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Pronominally marked noun determiners in Limbu

Boyd Michailovsky
LACITO/CNRS Villejuif, France

1. Introduction

As in other Kiranti languages, nouns in Limbu are typically modified either by demonstratives, by pronominal prefixes, by other nouns (bearing the genitive suffix, but with a pronominal prefix on the head noun), or by propositions, participles, place-names, time-adverbs, etc., marked by the Limbu “nominalizing” suffix *-pa*. In a few cases, however, Limbu shows a different construction, in which the modifier bears a pronominal prefix, the 3d singular “possessive” prefix *ku-*. This type of determination is reflected in a common type of color-term derivative, e.g. *kubhutla* ‘pale’. The same prefix is found in a number of other words which typically function as modifiers or as predicate adjectives, like *kusɔŋ* ‘new’. In compounds, a noun may take the place of the pronominal *ku-*, e.g. *mikphutla* [“eye-pale”] ‘European’. Similar phenomena are reported from other East Kiranti languages.¹

2. Modifier-Noun constructions

I begin with a review of nominal modifiers in Limbu. Nominals may carry the definite suffix *-en* or the plural suffix *-ha*?

2.1 Demonstrative: DEM.-N (no marking)

- (1) *kha nese-'n* (untimely209)²
that earring-DEF
‘that earring’

2.2 Genitive: (N-GEN)-PRON-N (head- and dependent-marking)

The “possessed” head is marked by a pronominal prefix belonging to the paradigm *a-* ‘1st person’, *kɛ-* ‘2d person’, *ku-* ‘3d person’. The genitive suffix on the dependent noun is *-rɛ/-lɛ*. Limbu independent pronouns do not take the genitive marker.

- (2) *kɛ-nn'ya-rɛ ku-him-mu* (elope51)
2-mat.aunt-GEN 3-house-LOC
‘in your maternal aunt’s house’
- (3) *yɛba-'llɛ ku-dhɔkk-ɛtmu* (untimely138)
shaman-DEF.GEN 3-body-LOC
‘into the body of the shaman’
- (4) *kha bakəs-ellɛ ku-sɔm-dhaŋ* (untimely271)
that box-DEF.GEN 3-top-LOC
‘on (top of) that box’

2.3 Relative clause, place-noun, time-adverb, etc.: X-*pa* N (dependent marking)

The dependent-marker here is the “nominalizer” *-pa*, which in some contexts has a marked feminine *-ma* (cf. *pa* ‘father’, *ma* ‘mother’). The function of *-pa* as a morphological element — the use which concerns us here — is to mark certain elements as nominal modifiers. Like other modifiers, these may serve as nominals in the absence of a head (see below).³

A time-adverb as modifier:

- (5) *asen-ba khɔdakmi-rɛ* (dance125)
before-NOM elder-ERG
‘old-timers’

A subject-relativization using the active participle:

- (6) *kha ke-si-bamɔna-n* (untimely270)
 that ACT-die-NOM man-DEF
 ‘the dead man’

English adjectives are most often translated by Limbu “stative” verbs (whose aspectual character is more complex than their name suggests). Morphologically, these have an unprefixated participial form in place of the active participle of (6):

- (7) *yɔm-ba sara thik* (trade143)
 big-NOM boar one
 ‘a big wild boar’

Any modifier, in the absence of an expressed head, can serve as a nominal; in other words, Limbu is a language in which ‘big’ may mean ‘big one’.

- (8) *a-mba a-mma-re-'tmu* (marriage39)
 1-father 1-mother-GEN-LOC
 ‘to/at my parents’ [place]’

- (9) *kha ke-si-b'-en* (untimely123)
 that ACT-die-NOM-DEF
 ‘the dead man’

3. Color-words

Color-words form a closed class in Limbu, with particular formal properties (cf. van Driem’s “bound colour morphs” 1987:23-25). The following are found in the Mewa Khola dialect:

- (10) *het* ‘red’
hik ‘yellow’, ‘green’ (Tembe, Phedap)
let ‘raw, unripe, green, light “grue”’
mak ‘black, dark’
ɔm ‘yellow’
phiŋ ‘blue, dark “grue”’
phɔ ‘white’
phu:t ‘gray, pale’

Color-words appear in a number of constructions and characteristic derivations. They occur as predicates with the copulas *lɔʔma* ‘to be like, to sound like, to make like...’ and *cokma* ‘to do, to behave’:

- (11) *mak lɔʔ pekk-elle bela* (elope43)
 black COP go-SUB time
 ‘when it becomes dark’

- (12) *ma:kki let lɔʔ*
 maize green COP
 ‘the maize is green (unripe)’

These predicates can serve as modifiers, using the regular relative construction :

- (13) *ɔm ke-lɔʔ-ba phuŋ*
 yellow ACT-COP-NOM flower
 ‘yellow flower’

There are a number of derived color-forms, some of them marked by the nominalizing suffix *-pa* mentioned above. The morpheme *-taŋ* ‘like’ is used to form color adjectives of the form [COLOR]-*taŋba*, e.g. *maktaŋba* ‘black’, *phodaŋba* ‘white’.

Special suffixes *-kəŋgəŋba*, *-kəkəkəpa* and *-yɔʔyɔʔba* are used to derive color adjectives expressing degrees of “[COLOR]ish”, e.g. *makkəŋgəŋba* ‘dark’, *phingəkəkəpa* ‘blueish’, *makyɔʔyɔʔba* ‘blackish’ (A).

But the most common and the most characteristic color-form has the prefix *ku-* and the otherwise unknown suffix *-ra/-la*, for example, *kuhetla* ‘red’, *kubhəra* ‘white’:

- (14) *kubhəra* *kubhəra* *phuŋ-haʔ*(A)
 white white flower-PL
 ‘white flowers’
- (15) *kuleʔtla sa-n* ‘raw meat’ (WS268)
- (16) *kuhikla aphis* ‘military [“green”] office’ (D24)
- (17) *kuhetla liŋ* ‘reddish thatch-grass’

The prefix *ku-* is clearly the 3d person clitic pronoun, although here it does not commute with the other clitic pronouns (*a-* ‘1st person’, *ke-* ‘2d person’). That is, if I am black, I am *kumakla* and not **a-makla*. Note also that *ku-* marks the dependent modifier (i.e. the color) and not, as in the genitive construction, the head.⁴ Like other modifiers, the color-term can function as head: *kuhetla* (*thik*) ‘a red one’, *kuhetla-n* ‘the red one’.

This is the construction that interests us here — or at least its lexicalized trace. Before discussing it further, I will present a few other lexical and morphological uses of *ku-*⁵

4. Other pronominalized modifiers

Three other words have the prefix *ku-* and the suffix *-la*, although they do not share other color-derivatives: *kuləpla* ‘cylindrical’ (A) (cf. *ləppət* ‘[manner of] lying stretched out’), *kugəpla* ‘round’ (A) (cf. *kəpma* ‘to surround, to reach around’), *kuseŋla* ‘dried’ (A) (cf. *seŋma* ‘to dry in the air’).

A small group of adjectives has the prefix *ku-* and the suffix *-wet* (~ *wa* in Tembe): *kuhiŋwet* ‘alive’ (cf. *hiŋma* ‘to live’), *kughəŋwet* ‘unripe (of fruits)’, *kumaŋwet* ‘uncooked’, *kusiwet* ‘dead’ (cf. *sima* ‘to die’).

- (18) *kusiwet siŋbuŋ* ‘dead tree’ (A)
kumaŋwa sa ‘raw meat’ (Tembe dialect)

Further examples include the word ‘new’, which has the prefix *ku-* with no suffix:

- (19) *kusəŋ him* ‘new house’ (cf. *səŋma* ‘to sell’)
kughekya sa ‘dried meat’ (cf. *khəkma* ‘to be dry’).

Two pronominalized words express comparisons:

- (20) *thi-n* *cwa:t* *kusiktaŋba* *cog-u*
 beer-DEF water like make-3O.pa
 ‘he made the beer like water [i.e. weak]’
- (21) *a-mbhəŋa-si-rə* *kusiktaŋba* ... *cələn* *hop* (dance251)
 I-uncle-COLL.GEN like ... custom not.exist
 ‘there is no custom like that of my uncles’ generation’
- (22) *jəmmə kudəŋba* *pət* (dance62)
 all same COP
 ‘all [of our body-parts] are the same’

In (22), *kudɔŋba* is derived from the verb *tɔŋma* ‘to agree’. In (20), *kusiktaŋba* is related to the postposition *kusik* ‘like, in the manner of’, which generally has an adverbial sense. In both cases there is an extra argument, the comparandum, which could justify the pronominal *ku-*; note, however, that this argument is not in the genitive case.

4. Modifier-compounds

In compounds, these modifiers generally appear without the *ku-* prefix, which can thus be seen as commuting with a compounded noun. There are two types of compounds: the first type occurs with color-words of the type *kuhetla* ‘red’, in which the pronominal element *ku-* may originally have indexed the head of a modifying construction. In compounds, what is logically a head-noun replaces the pronoun: structurally “meat-fresh” vs “its-fresh (meat)”. Note that the usual modifier-head order of Limbu syntax is reversed:

- (23) *saretla* ‘fresh meat’ (cf. *sa* ‘flesh’)
ŋaghekya ‘dried fish’ (cf. *ŋa* ‘fish’)
ma:kkiɾetla ‘green/unripe maize’ (cf. *ma:kki* ‘maize’)
thegek.hetla ‘police (an Assam police force wearing red headgear)’ (cf. *thegek* ‘head’)
mikphutla (1) ‘cataract’, (2) ‘European’ [“pale-eye”] (cf. *mik* ‘eye’)

The second type also occurs with color words, and with ‘new’. The pronominal prefix is again lost, but the usual order of determination is preserved: “black-earth” vs “its-black earth”. (The identity of the compounded element is not always clear.)

- (24) *maklep* ‘wart’
makkham ‘black (fertile) soil’ (A) (cf. *kham* ‘earth’)
makkhi ‘blood’
maksiŋro ‘charcoal’ (cf. *siŋ* ‘wood’)
phɔdiŋrek ‘*Solanum khasianum*’ (cf. *tiŋ'rekpa* ‘thorn’)
hetla.k'yakma ‘*Polygonum capitatum* (?)’ (has a reddish inflorescence).⁶
he:tho:kphetla ‘rhododendron’ (A) (cf. *thokphet* ‘id.’)
sɔŋkhim (cf. *him* ‘house’) (A)
sɔŋmi ‘new man, stranger’ (A)
(mi is a formative suffix in a number of nouns referring to persons)

This is the order of modifier-head compounds generally in Limbu, with modifiers like *cukpa* ‘small’ which never take *ku-*, e.g. *cukphe* ‘(kind of) small knife’ (A) (cf. *phedza* ‘Nepalese knife’).

5 Relational nouns and compounds

The great majority of *ku-* entries in the Academy dictionary are nouns, of which only a few will be cited here. Most have a relational sense, implying a relation to a whole, a source, a material, a complement, etc. In other words, to the extent that these words only appear with the pronominal prefix, they constitute a class of obligatorily possessed nouns.⁷ Grammatically, the prefix marks the head of a genitive expression, not a modifier as with color-words.

- (25) *kubherək* ‘half’
kube ‘edge’
kurum ‘middle’
kumulla (A) ‘piece (esp. of meat)’
kubuŋ (A) ‘base’
kumma:ma[?](A) ‘female (of a species)’
kusa:p (A) ‘root’
kusigek (A) ‘broken grain’

Many deverbal derivatives fall into this category, distinguished from the source verbs by the pronominal prefix. The prefixed form is either the present stem or the infinitive (suffix *-ma*). Note that the prefix *ku-* does not occur in the finite verbal paradigm (see appendix).

- (26) *kunam* ‘odor’ *namma* ‘to smell’
 (in *kunam nu/phən* ‘smells good/bad’)
kudza ‘taste’ *cama* ‘to eat’
 (in *kudza nu/phən* ‘is good/bad tasting’)
kusap ‘decoration’ *sapma* ‘to write’
kudemma ‘handle’ *temma* ‘to grasp’
kudepma ‘lid’ *tepma* ‘to cover’.
kuyaŋ ‘storage place, place to stay’ *yaŋma* (A) ‘to put inside’
kuyuŋ ‘handle (of a knife, etc.)’ *yūŋma* ‘to set, to fix’
kue:p ‘suppression’ (A) *epma* ‘to suppress’
kuge:ŋ ‘length’ (A) *keŋma* ‘be long’
kughe:k ‘piece’ (A), ‘odd member of a pair’ *khe:kma* ‘to have a nick, a missing tooth’

Relational nouns also enter into compounds. As in the case of modifier-compounds (above), a noun takes the place of the pronominal *ku-*. However, the semantic structure is different, because the noun that replaces the pronominal is logically a modifier and not the head: ‘tree(s)-base’ vs ‘its-base’.

- (27) *kudu:ppa* ‘large intestine (A)’ *hidu:t, hidu:ppa* ‘id.’ (*hi* ‘excrement’)
kumulla (A) piece (esp. of meat) *semulla* ‘piece of meat’ (A) (? *sa* ‘flesh’)
kubuy (A) ‘base’ *phaksamulla* ‘a piece of pork’ (*phaksa* ‘pork’)
kusa:p (A) ‘root’ *siŋbuy* ‘tree trunk’ (A) (*siŋ* ‘tree, wood’)
kusigek (A) ‘broken grain’ *siŋsap* ‘tree-root’ (A)
kuyuŋ ‘handle’ *ya’sigek, ya’sige:k* (A) ‘broken grain’ (*ya’* ‘grain, rice’)
pheyuŋ (A) ‘knife-handle’ (*phedza* ‘Nepalese knife’)

When the relational noun is itself the modifier, it comes first in the compound, e.g. in *pūsammaŋ* ‘chief among hunting deities’ (A) (cf. *sammaŋ* ‘deity’), *lumso:kma* ‘middle finger’ (A) (cf. *so:kma* ‘to point’). Where it is a quantifier, it can apparently come either before or after what is quantified, like NP quantifiers: *phre:ŋdɔk* [“half-pause”] ‘semicolon’ (A), *təŋbhre:ŋ* [“year-half”] ‘semester’ (A).

5. East Kiranti parallels

The phenomena described above find an echo in Ebert’s description of the closely-related language Athpare (1991:93-94) (Comments in square brackets are mine.):

Some adjectives [marked by the (singular) nominalizer *-na*] alternate with forms that have a prefix /*u-*/ [*u-* ~ *o-*, identical with the 3d person possessive prefix] and suffixes *-pa* ~ *-ba* or *-wat*.

<i>makna / umakpa</i>	black
<i>piŋna / upiŋba</i>	green
<i>phana / uphaba</i>	red
<i>usikna / usikwat</i>	dry

[...]

The following adjectives are attested only with /*u-*/, although they have the ending *-na* (rather than *-pa* or *-wat*) or no suffix at all.

<i>ucaphenna</i>	ugly, bad	[cf. Limbu <i>kudza phən</i> (“its-eating bad”)]
<i>ocetnuna</i>	beautiful, nice	[cf. <i>nu-</i> ‘become good’]
<i>ohop</i>	empty	[cf. Limbu <i>hopma</i> ‘not be, not exist’]
<i>umaŋ</i>	raw	[cf. Limbu <i>kumaŋwet</i>]

Ebert remarks (93n44):

The origin of the prefix /*u-*/ is obscure. It could be a frozen 3rd person possessive prefix, or the form *u-* *-ba/-wa* could be an old U[ndergoer]/S[ubject] participle. Cf. also

<i>o-mok-pa</i>	broth	(< <i>mok-ma</i> ‘boil’)
<i>o-yaŋ-wat</i>	broken rice	(< <i>yaŋ-ma</i> ‘beat’)
<i>o-choŋ-wat</i>	new	(< <i>choŋ-ma</i> ‘sell’) ⁸
<i>u-pha-ba</i> ~ <i>u-pha-wa</i>	money	(<?) ⁹

Finally, from Bickel's sketch of another East Kiranti language, Belhare (2003:563):

One adjective, *uchoŭat* 'new', is attributed without further marking (*uchoŭat khim* or *khim uchoŭat* 'a/the new house') and appears to go back to a possessive construction meaning 'its-newness'. Such constructions are found with a few other concepts: e.g. *ŋatlabu u-soŋ* [banana 3POSS-ripe] 'the/a ripe banana'.

The post-nominal position of the adjective is not necessarily significant, since Belhare is described as head-final with a "post-phrase adjunct position". But if pronominally-marked adjectives are more frequent in this position than other attributes, it might be taken to reflect the headedness of the hypothesized "house its-newness".

7. Burmese

Bernot (1971) describes Burmese as a language without a specifically adjectival category, in which demonstratives, possessors, and relatives precede the head. Modifiers which would normally be translated by French or English adjectives are generally drawn from the category of "stative verbs", which can serve as predicates, be followed by modal particles, etc. (I omit consideration of Pali loans, used in the literary language.) These usually follow the noun.¹⁰ A few of them — essentially limited to color-words in the spoken language, although exceptional examples with 'new' and 'warm' are also cited — are marked by the prefix *ʔə-*. Thus:

lu ʔci [ʔji] 'adult ["man big"]'

paŋ ʔəni 'the red flower ["flower PFX-red"]'

The prefix in question also serves regularly to form deverbal nouns, as well as being found on a certain number of other nouns. Finally, it is lost in compounds, unless it is in first position.

Thus, as in Limbu, we have a nominalizing prefix which marks color-terms in their function as noun-modifiers. This is an interesting typological convergence, but perhaps no more than that. The Burmese prefix is not pronominal, at least not synchronically. The prefixed color-term, like other stative-verb modifiers in Burmese, usually follows the noun.

8. Conclusion

Pronominally-marked modifiers constitute a small, closed class in Limbu, consisting essentially of color terms and the word 'new' — among the usual suspects in closed classes of adjectives (Dixon 1994) — as well as 'living', 'dead', and a few others.

They are characterized by the presence of the pronominal prefix *ku-*. The structure of the modifier, "its-[quality]", reflects grammaticalization of the notion that the quality is "possessed" by the noun. Syntactically, however, it seems clear that in an expression like *kubhōra phuŋ* 'white flower', 'flower' is the head, since head-final order is general in Limbu syntax. The pronominal morphology is frozen and unproductive.

The identification of the prefix as the 3d person possessive pronoun is reinforced by the existence of compounds in which the pronoun commutes with a noun. A pronominal form like *kuretla* 'green, unripe' can be seen as representing any of the possible compounds *saretla* 'meat+fresh', *ma:kkiwetla* 'maize+green/unripe', etc. Even in compounds where the internal order corresponds to the usual syntactic modifier-head order (e.g. *phōdijrek* 'white-thorn [*Solanum khasianum*]'), the prefix is almost always dropped (cf. note 6).

We might consider the prefixed adjectives like *kuretla* as simply grammaticalized pronominalizations derived from *saretla*, etc., but we would still have to explain the anomalous order of the latter, which falls out naturally from the "its-[quality]" grammaticalization path. Compounds with the more usual stative-verb-type modifiers — 'big' and 'little', for example — have only modifier-head order.

Pronominally marked modifiers are reported from two other East Kiranti languages, Athpare and Belhare. They have not been reported elsewhere in the Kiranti group.

APPENDIX: Syntactic use of *ku-* with verbs

The prefix *ku-* does not occur as a prefix in the finite verbal conjugation, but it occurs with non-finite verb forms in two constructions. First, it appears with a reduplicated gerund, forming a kind of propositional nominalization or headless relative with an extensive sense. The original referent of the pronominal is perhaps an implied head (i.e. the amount in (a), the duration in (b), the speech in (c)).

(28) *ku-ghambekk-elle ku-dhɔn-dhɔn lɔt* (elope77)
 3-land-DEF.INST 3-support-support only
 '[a fine amounting to] only as much as his land can bear'

(29) *khemsikpa ku-yuŋ-yuŋ-samma rɔt* (trade155)
 star 3-stay-stay-until only
 'only as long as the stars remain [visible]'

(30) *ku-ba:p-pa:p pa:p-ma* (A)
 3-say-say say-INF
 'to say whatever comes into one's head'

This gerund is found in a few compounds, e.g. *namdhadha* 'all day long' ["sun-set-set"], *namda:ttat* 'all night long' ["sun-fetch-fetch"].

Second, *ku-* appears with the present stem and the suffix *-se* in the purpose construction, van Driem's "supine" (1987:212), where it indexes definite 3d person personal objects (only), commuting with *a-* '1st person' and *kɛ-* '2d person'.

(31) *a-himdaŋm'-elle ku-la-se peg-aŋŋ-aŋ* (untimely133)
 1-wife-DEF.GEN 3-fetch-PURP go-1sg.pa.
 'when I went to fetch my wife'

(32) *a-hɔŋ-se pher-ɛ* (road146)
 1-look.for-PURP come-pa.
 'he came to look for me'

(33) *iŋga khɔl-le ku-hɔŋ-se t'y-aŋŋ-elle* (elope67)
 1 DEM-GEN 3-look.for-PURP arrive-1sg.pa-SUB
 'when I arrived to look for him'

The purpose construction makes an interesting distinction between definite human and other objects. With indefinite or non-personal objects, neither the pronoun nor genitive marking is used:

(34) *hatti tem-se me-dhaŋ-ba* (trade131)
 elephant catch-PURP 3pl.-go.up-NOM
 'where they go up to catch elephants'

(35) *liŋ hek-se pe kɔɔ* (untimely217)
 thatch-grass cut-PURP go.PA if
 'if she goes to cut thatch'

(36) *mench'ya hɔŋ-se pek-muna*
 woman look.for-PURP go-PART
 '[marriage-brokers] going to look for a young woman'

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, examples are from the author's fieldwork on the Mewa Khola dialect of Taplejung District, Nepal. A few are marked as from the dialect of Tembe, in the Maiwa Khola. Other sources are identified as follows: (A) Royal Nepal Academy 2003 (predominantly Panchthar dialect);

(WS) Weidert and Subba 1985 (Panchthar dialect); (D) van Driem 1987 (Phedap dialect). The transcription is IPA-based, except that *y* is used for IPA [j] and *j* for IPA [dz].

2. Examples from recorded texts are cited with references to the text and the sentence number. The texts (transcription, translation, and recorded sound) are available for browsing on the Lacito archive website: <http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr>.

3. This element also appears as a formative in a large number of nouns, not necessarily derived, designating persons or animals, e.g. *keba* ‘tiger’, *thokpa* ‘weevil’, *yeba* ‘(kind of) shaman’, (feminine: *yema*), and in some others, e.g. *nedeŋba* ‘cheek’, including probable loans from Tibetan, e.g. *thakpa* ‘rope’, *toŋba* ‘(kind of) drinking vessel’.

4. The Academy dictionary cites two examples of such forms with the nominalizer *-pa*, *kumaklaba* ‘dark-complexioned man’ and *kumaklama* ‘dark-complexioned woman’. It is not clear whether these can occur as modifiers.

5. The precise status of the unaffixed color morphemes is somewhat ambivalent. Van Driem speaks of “bound colour morphs”. This interpretation finds support in the form *kuretla* ‘unripe’, because, in the Mewa Khola at least, only dependent elements (suffixes, focus particles, verb stems in certain verbal expressions) show initial *r* in postvocalic contexts (cf. van Driem 1990). Compare the independent noun *laŋ* ‘leg’, *kulaŋ* ‘his leg’. (This rule is apparently not observed in the standard Panchthar dialect, cf. *kuletla* in ex. 15 and in A, and *kulaŋ* ~ *kuraŋ*, cited in A.) Syntactically, however, the color-words appear to be independent in exx. 11 and 12.

6. Note that the suffix *-ra* is retained in this example, and in *hetlaphuŋ* ‘poinsettia’ [“red-flower”] (A). The Academy dictionary also lists two compounds in which *ku-* is retained: *kubhiŋluŋ* ‘sapphire’ [“blue-stone”] (A), *kuhe’luŋ* ‘ruby’ [“red-stone”] (A) (cf. *luŋ* ‘stone’).

7. It is not clear to me that this is in fact the case. In my dictionary (2002) I have listed some of them as headwords without the prefix, and A lists most of them both with and without it. It is certain that both kin and body-part terms may appear unprefixated:

laŋŋ-elle *toŋ-usige* (father-in-law15)
foot-INST attack-1pl.ex.→3
‘We two attacked it with [our] feet.’

8. I have applied Ebert’s etymology for ‘new’ to Limbu *kusɔŋ* in (19) above.

9. Athpare ‘money’ is simply ‘red’, describing the copper coins that traditionally circulated in Nepal. Limbu money is *ke-sem-ba* ‘cold’.

10. Bernot argues that they are the heads of their NPs, and that the contradiction with the usual Burmese head-final order is only apparent. This question is not discussed here.

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