


## Analysing the Role of Language in Personal Growth: A Systemic Functional Study on Akeelah's Utterance

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### A B S T R A C T

This study analyzes the metafunctions of language (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) in Akeelah's discourse in the film *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) and how they relate to her personal growth in an educational context. A gap was found, namely the lack of research that pays attention to the social and personal functions of language in the learning process. Using a qualitative approach and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday), 20 discourses are utterances from the main character, namely Akeelah, which purposively selected for analysis. The findings show that the ideational metafunction reflects her thoughts and identity development. This is where the novelty of this study lies, the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach is applied in depth in the analysis of film media as a representation of language learning. Akeelah's use of language serves as both a mirror and a driver of her transformation as a learner. This insight contributes to English language teaching by emphasizing the role of language in supporting motivation and identity.

**Keywords:** *Metafunctions of Language, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Personal Growth, Language Learning, Film.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Language not only serves as a means of communication between humans, but also plays a crucial role in shaping individual identity, conveying subjective experiences, and building and maintaining social relationships within society. Therefore, the analysis of language functions cannot be separated from the social and psychological contexts of its use. In language education, for example, students learn not only structure and grammar, but also how to use language to build relationships, demonstrate identity, and develop critical and reflective thinking. Language becomes a tool for self-development that goes beyond simply exchanging information. In the context of linguistic studies, an approach that emphasizes the social function of language was systematically developed by Halliday through the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This theory views language as a system of meaning used in specific social contexts, where meaning is produced, interpreted, and adapted for specific communicative purposes (Halliday et al., 2014). SFL offers three main metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These three metafunctions operate simultaneously in every utterance. The ideational metafunction focuses on conveying experiences and representations of the external and internal world; the interpersonal metafunction relates to attitudes, emotions, and relationships between speakers and listeners; Meanwhile, textual metafunctions relate to how utterance is organized to ensure coherence and context. These three metafunctions enable researchers to analyze utterance comprehensively. This makes SFL a highly relevant framework in language studies in education and applied linguistics.

Personal growth is a dynamic process involving the development of an individual's identity, self-awareness, and motivation within a social and educational context (Ryff, 1995). In language learning, personal growth is evident not only in linguistic mastery but also in changes in ways of thinking and interacting (Norton & Kramsch, 2013). The film *Akeelah and*

the Bee (2006) depict the journey of a young student discovering her identity through language learning and academic competition. Each utterance produced by Akeelah represents the cognitive and emotional development she experiences during the learning process. Previous research has focused more on formal linguistic aspects than on personal meanings in language use (Eggs, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2007). Therefore, studies that explore the functions of language are needed.

Learning identity is a dynamic construct formed through the interaction between learning experiences, language use, and the social context in which individuals participate (Norton & Kramsch, 2013). Learner identity is not static, but rather continuously evolves along with changes in social position and language practices (Gee, 2000). In the context of language learning, identity is a crucial aspect that determines how learners interpret themselves and their roles within the learning community (Toohey, 2018). Halliday et al. (2014) emphasize that language functions as a tool for representing experiences and social relations, thus reflecting and shaping learner identity. Several previous studies have shown that the development of learning identity influences student motivation and participation in multicultural educational contexts (Block, 2007; Norton & De Costa, 2018). Other studies have found that learning environments that support identity expression can enhance a sense of ownership of language and the learning process itself (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). However, little research has examined how learning identity is represented through language practices in popular media such as film. The film *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) provides a compelling depiction of the formation of a learning identity through the speech and linguistic interactions of a young learner.

Language in educational contexts serves not only as a means of communication but also as a means of constructing social meaning and knowledge. Previous research has shown that implementing a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach in education can improve students' writing and critical thinking skills (Schleppegrell, 2012; Young & Sachdev, 2011). Furthermore, a study by Emilia (2016) confirmed that metafunctional analysis can strengthen students' ability to understand the relationship between language forms and social contexts. However, studies on the application of metafunctionality in learning contexts are still limited to the analysis of written texts, while aspects of oral interaction in the classroom have not been widely explored (Humphrey, 2017). Therefore, this study seeks to examine how the three metafunctions of language are realized in educational contexts, particularly in learning discourse that reflects the social and cognitive dynamics of learners.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of presenting a linguistic approach that is not only oriented towards formal structures, but also pays attention to the social and personal functions of language in the learning process. The SFL approach, which has been widely used in written texts, is still relatively rarely applied in depth in the analysis of film media as a representation of language learning. Herein lies the novelty of this research, including linking character transformations in popular educational films with functional language analysis, while simultaneously integrating linguistic, social, and psychological dimensions in one complete study. By examining the utterances of the character Akeelah functionally, this research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of applied linguistic studies and practical contributions in designing English language learning that is relevant, reflective, and oriented towards strengthening students' character.

Based on this background, this research seeks to address the following questions: (1) What forms of language metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) are manifested in the speech of the character Akeelah in the film *Akeelah and the Bee*? (2) How does Akeelah's use of language relate to her process of personal growth within the educational context depicted in the film? (3) What are the implications of Akeelah's language metafunctions for understanding English language learning, particularly regarding educational contexts and student motivation?

This research is intended to identify the forms of language metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) manifested in the speech of the character Akeelah in the film *Akeelah and the Bee*, analyse Akeelah's use of language and the process of personal growth in

the educational context that she experiences throughout the film, and identify the implications of the use of Akeelah's language metafunctions on the understanding of English language learning in the context of education and student motivation.

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using descriptive utterance analysis techniques. The focus of the study is to describe the use of language in the context of the identity formation and personal development of Akeelah through the use of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory. This approach was chosen to enable in-depth exploration of the main character's utterances and to focus on understanding the socio-cultural context (Miles, M.B., Huberman, a. m., & Saldana, 2015).

### Data source

Verbal dialogue of the character Akeelah Anderson in the film *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006). A total of 20 utterances were selected purposively. This number was determined not based on quantitative representation, but rather on the contextual relevance and depth of linguistic meaning contained within each utterance. This approach aligns with the characteristics of qualitative research, which emphasizes the intensity of analysis of meaningful data, rather than the sheer quantity of data (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

### Collection techniques

(1) Watch the movie twice to understand the narrative structure and characters. (2) Manually transcribing Akeelah's spoken transcripts of key scenes that demonstrate personal transformation. (3) Documenting contextual elements: setting, interlocutors, emotional atmosphere. (4) Selecting Akeelah's replica quotes based on relevance to the focus of SFL theory.

### Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study was conducted using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework (Halliday et al., 2014) and related theoretical perspectives. The analysis began with initial coding (open coding), in which each selected quotation was marked according to relevant linguistic phenomena, such as the use of metafunctions, stylistic tendencies, and shifts in self-expression. Following this stage, a metafunctional analysis was carried out. The ideational metafunction focused on examining transitivity patterns—processes, participants, and circumstances—to reveal how Akeelah's experiences and ideas are linguistically constructed. The interpersonal metafunction involved analyzing mood structures and modality choices to uncover social relationships, power dynamics, and emotional attitudes embedded in the speech. Meanwhile, the textual metafunction analyzed theme–rheme organization to identify strategies for information flow and overall coherence of the utterances.

Subsequently, a contextual analysis (register) was conducted by identifying the elements of field, tenor, and mode based on Hasan and Halliday's (1989) framework, in order to clarify the social context in which the speech occurs. The findings from the linguistic analyses were then interpreted in relation to Akeelah's personal growth, linking patterns of language use to her development of identity. This interpretation was guided by Norton and Kramsch's (2013) theory of language and identity, as well as Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive and language development, with particular attention to how changes in language reflect growth in self-confidence, motivation, and social positioning. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, validation procedures were applied through triangulation—by comparing results across the three metafunctions and the register analysis—and through peer debriefing, involving discussions with the supervising lecturer to refine interpretations and maintain analytical objectivity.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

## Manifestation of Language Metafunctions in Akeelah's Discourse

This section presents the analysis of Akeelah's utterance in the film *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) based on Halliday et al.'s (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. The 20 utterances were purposively selected using criteria that focused on their representation of pivotal moments in Akeelah's personal transformation and educational journey, ensuring each except demonstrated significant shifts in identity, social interaction, or cognitive development relevant to the study's objectives.

Table 1 Systemic Functional Analysis of Akeelah's Utterance

No	Akeelah's Utterance	Time (Minute)	Scene Context	Ideational	Interpersonal	Textual	Register	Personal Growth Discussion
1	"Why would anybody want to represent a school where they can't even put doors on the toilet stalls?"	00:06:30	Akeelah refused to represent her school in the spelling contest because she felt the school environment was not supportive.	Material process - criticism of the system	Cynical tone, rebellious position	Contrast and focus on criticism	Informal, social	Early stages: Akeelah is still defensive and pessimistic
2	"My name is Akeelah Anderson and I'm from Crenshaw."	01:09:45	Stated while appearing in a regional spelling bee competition	Relational process - declare identity	Confident and proud	Declarative directly	Formal, academic	Akeelah begins to take pride in her identity.
3	"I looked up this word last night just in case."	01:33:10	In the final competition when spelling difficult words	Mental process - preparation and strategy	Independent and confident	Clear time structure	Academic	Demonstrates personal responsibility and initiative
4	"I don't think I need a coach to help me anymore."	01:15:25	During the conflict with Dr. Larabee	Mental process - reflection	Autonomy, though still emotional	Negative, limiting external influences	Reflective	Transition period towards independence
5	"If I'm gonna win, I'm gonna do it my way."	01:25:50	When deciding to collaborate with an opponent	Material & relational - principles of life	Control and confidence	Repetition as confirmation	Motivational	The pinnacle of personal growth: the value of winning

No	Akeelah's Utterance	Time (Minute)	Scene Context	Ideational	Interpersonal	Textual	Register	Personal Growth Discussion
6	"I ain't no baby!"	00:05:10	When his older brother teased him and told him to play outside	Relational – confirm identity	Defensive tone and rejection of authority	The negation "ain't" strengthens the emotion.	Informal, family	Demonstrates a need for recognition and respect
7	"You don't think I'm smart enough, do you?"	00:17:55	Talking to his mother about entering the competition	Mental – perception and assumption	Seeking recognition and validation	Rhetorical question intonation, focus on 'you'	Family, emotional	Shows self-doubt and the beginnings of growing awareness
8	"Why do I have to be the one to represent Crenshaw?"	00:08:00	Refusing to be selected by a school because he felt unworthy	Material – forced action	Protest tone, passive position	Rhetorical question sentence	School, informal	Still in the stage of denial and self-doubt
9	"It's just a stupid word game."	00:09:30	Underestimating the spelling bee at the beginning	Relational – evaluation	Cynical, dismissive attitude	Focus on the word "just"	Casual, informal	Early reflections on resistance to challenges
10	"I don't need help. I can do it myself."	00:24:50	Feel enough to learn alone without a coach	Mental & material – cognition and action	Independence, but also selfish	The implicit conjunction 'but'	Personal, informal	The beginning of exploration of autonomy and self-direction
11	"You're the only one who believes in me."	00:39:20	To Dr. Larabee	Relational – revealing personal relationships	Gratitude and dependence	Emphasis on 'only one'	Personal, emotional	Need external support for growth
12	"Do you think if I learn these words, people will like me?"	00:42:00	Ask to Larabee	Mental – reflection & social motivation	Vulnerable and need connection	Evocative question structure	Personal, reflective	Linking learning to social identity
13	"Winning isn't everything, you know."	01:10:45	To Javier, show empathy	Relational – values of life	Empathetic, wise	Emphasis on meaning rather than results	Academic, social	Human values begin to develop

No	Akeelah's Utterance	Time (Minute)	Scene Context	Ideational	Interpersonal	Textual	Register	Personal Growth Discussion
14	"If I mess up, everyone will laugh at me."	00:44:20	Fear before appearing in a competition	Material & mental – fear of action	Fear and shame	Focus on social consequences	Personal, emotional	Describes the stages of vulnerability and anxiety
15	"Why should I try if I know I'll lose?"	00:18:30	Pessimism about the competition	Mental – assumption and justification	Passive and inferior position	Contrast between effort and results	Negative, reflective	The beginning of an internal struggle with a sense of failure
16	"What's the point of knowing all these words if I'm still just a kid from Crenshaw?"	01:02:00	Frustration while studying	Relational – conflict between science and identity	Cynical and reflective tone	Contrast and identity	Personal, informal	Identity crisis and social context
17	"You can't stop me now!"	01:29:40	Approaching the spelling bee final	Material – action statement	Confident tone, full of control	The exclamation provides confirmation	Motivational	Transformation into a firm and strong individual
18	"I want to do this. I want to be here."	01:12:15	Expressing willingness to participate in the final	Mental – conscious will	Demonstrates self-awareness and control	Repetition of 'I want' strengthens determination	Academic, formal	A moment of full self-awareness and active participation
19	"We can't let fear stop us."	01:27:10	Cheering Dylan on	Mental – beliefs and values	Inclusive, supportive	The use of 'we' expands the meaning	Reflective, inspiring	Demonstrate empathy and leadership
20	"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate..."	01:35:00	Quoting Nelson Mandela at the climax of the race	Mental – deep values and reflection	Inspirational and enlightening	Rhetorical and thematic quotes	Formal, motivational	The climax of personal and spiritual growth

These findings demonstrate that each metafunction (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) operates synergistically in Akeelah's utterance to construe her evolving identity, social relationships, and worldview.

### The Ideational Metafunction

The ideational metafunction reveals Akeelah's gradual transition from external resistance to internal awareness, reflecting her cognitive, emotional, and experiential development throughout the film. In the early stages, her utterances often feature material processes, such as the clause "Why should I try if I know I'll lose?" which indicates a potential action (try) and a consequence (lose). This clause structure demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship that represents an internal conflict between effort and fear of failure. Linguistically, the use of the modal *should* indicates external pressure, while the verb *lose* depicts a negative perception of learning outcomes, two elements that reflect resistance to the learning experience.

As the character develops, a dominance of mental processes emerges, indicating increased reflective awareness. For example, in the clause "Do you think if I learn these words, people will like me?", the mental verbs "think" and "learn" indicate cognitive and affective activities. Here, Akeelah begins to interpret the learning experience as a social and emotional process, not simply an academic one. Analysis at the clause level reveals a hypothetical (if-clause) structure reflecting internal dialogue and the interdependence between effort (learning) and social acceptance (being liked). Then, relational processes emerge that affirm identity and social position, as in the clause "My name is Akeelah Anderson and I'm from Crenshaw." This clause consists of two attributive relational relationships (*is* and *am from*) that grammatically indicate the existence and origins of identity. The choice of first-person pronouns "my" and "I" reinforces the subject's position as self-aware and proud of her social background. Thus, the clause level analysis proves that the ideational metafunction in Akeelah's discourse not only constructs a representation of events, but also reflects the process of identity formation and personal growth through language, in line with Halliday et al.'s (2014) concept that clause structure is the heart of the expression of human experience.

### **The interpersonal metafunction**

The interpersonal metafunction highlights Akeelah's shift in attitude and position from defensive self-doubt to confident empathy and mature social engagement, marking the emergence of an empowered self. Early on, clauses like "You don't think I'm smart enough, do you?" exhibit an interrogative structure with a tag question, signaling a need for validation and interpersonal uncertainty. The negative polarity (*don't think*) reflects emotional distance and a position of inferiority towards the interlocutor. Mood analysis shows this clause serves an interrogative function, revealing an unequal power relationship between speaker and addressee.

However, in later developmental stages, Akeelah begins to use declarative clauses that imply confidence and control, as in "My name is Akeelah Anderson and I'm from Crenshaw." This declarative mood indicates a statement of identity and self-affirmation. The choice of the pronoun "I" signals increased subjectivity and awareness of her social position.

Furthermore, the clause "We can't let fear stop us." displays significant changes in interpersonal aspects: the use of the inclusive pronoun "we" expands social relationships from the individual to the collective, demonstrating empathy and leadership. In terms of modality, the modal verb "can't" indicates strong beliefs and normative attitudes toward action.

Analysis at the clause level shows that Akeelah shifts from interrogative to declarative and imperative forms, reflecting interpersonal development from dependence to autonomy and social influence. Thus, the interpersonal metafunction in Akeelah's discourse not only reveals the dynamics of social relationships but also serves as a linguistic indicator of her psychological transformation and identity, as Halliday et al. (2014) explain that language plays a crucial role in constructing roles, attitudes, and relationships between individuals.

### **The Textual Metafunction**

This analysis reveals increasing cohesion and control in Akeelah's language, reflecting her cognitive and emotional maturity. Linguistically, this development is evident through the use of increasingly organized theme-rheme structures, for example in the clause "I want to do this. I want to be here." The recurring thematic pattern with the subject "I" demonstrates textual control and a stable focus on personal goals, indicating psychological consistency and clarity of intention. Furthermore, the use of conjunctive relations such as "but," "so," and "because" in

her utterances demonstrates an increasing ability to connect ideas logically, an indicator of mature thinking that also reflects the ability to reflect on experience.

In the final stage, clauses such as "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate..." demonstrate a strong textual metafunction through rhetorical structure and parallel repetition, emphasizing their argumentative and emotional power. The use of the inclusive pronoun "our" expands the personal meaning into the collective, indicating a shift from individual to social awareness.

Overall, these linguistic patterns reinforce Halliday et al. (2014) proposition that language not only reflects social reality but also actively constructs it. Through her semiotic system, Akeelah uses language as a means of negotiating identity, agency, and self-transformation. Thus, the increasing cohesion, thematic control, and choice of clause structure serve as linguistic evidence that Akeelah's language development aligns with her cognitive and emotional growth.

### Language and the Process of Personal Growth

The trajectory of Akeelah's personal growth is mapped through her utterance. Her earlier utterances are marked by hesitation and self-doubt, while later utterances express confidence, empathy, and leadership.

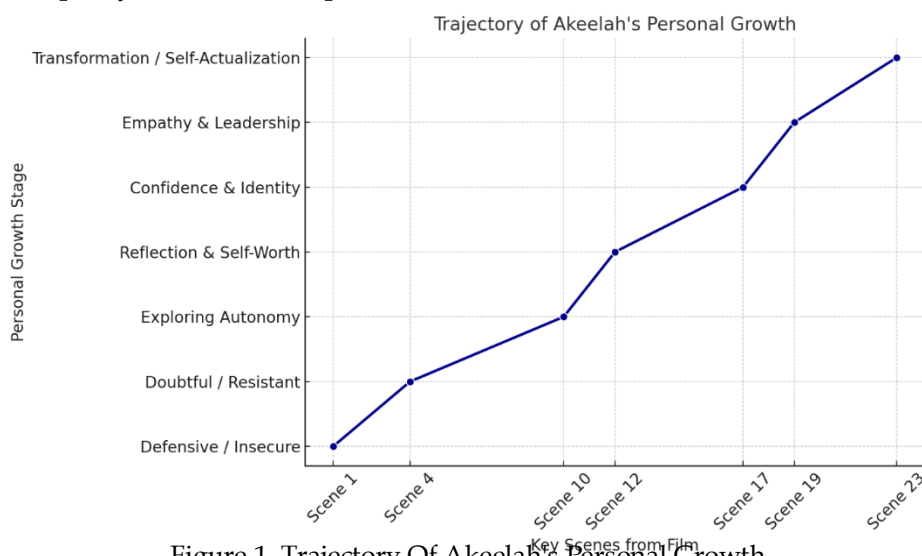


Figure 1. Trajectory Of Akeelah's Personal Growth

The trajectory depicted in Figure 1 shows a progressive movement from Defensive/Insecure to Transformation/Self-Actualization, illustrating how Akeelah's linguistic choices reflect and construct her psychological and social development. Each growth stage is marked by distinct metafunctional patterns: early utterances such as "I ain't no baby!" and "Why should I try if I know I'll lose?" reveal relational and mental processes dominated by negation and conditionality, it's signaling resistance, fear, and self-doubt. As she moves toward Exploring Autonomy and Reflection & Self-Worth, expressions like "I don't need help. I can do it myself." and "Do you think if I learn these words, people will like me?" demonstrate increasing self-awareness, with assertive and interrogative moods that project agency and emotional introspection.

In later stages, Akeelah's utterance evolves into expressions of identity, empathy, and leadership. The declarative tone in "My name is Akeelah Anderson and I'm from Crenshaw" and the inclusive modality of "We can't let fear stop us" signify a linguistic shift from individuality to collective empowerment. Her final exclamation, "I did it!" encapsulates material realization and emotional culmination, representing full agency and transformation. These discursive patterns affirm Vygotsky & Cole's (1978) notion that language mediates cognitive growth and Halliday et al. (2014) view of language as a social semiotic resource, demonstrating that Akeelah's self-actualization is both expressed through and achieved by her evolving use of language.

### Implications for Language Learning and Student Motivation

The implications of the use of linguistic metafunctions in Akeelah's speech provide important insights into English language learning, particularly in the context of education and student motivation. From an ideational metafunction perspective, the use of material, mental, and relational processes in Akeelah's speech demonstrates that language is not only a means of communication but also a vehicle for thinking and understanding social experiences. This aligns with Halliday et al.'s (2014) view that language serves to represent and shape social reality. When students like Akeelah use language to express self-reflection ("Do you think if I learn these words, people will like me?") or determination ("I can do it myself"), they are actually practicing cognitive and affective processes that strengthen self-awareness and learning autonomy. In an educational context, this confirms that effective language learning needs to emphasize the use of language as a tool for thinking and identity formation, not simply mastery of linguistic structures.

Meanwhile, the interpersonal and textual metafunctions in Akeelah's language reveal the motivational and social dimensions of learning. The shift in tone from defensive to collaborative ("We can't let fear stop us") marks a shift from an individualistic orientation to empathy and leadership, reflecting the growth of intrinsic motivation as outlined by Deci & Ryan (2000) Self-Determination theory. Thus, the use of language in this film implies that English teachers can utilize metafunctional analysis to help students identify their position in the learning process, whether they are still at the stage of doubt, exploration, or self-actualization. This approach supports Fairclough (2013) and Gee (2025) ideas that language learning must be connected to social practices and critical consciousness, so that language becomes a tool for personal and social empowerment in education.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that Akeelah's language development in the film *Akeelah and the Bee* reflects a journey of personal and social transformation through the use of diverse language metafunctions. Analysis based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework reveals that changes in linguistic structure (from defensive expressions to affirmative declarations) mark the cognitive, emotional, and self-identity evolution of the main character. Each metafunction contributes to the construction of meaning, demonstrating how language becomes a means of thinking, interacting, and building self-awareness. For English teachers, these findings provide a reflective basis for developing learning that focuses on the social and personal functions of language. Teachers can utilize metafunctional analysis to guide students in understanding how word choice, clause structure, and forms of interaction reflect their ways of thinking and relating to the world around them. Thus, language learning not only emphasizes grammatical aspects but also fosters identity awareness, empathy, and self-empowerment. Meanwhile, for curriculum designers, the practical implications of this research emphasize the need for language curriculum design that integrates functional and reflective dimensions. An SFL-based approach can serve as a foundation for designing learning activities that allow students to explore the meaning, social position, and communicative purpose of each form of speech. Such a curriculum not only facilitates language acquisition but also supports the development of critical, adaptive, and meaning-conscious learner identities. Analytically, this research broadens the horizons of language learning studies by demonstrating that linguistic and personal development are complementary. Akeelah's transformation into an independent and reflective learner illustrates that identity growth is inseparable from the development of language skills. Thus, this study provides theoretical and practical contributions in understanding language as an educational tool that fosters social sensitivity as well as personal maturity.

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