As Simple as It Seems

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Abstract. Even when linearized after it, *seem* can take scope over the modal *can,* provided that a downward-entailing trigger is present locally. Downward-entailingness plays a key role in the scope reversal: *seem* takes scope not only over *can,* but also over the trigger, because it is a mobile positive polarity item, which has the ability to raise covertly above a potential anti-licenser. This movement permits aspectual configurations that are otherwise disallowed in the complement of *seem.*

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1 Introduction

It has been claimed (Homer (2010, 2012b), Iatridou & Zeijlstra (2010)) that a number of intensional verbs, e.g. deontic *must,* are PPIs which undergo covert raising in order to scope out of an anti-licensing environment; this claim helps explain an English phenomenon known under the name of 'can't seem to' construction, a case of syntax-semantics mismatch (Langendoen (1970), Jacobson (2006)):

(1)   John can't seem to lose weight.
        Paraphrasable as: It seems that John can't lose weight.   SEEM≫NEG≫CAN

This phenomenon consists in the reversal of the relative scope of *seem* (and for some speakers, *appear*) and *can* (in the schema, E_{DE} is a downward-entailing expression):

(2)   Surface order (ignoring V-to-T movement): E_{DE} ...   can   ...   seem
                                                        1   2   3
        Scopal relations: SEEM ≫ E_{DE} ≫ CAN
                                                        3   1   2

Some conditions are necessary (though not sufficient). 1. Only a few modals can take part in the scope reversal with *seem:* in fact, previous researchers claim that only *can,* and more specifically yet, only ability *can,* lends itself to the scope reversal (Property 1). Although it is certain that deontic and epistemic *can* are not involved, this description is too restrictive, in view of (3):

(3)   There can't seem to be enough vampire movies.   ✓SEEM≫NEG≫CAN

I also wish to point out that for a number of speakers, *will* enters the scope reversal too:

(4) He won't seem to give me a straight answer. ✓SEEM≫NEG≫WILL
     Paraphrasable as: It seems that he cannot give me a straight answer.

2. The reversal only occurs in the presence of an expression (henceforth the 'reversal trigger') which denotes a DE function (Prop. 2):

(5) #John can seem to lose weight. *SEEM≫CAN
     Not paraphrasable as: It seems that John can lose weight.

3. Furthermore, *seem* achieves wide scope over both the trigger and *can* (in that order) (2) (Prop. 3); 4. contrary to what normally happens in present-tense sentences (6), the predicate under *seem* need not be stative, witness *lose weight* in (1) (Prop. 4):

(6) *John seems/doesn't seem to lose weight.[1]

5. The two verbs have to be relatively 'close' to each other (Prop. 5). 6. Semantically, more than just scope reversal is involved: sentences that instantiate the phenomenon yield an actuality implication (Prop. 6; lack of space doesn't allow me to discuss it):

(7) This man can't seem to climb Mount Everest.
     Context A: The speaker just looks at a man and only bases her judgment on his apparent health condition.
     Context B: The speaker knows that the man tried to climb Mt. Everest and failed.

Sentence (7) cannot be uttered felicitously in context A, but it can in context B.

I argue that scope reversal is not illusive (*contra* Jacobson (2006)) and that a fully compositional analysis is possible. First, I discard two possible accounts: the phenomenon is not idiomatic (Sect. 2), and neg-raising is not involved (Sect. 3). Sect. 4 offers an analysis in terms of a covert movement motivated by positive polarity; this movement also explains why in the presence of *can* non-statives are exceptionally available in the complement of *seem* in present tense sentences (Sect. 5).

2 Not an Idiom

There are a number of reversal triggers besides negation: they form a substantial set, which is included in the familiar natural class of (Strawson) DE expressions:

(8) a. <u>Few</u> can seem to fathom how he could be so popular. [Jacobson 2006, ex. 9]
     b. <u>At most five people</u> can seem to understand this.
     c. John can <u>never</u> seem to speak in full sentences. [Jacobson 2006, ex. 7]
     d. I just bought this lens, and I can <u>rarely</u> seem to get a clear picture.
     e. <u>Only</u> John can seem to stomach watching reruns of the 6th game of the 1986 Series. [Jacobson 2006, ex. 10]

They are thus characterized by their variability and their predictability: this allows us to eliminate the hypothesis that *can, seem,* and the trigger jointly form an idiom. Still, a possible rejoinder would be that there really are two parts to consider, a negatively

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[1] The sentence is grammatical under a non episodic reading.

polarized idiom *can seem* (SEEM≫CAN) on the one hand, and some licenser (the trigger) on the other. This is a non-starter as well. In effect, the trigger can (and in fact must) take intermediate scope between the other two elements: (8d) for example is paraphrasable as (9a), not as (9b):

(9) a. It seems that I rarely can get a clear picture.
     b. It seems upon rare occasions that I can get a clear picture.

In (8d), the adverb *rarely* binds the closest situation variable in its scope, which is an argument of *can,* and hence quantifies over situations of being able to get a clear picture, not over *seeming* eventualities. Even if *can seem* were an idiom in its own right, it would be expected to combine compositionally with the rest of the sentence. Then the trigger would have to scope over the semantic construct *can seem* (SEEM≫CAN)—since it is generated higher than *can* and *seem*—contrary to fact. A proponent of the idiom line would then be forced to say that the trigger makes a non-compositional contribution to meaning in combination with *can* and *seem.* In other words, the three elements would have to form an idiom. But we have already rejected this possibility: therefore the scope reversal is not idiomatic. Still one might have in mind yet another option, which is eliminated in the next section, namely that the reversal is due to neg-raising.

3   Not Neg-raising

Seem can achieve wide scope over negation and negative quantifiers by the *semantic* route of neg-raising. *Think* is an example of a neg-raising predicate (NRP): a homogeneity inference, which is responsible for the effect, is attached to it (Gajewski (2005)):

(10) John doesn't think that I understand French.
      Paraphrasable as: John thinks that I don't understand French.

      a. *Assertion:* It is not the case that John thinks that I understand French.
      b. *Homogeneity inference:* John thinks that I understand French or John thinks that I don't understand French.
      ∴   John thinks that I don't understand French.

The neg-raised reading of a sentence containing a negated NRP is often favored, but it is not mandatory. Importantly, when it obtains, negation is syntactically higher than the NRP, it is not transported back into a low position. A distinctive property of NRPs is that only they pass the *cyclicity test,* as shown for *want* in (11). The test uses a negation and an NRP embedded under another NRP: it is passed when negation is interpreted below the lower NRP although it surfaces above the higher one (Horn 1978):

(11) I don't think that John wants to help me.   ✓THINK≫WANT≫NEG

(12) I don't think that John seems to understand the situation.✓THINK≫SEEM≫NEG

Seem passes the test too, and is thus an NRP. But it is covert raising (syntax), not neg-raising (semantics), which explains the scope reversal: the predicted neg-raised reading of (1) is (13) (due to the universal projection of the homogeneity inference associated with *seem,* see Gajewski (2005)), and it is not the desired reading:

(13)   In all worlds w' compatible with J.'s abilities in w*, it seems in w' that J. isn't losing weight.
$\neq$ It seems that there are no worlds w' compatible with J.'s abilities in w* such that J. is losing weight in w'.

4   Movement

We have seen that *seem* gives rise to neg-raised readings under DE expressions; these readings require *seem* to be syntactically *under* these expressions. But it is also possible for *seem* to be interpreted in a higher position than scope-bearing elements linearized before it, a fact that has not been documented yet, as far as I can tell.

   We will need to distinguish two kinds of movements: (i.) *seem* can be interpreted in a higher position than certain elements, non-DE adverbs in particular (but the identity of the mover and the direction of the movement are unclear) (Sect. 4.1); (ii.) *seem, qua* mobile PPI (like deontic *must* and *supposed*), raises covertly out of the scope of a potential anti-licenser (Sect. 4.2 through 4.4).

4.1   Non-DE Adverbial Expressions

Because *seem* is a raising-to-subject verb, its wide scope over quantified subjects can always be due to A-reconstruction. But adverbs are not usually assumed to A-move, let alone reconstruct. Therefore the fact that *seem* can outscope a number of adverbs, e.g. *often, always, easily,* that precede it on the surface, might suggest that it raises covertly past them:

(14)   a.   *Context:* Just looking at the hospital's visitors register, a doctor says…
            People often seem to visit the patient of room 32.   ✓SEEM≫OFTEN
       b.   Some of you guys easily seem to forget that football is a team sport.
            ✓SEEM≫EASILY

But there is a fact that could point to A-movement and reconstruction of adverbs after all: remarkably, the only option is surface scope when *seem* takes a tensed complement:

(15)   a.   It often seems that people visit this patient.*SEEM≫OFTEN; OFTEN≫SEEM
       b.   It easily seems that some of you guys forget that football is a team sport.
            *SEEM≫EASILY; EASILY≫SEEM

Now, whatever the mechanism of wide scope over non-DE elements may be, it doesn't suffice to account for the scope reversal with DE expressions: Prop. 2 (a DE expression is needed) and Prop. 3 (*seem* outscopes both the trigger and the modal) can only be understood in light of the fact that certain intensional verbs are mobile PPIs.

4.2   Mobile PPIs

The deontic modal *must* is a mobile PPI (as claimed in Israel (1996), Iatridou & Zeijlstra (2010)): this fact is established in Homer (2010, 2012b). The property of *must* that bears

directly on the present discussion is its ability to raise covertly past an potential anti-licenser, e.g. negation (*must* can be shown to be generated under negation; it raises covertly from this position; V-to-T is semantically idle, see Chomsky (2000)):

(16) a. John must$_{deon}$n't leave.   MUST≫NEG;*NEG≫MUST
      b. LF: [John$_1$ must$_{deon}$ not ___ [t$_1$ leave]]

Evidence for the movement of *must$_{deon}$*, which I label *escape* in Homer (2010, 2012b), comes from occurrences of a quantified subject scopally sandwiched between raised *must$_{deon}$* and a clausemate negation. I show in Homer (2012b) that the particular scopal configuration instantiated in (17) cannot obtain through a purely semantic route and has to be syntactic (in fact, *must* is not an NRP); therefore the intermediate scope of quantified subjects is a test for movement:

(17)   *Context:* The rules of this bowling game state that exactly one pin must remain standing, no matter which one. . .
    Exactly one pin must$_{deon}$n't be knocked down. ✓MUST≫EXACTLY_ONE≫NEG

PPIs can be 'shielded' from an anti-licenser by interveners, e.g. *every, always,* conjunction, because-clauses, etc. Remarkably, when *must$_{deon}$* is shielded, it cannot raise (compare with *a single person,* which is not an intervener):

(18) a. Not everyone must$_{deon}$ leave.   *MUST≫NEG; NEG≫MUST
      b. Not a single person must$_{deon}$ leave.   MUST≫NEG; *NEG≫MUST

Escape is a last resort, i.e. it is blocked when unnecessary (due to shielding). Importantly, it is also clause-bound:

(19)   You don't think John must$_{deon}$ be friendly.   *MUST≫NEG≫THINK

The syntactic mechanism whereby PPIs acquire wide scope over potential anti-licensers is not to be confused with the semantic route to wide scope, *viz.* neg-raising. The two processes are distinct but not incompatible: nothing in principle precludes the conjunction of the two properties in a given predicate. Such is indeed the case of *should* and—for some speakers—of *supposed* (Homer 2012b). Such is also the case of *seem,* which has already been shown to be an NRP: I now set out to show that it is also a mobile PPI.

4.3   PPIs Interpretable under a Clausemate Negation

First, it bears saying that it is generally assumed, and wrongly so, that in order to be a PPI, a given expression must be unable to be interpreted under a clausemate negation. In Homer (2012a) I propose a theory of polarity item licensing which predicts that there can exist PPIs which are licit in such a position. This theory of licensing has three main ingredients: (i.) polarity items are sensitive to the monotonicity of their syntactic environment (rather than to c-command by a DE expression); (ii.) to be licensed, a PI needs to find itself in at least one constituent that has the appropriate monotonicity w.r.t. its position (upward for a PPI, downward for an NPI); (iii.) only certain constituents are eligible for the evaluation of the acceptability of PIs, but a PI can be licensed in any of the

eligible constituents in which it is acceptable. Regarding the eligibility of constituents, the presence of the Pol head, which hosts the polarity operator of the sentence (negation for negative sentences, and a positive operator for positive ones) is required in the constituents in which the acceptability of *some,* a well-known PPI, is checked. Specifically, for each CP γ that contains *some,* only the constituents that contain the Pol head of γ are eligible. This condition on eligibility seems to be lexically determined because it is PI-specific. The contrast between (20a) and (20b) falls out from this hypothesis:

(20) a. John didn't understand something.   *NEG≫SOME
      b. It is impossible that John understood something.   ✓IMPOS.≫SOME

In (20a), all eligible constituents are DE w.r.t. the position of *some* under negation, whereas in (20b), *some* is acceptable in at least one eligible constituent, e.g. the embedded TP. Just like *must$_{deon}$*, French *devoir$_{deon}$* 'must' is a mobile PPI (Homer 2010); but unlike *must,* it is interpretable under a clausemate negation (without shielding), which suggests that the smallest eligible constituents for its evaluation are smaller than PolP. Licensing is liberal: it can occur in any constituent chosen for evaluation. This means that depending on which constituent gets evaluated, i.e. a constituent that contains negation vs. a constituent that doesn't, *devoir* either has to raise or—since escape is a last resort—cannot raise; this alternative gives rise to an illusive air of optionality:

(21) Jean ne   doit$_{deon}$ pas faire de jogging.   NEG≫DEVOIR; DEVOIR≫NEG
      Jean NEG must   NEG do   of jogging
      'Jean need not jog/must not jog.'

4.4   Escape of *seem*

Like *devoir, seem* can take scope above or below a clausemate negation. To show that *seem* can raise, let us consider a sentence where the presupposition trigger *longer* is merged between it and negation. I assume *longer* to be a fixed point; the make-up of the presupposition that gets computed is an index of the position where *seem* is licensed and interpreted, i.e. if *seem* is part of the presupposition, it is interpreted in the c-command domain of *longer* at LF; if not, it is not:

(22) a. *Context:* James Bond is wending his way across a deserted warehouse; he
          trips over an unidentifiable body and says:
          Well, this man no longer seems to be alive.   SEEM≫NEG≫LONGER
          Presupposition: This man was alive.
      b. Uttered in 2006: In view of the latest recording, Bin Laden no longer seems
          to be dead.   LONGER≫SEEM
          Presupposition: Bin Laden used to seem to be dead.

In (22a), *seem* is interpreted in a position above *longer,* since it is not used in the computation of the presupposition; it is also interpreted above negation, which suggests that it raises past negation.[2] In (22b), *seem* gets interpreted lower than *longer* and by tran-

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[2] If, as I assume, *no longer* comprises sentential negation and the element *longer* attached to the clausal spine, the widest scope of *seem* can be envisaged in an alternative way: first the modal

sitivity, since the NPI *longer* needs licensing, lower than negation; neg-raising remains possible and explains the availability of a wide scope reading of *seem* over negation concomitant with a narrow scope reading under *longer*.

The 'pin' test (17) confirms the movement of *seem* past negation:

(23)   *Context:* There are as many guests as there are seats in an auditorium and the speaker knows it. She takes a quick look: exactly one seat is not taken. . .
Exactly one guest doesn't seem to have arrived. ✓SEEM≫EXACTLY_ONE≫NEG

The PPI hypothesis explains why *seem* only outscopes *can* when both *can* and *seem* are in the scope of a DE expression (Prop. 2). Compare (24) and (25):

(24)   a. #John can seem to lose weight.   *SEEM≫CAN
        b. *Context:* John just rose from under the water. Incredible though it may sound. . .
            #John can not seem to breathe for 2 minutes.   *SEEM≫CAN≫NEG

(25)   a. John can't seem to lose weight.   ✓SEEM≫NEG≫CAN
        b. He can no longer seem to live without her. ✓SEEM≫NEG≫LONGER≫CAN

We verify that *seem* not only can but has to outscope the reversal trigger (Prop. 3):

(26)   *Context:* John had been bragging that someday he would levitate; and one day he rose above ground at a party, to his friends' amazement. But Peter later demonstrated to everyone that John used a mechanical trick at that party. . .
        #John can no longer seem to levitate.   SEEM≫NEG≫LONGER≫CAN
        Paraphrasable as (only reading): John used to be able to levitate and he seems to have lost the ability.
        Not as: It no longer seems that John can levitate.

That *seem* cannot be sandwiched between *longer* and *can,* but has to scope over negation when it outscopes *can,* leads us to conclude that the scope reversal is due to *polarity sensitivity.* The shielding effect of *every* lends further support to the PPI hypothesis:

(27)   a. #Not everyone can seem to lose weight.   *SEEM≫NEG≫CAN
        b. Not a single person can seem to lose weight.   SEEM≫NEG≫CAN

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raises covertly past *longer* and stays there, below negation, an option open to it since it can raise past scope-bearing elements, and it is the kind of PPI that is interpretable under negation; second, neg-raising kicks in. Under this view, *seem* doesn't end up higher than negation. This doesn't seem to be a possible derivation, though. The reason is that neg-raising is optional (Homer 2012b)—true, it is sometimes required to license a strict NPI, e.g. *until,* in the scope of a neg-raising predicate (*'I don't (*particularly) think that John left until 5'*); but the NPI *longer,* whatever its strength may be, can be 'licensed through' a non neg-raising predicate (*'I am not sure I any longer agree with this conclusion, maybe one could turn that question around'*). So neg-raising would be expected to be optional when *seem* outscopes *longer.* However a sentence like *'This man no longer seems to be alive'* lacks the expected non neg-raised reading, i.e. a reading paraphrasable as: this man was alive, and it is not true that he seems to be alive. This suggests that *seem* can raise past negation, and that when *longer* intervenes, it raises past negation in one fell swoop.

Escape, the covert raising of *must* (*should* and *supposed*) is constrained: it appears to be clause-bound; likewise, *seem* cannot raise past a superordinate negation (28a) (even with a neg-raised reading of negated *think*), and doesn't acquire maximal scope in (28b):[3]

(28)   a.   #You don't think John can seem to lose weight. *SEEM≫THINK≫NEG≫CAN
                                                           *THINK≫NEG≫SEEM≫CAN
       b.   You think John can't seem to lose weight.   *SEEM≫THINK≫NEG≫CAN

While the reversal can occur in weakly negative environments, such as the one created by the strictly DE *at most five* (8b), it is not triggered by a superordinate negation (28a). Due to neg-raising, the environment in the embedded clause in (28a) is one in which NPIs of all strengths can be licensed, therefore it appears to be negative enough to precipitate the reversal (provided that the acceptability of *seem* is evaluated in a constituent which contains this superordinate negation). The lack of scope reversal must therefore be due to the presence of a clause boundary.

Another fact militates in favor of the movement approach: scope reversal is possible even when *can* is itself part of a well attested idiom, e.g. *can help:*

(29)   John can't seem to help falling asleep.   ✓SEEM≫NEG≫CAN

If *seem* didn't raise covertly to give rise to scope reversal, as claimed in this article, it would intervene between *can* and *help,* in contravention of the definition of idioms as connected sequences of strings (Sportiche 2005): *can help* conforms to this definition, but at LF, after movement of *seem* has taken place.

In sum, *seem* appears to be able to raise past anti-licensing elements. But observe that surface scope is forced with a tensed complement:[4]

(30)   *Same context as (22a)...*
       #Well, it no longer seems that this man is alive.   *SEEM≫LONGER
       Presupposition: It used to seem that this man is alive.

This suggests that when it embeds a tensed complement, *seem* loses the ability to raise, or that it ceases to be a PPI. If the former is the case, then, by parity of reasoning, it is probably also via a covert movement—sensitive to the presence of a tensed complement (15)—that it takes scope over certain non-DE adverbs (14), rather than via reconstruction of the adverbs. Settling the issue is beyond the scope of this article, but if we assume that there is a movement of *seem* past non-DE adverbs (e.g. *often* in (14a)), it differs from escape (for a reason that is still mysterious at this stage):

(31)   a.   #John can often seem to open the door.   *SEEM≫OFTEN≫CAN
       b.   John can rarely seem to open the door.   ✓SEEM≫RARELY≫CAN

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[3] At this stage, I am not in a position to state in what syntactic position *seem* lands.

[4] Lacking covert movement, it is neg-raising which gives rise to wide scope in (i):

(i)   It doesn't seem that this man is alive.   ✓SEEM≫NEG

Seem cannot take wide scope over *often* if *can* intervenes, while it can take scope (via escape) both over the DE adverb *rarely* and over *can*.

This section has established that *seem* can raise covertly out of an anti-licensing environment, and that this movement is the source of the scope reversal. This hypothesis also explains why the complement of *seem* at merge can contain non-stative predicates only in the 'can't seem to' constellation.

5   Temporal and Aspectual Properties of the Infinitive

The infinitival complement of *seem* normally has two remarkable properties: (i.) its tense is identical with the matrix tense ((32d) follows this rule, for it has a *present* perfect), and (ii.) when the matrix tense on *seem* is present, the main embedded predicate must be stative (32b), or else receive a non episodic reading, just like predicates in present tense clauses (32e), hence the oddness of certain sentences where reversal fails ((5), (27a), etc.); if the matrix tense is past, an embedded eventive is acceptable (32f):

(32)   a.   John seems to be happy (*yes-terday/*tomorrow).
     b.   *John seems to fall.
     c.   *John seems to sleep.
     d.   John seems to have fallen.
     e.   John is happy/*falls/*sleeps.
     f.   John seemed to fall.

The 'can't seem to' constellation provides the only exception to constraint (ii.): we have seen examples of non-statives in the present, e.g. *lose weight* (1). In the sentences that exhibit scope reversal, the infinitive is undoubtedly c-selected by *seem,* not *can,* because of the presence of *to*. Irrespective of the particular hypothesis developed here (movement for polarity reasons), it seems inevitable that the source of the aspectual restriction is not linked to the subcategorization of *seem* (against the received view, Stowell (1982), Wurmbrand (2011) among many others) but is semantic. This constraint remains to be explored, but one thing is already clear: in our perspective, once *seem* moves out, it no longer composes with the complement, but *can* does (Prop. 4). This is how the semantic constraint is respected when the complement contains an otherwise illicit non-stative. The facts discussed here call for a revision of the received view on the temporal-aspectual properties of the infinitival complement of *seem,* and of infinitives in general. This received view has an important shortcoming anyway: it focuses exclusively on the properties of the *infinitival* complement of *seem,* but ignores that the same puzzling contrast (32b)-(32f) also holds in tensed complements:

(33)   a. *It seems that John falls.   b.   It seemed that John fell.

The eventive predicate in (33b) is interpretable as denoting an eventuality simultaneous with the *seeming* eventuality; (nearly) everywhere else, past tense complements of past tense verbs cannot receive this interpretation. There has to be 'past-shifting': e.g. the time of the leaving is ordered before the time of the saying in (34); exceptions can be found in the complements of perception verbs, see examples of 'belief based on perception' by B. Partee, cited e.g. in von Stechow (2009)):

(34)   Peter said that John left the building.

6   Conclusion

The hypothesis that *seem* can move covertly out of an anti-licensing environment provides a simple explanation to the scope reversal of *can* and *seem*. One interesting aspect of the phenomenon is that it may help further our understanding of the temporal properties of infinitives. In closing, the movement hypothesis, conjoined with the clause-boundedness of escape, leads me to propose that there is no clause boundary between *can* and *seem* (Prop. 5). A novel distinction among English root modals is thus needed: *can* (and *will*) creates a monoclausal structure, but only under certain construals (ability *can* is one of them). With other sorts of *can* and other root modals, a biclausal structure is created (Prop. 1). Therefore the syntax of *can* varies depending on its modal base and ordering source. *Able* does not enter into the scope reversal:

(35)   #John isn't able to seem to lose weight.   *SEEM≫NEG≫ABLE

It differs from *can* in that it takes a complement headed by *to;* it might also differ from it along the control/raising distinction; but it is too early to venture an explanation. Epistemic modals have been argued to create monoclausal structures (Homer 2010); yet, they do not allow scope reversal. It is possible that this reversal is blocked by Epistemic Containment, the constraint whereby an epistemic modal needs to outscope other clausemate scope-bearing elements (von Fintel & Iatridou 2003).

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