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The impact of Theme-Rheme Progression Method on Improving Textual Coherence and Cohesion in L2 Writing: A Study of L2 Learners of English

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ABSTRACT

Coherence and cohesion are considered two main elements of essay writing. Despite their importance in writing, they are still regarded as difficult to teach and learn as compared to grammar and spelling. Theme-rheme development is suggested to be a tool to teach coherence and cohesion in writing. This experimental study was carried out to verify whether the teaching of theme-rheme approach helps the learners to improve their textual coherence. Forty graduate-level students (20 males and 20 females), aging between 19 and 23, participated in the study. The participants were equally divided into two groups. The experimental group was taught coherence and cohesion by using the thematic progression method, whereas the controlled group was taught by using the ordinary method. Pre- and post-tests were conducted to compare the effects of the thematic progression method. The findings show that the teaching of coherence and cohesion through the thematic progression method helped the learners to improve their essay writing quality. The experimental group outweighed the controlled group as it got twice higher marks in the post-test than the pre-test. In contrast, the controlled group showed a negligible improvement.

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1. Introduction

Among four language learning skills, writing is considered as the most difficult skill to learn. It is because it is not an acquired skill like listening and speaking rather it needs constant practice to get mastery over (Kellogg et al., 2013). Although it is very close to reading in this regard, it is difficult than reading because a writer has to construct a text to convey a message to an unseen and distant reader. The writing process is more difficult in a second language (L2) as the learner has to acquire all the necessary rules of the L2. The situation gets worse if the L2 rules do not match with the first language (L1) of the learner.

Writing has become an integral part of our lives. From a simple task of writing an application or email to writing an essay or a full dissertation, having good writing skills prove helpful to make the task easier. From class assignments to written exams, students are supposed to achieve excellence in writing skills to secure good grades. Especially, in the case of academic success, students need to have proficiency in writing skills to an extent that they can write up to the required level of their desired degree. Therefore, among other language skills, writing has a prominent role in academic life and is deemed to be unavoidable in the present scenario.

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Essay writing is an essential part of academic activities. Either as a part of a class assignment or exam, essay writing is used for grading students' writing ability (Ángel et al., 2017). Not only this, essay writing is included as an integral part of other international language assessment tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, to assess the writing ability of the candidates. One of its main reasons is that essay writing demands from a student to have analytical and critical ability to evaluate the claim and to synthesize them in a way that reasonably persuades the reader.

Coherence and cohesion are two important elements of essay writing (Berninger et al., 2010; McCutchen, 2015). Coherence is defined as the semantic unity of the text that binds the whole text together as a single unit of meaning, whereas cohesion is the grammatical unity that joins different parts of a composition. These two compositional techniques help the writer to produce meaningful and reader-friendly text. The importance of these writing skills can be witnessed through their presence in different well-recognized language assessment tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL. Despite their great importance, these skills, particularly coherence, are ignored in teaching and learning composition (Lee, 2002). Consequently, a majority of adult L2 learners of English are found struggling to produce an effective essay. One of the reasons for ignoring the teaching of coherence is that it is still considered a subjective and abstract idea (Lee, 1998) which is difficult to teach and assess as compared to other skills, such as grammar and spelling (Attelisi, 2012).

Theme-rheme is an approach to teach and analyse textual coherence by assessing thematic flow in the development of the text. The theme is defined as what the whole sentence is about and the rheme is defined as what is about the theme. The connectivity is assessed by locating the juxtaposition of theme and rheme in the sentence which creates connectivity between the preceding and succeeding sentences. In this way, a web of ideas is created. Although a lot has been done with the thematic development to assess the textual connection, many perspectives for the thematic progression as a teaching tool are yet to be explored.

This study brings forth one more perspective to thematic progression as a teaching tool as it applied the theme-rheme progression for teaching coherence and cohesion in an argumentative essay. The study provides experimental evidence of how thematic progression can influence the construction of coherence and cohesion and overall writing quality in an essay. The study is valuable as it provides experimental evidence regarding the role of thematic development in the teaching of coherence and cohesion. It will not only help language teachers to teach and assess these two writing skills explicitly but will also help the L2 learners of English to understand these two concepts and practice to produce a well-knit text. The Research question: What is the impact of the use of thematic progression method in improving textual coherence and cohesion in the writing of the L2 learners of English?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Coherence and cohesion

Generally, coherence is considered as the semantic unity of the text that binds the whole text together as a single unit of meaning, which according to Knoch (2007), is the end purpose of every communication. De Beaugrande (1981, p. 85) explained that the 'continuity of sense is the foundation of coherence, being the mutual access and the relevance within the configuration of concepts and relations'. Thus, a coherent text has a smooth flow of ideas in which one sentence logically follows the next sentence without any divergence from the main idea. In contrast, an incoherent text does not convey proper sense or meaning, as there is no logical progression and connection between the sentences, paragraphs, and the whole text. As a result, the reader or listener is unable to understand the message or meaning of the text.

The concept of cohesion was introduced by Halliday (1976) in his influential work *Cohesion in English,* in which he introduced systematic means of text analysis. He introduced two main types of cohesion: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion consists of conjunction, reference, ellipsis, and substitution, whereas lexical cohesion was divided into reiteration and collocation. The prime objective of Halliday (1976) in *Cohesion in English* was to investigate the connections between sentences and paragraphs, asserting that there are linguistic cues in the text that hold the text together and help the reader to

comprehend. Halliday (1976) further asserted that these textual links give the text a 'texture'. The texture here refers to the systematic links which contribute to the total unity of the text and differentiates it from just being a random collection of sentences in isolation. These systematic links are created through cohesive links, using grammatical and lexical cohesion which, in turn, provide a proper shape to the text as opposed to a jumbled composition devoid of meaning.

Various studies show that different textbooks and composition books provide ambiguous or even sometimes misleading definitions of coherence (Alsagoafi, 2013; Johnson, 1992). Some of these textbooks define coherence narrowly as cohesion which has explicit links in the text to join the whole text together. But this idea has been criticized in several studies. Many studies have differentiated between coherence and cohesion claiming cohesion as the effect of coherence, not the cause, and proceed to treat them separately (Bamberg, 1984; Brostoff, 1981; Crossley et al., 2016; Fitzgerald, 1986; Todd et al., 2007).

Notably, cohesion is involved in the linking of linguistic items and does not deal with the semantic aspect of the text. Halliday (1976, p. 26) clearly states that cohesion is not concerned with what the text means but rather 'how the text is constructed as a semantic edifice'. This statement clarifies that cohesion deals with the surface-level links of the text and is not concerned with the semantic unity and, therefore, that cohesive links may or may not help in the development of semantic meaning. Indeed, there is a weight of linguistic consensus that it is the coherence and not cohesion that helps develop the semantic aspect of the text.

Some other studies examined the correlation between cohesion and coherence and their impact on writing quality (Candelo et al., 2018; Fitzgerald, 1986; McCulley, 1985). All of these studies found that cohesive ties correlated with coherence. These studies also found that coherence and cohesion contributed to writing quality. However, it is worth noting that not all types of cohesive ties have equal levels of correlation with coherence and writing quality. Among cohesive ties, lexical cohesion showed larger correlations with coherence and writing quality. Moreover, Hoey (1991) asserted that not the quantity of ties but the combination of ties is significant. Fitzgerald (1986) also supported that increasing the number of cohesive ties did not affect coherence construction or reading comprehension. Furthermore, studies supported the view that cohesive links help inexperienced readers, whereas experienced readers comprehend well without cohesive links (Crossley et al., 2016).

However, despite such great importance of coherence and cohesion in writing, its teaching is neglected due to the above-mentioned ambiguity between the two. Consequently, most ESL/EFL teachers prefer teaching grammar and mechanics which leads ESL/EFL teachers to focus, consciously or unconsciously, on sentence-level skills, such as vocabulary learning, spelling memorization, and syntactic accuracy. The emphasis on these primary skills, however, can lead to the neglect of discourse-level skills of writing, such as organization, planning, revision, and thematic development and may be one of the main reasons why many ESL learners produce incoherent texts. Candelo et al. (2018) assert that the teaching and practising of higher-order compositional skills are as important as the teaching and practising of all primary sentence-level skills are important for writing composition.

2.2 Issues in essay writing

Prescott (2007) held a study with entry-level students at Eotvos Lorand University Hungary. He collected 12 essays with five different genres of essay writing, such as argumentative, cause-effect and descriptive essays. The purpose of the study was to assess paragraph development and superstructure of essays written by students. He found that most of the students did not write topic sentences at the paragraph level. Moreover, most of the students did not develop their paragraphs well as there were no sufficient supporting details in the paragraph. Whereas, in terms of the superstructure, an organizational pattern was not found in most of the essays. Even some of the essays were without a conclusion. Additionally, essays were lacking in connections in paragraph as well as essay level. Overall, findings revealed that students did not know essay writing techniques, particularly organizational pattern of the essay.

Generally, writing is regarded as a very complex process that demands more than one skill to be used during the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Students feel more

difficulty if they write in English as a an L2 because they have to learn the rules of the L2. The situation gets worst if the rules of an L2 are not compatible with those of L1. That is the reason why most ESL/EFL learners struggle to produce a well coherent and cohesive text (Attlesi, 2012). Moreover, most of the ESL/EFL learners deemed unity as coherence and repeat the topic in every sentence to maintain it. However, it sometimes hinders text development that is the case with most of ESL/EFL learners (Oshima et al., 2006). Naheed (2006) also found that ESL learners had problems in producing a well-organized text. On the whole, it can be concluded that a majority of students encounter problems in producing a well-organized coherent and cohesive text that has a unity of ideas without any divergence from the main topic.

2.3 Pakistani ESL/EFL learners and writing

According to the benchmarks set by the Pakistani Education Policy 2006, graduate students should be expected to produce coherent and error-free pieces of written text as they are taught all these skills in their previous education. However, the situation is not very encouraging as most of the students are unable to write grammar-free and well-organized essays (Ahmad et al., 2019). Saeed (2020) also found that most of the essays written by adult ESL learners lacked organization and had frequent coherence breaks. Particularly, most of the essays did not use concluding remarks at the end of the essays. Although, students used cohesive ties to connect the text, sometimes the ties were found overused that seemed unnatural.

Teaching methodology in practice in Pakistan now-a-days is one of the reasons for this problem. The majority of Pakistani ESL learners study in government schools where teachers are not well-qualified and well-skilled to teach through modern effective teaching methods. Most of them predominantly use the grammar translation method (GTM) to teach English (Shamim, 2008). The GTM emphasizes the use of mother tongue to learn the target language and such teaching methods are likely to influence L2 writing performance (El-Aswad, 2002). In addition, sentence-level teaching is deemed to be the core purpose of English language teaching and is considered sufficient to get proficiency in the English language. Higher-level writing skills, such as planning, organizing, and editing, are either completely ignored or inadequately taught in the classroom.

Therefore, there is a strong need for a tool that can be used to improve students' English language writing skills, particularly coherence and cohesion. Theme-rheme progression is the strategy that is used in many countries to teach foreign language writing. Particularly, it is considered instrumental for editing and revising the text. The present study is an attempt to get experimental evidence for the teaching of theme-rheme development to improve textual coherence and cohesion.

2.4 Theme-rheme progression

The topical development was proposed by the Prague School of Linguists. The main linguists of the school were Danes (1974), Firbas (1964), and Mathesius (1975). For topical analysis, Prague linguists divided sentences into two main parts, 'theme' and 'rheme'. The theme is defined as 'what is the sentence about' and rheme as 'what is about the theme'. Mathesius (1975) maintained that in the 'theme' part of the sentence information already known to the reader or listener is mentioned, whereas, in the 'rheme' part, new information is added to the discourse. This juxtaposition of old/new or known/unknown information develops the discourse topic.

The theme-rheme development of text can be analysed by bottom-up or top-down approaches. In the bottom-up approach, the topic of each sentence is assessed for its link to other topics in consecutive sentences and hence for an overall topic of a paragraph. Similarly, the topic of each paragraph is assessed for its link to the overall topic of the written discourse. In this way, the topic of each sentence and paragraph is connected to the overall topic of the text. In contrast, in the top-down approach, topical analysis is conducted downward from discourse topic to paragraph topic, and then the topic of each sentence. In either approach, to produce a coherent text, each topic should be semantically connected to another. This topic should be recognized from sentence to paragraph and paragraph to discourse level, ultimately

leading to a single unit of meaning. Any disconnected topic is considered as a coherence break or deviation from the main topic which may disturb the meaning of the discourse.

Danes (1974) proposed the idea of uniformed pattern in the use of theme-rheme. He proposed three different kinds of progressions in the text that make the text coherent and cohesive. These are:

- Simple linear progression
- Constant progression
- Derived theme progression

In simple linear progression, the topics in successive sentences are either the same, or synonyms and/or pronouns are used. Simple linear progression is used to give depth to the topic. By repeating the same topic in consecutive sentences, the writer provides detailed information about the topic under discussion.

In constant progression, semantically related but different topics are used in successive sentences. Usually, any element from the 'rheme' part of the preceding sentence becomes the topic or theme of the succeeding sentence. Constant progression is a way to extend the text by introducing new topics that are semantically related to one another.

In derived theme progression, two semantically identical topics are interrupted by at least one occurrence of sequential progression. Derived theme progression is used to remind the reader about the main topic by repeating the previously used topic after at least one occurrence of a constant progression. It is also used to write a closing statement at the end of the paragraph. Thus, these three progressions work to give depth, width, and to close the text which helps in the development of a coherent and cohesive text.

Due to these characteristics of different kinds of theme-rheme development, Downing (2001) urges both the teachers and the students to teach, learn and practice these different kinds of theme-rheme development to give proper structure to their texts such as introduction, development of ideas and proper conclusion. Herriman (2011) also asserts that the writers must select themes and rhemes in such a way that contributes to maintain the flow of information and create a coherent text. Dejica-Cartis (2013) notes that in the whole text, the procedure of repeating themes and rhemes in juxtaposition helps the writer to carry on a connected text in which each preceding sentence relates to the successive sentence which makes the whole text a single unit of meaning. Mulatsih (2010) claims that the students need to know the way of organizing theme and rheme through these different types of progressions to develop a coherent and cohesive text. These kinds of progressions help the writers to state the importance of the topic, include relevant details to expand, and finally, to sum up their topics. Sharndama (2013) observed the interplay of different theme-rheme patterns in building a coherent text and emphasized the teaching of theme and rheme structures which can render immediate results in teaching writing.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study was aimed to observe the effect of theme-rheme progression on developing coherence and cohesion in essay writing. Therefore, an experimental research design was deemed appropriate. Experimental and controlled groups were established to measure the effect of thematic progression on developing cohesion and coherence in essay writing. Each group consisted of 20 students, 10 male and 10 female. Pre- and post-tests were conducted to observe the effect of thematic progression on cohesion and coherence. Both groups were the same in their educational level as they were the students of graduation in the same institute. The experimental group got the treatment of theme-rheme development. The researcher gave the introduction of theme-rheme development and coherence and cohesion to the students in first class. In the next classes, the researcher introduced the concept of different types of progression and their role in the development of the text. The researcher also taught about coherence and cohesion and how to recognize these concepts in a piece of text. The researcher also instructed the students about how different types of thematic progression can be formed at sentence and paragraph levels. Initially, the students were given some texts to identify various types of thematic progression. As the research went further, the researcher instructed the students to write sentences by using different kinds of thematic progression. And later, the

students were given instructions to produce short paragraphs. Gradually, they wrote short paragraphs by using one or two types of theme-rheme progression. Then they were told how theme-rheme progression gave coherence and cohesion to paragraphs. Further, the researcher gave those samples of essays and asked them to read and identify types of theme-rheme progression and points of coherence and cohesion. After enough practice, they were asked to discuss one essay topic and make an outline. They were asked to write a complete essay of about 250 words by using this outline for practice purposes. This practice made them produce an essay by following the theme-rheme progression. It also guided them to keep an eye on developing coherence and cohesion while writing an essay.

The controlled group received no treatment, and they continued their study in their usual way without any treatment. At the end of the research, both groups were given a topic to write an essay of 250 words. Both groups were given the same topic in the post-test to keep the uniformity between the groups. The purpose of writing this essay was to collect post-test results to analyze the effects of teaching theme-rheme progression. To get an idea of the effects of the teaching of theme-rheme progression, scores of pre- and post-tests of both groups were compared to calculate the difference after the treatment.

3.2 Samples of the study

A total of 40 graduation level students including 20 males and 20 females were chosen as participants in the study. They were studying at the graduation level class in a university in Pakistan. Their average ages were between 19 and 23 years and a majority of the students was having Punjabi as their mother tongue.

3.3 The measure of the study

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) measure was used to analyse the coherence and coherence of the texts written by the participants. The IELTS assesses candidates on a scale from 1-9, which are called bands for each of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each band shows a competence level of the candidate which is required for different levels of courses. It ranges from 'Non-user' in band 1, to 'Expert-user' in band 9. For the writing skill, the candidates in the IELTS are assessed on four criteria: Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (Pearson, 2018). Marks are allocated on a 9-point scale as explained above, with 1 as the lowest and 9 as the highest band. Each band of the scale has specific descriptors. An assessor allocates marks by observing the presence or absence of these descriptors in the candidates' written scripts. Scripts are first assessed for each of the four criteria on the 1-9 bands scale separately and subsequently they are marked using the 1-9 bands scale holistically for the overall writing proficiency. As the object of the present study was to analyse coherence and cohesion, only the part of the IELTS measure that describes coherence and cohesion was used in the present study.

3.4 Validity of the measure

Morton (2007) conducted a study to assess the content validity of the IELTS academic written task 2. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between IELTS academic writing tasks and the required language use for university assignments. The data was collected through a survey of writing tasks and interviews with academic staff. It comprised a total of 155 university written assignments of undergraduate, and postgraduate levels, and compared 20 IELTS written tasks. For the interview, 12 university lecturers were recruited. Overall, academia was satisfied with the IELTS; however, some of them identified an overwhelming focus in the IELTS upon opinion, whereas university assignments require careful use of source and language.

Rater training is generally recognized as an important source for maintaining validity and reliability in the testing of L2 performance (Alderson, 1991). Furneaux (2007) conducted a study to investigate the effects of training on IELTS raters' marking consistency and the judgement about the writing scale. For this, 12 trainee-examiners participated in the study. Each rater rated 8 scripts in addition to writing a brief retrospective report about the rating of four of the scripts. The findings indicated that there was a modest gain in the standardization of the raters over time but suggested that training was more useful for an individual's

consistency and confidence in assessment, rather than their conformity with other raters. The findings also revealed that some of the criteria for assessment (such as coherence) were more difficult for the raters to apply than others. For example, some raters do not strictly follow all of the criteria leading to the difference among the raters. These data suggest a need to revise some of the assessment criteria, such as coherence, and to encourage raters to follow the prescribed criteria.

4. Data Analysis

Table 1 below shows the pre-test results of the experimental and controlled groups in terms of marks obtained by each group and their mean score. Both groups secured almost equal marks for coherence and cohesion with a negligible difference. The experimental group secured slightly higher marks for coherence than the controlled group, whereas the controlled group secured comparatively higher marks for cohesion. However, a notable thing in the pre-test is that both groups obtained slightly higher marks for cohesion than coherence.

Table 1: Pre-test results of the experimental and controlled groups

Name	Coherence	Cohesion	Total
Experimental group	78	80	154
Mean	3.9	4	3.95
Controlled group	72	82	154
Mean	3.6	4.1	3.85

Table 2 below shows the post-test results of the experimental and controlled groups. The findings show that the experimental group had a visible improvement after the teaching of thematic progression for coherence and cohesion in the development of the text. Particularly, the students showed great improvement in paragraph development and producing a coherent text. On the other hand, the controlled group witnessed a very low level of improvement. The experimental group obtained a total of 24 higher marks for coherence after the treatment than the controlled group with a difference of a mean score of 1.2. The experimental group also obtained 16 higher marks for cohesion than the controlled groups with a difference of a mean score of 0.8.

Table 2: Post-test results of the experimental and controlled groups

Name	Coherence	Cohesion	Total
Experimental group	110	108	218
Mean	5.5	5.4	5.45
Controlled group	86	92	178
Mean	4.3	4.6	4.45

The results of the post-test are considerably different from the pre-test score. The overall pre- and post-test results show that the students got a better idea of writing a coherent and cohesive text after the teaching of thematic progression. The experimental group showed a difference of 32 higher marks in their pre- and post-test results with an improvement of a mean score of 1.6 for coherence. Also, the experimental group secured 28 higher marks in the post-test for cohesion with a mean score of 1.4. On the other hand, the controlled group also showed little improvement after the teaching of coherence and cohesion in a traditional way. The controlled group added 14 marks for coherence in the post-test with a mean score of 0.7 and added 10 scores for cohesion with a mean score of 0.5. The findings reveal that the experimental group improved significantly for coherence and cohesion after the teaching of thematic progression.

The researcher trained another ELT teacher (Rater-2) to mark the essays for the study. The Rater-2 had a 15-year experience of teaching and assessing English as an L2. The researcher had several meetings with the Rater-2 before the assessment of essays for coherence and cohesion. He was made completely familiar with the theoretical concepts of coherence and cohesion as well as thematic development. Both researcher and the Rater-2 assessed few papers before the assessment of the essays for the study and ambiguities were discussed if there were any. Finally, both of them assessed essays written by the participants. To ensure complete transparency, the essays were given anonymous numbers. After the assessment, inter-rater reliability was counted which was 0.81 for coherence and 0.85 for cohesion. Cronbach alpha was used to calculate the value for inter-rater reliability.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to find out whether the teaching of coherence and cohesion through thematic progression helps the learners to improve their textual coherence and cohesion. Findings show that the participants' writing skill improved after the teaching of thematic progression.

Theme and rheme are the two parts of a sentence. The theme is the subject or information in the sentence already known to the reader, whereas rheme is the new information about the theme. This juxtaposition of theme-rheme/old-new/known-unknown helps the writer to introduce new information about the subject and thus develops the essay. Proper use of theme-rheme makes the sentence semantically meaningful (Liangprayoon et al., 2013). Coherence also is the semantic unity of the text that binds the whole text together in terms of meaning. This may be the reason that the enhanced knowledge of thematic progression helped the experimental group to develop a coherent essay. In addition, in theme-rheme progression, semantically related themes or subjects are written to link the local coherence with the global coherence of the essay. These themes are either nouns or pronouns. As cohesion is the grammatical unity of the text that links the structure of the text, this may be the reason that the improved thematical progression helped the writer to improve the cohesion of the text and make the text clearer and more reader-friendly. These findings are similar to Liangprayoon et al. (2013), Almaden (2006), and Chiu (2004). These studies show that the teaching of thematic development is helpful to improve coherence and cohesion in students' writings.

Organization of the essay means the step-by-step chronological or emphatic inclusion of incidents. This sequence of incidents helps the reader to connect the ideas and infer the intended meaning of the writer. Well-organized and connected ideas are deemed to be the quality of essay writing and are given a higher score than ill-organized essays (Ahmad et al., 2019). Different theme-rheme progressions, as mentioned in the literature review section above, assist the writer to widen, broaden, and reiterate the topic which makes the organization of the essay free from any divergence. The findings of the study show that the experimental group developed their theme-rheme progression significantly and improved the organization of their essays and got higher marks than the controlled group.

6. Conclusion

The teaching of theme-rheme progression helps the students to improve essay writing. The students use different types of theme-rheme progression in their essays. It was found that theme-rheme progression helps the students in many ways when writing an essay. For example, the students utilized theme-rheme progression to make their essays cohesive and coherent. This technique enriched their essay writing skill which is visible in the post-test results. The students wrote compact essays that were void of digressions. Thus, learning coherence and cohesion through theme-rheme progression improves students' essay writing skills.

The present study used an argumentative essay for the analysis. Other studies may use other types of essay writing to yield interesting results. Moreover, other genres of writing, such as story or letter writing can also be used for this purpose. Additionally, different kinds of paragraphs written by individuals can also be assessed to explore the difference of theme-rheme development across the different types of writings.

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