



The Multiplicity of Meaning: A Comparative Analysis of Polysemy in Quranic Translation

Soad Altaher Ahmed Mohammed 

Department of English, Abu-Issa Faculty of Education, University of Zawia, Libya

Corresponding Author's Email: s.mohammed@zu.edu.ly

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Abstract

The translation of religious texts poses unique and intricate challenges. This is particularly more apparent when it pertains to capturing the subtle meaning by using suitable equivalence, since one lexical term has various meanings based on its particular context. This study examines the difficulties and consequences of translating these polysemous words from Arabic to English. The data of this study were collected from the Quran, where four verses that contain the terms Fitnah, Ummah, and Huda were chosen because they have different meanings. Employing a qualitative and comparative approach, the research examines the terms Fitnah, Ummah, and Huda within three prominent translations: Marmaduke Pickthall (1930), Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934), and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2004). The results indicate that dependence on "formal equivalence" or literal translation frequently results in "semantic thinning," causing the theological richness and logical consistency of the original text to be diminished. In contrast, contemporary "functional" methods that emphasize contextual interpretation are better at maintaining and conveying the original message. The research finds that although no English term can entirely capture the complex essence of Quranic polysemy, employing explanatory descriptors and exegetical footnotes is crucial to avoid theological misinterpretation and provide a clearer understanding for non-Arabic speakers.

Keywords: Quranic Translation, Polysemy, Linguistics, Comparative Analysis, Semantic Loss.

الملخص

تواجه ترجمة النصوص الدينية تحديات معقدة. ويظهر هذا بشكل جلي عند محاولة نقل المعاني الدقيقة باستخدام المكافئ المناسب، نظراً لأن الكلمة الواحدة قد تحمل دلالات متعددة بناءً على سياقها الخاص. تتناول هذه الدراسة الصعوبات والتبعات المترتبة على ترجمة هذه الكلمات ذات المعاني المتعددة (المشتركة لفظياً) من اللغة العربية إلى الإنجليزية. تم جمع بيانات هذه الدراسة من القرآن الكريم، حيث تم اختيار أربع آيات تحتوي على ألفاظ: فتنه، وأمة، وهدي؛ نظراً لتعدد معانيها. وباستخدام المنهج النوعي المقارن، تبحث الدراسة هذه الألفاظ ضمن ثلاث ترجمات بارزة لكل من: مرمادوك بيكثول (1930)، وعبد الله يوسف علي (1934)، وم. أ. إس. عبد الحليم (2004). تشير النتائج إلى أن الاعتماد على "المترادف الشكلي" أو الترجمة الحرفية يفضي غالباً إلى ما يُعرف بـ "الفقر الدلالي"، مما يتسبب في انحسار الثراء العقدي والاتساق المنطقي للنص الأصلي. وفي المقابل، تُظهر المناهج "الوظيفية" المعاصرة التي تركز على التفسير السياقي قدرة أفضل على الحفاظ على الرسالة الأصلية

ونقلها. تخلص الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من عدم قدرة أي مصطلح إنجليزي بمفرده على الإحاطة الكاملة بالجواهر المعقد للتعدد الدلالي القرآني، إلا أن استخدام الشروح التوضيحية والهوامش التفسيرية يُعد أمراً بالغ الأهمية لتجنب سوء الفهم العقدي، وتقديم فهم أوضح وأدق لغير الناطقين باللغة العربية.

1. Introduction

The Quran is often seen as the highest form of Arabic eloquence, distinguished by a distinctive linguistic feature called Polysemy (or Al-Wujuh). In contrast to typical prose, an individual Quranic term frequently acts as a "semantic vessel," bearing various layers of meaning that change according to its surrounding context (Siyāq). For instance, the term al-fitnah can represent a test, an act of worship of idols, or a penalty, depending on the context. Polysemy the capacity of a single lexical item to convey multiple contextual meanings constitutes a formidable challenge in Quranic translation, a domain where contextual fidelity and semantic precision are critical. This linguistic complexity is further magnified by the imperative for translators to balance subtle linguistic nuances with profound theological implications.

Nonetheless, when this "multi-layered" text is rendered into English, it must go through the limited funnel of a target language that frequently lacks precise lexical equivalence. This study examines how neglecting Quranic polysemy in English translations leads to a tangible loss of semantic richness and theological accuracy. This study aims to emphasize the differences that emerge when a polysemous term is reduced to a single, frequently insufficient, English equivalent by analyzing the works of notable translators like Marmaduke Pickthall, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

2. Literature Review.

The exploration of polysemy in the Quran is not a contemporary development but a core aspect of Islamic sciences referred to as *Ilm al-Wujuh wa al-Naza'ir*. Scholars of classical literature, such as Al-Zarkashi(1957) and Al-Suyuti(2011), highlighted that grasping the different "faces" (Wujuh) of a term is essential for any legitimate interpretation (Tafsir). They contended that overlooking these subtleties might result in significant mistakes in understanding religious law and doctrine.

2.1 The Linguistic Difficulty of Polysemy.

Modern translation theorists, including Nida (1964) and Newmark (1988), have extensively examined the issue of "non-equivalence." Within the framework of the Quran, Hussein Abdul-Raof (2001) observes that the Quranic text is "translation-resistant" due to its words frequently being context-sensitive to a level not observed in secular Arabic. Research in this area indicates that many English translations experience "lexical compression," where a translator selects a single standard translation (for instance, consistently rendering Ummah as "Nation") and uses it universally, thus eliminating the distinct theological nuance meant in various verses.

Contemporary scholars are increasingly departing from conventional "literal" evaluations in favor of Frame Semantics. They contend that polysemous lexemes elicit comprehensive cognitive

"frames" that frequently remain unacknowledged in the process of translation. El-Hassan (2014): By concentrating on particles, El-Hassan elucidates that polysemy extends beyond mere nouns. This investigation reveals how the significance of a singular term fluctuates according to the "mental spaces" engendered by the Quranic discourse. Ali, A. (2015): Ali posits that numerous polysemous expressions within the Quran should be understood as conceptual metaphors. Translators tend to convey the "surface" interpretation while overlooking the foundational metaphor that interconnects the diverse Wujuh (faces) of the term.

2.2 Comparative Approaches in Current Research.

Recent research has criticized early 20th-century translations for their reliance on a "dictionary-based" methodology. Scholars such as M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2004) have suggested that earlier translations (such as Pickthall's) frequently used outdated English, which obscured the multiple meanings. Conversely, the efforts of Yasir Qadhi and others highlight that although Yusuf Ali's translation possesses poetic depth, it sometimes favors allegory at the expense of the precise semantic limits defined by traditional Tafsir. With the emergence of digital humanities, researchers now employ Parallel Corpora (analyzing the Arabic source in direct comparison with various English translations) to measure the phenomenon of "lexical loss." Saeed, A. (2006) stated that the Qur'an must be understood as a text rooted in a specific historical context, yet possessing a message that can be dynamically applied to contemporary life. Saeed argues against "literalism"—which treats 7th-century socio-legal applications as immutable—and instead proposes a method that extracts the underlying principles (the "ethico-legal" core) of the revelation.

Salama, A. H. (2011) undertakes a meticulous case study of the term Amr (command, matter, affair, decree). He concludes that translators frequently encounter challenges due to their neglect of collocation—how the lexical context surrounding the polysemous term determines its particular meaning in that instance. Musa, S. (2021) elucidates how "Standard English" is deficient in semantic density compared to "Quranic Arabic," resulting in what has been identified as lexical compression, analyzed through a framework of data-driven frequency assessment. Certain scholarly inquiries posit that polysemy is purposefully employed in the Quran to facilitate legal flexibility (Ikhtilaf), contending that fixed translations "freeze" the text in a manner that the original Arabic did not. Suleiman, Y. (2013) examines the translation of polysemous sacred texts as an act of "ideological pruning. By selecting a singular meaning, the translator assumes the role of a Mufti (legislator) rather than merely that of a linguist. Dussouchet, H. (2010). An in-depth exploration of one of the most polysemous terms in the Quran (Taqwa: fear, piety, mindfulness, protection). It analyzes the difficulties translators face in identifying a "functional equivalent" that concurrently encapsulates all these nuanced layers. Izutsu, Toshihiko (2002) carried out a study about an examination of the semantics within the Koranic Weltanschauung. This work is of paramount significance within the field. Izutsu employs a "semantic field" methodology to elucidate that the meaning of a term is contingent upon its interrelations with other terms within the Quranic framework. He posits that polysemy arises from a term's simultaneous affiliation with multiple semantic fields.

Despite extensive writings on the overall challenges of translating the Quran, there is still a demand for targeted comparative studies on particular polysemous groups. The majority of literature concurs that a "functional" or "interpretive" translation is preferable to a literal translation, but the "literalist trap" continues to be a frequent mistake. This study aims to address that gap by examining three significant terms, Fitnah, Ummah, and Huda, within three prominent translations: Marmaduke Pickthall (1930), Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934), and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2004).

3. Research question.

1. To what extent does the failure to account for Quranic polysemy (Al-Wujuh) in English translations result in a loss of semantic depth and theological precision?

4. Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, comparative, and contrastive linguistic framework to examine the complexities associated with translating polysemy within the Quranic text. The methodological approach is delineated as follows:

4.1 Selection of Primary Sources

Three distinct English translations have been judiciously selected to epitomize varying temporal contexts, cultural backgrounds, and philosophical orientations in translation:

- a. Marmaduke Pickthall (1930): Designated as a representative of early 20th-century "formal equivalence" and recognized as a trailblazer in English-Muslim scholarly discourse.
- b. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934): Chosen for its poetic aesthetic and significant emphasis on allegorical and spiritual interpretation.
- c. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2004): Selected as a contemporary "functional" translation that emphasizes the utilization of modern English vernacular and contextual lucidity.

4.2 Selection of Case Studies (Lexical Units)

The investigation concentrates on three high-frequency polysemous lexemes: Fitnah, Ummah, and Huda specifically in four verses. The researcher selected these terms due to their:

- a. Exhibition of significantly divergent meanings contingent upon their Quranic context (Al-Wujuh).
- b. Influence on foundational theological and legal constructs within Islamic discourse.

4.3 Analytical Procedure

The analytical process adhered to a four-phase methodology for each case study:

1. Contextual Mapping: Identifying the diverse semantic "faces" of the term through classical Tafsir (exegesis) such as those by Ibn Kathir and Al-Jalalayn.
2. Data Extraction: Isolating specific verses in which the term undergoes semantic transformation.
3. Comparative Analysis: Juxtaposing the interpretations of these verses across the three selected translations.
4. Critical Evaluation: Appraising whether the translator employed "literal equivalence" (lexical-based) or "functional equivalence" (contextual-based) and analyzing the consequential effect on the comprehension of the English reader.

4.4 Integration of Classical Arabic Lexicography.

To guarantee the linguistic precision of the analysis, this research has drawn upon classical Arabic dictionaries and lexicons. These resources were employed to trace the etymological origins of the terms and to substantiate the historical evolution of their meanings (Karrar, 2026).

The following primary lexicons were consulted:

Lisan al-Arab (by Ibn Manzur): This work was utilized to ascertain the original root of terms such as Fitnah (the smelting of gold), thereby illuminating the metaphorical transformation into "trial" or "persecution."

- Al-Mu'jam al-Waseet: This lexicon served to bridge the divide between classical usage and contemporary semantic interpretation.

- Mu'jam Mufradat Alfadh al-Quran (by Al-Raghib al-Isfahani): This dictionary constituted an essential tool, specifically targeting Quranic vocabulary, which enabled the researcher to differentiate "Quranic polysemy" from the broader contexts of poetic or secular Arabic polysemy.

4.5 The Process:

1. Isolate the Root: For each case study, the tri-literal root was meticulously examined in Lisan al-Arab.

2. Map the Wujud: Utilizing Al-Isfahani's scholarship, the various "faces" employed within the Quran were systematically categorized.

Benchmark: These classical definitions were established as the "Gold Standard." Any English translation that diverged substantially from these classical definitions was earmarked for rigorous analysis within the study.

5. Analysis and Discussion

In this section we will deal with the first term "Al-Fitnah (الفتنة)".

The term Fitnah is derived from the Arabic root f-t-n, which has historically signified the procedure of smelting gold to eliminate impurities. Within the Quran, it manifests in numerous forms, embodying at least four distinct semantic dimensions (Wujud).

5.1 Analysis of Meaning.

1. Trial/Test (الابتلاء): "And we test you with evil and with good as a trial..." (Al-Anbiya: 35).
2. Persecution/Oppression (العذاب): "Indeed, those who have tortured the believing men..." (Al-Buruj: 10).
3. Shirk/Disbelief (الشرك): "And fight them until there is no more Fitnah..." (Al-Baqarah: 193).
4. Temptation/Seduction (الاستدراج): Pertaining to the enticement of wealth or progeny.

5.2 Comparison of Translations

An analysis will be conducted regarding the approach taken by three translators with respect to Surah Al-Baqarah (2:193):

Translator Rendering of Fitnah

Table 1: Translation of *Fitnah* (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:193)

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Context: *Fitnah* as Shirk/Persecution

Translator	Rendering of <i>Fitnah</i>	Analysis of Polysemic Accuracy
Marmaduke Pickthall	"Persecution"	Focuses on the socio-political aspect; accurate but narrow.
Abdullah Yusuf Ali	"Tumult or Oppression"	Uses synonyms to capture the "vibe," but remains somewhat vague.
M.A.S. Abdel Haleem	"Idolatrous Persecution"	Most Accurate: Bridges the gap between "Shirk" and "Persecution."

5.3 Critical Analysis.

1. Marmaduke Pickthall "Persecution" | Pickthall opts for a socio-political interpretation. Although his rendering is historically consistent with the conditions of Meccan oppression, it constrains the theological breadth of the verse, which classical Tafsir (such as that of Ibn Kathir) elucidates as "Shirk" (Idolatry). |
2. Abdullah Yusuf Ali: "Tumult or Oppression" | Yusuf Ali employs a dual terminology in an attempt to encapsulate the overarching "aura," yet "Tumult" remains ambiguous. It conveys a sense of disorder in the public sphere rather than the intended implications of spiritual trial or religious persecution. |
3. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem: "Idolatrous Persecution" | Abdel Haleem presents a compound translation. By appending the modifier "Idolatrous," he adeptly reconciles the polysemous divide, elucidating that the "fitnah" referenced here pertains explicitly to persecution based on one's religious convictions (Shirk).

5.4 The Loss of Semantic Depth

The peril inherent in these translations is "semantic thinning." If a reader encounters "Persecution" in one passage and "Trial" in another, they may overlook the Quran's employment of a singular term to interlink these notions—implying that persecution constitutes, in essence, a form of spiritual refinement (the etymological origin of the term).

Key Finding: The reliance of Pickthall and Yusuf Ali on singular English equivalents inadequately communicates to the reader that *Fitnah* is a complex process of purification. Abdel Haleem's contemporary methodology is more "polysemy-aware," as he utilizes contextually specific descriptors.

The second term will be examined is “Ummah (أمة).”

The term "Ummah" (أمة) presents an intriguing instance of polysemy, as it transcends its prevalent contemporary interpretation of "a global community" to encompass a range of concepts including temporality, leadership, and religious methodology.

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While the term *Ummah* is nearly universally acknowledged in modern discourse as the "Global Muslim Community," the Quranic connotation is substantially more intricate. Classical exegetes delineate at least four distinct "faces" (*Wujuh*) of this term, spanning from an individual entity to an abstract representation of time.

5.5 Analysis of Meanings

1. A Leader or Role Model (الإمام والقُدوة): "Indeed, Abraham was an *Ummah*, devoutly obedient to Allah..." (Al-Nahl: 120).
2. A Period of Time (الحين والزمان): "And [the one who] said... 'I will inform you of its interpretation, so send me forth' ... after a [long] *Ummah*." (Yusuf: 45).
3. A Path or Religion (الدين والملة): "Indeed, we found our fathers upon an *Ummah* [a religion]..." (Al-Zukhruf: 22).
4. A Group or Nation (الجماعة): The most prevalent usage, denoting a specific collective of individuals.

5.6 Comparison of Translations

We will examine how translators approach the "Time" and "Leader" variants, which present the most significant challenges for English naïve speakers.

Example A: *Ummah* as Time (Surah Yusuf: 45)

Translators' Rendering

1. Analysis of *Ummah* as a Period of Time (Surah Yusuf 12:45)

Translator	Rendering of <i>Ummah</i>	Analysis of Polysemic Accuracy
Marmaduke Pickthall	"After a space of time"	Functional: Abandons the primary "nation" meaning to ensure the sentence is logically sound in English.
Abdullah Yusuf Ali	"After a (long) period"	Interpretative: Uses brackets to provide narrative context (the length of the imprisonment) as found in classical <i>Tafsir</i> .
M.A.S. Abdel Haleem	"After all that time"	Idiomatic: Focuses on the natural flow of the English language, making the polysemy invisible to the reader.

5.7 Critical Analysis

- Marmaduke Pickthall "After a span of time" | This translation is both precise and functional, yet it diminishes the distinctive Quranic nuance inherent in the original word choice. |

- Abdullah Yusuf Ali "After a (prolonged) period" | The inclusion of "(prolonged)" within parentheses aids the reader in comprehending the context surrounding the narrative of Yusuf, demonstrating an acute awareness of the storyline. |

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-M.A.S. Abdel Haleem "After all that duration" | This rendition employs a more colloquial English phrasing, which enhances clarity but compromises the technical linguistic connection to other verses utilizing *Ummah*. |

Example B: *Ummah* as an Individual Leader (Surah Al-Nahl:

Table 2: Translation of *Ummah* as an Individual leader (Surah Al-Nahl 16:120)

Context: *Ummah* as a Role Model/Leader

Translator	Rendering of <i>Ummah</i>	Analysis of Polysemic Accuracy
Marmaduke Pickthall	" <i>A nation</i> "	Literalist Trap: Obscures the meaning for English readers by applying a collective designation to a specific man.
Abdullah Yusuf Ali	" <i>A model</i> "	Functional: Values the spiritual essence of the text above its formal linguistic structure.
M.A.S. Abdel Haleem	" <i>A community in himself</i> "	Interpretative. Preserves the original semantic gravity of the term while specifying its application to a particular person.

5.8 Critical Analysis

- Marmaduke Pickthall's translation, "Abraham was a nation," is categorized as highly problematic. Without extensive footnoting, a literal rendering makes the text logically incoherent to an English reader, as a single individual cannot literally be a "nation."
- Abdullah Yusuf Ali's choice to translate the term as "model" is praised for prioritizing the intended meaning (an individual acting as a paradigm) over dictionary literalism.
- M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's "a community in himself" offers a compromise that preserves the collective essence of *Ummah* while logically applying it to a single person.

5.9 The Impact of Polysemic Shift

Failure to account for context-dependent shifts in the meaning of *Ummah* (which can mean "Role Model," "Time," or "Community") leads to "nonsensical" results:

In Surah Yusuf: Translating *Ummah* strictly as "nation" would imply that Yusuf's companion remembered him only "after a nation," rather than "after a period of time."

In Surah Al-Nahl: A literalist rendering obscures the theological significance of Ibrahim as a solitary figure who embodied the truth alone.

- Key Finding: Interpretive translation is not merely a preference but a necessity to preserve the internal logic of the Quranic narrative for those reading in English.

5.10 The Concept of Huda (Guidance)

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The term *Huda* serves as a primary example of spiritual polysemy, where the meaning fluctuates between the source (The Quran), the act, and the result of guidance (Tawfiq):

- As Scripture (القرآن والكتب السماوية): It refers to the Quran itself as a source of direction (e.g., Al-Baqarah 2:2).
- As Clarification (البيان أو الدلالة): It refers to the act of "showing the way" or providing evidence, which can be rejected by the recipient (e.g., the people of Thamud in Fussilat 41:17).
- As Divine Success (التوفيق والإيمان): It refers to the internal change of heart granted only by Allah, distinguishing human preaching from divine intervention (e.g., Al-Qasas 28:56).

Theological Implications The case of Surah Al-Qasas (28:56) إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِي مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ where the Prophet is informed he cannot "guide" (*tahdi*) those he loves.

Translators must distinguish between *Huda* as "preaching/showing the way" (which the Prophet did) and *Huda* as "granting faith" (which is exclusive to God). Failing to navigate this polysemy risks misrepresenting the relationship between human agency and divine will.

5.11 Translator Rendering of Huda.

Table 3: Translation of *Huda* (Surah Al-Qasas 28:56)

Context: *Huda* as Divine Success (*Tawfiq*) vs. Showing the Way

Translator	Rendering of <i>Huda</i>	Analysis of Polysemic Accuracy
Marmaduke Pickthall	" <i>Thou guidest not</i> "	Literal; may lead to apparent contradictions with other verses.
Abdullah Yusuf Ali	" <i>Wilt not be able to guide</i> "	Poetic and emphatic, but doesn't distinguish between types of guidance.
M.A.S. Abdel Haleem	" <i>Guide... to the truth</i> "	Precise: Clarifies that the "guidance" here is the internal acceptance of faith.

5.12 Critical Analysis

Marmaduke Pickthall's rendering of "Thou guidest not" | While this translation is accurate, it engenders an apparent paradox for the English-speaking audience, given that other verses assert the Prophet's role as a guide (وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ) |

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's phrase "It is true thou will not be able to guide..."

Ali retains the term "guide," yet adopts a poetic and emphatic style. Nevertheless, the subtle linguistic distinction between the Guidance of Showing and the Guidance of Success remains obscured.

M.A.S. Abdel Haleem states, "You [Prophet] cannot guide everyone you love to the truth; it is God who guides whoever He will" | By incorporating the phrase "to the truth," Abdel Haleem

suggests that the guidance in question pertains to the internalization of faith, rather than merely the transmission of the message.

6. Theological Precision and Polysemy

The ambiguity inherent in this case study is fundamentally theological. Should Huda be translated solely as "Guidance," the reader may inquire: "How can the Prophet be admonished that he does not guide in one verse, while being designated as a Guide in another?"

In Surah Ash-Shura (42:52), the term signifies the act of showing the path (Irshad).

In Surah Al-Qasas (28:56), the term conveys the notion of instilling faith within the heart (Tawfiq).

Key Finding: Translators who neglect to incorporate explanatory footnotes or precise English qualifiers (such as "granting faith" versus "showing the way") inadvertently generate "textual contradictions" in English that do not manifest in the polysemous Arabic original.

7. Conclusion.

This investigation has illustrated that polysemy within the Quran constitutes not merely a linguistic feature but rather an essential element of its rhetorical miracle. Through the examination of concepts such as Fitnah, Ummah, and Huda, several deductions can be made:

1. The Pitfall of Literalism: Translators such as Pickthall, who emphasize word-for-word correspondence, frequently succumb to the "Literalist Trap," culminating in verses that are logically perplexing or theologically restrictive in English.
2. The Imperative of Exegetical Context: Terms with polysemous characteristics cannot be translated relying on a dictionary alone; they necessitate a profound engagement with Tafsir to ascertain which "face" (Wajh) of the term is being referenced.
3. Abdel Haleem's Contemporary Advantage: Recent translations tend to address polysemy more adeptly through the application of "Contextual Substitution"—selecting English lexicon that reflects the functional significance of the term rather than its etymological meaning.
4. The "Lost in Translation" Phenomenon: Ultimately, an English translation can never fully supplant the Arabic Quran, as it is unfeasible to encapsulate three or four simultaneous meanings within a singular English word.

Final Recommendation: Subsequent translations ought to adopt a multi-gloss methodology, wherein polysemous terms are accentuated with footnotes elucidating the semantic breadth of the Arabic root, thereby enabling the English reader to perceive the profundity of the original text.

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