

# Variantivity in audiovisual translation - a position paper

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## Abstract

The paper proposes to construe the outcome of translation as a summation of multiple acceptable target versions. From the vantage point of interlingual subtitling, we sketch out a position that these target versions could vary across a range of dimensions like cultural-embeddedness, ideological framing, standardness of language, humour and presentation rate, to give a preliminary list. With the proposal's primarily user-centred character, we discuss survey findings to shed light on the possible affordances and limitations that may come with variantivity in translation.

**Key words:** decision-making in translation, interlingual subtitling, media accessibility, viewer experience

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper we outline a proposal predicated on the notion that it is generally untenable to argue that a given source text (ST) can be successfully translated in the form of only a single target text (TT). In other words, we start from the premise – likely not a controversial one among translators or translation scholars – that a given ST can be translated as multiple TTs which can be equally acceptable despite being different. The degree of variance will naturally be subject to many influences, depending among other things on the type of translation – for instance, in specialised translation terminology can have fixed cross-linguistic equivalents – and the volume of text – broadly speaking, the interdependence being that as volume increases, so typically does the overall number of target versions. The working term we use here to refer to this phenomenon is variantivity (cf. Majdzińska 2018).

## 2. Variants in translation decisions

Well-established as the above observations could appear to some of the readers, we believe they can be productively revisited because they have important implications for how we – as researchers, but even more interestingly as viewers – conceptualise translation, i.e. primarily to what extent we recognise it that the target text we experience is one of many possible variants. On a very practical level, the “exclusive” nature of the target text that a viewer is typically presented with, implies that some translation choices made it to the target text and other variants did not. This gains significance when we acknowledge that oftentimes, as the translation decision is being made, one of the available variants is selected not because the translator is fully convinced that this is the (only) “right” choice but because the choice has to be made. A typical case of this is when the ST provides insufficient evidence for the choice to be well-informed and highly unambiguous.

The consequences of these mechanisms can be addressed from at least two perspectives. First, these decisions hold important implications for reception as they differently guide viewers to construct meanings, or – we might argue – even impose certain interpretations. This will influence reception in a local sense – reshaping the reception of a particular scene/event/character/film – but given how much audiovisual content is globally consumed in translation, such decisions could also arguably be instrumental in shaping worldviews, e.g. on the ideological level.

Then, from a proactive and user-centric perspective – which has already been postulated in audiovisual translation and media accessibility research (e.g. Greco 2018), featuring notably the framework of accessible filmmaking advocated by

Romero-Fresco (2013, 2019) – an underexplored point is that viewers differ along a number of largely interdependent parameters which could be factored in, some of which are more evidently associated with audiovisual translation than others. These include the viewer's reading speed, individual differences (e.g. personality and Need for Cognition), knowledge (e.g. cultural assumptions they share) as well as expectations and viewing motivation whereby, for instance, some receptors want to be confronted with the unfamiliar and possibly learn from films while others opt for maximum amusement with minimum cognitive effort, at least on a given occasion.

While the above is still a tentative selection – meant to sketch out an outlook more than be definitive – we believe these facets deserve to be taken up in empirical research to expand our understanding of translation reception and then likely feed into translation production, translation didactics and the industry's decisions.

### **3. Aspects of variantivity in translation**

The premise that translations can be conceived of in terms of multiplicity and variantivity, as well as the related notion of dynamicity, leads us in many interesting directions some of which have already been pointed to.

One functionality to consider are “enhanced captions/subtitles” (Brewer et al. 2015, Jankowska 2019), i.e. subtitles supplemented with extra data such as “glossary definitions for acronyms and other initialisms, foreign terms (for example, Latin), jargon or descriptions for other difficult language”. These could be for instance “age-graded” (Brewer et al. 2015).

By extension, part of the rationale behind the phenomenon of collaborative translation (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Bogucki 2016; Fan 2020) is dissatisfaction with the default translation version that has been officially accepted as part of the translation service provision process (cf. abusive subtitling, Nornes 1999). Thus, alternative target language versions appear, made “by fans for fans”. The audience have a significant role not only in assessing translation quality, but also in improving it. To use an economic term, recipients of audiovisual translation are prosumers; they do not merely consume the product, but have their hand in producing it. In Asia, there is the phenomenon of “barrage cinema”, which European viewers consider offensive and intrusive. In barrage cinema, viewers can use their mobile phones to directly send comments to screens (Dwyer 2017). This may be a radical method of influencing the audiovisual target text, but it is evident that the life cycle of an audiovisual text and its localization does not have to end with the recipient accepting the target version at face value.

From another angle, Jędrzejko and Salmeri (2021) explore an interesting case of the literary translator's legal responsibility. They compare two target language versions of a John le Carré's novel to investigate whether one translator could have plagiarised the other. Variantivity in the case of literary translation is certainly more pronounced than in the case of specialised translation; there is the question of the author's style and the translator's style. A second translation of the same literary text may be an illicit copy of the first in terms of style or approach, or so Jędrzejko and Salmeri claim. More often than not, however, a second translation of a literary text is published because the first one is obsolete, having appeared decades ago, or the second translator believes that a different translation strategy should be applicable. The latter is the case, for instance, with two Polish translations of Winnie the Pooh or The Lord of the Rings, one markedly different from the other in both cases. By the same token, multiple target language versions of an audiovisual text would be economically and logistically justifiable if there were marked differences between them; for instance, one would be foreignised and the other domesticated.

## 4. Theoretical and practical grounding of variantivity

### 4.1. Cognitive Linguistics and variantivity

A suitable framework for the position described in this paper is provided by Cognitive Linguistics – whose aim is summarised as follows by Wen and Taylor (2021: 2):

- (1) to study how cognitive mechanisms like memory, categorization, metaphor, metonymy, attention, and imagery are used during language behavior; and
- (2) to develop psychologically viable models of language that cover the broadest possible range of linguistic phenomena, including idioms and figurative language.

The view on variantivity supported by Cognitive Linguistics is linked to the notion of construal which can be defined as the ability of human beings to “conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways” (Langacker 2015: 120). In that formulation linguistic expressions are understood as concrete evidence of how we structure, or construe, conceptual content.

An expression’s meaning depends on both the conceptual *content* invoked and how that content is construed. Content is roughly comparable to truth conditions, a state of affairs, or the objective situation described; in a conceptualist semantics, it amounts to the neutral apprehension of a situation, conceived in its own terms. But since the world does not just imprint itself on our brains, conception is never really neutral – it consists in mental activity, being shaped by the previous experience, capabilities, and current state of the conceptualizer. Thus every conception and every linguistic expression construes the content invoked in a certain manner.

Langacker (2015: 120-121)

This can be neatly illustrated with reference to the different dimensions of construal such as granularity, perspective and prominence. Granularity, or level of detail, will be a very common matter of choice as seen in the juxtaposition of expressions like “an animate being”/“an animal”/“a bird”/“a robin” which can be used to refer to the same entity. Then, perspective can vary, among other things in how its crucial constitutive element – the vantage point – is manipulated. That is to say, the same arrangement of scene participants can be described differently depending on the (not necessarily physical) location of the viewer, as in “The tree is in front of the house”/“The house is behind the tree”. This pair also instantiates a shift in prominence status, which brings us to the third parameter, whereby either the tree or the house is portrayed as the more prominent participant. A basic, or even commonplace, example of the last one could be how portions of the conceptual content that comprises a 250 ml container with 125 ml of liquid can be alternately profiled to structure either of the halves as more prominent. This case also points to some of the multi-layered meaning implications of construal selection. What is more, as begins to surface in the tree/house example, there are additional parameters at play when conceptualisers mentally organise and linguistically structure scenes. For example, certain properties of participants (like size or mobility) make them more/less likely to be construed as highly prominent (compare for instance the pair of expressions “The bike is in front of the house”/“The house is behind the bike”), which overlaps with how easy, economic and conventionalised certain ways of construing content are or are not. This can be exemplified with the different prominence setups in “The ball rolled across the snooker table”/“The snooker table was what the ball rolled over across”. Likewise, it would be unconventional to draw a friend’s attention to a bird by saying “Look, an

animal”, unless in a specific (e.g. humorous) context. Variants such as “bird” or “robin” are generally more likely, but here again the choice need not be self-explanatory, with one of the central variables to keep in mind being what background assumptions can be presupposed in the addressee.

#### **4.2. The case of managing conceptual-semantic asymmetry**

Remarkably, while in this formulation the conceptualiser has numerous (or in fact quite literally innumerable) construal variants at his or her disposal, which holds implications both intralingually and translationally, another dimension of complexity is appended in a subset of translatorial decisions. Let us more specifically mention the case when the asymmetric SL-TL/ST-TT relation provides the translator with insufficient evidence for the choice to be well-informed enough. Here again, what we call “insufficient evidence” can naturally take different shapes and using variantivity as an approach can help address only some. One instance where it could be helpful are forms of address, as in the oft-mentioned case of the English “you”, which in languages like Polish or German can be rendered differently depending on the relation between interactants (cf. Szarkowska 2013, Levshina 2017). These forms oftentimes create a dilemma because the contextually supplied clues might still make it hard to ascertain which of the options to use, or even more trickily, when to switch from the formal to the informal variant. A related curious case – and one where multiple target variants could largely alleviate the problem – is where the TL, such as Polish, does not require the translator to code gender but gives the option to do so. A topical example of this is when names of professions or functions appear originally in English (e.g. “I am a doctor.” uttered by a woman) and Polish leaves choice between expressions that code or do not code femininity, such as “Jestem lekarzem” [I am a (male) doctor] and “Jestem lekarką” [I am a female doctor]. A significant consideration at that point is additionally that some of the female expressions are less widely conventionalised than others and might therefore be perceived as less acceptable or even derogatory. Here, in line with the variantivity stance, the choice would not need to be made once and for all – versions with the different target variants could co-exist to better render the gradual conventionalisation, possibly striking a balance between language that is already well-entrenched and non-discriminatory.

### **5. A viewer perspective**

#### **5.1. Participants and instrument**

A proposal that claims to be user-centred should likely take on board the user perspective from the outset. Therefore below we report survey findings on some of the key points relevant to the proposal outlined in this paper. These results come from a larger online survey administered to different viewer profiles, and here we concentrate on a subset of respondent – English philology students (N = 70). The participants’ age ranged from 18 to 26 (M = 20.57, SD = 1.42), 17 were female and 53 were male, and they answered anonymously. Pertinently for the questions we are interested in, all the participants reported experience with subtitling as viewers, either using subtitles for audiovisual material in English (in which case the subtitles can be in their mother tongue or in English), a language which they are well-acquainted with given their specific educational profile, or for films in languages they do not speak. The questions used a 1-7 Likert-type and the participants could freely share any additional comments.

**5.2. Views on variantivity in translation**

To start with, we wanted to get an insight into the viewers’ conception of translation with respect to variantivity. The participants responded (1 – strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree) to 3 interconnected items as summarised in Table 1 below. It should be pointed out that the items – and all the questions in the study – were phrased without the use of specialised translation studies terminology to maximise comprehension across the participant pool.

<b>statement</b>	<b>M(SD)</b>
A sentence spoken by a character in a foreign language film can be correctly translated in only one way.	1.59(0.83)
If a fragment of film dialogue is translated by two translators in two different ways, it is certain that (at least) one of the translations is not going to be acceptable.	1.71(1.02)
A short and uncomplicated utterance can be translated in many ways and it is possible that all of them would be equally acceptable.	5.63(1.47)

**Table 1: A receptor perspective on variantivity in translation**

These results indicate a high degree of awareness in our respondents, indicating they generally see variantivity as a basic feature of translation choices. Needless to say, given that the answers come from students of English philology, it remains to be further tested how much this understanding of translation is shared among other viewer profiles.

**5.3. Dimensions of variantivity in translation**

The second component of the study was concerned with viewers’ opinion on the notion of offering access to more than one target variant, focusing on different dimensions of variantivity. Four such dimensions are tentatively labelled as followed:

- cultural-embeddedness (modulating the degree to which cultural references are retained as opposed to being domesticated or generalised)
- ideological framing (using language that is variably inclusive, neutralising or strengthening messages that can be found offensive),
- standardness of language (e.g. calibrating the use of terminology or slang)
- humour (offering different solutions)

Participants were instructed to state whether they considered it a sensible proposal for the viewer to be given the option to choose between translation versions within these areas (1 – definitely no, 7 – definitely yes).

<b>items/dimensions</b>	<b>variantivity preferences of viewers M(SD)</b>
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cultural-embeddedness	5.14(1.88)
ideological framing	4.2(2.01)
standardness of language	5.3(1.65)
humour	4.86(1.87)

**Table 2: Viewer preferences across dimensions of variantivity in translation**

The results rather clearly lean towards the ‘pro’ end of the spectrum. At the same time, it has to be pointed out that our respondents were more enthusiastic/skeptical about some of the ideas than others, which is also expressed in their comments. One critical opinion – and indeed a valuable word of caution – is as follows:

*Such details might not deserve so much attention.* [1]

Two other respondents have doubts about the approach in the sense that (excessive) choice it could lead to neutralising the cultural component:

*When watching a film, the viewer should be made aware of cultural differences.* [2]<sup>1</sup>

*On the one hand, this will facilitate reception, on the other hand, it can hinder the cross-cultural dialogue.* [3]

A somewhat more nuanced related view is given by another respondent:

*This depends on the degree of domestication [‘polonisation’] and on the genre – e.g. comedies can be completely domesticated (e.g. Shrek, Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra) while in other works rendering culture can be more important.* [4]

One respondent pertinently adopts the translator’s point of view and shares the following concern:

*Still, we should be careful to prevent a situation where the translator feels forced to e.g. domesticate where he/she considers this a terrible idea (...).* [5]

This brings to the fore the translator’s agency and autonomy in the process. As the participant goes on to observe, the feasibility of a variantivity-driven approach would then among other things be contingent on “the nature of the compromise between the quality of the original work and the quality of the target text” [4]. A related point is made in [9] further on.

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<sup>1</sup> Comments are numbered for ease of reference.

Talking about the second and third dimension listed in Table 2, respectively, two respondents bring up a key consideration – that of the viewer’s awareness:

*I think these [translations that vary in ideological framing] should be available but the viewer should be properly informed about such a solution being introduced. [6]*

*If the viewer realises he/she will not be able to understand the film because of the technical terms/slang, but at the same time is aware that these are found in the original, then this solution makes sense. [7]*

Finally, when it comes to humour, the following comment is particularly insightful:

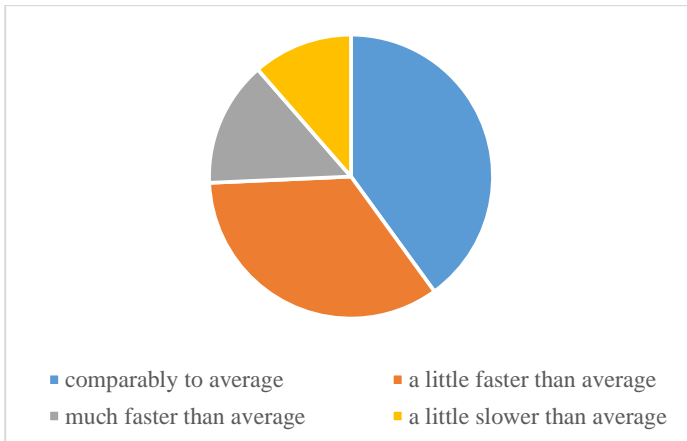
*Getting acquainted with a few different translations can increase one’s level of understanding of a given joke. [8]*

This asset of variantivity is addressed again in Section 6 below.

#### 5.4. Variantivity and reading speed

A fifth dimension, or in fact what could be called a supra-dimension, is reading speed (presentation rate) which – depending on the perspective – governs or is governed by other dimensions like the sample ones listed above. When it comes to viewer preferences, our findings indicate a decidedly positive attitude. With  $M = 5.8$  (1.23), we see a pronounced trend in the participant pool to agree that the solution could be reasonable. Notably, not a single participant stated he or she strongly disapproved of the solution (then, only 1 participant chose ‘2’ on the scale) and as many as 26 participants opted for the maximum rating.

To get a fuller picture of reading speed as a parameter, we elicited input from our respondents. First, we asked them to estimate their reading speed against “an average adult Netflix user in their country”.

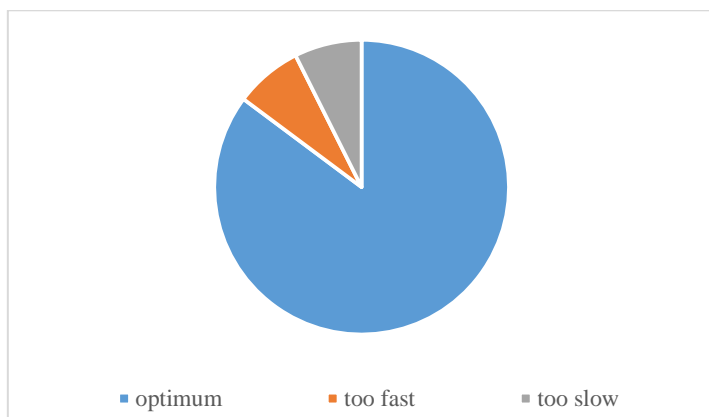


**Figure 1: Self-estimated relative reading speed**

As illustrated in Figure 1 above, 28 participants (40%) state they read comparably fast. Then, 24 (34.3%) participants estimate they read “a little faster” and a further 10 participants (14.3%) estimate they read “much faster”. A total of 8 participants (11.4%) see their reading speed to be slightly below average, and no one estimates it

to be much slower than in an average viewer. The takeaway is then that only some 40% of participants see themselves as approximating the average while almost 50% say they read faster, which implies they could handle faster presentation rates (cf. Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón 2018).

Figure 2. below shows the feedback from a complementary question about Netflix’s subtitle presentation rate.



**Figure 2: Evaluation of subtitle presentation rate on Netflix**

Among the group of 54 participants who both use Netflix and expressed an opinion, as many as 46 (85.2%) state the presentation rate is optimum to them. On the other hand, 8 viewers (14.8%) say the subtitles are too fast or too slow, with 4 respondents opting for each of these answers. While clearly a minority, this latter group of viewers is still arguably large, especially if we keep in mind that our participants constitute a relatively homogenous group as far as their educational background goes, and therefore their reading speeds would likely display less variation than in the case of the broader population of Netflix users who turn to subtitles.

The account is then again supplemented with comments from respondents. When it comes to presentation rate, the only respondent who evaluated the idea to vary that parameter as low as ‘2’ additionally explained her position:

*With such a solution there is a risk that a large portion of content is left untranslated. This could significantly affect the reception of a film/show. [9]*

That comment brings up a major question which appears to be whether some boundaries would need to be set for the user – and if so where and by whom – or whether the viewer should be given maximum flexibility. If the latter is the case, one question to be answered is whether perhaps the risk of compromising the artistic vision of the creators would be increased. The question appeared already when Netflix introduced the functionality to adjust playback speed<sup>2</sup> from 0.5 to 1.5 and it seems very complex, if only given the elusive nature of what we can call an artistic vision or film appreciation. While it is invariably up to the viewer – who might “misunderstand” and “underappreciate” a film for various reasons (e.g. not having the

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/31/21348693/netflix-playback-speed-slow-fast-mobile-android-web-tv-streaming>



required background assumptions or even more simply not paying enough attention) – a functionality of a streaming platform that would offer the option to individually shape one’s experience needs to be implemented with caution.

Another respondent voices the following reservation:

*An interesting idea but I doubt it would attract the attention of a larger group of receptors.* [10]

Conversely, other participants argue in support of the notion, possibly giving some specific examples of application:

*I think subtitle reading speed is the main factor that deters people from using them. Different versions could serve as encouragement to use subtitles.* [11]

*I think the distinction only makes sense if it is based on the viewer’s proficiency in the film’s original language. An individual who does not speak the foreign language could choose the option with slower and more extensive subtitles, while an individual with an intermediate or high proficiency level could go for “limited subtitles”.* [12]

If some degree of customisability of presentation rate were to be introduced, the viewer would most likely be the one to decide – if within pre-defined constraints – possibly taking advantage of a dedicated reading speed test or just being offered a functionality that is user-friendly enough to adjust speed on the go<sup>3</sup>. However, that the choice should be completely with the user is not uniformly straightforward across different dimensions of variantivity. In certain instances – such as those of insufficient evidence, as signalled in Section 4.2. – variants could potentially be assigned randomly, in the sense that a viewer watching a given film for the second time could be presented with a non-identical translation.

## **6. Having more than one target text – some implications**

When it comes to some of the advantages of the approach, it brings the social benefit of awareness-raising in that it tangibly foregrounds the non-identity of the TT and the ST. Not only can it make viewers more aware of the intricateness and implications of interlingual translation but it can also draw viewers’ attention to the translator’s agentivity which only slowly begins to be appreciated. On another level, a possible argument for embracing variantivity as a feature of translation – and then possibly introducing industry practices and technological solutions that would respond to that feature – is that having multiple target versions brings us closer to what we could call a ‘summative translation’ whereby the versions viewed cumulatively constitute a more – though never completely – comprehensive or objective account of the original. In a similar vein, if provided with an opportunity, some of the more avid viewers might re-watch a film specifically to see what the other translation variants are and how they shape the viewer’s experience.

An intuitive argument against multiple target versions might be the additional labour and cost. However, workload and finances need to be considered against the bigger picture of a motion picture at which point these become clearly negligible. What is more, notably, the point would not be to create the additional versions from

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<sup>3</sup> How the choice is presented to the viewer is another highly consequential matter. One of our respondents remarked with respect to humour translation that it would be advisable not to label the available variants in a way that discloses their differences.

scratch each time but to reuse the first translation and rework it in specific places (with any additional resulting modifications) – those that remarkably leave much room for decision-making and can have considerable cognitive and interpretational implications.

In fact, a practical application of the idea put forward in this paper might involve machine translation (MT). The notion of MT has undergone significant changes over the last century or so, from transfer systems, through statistical MT and algorithms formerly used in the most popular MT system (Google Translate) to state-of-the-art deep learning systems. The changes were followed by an increase in quality; in fact, recently the increase has been nothing short of impressive, whereby the current Google and Microsoft applications approach human-level accuracy, at least for certain texts and certain pairs of languages. However, by and large MT still remains only what it started out as – a service to produce translations that are incredibly fast, very cheap, largely consistent in terms of specialised terminology, but largely unusable as a final product in terms of quality. Therefore, human post-edition is usually in order, unless we are dealing with translation for gist, where quality is not a concern.

To provide multiple target language versions of an audiovisual text for reasons delineated above, a template might first be created by an applicable machine translation engine. Subsequently, human subtitlers would take the template to post-edit it. Naturally, the resulting final versions would differ from one another, while maintaining the same core (the machine-created template) and thus being comparable. The feasibility of this solution would need to be tested in practice. Apart from operability, however, the main drawback seems to be the machine's inability to decide on a translation strategy, a crucial first stage of the translation process, thus far the preserve of human translators. The decision whether to foreignise or domesticate, for example, has a major influence on the final outcome, as it also influences the choice of applicable translation techniques in the process of translating.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

At a general level variantivity in translation might be considered a way towards maximising viewer experience, primarily through optimisation and customisation. While “experience” can denote many constructs ranging from enjoyment and processing fluency to comprehension and learning, one overarching facet is that of accessibility. The acknowledgement of variantivity apparently underlies the efforts to maximise the accessibility of audiovisual content instantiated by solutions like “easy subtitles” (Alba Rodríguez 2013) and “easy-to-understand-language” in audiovisual translation more generally (Bernabé-Caro 2020; Matamala, this issue). Likewise, the ideas put forward in this paper can be seen as a form of managing the maker-user as well as well as maker-expert-user gaps (Greco 2013, 2018; Greco and Jankowska 2020).

To sum up, with interlingual subtitling as a case in point, we have posited that it could be productive and beneficial if the broadly defined agents of translation and media construe the target text cumulatively as an aggregate comprising multiple versions. This is a step towards a framework that would capture the premises, parameters and implications – conceptual but also practical ones – linked to variantivity in translation as preliminarily laid out above. Some first user insights suggest the endeavour is worthwhile, or at the very least deserves to be further explored.

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