kemarau* (Indonesian: drought) with the Banjar phonetic construct *kemarau/karau* (Banjar: dry/hardened/dusty surface), leading him to infer a dusty windstorm rather than a water shortage. Furthermore, abstract academic terms such as *mengimbau* (to urge/appeal) and *pemerintah* (government) were entirely absent from SAP's semantic repertoire.

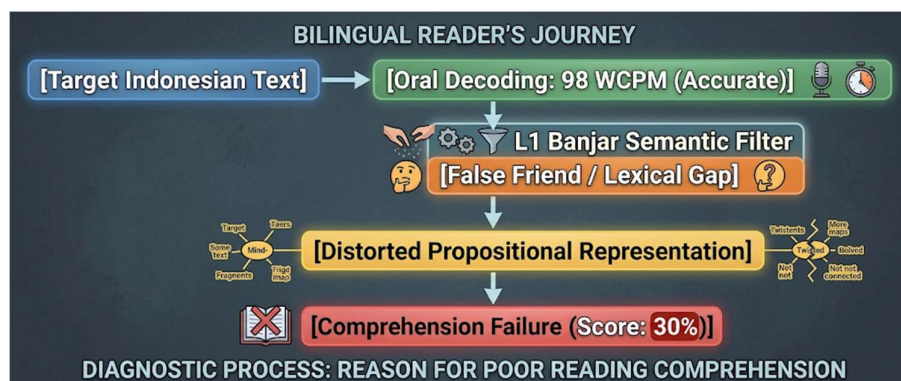


Figure 1. Bilingual Reader Journey Flowchart

Parental interviews confirmed that SAP's home environment provides virtually no exposure to academic Indonesian. Informant P stated: *"At home, we speak 100% Banjar. Even when SAP watches television, he prefers non-verbal cartoons or regional YouTube channels. He never reads Indonesian books outside of assigned homework."* Consequently, SAP operates with a dual-language deficit: robust conversational L1 Banjar, but an impoverished L2 Indonesian academic vocabulary.

Absence of Metacognitive Reading Strategies

In addition to vocabulary constraints, observations during diagnostic reading tasks revealed an absence of active, self-regulatory reading strategies. SAP processed texts in a rigid, single-pass linear manner. When encountering unfamiliar vocabulary or dense syntax, SAP did not employ repair mechanisms such as re-reading, contextual guessing, or structural analysis.

Worksheet artifacts showed a distinct pattern in SAP's response mechanics for multiple-choice and short-answer questions:

- **Keyword Matching Fallacy:** SAP scanned the question for a prominent noun, searched the text for an identical string, and copied the entire surrounding sentence regardless of its semantic relevance to the prompt.
- **Omission of Integrative Reasoning:** On items requiring integration across two paragraphs, SAP's response rate dropped to 0%, consistently leaving blank spaces or writing *"tidak ada di teks"* (not in the text).

During the post-task interview, SAP explained his cognitive shortcut: *"If I read a sentence and don't understand the hard words, I don't read it again because it stays confusing. I just jump to the end and look for words in the question that look the same as words in the story."* This confirms that SAP lacks the metacognitive awareness

required to monitor text processing, relying instead on superficial surface-level matching to complete tasks.

Discussion

This study investigated the underlying diagnostic mechanics of reading comprehension breakdown in a Banjar–Indonesian bilingual elementary student who exhibits robust oral reading fluency. The findings demonstrate that reading comprehension failure in linguistically diverse contexts does not stem from an isolated cognitive deficit but rather emerges from a cascading interaction among constrained L2 academic vocabulary depth, an absence of metacognitive reading strategies, and home language environment dominance (Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Zheng et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2024). Specifically, the participant's surface-level fluency masked a severe underlying failure in propositional text integration and mental model construction.

The observed dissociation between fluent decoding (98 WCPM) and poor comprehension performance (30%) provides strong empirical validation for the Simple View of Reading (SVR) framework (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). While classical reading instruction often operates under the assumption that oral reading fluency serves as a sufficient proxy for reading competence, this study highlights its diagnostic inadequacy in bilingual settings. In terms of Kintsch's Construction–Integration Model (Butcher, 2024), SAP successfully executed the surface-code processing of Indonesian text. However, during the construction phase, SAP's limited L2 academic vocabulary forced a reliance on L1 Banjar semantic filters, causing a breakdown at the text-base level. For instance, misinterpreting the target Indonesian word *kemarau* (drought) as the Banjar phonetic construct *karau* (dry/hardened dust) resulted in a completely distorted situation model (*duststorm* instead of *water shortage*). This empirically supports recent extended SVR models (Kargiotidis et al., 2026; Lee & Lee, 2025), demonstrating that when L2 vocabulary depth is impoverished, high decoding automaticity merely creates a "fluency illusion" that conceals severe linguistic comprehension deficits (Hoover, 2024).

The vocabulary bottlenecks observed in SAP's diagnostic worksheets directly reflect the sociocultural dynamics of L1 home language dominance (Vygotsky paradigm; Nawaz et al., 2024). As predicted by Fethi and Józsa's (2026) linguistic interdependence hypothesis, the stark discrepancy between SAP's home language (100% Banjar) and the school's medium of instruction (*Standard Indonesian*) restricted natural exposure to Indonesian academic registers. This environment engendered what can be conceptualized as *phonetic-semantic interference* between genetically related languages. Because Banjar and Indonesian share lexical overlaps, SAP frequently encountered "false friends" and structural subtle differences. Without explicit vocabulary depth—a core strand in Scarborough's Reading Rope (McCandlish, 2024; Wang & Reynolds, 2024)—SAP lacked the semantic precision required to construct higher-order inferences, echoing Alshehri and Zhang's (2022) assertion that lexical depth forms the indispensable bedrock of text representation.

Compounding these vocabulary deficits was SAP's reliance on superficial, passive task-completion behaviors in place of active metacognitive strategies. When faced with semantic breakdowns, SAP did not initiate repair mechanisms such as re-reading or contextual inference; instead, SAP defaulted to a *keyword-matching heuristic*—copying sentences from the text that matched prominent nouns in the question prompt. This finding extends current literature on strategic reading in bilinguals (Yapp et al., 2023) by revealing that strategic deficits are not merely a lack of skill, but an adaptive cognitive shortcut driven by cognitive overload when navigating unfamiliar L2 academic prose. Without active monitoring (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Hwang et al., 2024), the reader remains trapped in a single-pass linear processing mode that precludes global text synthesis.

The theoretical novelty of this study lies in extending the SVR and Scarborough's Reading Rope into regional-language bilingual contexts in Southeast Asia. Rather than viewing reading comprehension through a monolingual lens where L2 reading difficulties are attributed broadly to "low language proficiency," this study provides a micro-diagnostic model (as conceptualized in our diagnostic workflow) showing how L1 semantic filters actively distort L2 propositional construction in fluent decoders. Synthesizing Gough and Tunmer's SVR with Vygotsky's sociocultural paradigm demonstrates that in bilingual environments, linguistic comprehension is fundamentally mediated by the structural and semantic overlap between the home language and the instructional medium.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings offer critical actionable insights for educators in multilingual classrooms:

- Dismantling the "Fluency Illusion": Schools must update primary literacy screening protocols to decouple oral reading fluency from comprehension assessments, ensuring that fluent decoders are routinely screened for semantic depth and inferential reasoning.
- Pedagogical Translanguaging & Contrastive Analysis: Teachers should explicitly incorporate contrastive vocabulary instruction that targets "false friends" and semantic overlaps between regional languages (e.g., Banjar) and Standard Indonesian academic registers, leveraging students' home language as a scaffold rather than treating it as a barrier.
- Explicit Metacognitive Strategy Instruction: Literacy instruction must move beyond passive reading tasks to model active comprehension monitoring, teaching students how to repair comprehension breakdowns through structured re-reading, contextual guessing, and graphic organizers.

Several methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting these results. First, as a qualitative single-case study, the findings provide *analytical generalizability* to bilingual reading mechanics rather than statistical generalizability across broad populations. Second, the study focused specifically on a Banjar–Indonesian linguistic dynamic, which may present different structural overlaps compared to other regional language pairings. Future research should expand this inquiry using mixed methods designs and larger bilingual cohorts across diverse

regional dialects. Additionally, longitudinal intervention studies are needed to evaluate the empirical efficacy of contrastive translanguaging strategies and explicit vocabulary interventions in accelerating L2 academic reading comprehension.

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative diagnostic study demonstrates that accurate oral reading fluency does not equate to reading comprehension competence in regional-language bilingual contexts. By unpacking the micro-mechanisms of a fluent "poor comprehender," the findings confirm that reading comprehension breakdown is driven by a cascading interplay between impoverished L2 (Indonesian) academic vocabulary depth, absent metacognitive repair strategies, and strong L1 (Banjar) home language dominance. Specifically, the participant's phonetic decoding automaticity concealed severe semantic gaps and false-friend interferences, trapping the learner in a "fluency illusion" that resulted in distorted text representations.

Theoretically, this study advances the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope by extending their applicability to genetically related bilingual settings in Southeast Asia. It demonstrates that in regional-language contexts, linguistic comprehension deficits are mediated not merely by low L2 proficiency, but by structural and semantic interference from the home language. Practically, these insights call for a fundamental paradigm shift in primary literacy education: diagnostic screening protocols must dismantle the reliance on oral fluency benchmarks alone, integrating explicit translanguaging instruction, contrastive vocabulary analysis, and metacognitive strategy training. Ultimately, ensuring equitable literacy development for linguistically diverse learners requires recognizing home language structures not as barriers to be overcome, but as essential diagnostic benchmarks for targeted instructional scaffolding.

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