# A LOGICAL APPROACH TO MODAL VERBS 5. *WOULD*

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*Abstract*

The present article aims at a possible logical approach to discussing the modal auxiliary verb *would*, including its importance in the English verb and tense system. Being one of the central modal verbs, we argue that *would*s the remote pair of *will*, including temporal, psychological, tentqative and social remoteness, primarily based on the ideas developed by Michael Lewis (1986). Thus we support the idea that the core meaning of *would* is connected to the concept of*remoteinevitability*, which comes to complete Palmer's distribution of modal verbs, expressing epistemic, deontic and dynamic meanings.
Uses of *would*include both an auxiliary and various modal meanings, its presentation relying on authoritative sources published for international (English), Hungarian and Romanian students. Possible issues of teaching *would*are also dealt with, supported by data from a popular TV series containing modal verbs. The conclusion discusses the importance and relativity of number of occurrences, trying to offer a possible teaching option for modals stemming from practice.

**Keywords: modality, future auxiliary, inevitability, remoteness, teaching modal verbs.**

## Introduction

In a strict sense, *modality* is a semantic term dealing with non-factual situations, covering two major areas:

- *deontic*, referring to 'human' control over a particular situation, associated with *obligation*, *permission*, *intention*, and the marginal *ability*;
- *epistemic*judgements expressing the speakers' opinion (Palmer, 1990, p. 2), attitudes (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 80), probability, predictability (Greere & Zdrenghea, 2000, p. 29), or likelihood (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 219). referring to factuality (i.e. the truth value of utterances: *certainty*, *probability*, *possibility*);

The shortest possible definition is that modality deals with a "personal interpretation" of the *non-factual and non-temporal* elements of things, actions or events (Aarts, 2011, p. 275), and there are various grammatical options to express them (cf. Gălăţeanu & Comişel, 1982, p. 59; Magyarics, 1997, p. 209; Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 638):

- *mood (cf. Subjunctive Mood);*
- *inflection or conjugation (not characteristic to English);*
- *intonation;*
- *lexical units, such as nouns (demand, intention, suggestion), adjectives (certain, inevitable, likely), adverbs (allegedly, certainly, perhaps), or verbs (appear, decide, guess, imagine);*
- *hedges(Aarts, 2011, p. 311), that is phrases turning factual to non-factual by blurring the truth-value of statements by dodging facts,* disperse doubt, etc.:

*You know, Mr. Castle is a* ***sort of*** *agent.* (~ not really)

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*Whenever in trouble, Shrek would* ***kind of*** *rescue Fiona.*

Although the underlying part of the modality iceberg reveals an immense richness of options contributing to a colourful modal palette, the tip of the modality iceberg is represented by the *modal* verbs, which are most readily associated with the English modality.

At morphosyntactic level, modal verbs form the most intricate modal system, pervading large areas of grammar, such as:

- *tenses, particularly those reflecting future time (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 54), as there is no factual information is available about the future;*
- *subjunctive structures (e.g. Would to God…);*
- *conditional sentences (e.g. I would buy it if …);*
- *hypothetical c*onstructions (e.g. *I wish you wouldn't complain!*)

A well-summarized definition of modality reveals thatit "refers to a speaker's or a writer's attitude towards, or point of view about, a state of the world. … modals are used to say whether something is real or true, or whether it is the subject of speculation rather than definite knowledge" (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 638).

**Describing WOULD**

We assume that *would* is a central modal verb, thus it fulfils the criteria of having a single form for all persons and numbers, whatever the time reference, violating the rule of "concord" between the subject and predicate (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 149) and it also takes over major auxiliary functions (cf. the NICE properties in Huddleston, 1976, p. 333).

It is followed – almost exclusively – by either the short (bare) infinitive (I. verb form) or a perfect infinitive construction (*have* + III. verb form): *would sing, would have arrived*, except for semi-modal idiomatic phrases *would rather, would sooner, would better*).

As we would like to describe *would,* it is worth remembering that modals are not 'designed' to express temporal relationships only. Authoritative grammars state that – grammatically speaking – English has no future tense (e.g. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 208; Thomson & Martinet, 1986, p. 187; Quirk et al., 1985, p. 213; Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 405), this is often neglected, as native speakers have no problems with that, while non-native speakers wishing to improve their knowledge find the discrepancy between *time* and *tense* disturbing. After all, Palmer observes that "philosophers have for a long time debated whether the future can ever be regarded as factual, since we can never know what is going to happen." (1990, p. 12). Needless to say that *would* is considered the remote pair of *will*, which is why we have mentioned this issue.

The most logical explanation we have found so far is that each and every modal verb "is fundamentally grounded in the moment of speaking, at the point of Now" (Lewis 1986: 102), so the concept of 'remoteness' describes the relationship between the pairs, understood on multiple levels:

- *temporal remoteness*: *will*' present / future' *would* 'future-in-the-past';



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- *tentative, conditional, hypothetical remoteness:If you will show me…; If you would just show me…);*
- *social remoteness, politeness* (*Will you help me…?Would you tell me…?*)

*Would* – similarly to *will* – is another highly frequent modal verb ("whimperative", cf. (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 25), having a multitude of uses. It basically "introduces an element of psychological remoteness into what the speaker is saying", being the remote pair of *will* (Lewis, 1986, p. 73), thus *would* combines *inevitability* associated with *will* and *remoteness* at the same time. Certain forms of *would* should be mentioned before various meanings are discussed:

- the affirmative *would* has either present tentative or past reference, based on the context:

*John* ***would*** *meet the neighbours once a week.* (~ When he lived in the area.)

*John* ***would*** *meet the neighbours once a week.* (~ If he were at home for long.)

- a definite past context is possible with would + have + III. verb form:

Jane would have listened to the colonel.

- the negative form (*wouldn't*) is associated with both *power* and *volition* (similar to *won't*), expressing *refusal*, *obstinacy*, *determination*,being valid for both the animate and the inanimate:

*Jane* ***wouldn't listen*** *to the colonel.*

*Jane* ***wouldn't tell*** *us the truth.*

*The smoke* ***wouldn't come*** *out of the chimney, filling the room.*

*Google Chrome* ***wouldn't open****, so I have to reinstall it.*

- alternative constructions are *refuse to* and *be unwilling to*(Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 249):

*I guess Jane* ***will refuse to tell*** *us the truth.*

*Jane* ***was unwilling to tell*** *us the truth.*

- the interrogative form typically expresses tentative politeness:

***Would*** *you do me a favour?*

Subsequent sections deal with major uses of *would*.

**Auxiliary to express 'future-in-the-past'**

*Would* structures often express that they are "true in certain circumstances, not those currently prevailing" (Lewis, 1986, p. 123) or "based on circumstantial knowledge" (Aarts, 2011, p. 282), signalling that *would* must be discussed as a conditional and hypothetical marker.

Yet, grammar books refer to a specific shift from *will* to *would* as 'Future-in-the-Past', which actually means that four future tenses (*Future Simple, Future Continuous, Future Perfect Simple* and *Future Perfect Continuous*) have reported speech versions, where *would* is considered to be the auxiliary (Bădescu, 1984, p. 434)as the past "replacement" of *will* (Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245), or the "preterite for *will*" (Levițchi, 1971, p. 153):

*The colonel* ***announced*** *that John Doe* ***would return*** *from Burma in 2118.*

*It* ***was*** *known that John Doe****would be relaxing*** *next Sunday.*



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*The colonel* ***said*** *that he* ***would have grown*** *a beard by then.*

*The HQ* ***estimated*** *that by 2018John Doe****would*** *have been fighting in the jungle* ***for 9 years****.*

The fact that *would* is associated with past time, is also strengthened by being an alternative to *used to* for frequent past actions (cf. 'frequentative' *would*); while *used to* expresses habitual past actions difficult to imagine to be repeated in the present or future due to a radical change of circumstances (death, different environment, etc.), *would* – being a remote modal form – is associated with nostalgia or longing(Lewis, 1986, p. 121), expressing psychological remoteness from frequent past events (which are not necessarily distant in time), without the air of finality of *used to*:

*When he was young, the colonel* ***used to*** *take part in dangerous deployments.*

*When he was young, the colonel* ***would*** *spend little time with his family.*

**Prediction**

*Would* is associated with evidence-based *predictions*, *conclusions* (Aarts, 2011, pp. 282–286), *presupposition*, 'educated' *guesses*, which is similar to logical predictions of *will* or *must*; depending on the circumstances, this may be a vague opinion or certainty (even if "nothing about the future is totally certain"(Lewis, 1986, p. 118):

*Don't ask the colonel about Jane's whereabouts as he* ***wouldn'tknow*** *the answer.*

*I think John* ***wouldbeable*** *to speak fluent Chinese in ten years.*

*Indeed, that* ***would be*** *nice.*

Psychological remoteness is visible by comparing the meaning of the following statements (cf. Lewis, 1986, p. 121):

*I* ***am*** *surprised.* (present fact)

*I* ***have*** *never* ***expected*** *it.* (present result)

*I* ***will*** *be surprised* ***if*** *he shows up.* (modal and future remoteness from factual)

*I* ***would*** *be surprised.*(modal and psychological remoteness)

*I* ***would*** *never have expected it.* (modal and psychological remoteness)

The stressed negative form has evolved into a stock phrase expressing high certainty and denying responsibility or knowledge:

***I wouldn't know.*** (~ I am absolutely sure I have no clue about it.)

However, *would*-predictions are weaker than those with *will* (Foley & Hall, 2012, p. 152), and they may be considered elliptical conditional sentences (cf. Aarts, 2011, pp. 282–286):

"*Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." That* ***would be*** *Benjamin Franklin.*

*I* ***wouldn't be*** *surprised (****if*** *that was / were Benjamin Franklin).*

Past unfulfilled assumptions may be formulated with *would have* + III. verb form (Foley & Hall, 2012, p. 152), which may well be an elliptical conditional sentence (cf. the *conditionality* of *would*described below):

*Your presence* ***would have helped,*** *probably.*

*The colonel* ***would have known*** *how to send air support to John Doe (****if*** *he had asked to).*



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The 'frequentative' *would* may not be regarded as having special modal meanings (much more connected to Past Simple), yet it may be connected to past predictability, stemming from repeated events, habits or routines in an elevated style:

*When in Rio, he* ***would*** *just* ***watch*** *the samba dancers.*

If the habit or characteristic behaviour is associated with negative feelings, such as *anger, annoyance, criticism,* "*feeling of exasperation*" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 229), *grumble, irritation*, *etc., would* is also used in an idiomatic reply; in this respect, *would* is 'in line' with other modal verbs (*could, might* or *should*), knowing that these strong feelings may be fake, turning to *irony* or *humour*:

*Jane shot three more thugs. Oh, she* ***would****!* (~ I might / could have predicted it.)

*John 'will sharpen the knife again. Oh no, he* ***wouldn't****!* (~ I should have known it.)

**Volition and power**

*Volition* and *power* are typically connected with the following uses of *would*:

- although highly subjective, dynamic volition may be labelled as 'weak', 'intermediate' or 'strong' willingness (Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245; Foley & Hall, 2012, p. 152), associated with future-in-the-past cases:

*John promised Jane that he* ***would fix*** *the leaking roof the following week.*

*John replied that he* ***would accept*** *the new mission.* (~ He was willing to accept it.)

- 'strong' volition is mixed with *power,* expressing *insistence*, *obstinacy*, when the stressed *would* is used and no contracted form (*'d*) is possible:

*Whatever you do, John Doe '****would*** *sign up for another mission.*

- very serious *promise* to do something similarly to *will,* (Budai, 2007, p. 201):

*And I* ***would do*** *anything for love*

*I'****d run*** *right into hell and back*

*I* ***would do*** *anything for love*

*I'****d never lie*** *to you and that's a fact* (Meatloaf)

- *advice*, *recommendation* may take the form of *volition* or *refusal* (Preda, 1962, p. 318):

'*I'****d buy*** *that for a dollar.'*[2]

*I* ***wouldn't trust*** *anyone in the jungle (if I were you.)*

- *habits, repeated actions* (present reference) may result in *annoyance*:

*He* ***would*** *(just)* ***sit*** *and* ***drink*** *his beer in that corner of the pub.*

- *power* is more 'visible' when the *annoyance* or *irritation* takes the form of a question tag with *would* (cf. tags with *will*); in effect, the imperative combined with *would* is a hidden *threat*:

*Stop lying to me,* ***would*** *you?*

*Listen to me more carefully,* ***would*** *you?*

- *requests* for permission are formulated with *would*:

***Would*** *you* ***let*** *me in?*

***Would*** *you* ***mind if*** *I brought my fiancée to the party?*

[2] Cf. http://deadspin.com/i-wouldnt-buy-this-for-a-dollar-robocop-reviewed-1520545447, 09.03.2017.



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- *orders*, *commands* are also possible with *would*, even if it is generally used for polite requests; this sense is connected to hypothetical and subjunctive constructions and is "softer" (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245) than formulated with *will*; it is in fact a semi-modal expression:

*You* ***would better stay out*** *of this.*

- *offer*, *invitation*, *desire* or *asking for preference* is politer with *would*, as it is "the tentative form of *will*" (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 247), leading to hypothetical constructions; there are even tentative intensifiers, such as *by any chance, I suppose, of course*(Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 246):

***Would*** *you* ***like to join*** *us for dinner (by any chance)?*

*I* ***would love*** *to.*

*Shrek* ***would prefer*** *to stay out of trouble.*

- a possible alternative for *preference* or *invitation* is *would care,* a much less polite alternative to *preference* is *want* (Zdrenghea & Greere, 1999, p. 266):

***Would*** *you* ***care*** *for a different approach?*

*Do you* ***want to join*** *us?*

- *would*-requests are politer and less authoritative than formulated with *will*; still, it may sound polite in a particular situation, but distancing as well:

***Would*** *you consider this option as well?* (in school)

***Would*** *you (be so kind and)* ***excuse*** *me, (please)?* (in a business relationship)

*I* ***wouldn't refuse*** *a dry Martini…* (hidden request, *modest wish*)

- *would* is the standard way of formal addressing to people ("complete strangers", as described by Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 251), including the contracted version:

*I****'d need*** *a hand here.*

- hedging (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 652) may be interpreted as a polite solution (compared to directness), and it can be well exemplified with *would* followed by specific verbs (*advise, imagine, recommend, say, suggest, think*), expressing the above-mentioned speech acts in a less direct way:

*I* ***would say*** *that paying a visit to her is the best option.* (But it's your call.)

**Conditionality and hypotheticality**

Although English has no 'conditional tense' and specific 'conditional markers', *would* is indispensable in conditional sentences combined with temporal, psychological (tentative) or social remoteness.

Compared to *will, would* expresses a remote *likelihood* or *probability*, leading to *hypothetical inevitability* expressing that these conditions are "true in certain circumstances, not those currently prevailing" (Lewis, 1986, p. 121) in the main clauses (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 234) and forming the type II and type III conditional sentences:

- when followed by a I. verb form, it refers to present / future conditions:

*Jane* ***would fire*** *if she had to.*

- however, there are many situations "where a conditional sense is understood but not stated" (Vince, 2009, p. 67):



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*Jane* ***wouldn't agree*** *with it.* (if you asked her)

- while combined with *have* + III. verb form, it refers to past (unfulfilled) conditions:

*Jane* ***would have fired*** *if she had been forced to.*

- "explicit" condition is expressed with a specific structure (Lewis, 1986, p. 122):

***I would expect so.***

- tentative (very polite or over-polite) *requests*(Palmer, 1990, p. 158), modest *wishes*, *suggestions*, *offers* combine *would* and *if* in the same clause:

***If*** *you* ***would*** *wait a moment please, the manager will be at your service.*

***If*** *you* ***would like*** *to have a go, here's the key of the Porsche.*

- w*ould* combined with *if* may also express *resignation*, *acceptance*(Bălan et al., 2003, p. 178):

***If*** *the Does* ***would*** *insist on that, let them go.*

*Volition* expressed with *would* (*wishes, hopes*) is also connected to hypothetical or analytical subjunctive constructions:

a) (modest) *wishes*, *intentions*(Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245) or *preference* may be expressed with *would like*:

*I* ***would like to*** *be a millionaire.*

***Would*** *you* ***like*** *to be a princess?*

*What* ***would*** *you have me do?* (cf. Bădescu, 1984, p. 312: ~ What would you like me to do?)

b) modest wishes may be interpreted as personal desires leading to commands in a polite coating:

*I* ***would like you to*** *do me a favour.*

*The colonel* ***wouldn't like to*** *see any soldier left behind.*

*I* ***would like*** *a dry Martini, please.*

c) emphasised wishes or reproaches in hypothetical and subjunctive constructions, implying *if only, wish* or even inversion:

*I* ***wish*** *the colonel* ***would stop*** *sending the Does into suicide missions!*

***If only*** *Jane* ***would return*** *home happily!*

*Look at is as I* ***would****, I could not see the difference.* (cf. Bădescu, 1984, p. 312:~ however much)

***Would*** *to God they were alive!*

d) further possibilities to express wishes with *would* are part of specific constructions (*would better, would rather, would sooner*) and must be dealt with separately.

**Teaching WOULD**

Teaching modal verbs is an eternal challenge, and our alternative is to dedicate a little time for modal verbs within each grammar sections (verbs, tenses, conditional and hypothetical constructions, as well as passive voice and reported speech), and it may even take the form of 'practice first, theory later' by making use of multimedia samples.



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As TV series are highly popular (cf. *Game of Thrones*), learners may be motived to collect themselves sample sentences with *would* (by this stage they should know that modal meanings derive from sentences, not isolated instances. Our example is *Castle*[3], having 8 seasons with 173 episodes (combined) of at least 40 minutes' length each; that is 6,920 minutes, or more than 115 hours. It may be shocking to realize that the first season of 10 episodes alone contains a multitude of modaluses, detailed in the table below:

| **MODAL** | **NR.** | **%** | **MODAL** | **NR.** | | **%** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *can* | 226 | 18.56 | ***'ll*** | 103 | 182 | 8.46 | **14.94** |
| *could* | 128 | 10.51 | ***will(ing)*** | 65 | | 5.34 | |
| *be able to* | 11 | 0.90 | ***won't*** | 14 | | 1.15 | |
| *capable* | 1 | 0.08 | *'d* | 107 | 310 | 8.78 | 25.45 |
| *manage* | 7 | 0.57 | *would* | 203 | | 16.67 | |
| *succeed* | 1 | 0.08 | *shall* | 1 | | 0.08 | |
| *may* | 18 | 1.48 | *should* | 54 | | 4.43 | |
| *might* | 39 | 3.20 | *ought to* | 2 | | 0.16 | |
| *allow* | 1 | 0.08 | *need** | 104 | | 8.54 | |
| *permission* | 3 | 0.25 | *dare** | 5 | | 0.41 | |
| *must* | 34 | 2.79 | **TOTAL** | **1218** | | **100** | |
| *have/has/had to* | 91 | 7.47 | | | | | |

*Table 1. Modal occurrences in Castle, Season 1*

The table clearly shows that *would* and its abbreviated form is the most frequent of all modal verbs, being one of the most popular modals according to a recent research as well (Aarts 2011, p. 280), listing *would, 'd* and *wouldn't* in the top frequent batch of modal verbs:

| **/million words** | **Spoken** | **Written** | **Total** | **Combined** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***would*** | **2,581** | **2,533** | **5,114** | **6,572** |
| ***'d*** | **795** | **182** | **977** | |
| ***wouldn't*** | **394** | **87** | **481** | |
| *will* | 1,883 | 3,284 | 5,167 | 7,289 |
| *'ll* | 1,449 | 361 | 1,810 | |
| *won't* | 232 | 80 | 312 | |
| *can* | 2,652 | 2,533 | 5,185 | 6,595 |
| *can't* | 792 | 222 | 1,014 | |
| *cannot* | 80 | 316 | 396 | |

*Table 2. Modal frequency (Aarts 2011:280)*

[3] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1219024/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1, 26.02.2017.



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Collecting samples from *Castle* may be based on various criteria: past reference, expressing *prediction*, being part of a conditional or hypothetical clause, which inevitably brings into picture the importance of translation:

*A little lipstick* ***wouldn't hurt****.* (polite or ironical remark)

*Do you know what he* ***would've been doing*** *in the park?* (most rare perfect continuous form, conditional meaning)

*He's not the only one that* ***wouldberuined****.* (passive voice)

*I* ***would*** *just* ***appreciate*** *it if you wouldn't share it.* (tentative suggestion, request, command)

*I* ***wouldsay*** *don't wait up.* (polite hedging suggestion)

*I* ***would've retired*** *him.*(past reference, part of a conditional)

*I* ***wouldn'tneed*** *an alibi for that,* ***would*** *I?* (question tag)

*It* ***would've been*** *impossible.*(past reference, elliptical conditional or hypothetical)

*Otherwise, it* ***wouldn'tbe*** *a tragedy.* (negative form)

*So if this kid is dragged, wouldn't there be more of a blood trail?* (negative interrogative form)

*The doorman* ***said*** *she'****d have*** *a red vest on.* (future-in-the-past)

*We* ***thought*** *he'****d do*** *great things.* (future-in-the-past)

*Well, if it was, looks like I'****d be winning****.* (rare, continuous form)

***Whywould*** *a psychotic fan pick those?* (expressing surprise, indignation, etc.)

***Would*** *get you whatever you wanted.*(subjunctive wish, special construction)

**Conclusions**

We tend to think that Jakobson's famous statement is still valid: "Languages differ not in terms of what they can express, but in terms of what they must express." Once accepted *will* as a future auxiliary (especially the abbreviated form), *would* is also mentioned as a future auxiliary, being the remote pair of *will*, being used to express future-in-the-past.

Various uses of *would* convince us that the concepts of *inevitability* and *remoteness* perfectly mingle in its core meaning, yet different shades of meaning are also possible, such as *prediction, volition, power*, often involving (hidden) tentative meanings as well, taking the form of mostly conditional sentences (type II and III).

While we do not claim too much novelty to the discussion of *would,* we have found it interesting that the concept of *remoteness* described by Lewis as early as 1986 has not become a widely celebrated finding, so we would like to offer this perspective through the prism of *would,* following a hopefully logical path.

It has also become clear that sheer theory without supporting practice is in vain; more than that, we highly recommend the involvement of modern tools in teaching modal verbs, which should be completed – for non-native speakers – with tranlation activities as well: depending on the level, English may be the source language first, then translation into English should be also practised. While authoritative publications from native speakers describe issues extremely well, they typically lack why and how certain aspects are less accesible for non-native speakers; in our case the presentation of *would* is



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extended to reputable Hungarian and Romanian publications, trying to summarize all relevant insights into the intricacy of *would,* which is also discussed from the perspective of teaching it.

A final remark is that frequency of use should be considered for various levels (e.g. higher frequency use first for beginners), while translators and interpretersmust know even rarely used shades of meaning, which constitues a real challenge in case of modal verbs, including *would.*

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