

RESEARCH

REVISITING MORPHOLOGICAL ERGATIVITY IN HINDI-URDU

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Summary: This paper is an attempt to understand Hindi-Urdu morphological ergativity from a new perspective. We critically assess the existing ergativity analyses for Hindi-Urdu, with the main focus on light verb constructions. Our main contentions are: (i) transitivity of the lexical verb or that of the light verb does not determine ergative case marking on the subject and (ii) ergative subject constructions do not have underlying control representations. Our account gives a phase-based derivational approach to ergative as an inherent case.

1. Introduction

Mcgregor [2009: 480] understands morphological ergativity as a kind of patterning in which the Agent is case-marked differently from an Actor and Undergoer, which are case-marked identically. In more precise terms, the agent or the transitive subject appears with a case marker different from the case marker on the intransitive subject (Actor) and the transitive object (Undergoer). While such systems are called ergative-absolutive, those systems where the agents and the actors are case marked similarly are called nominative-accusative. A schematic representation is given below, see tab. 1:

Tab. 1. A schematic representation of nominative and ergative systems

Nominative system		Ergative system
Nominative	{ A	Ergative
Accusative	S } O }	Absolutive
		[cf. Dixon 1994]

While ergative-absolutive systems abound in many languages (see [Coon, Preminger 2012, Dixon 1994, Legate 2008, 2012] among others for details on cross-linguistic patterns), in this paper, we focus primarily on the morphological ergativity in an Indo-Aryan language Hindi-Urdu. The language marks its transitive subject with the ergative case marker in the perfective aspect and has been widely studied in the literature. Two primary claims made about its ergativity are: (i) the transitivity of the lexical verb or that of the light verb in a complex predicate construction is responsible for ergative subject marking and (ii) transitivity of both lexical and light verb necessitates positing of an underlying control structure for even simple sentences with ergative subjects. We contest these claims with novel empirical data, illustrating instances (i) where neither transitive lexical verbs nor light verbs necessitate ergative marking on the subject, and (ii) where underlying control representations give rise to wrong predictions vis-à-vis ergative subject marking in simplex clauses. We claim that the ergative constructions in Hindi-Urdu are mono-clausal constructions that do not contain a PRO argument in the lower clause à la Mahajan [2012].

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives a descriptive overview of ergative constructions in Hindi-Urdu in the transitive as well as intransitive domain and introduces the role of light verbs in such constructions. Section 3 critically assesses existing analyses, arguing against the claims that transitivity of the lexical/ light verb determines morphological ergativity on the subject. Section 4 further examines Mahajan's [2012] claim that ergative case comes from the light verb. Section 5 presents diagnostics from binding properties and Long Distance Agreement constructions to show that Hindi-Urdu ergative light verb constructions are indeed mono-clausal constructions. Section 6 provides an alternative phase-based approach to account for the phenomenon in Hindi-Urdu. Section 7 sums up the main claims of the paper.

2. Morphological ergativity in Hindi-Urdu

Morphological ergativity in Hindi-Urdu is a widely studied phenomenon [Bhatt 2007, Dasgupta 1984, Davison 2004, Kachru 1987, Kachru, Pandharipande 1978, Mahajan 1990, 1997, 2012, Mohanan 1994, Subbarao 2012]. Hindi-Urdu is primarily a nominative-accusative language, in which the nominative subject triggers person, number, and gender agreement on the verb-auxiliary complex, see (1). The language displays morphological ergativity in the perfective aspect, where the subject gets marked with an overt case morpheme *-ne* and fails to trigger agreement with the verb-auxiliary complex, which alternatively agrees with the object in number and gender, as in (2).

1. *laṛkaa rotii khaaṛaa hai*
boy-nom bread.f.sg eat.hab.m.sg be.pres.3.sg
'The boy eats bread.'
2. *laṛke-ne rotii khaayii hai*
boy-erg bread.f.sg eat.perf.f.sg be.pres.3.sg
'The boy has eaten bread.'

The domain of morphological ergativity is not limited to transitive predicates in Hindi-Urdu. We also find ergative case marking with certain intransitives in the perfective aspect. Among intransitives, unaccusative verbs never show ergative case marking in the perfective aspect, as instantiated in (3). However, among unergatives, the ergative case marker may or may not surface depending on the unergative predicate used, as can be seen in (4)-(5).

3. *jɔn/ *jɔn-ne giraa*
 John-nom/*John-erg fell.perf.m.sg
 ‘John fell.’

4. *jɔn/ *jɔn-ne calaa*
 John-nom/*John-erg walk.perf.m.sg
 ‘John walked.’

5. *jɔn(-ne) cʰiĩkaa*
 John-(erg) sneeze.perf.m.sg
 ‘John sneezed.’

Another interesting aspect of Hindi-Urdu morphological ergativity is seen in the domain of light verbs. Hindi-Urdu shows a number of complex verb constructions with light verbs *jaanaa* ‘to go’, *aanaa* ‘to come’, *maarna* ‘to hit’, *denaa* ‘to give’, *lena* ‘to take’, *paraa* ‘to fall’, *karna* ‘to do’, *paanaa* ‘to find’, *cukaanaa* ‘to pay’, *betʰnaa* ‘to sit’, *daalnaa* ‘to put’, *uthnaa* ‘to rise’ etc. As has already been noted by many scholars (see [Butt 2003, 2010, Hopper, Traugott 1993] for a discussion on whether or not light verbs follow a grammaticalization cline), light verbs are commonly derived from lexical verbs and can be classified as transitives, or as intransitive-unergatives, or as unaccusative verbs and contribute towards the semantics of the entire predicate (e.g. completion, volitionality).

A few examples of intransitive unaccusative light verbs are given below in (6)-(8); such light verbs never allow ergative case marking on their subjects. Note that the light verbs ‘to come’ (7) and ‘to fall’ (8) do not appear with transitive predicates.

6. *merii/*merii-ne jɔn-ko kʰaanaa de gayii*
 Mary-nom/*Mary-erg John-acc food.m.sg give go.perf.f.sg
 ‘Mary gave food to John.’

7. *aasmaan mē baadal/*baaḍal-ne gʰir aaye*
 sky in clouds-nom/*clouds-erg gather come.perf.m.pl
 ‘The sky became overcast.’

11. *jɔn/*jɔn-ne gʰar-se cal paraa*
 John-nom/*John-erg home-from walk fall.perf.m.sg
 ‘John started from home.’

Similarly, transitive light verbs ‘to find’ and ‘to bring’ do not allow ergative case marking on the subject, as can be seen in (12)-(13). In contrast, ditransitive light verbs ‘to give’ and ‘to put’ take obligatory ergative case marking on the subject in the perfective aspect in Hindi-Urdu, as can be seen in (14)-(15). A

brief summary of the light verb-nominative/ ergative subject combination is given in Table 2 below.

12. *jɔn/*jɔn-ne bəhət muʃkil-se merii-se mil paayaa*
John-nom/*John-erg very difficulty-with mary.acc meet find.perf.m.sg
'John met Mary with great difficulty.'
13. *jɔn/*jɔn-ne gaari pahaarii-par caɾ^haa laayaa*
John-nom/*John-erg car.f.sg hill.f.sg-on climb bring.perf.m.sg
'John drove the car up the hill.'
14. *jɔn-ne/*jɔn merii-kii gaarii curaa lii*
John-erg/*John-nom Mary-poss car.f.sg steal take.perf.f.sg
'John stole Mary's car.'
15. *jɔn-ne/*jɔn merii-kii gaarii curaa rakkhii hɛ*
John-erg/*John-nom Mary-poss car.f.sg steal put.perf.f.sg be.past.3.sg
'John has stolen Mary's car.'

Tab. 2. Case patterns with light verbs

Light verb	Unaccusative		Unergative		Transitive/ Ditransitive	
	Erg subj	Nom subj	Erg subj	Nom subj	Erg subj	Nom subj
'To come'	✗	✓	–	–	–	–
'To find'	–	–	✗	✓	✗	✓
'To pay'	–	–	✗	✓	✗	✓
'To hit'	–	–	✓	✗	✓	✗
'To give'	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✗
'To take'	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✗

Of the many analyses that have been put forward for morphological ergativity in Hindi-Urdu, there are two claims that stand out: (i) the transitivity of the lexical and/ or the light verb is responsible for ergative marking on the subject and (ii) the transitivity of the verbs in complex predicates leads to the positing of a control structure underlying ergative subject constructions. In this paper, our primary objective is to refute both such claims on empirical grounds. We, therefore, start with brief summaries of these analyses.

3. Existing analyses

In the literature on morphological ergativity, transitivity of the lexical verb is often considered a crucial motivation behind ergative case marking on the subject [Bobaljik 1993, Comrie 1978, Davison 2004, Dixon 1979, 1994, McGregor 2009]. This view is based on the observation that the subject of an intransitive clause is never marked ergative, unlike the agent/ subject of a transitive clause, which is marked with an ergative case. The following sentences (16)-(17) from Basque help make the contrast clearer.

16. *emakume-ak emakume-a ikusi du*
woman-the-erg woman-the-abs seen has
'The woman saw the woman.'

17. *emakume-a erori da*
 woman-the-abs fallen is
 ‘The woman has fallen.’ [Laka 1993: 151-152]

In the case of Hindi-Urdu, however, the link between ergativity and transitivity does not hold true for all intransitives, as certain bodily unergative predicates do take ergative case marker on their subjects, as given in (18); also see Mohanan [1994] for details. It is to be noted that Mohanan associates the presence of an ergative marker with property of volitionality. We contest this claim by showing that an adverb of volition is possible with both a nominative and an ergative subject in (19).

18. *jɔn/jɔn-ne khããsaa*
 John-nom/John-erg cough.perf.m.sg
 ‘John coughed.’
19. *jɔn/jɔn-ne jaan buujh kar c^hĩkkaa*
 John-nom/John-erg deliberately sneeze.perf.m.sg
 ‘John sneezed deliberately.’

It is also important to note here that these unergatives are actually underlying transitives, as evidenced by their behaviour vis-à-vis transitivity diagnostics like adjectival modification of objects (20)-(21). In these instances, the possibility of adjectival modification indicates the presence of an implicit object.

20. *merii-ne pyaaraa hãsaa*
 Mary-erg lovely.m.sg laugh.perf.m.sg
 ‘Mary laughed a lovely laugh.’
21. *merii-ne mardaanaa k^hããsaa*
 Mary-erg masculine.m.sg cough.perf.m.sg
 ‘Mary coughed a masculine cough.’

Also notice that these unergatives allow overt cognate objects (22) which trigger number and gender agreement at par with objects in transitive constructions with ergative subjects (23).

22. *jɔn-ne raakshas-kii hãsii hãsii*
 John-erg demon.poss laughter.f.sg laugh.perf.f.sg
 ‘John laughed a demonic laughter.’
23. *jɔn-ne rotii k^haayii*
 John-erg bread.f.sg eat.perf.f.sg
 ‘John ate bread.’

The transitivity of the main verb as a determinant for ergativity therefore seems to remain uncontested. The problem, of course, is that such an association also makes an incorrect prediction: that transitives and unergatives would always mark their subjects with ergative in the perfective. This, however, as we have seen, is incorrect, especially in the case of the latter class of verbs. Transitivity therefore cannot be the sole determinant of ergativity.

Amritavalli [1979] and Platts [1874], among others, on the other hand, claim that the main determinant of morphological ergativity in compound verb constructions is not the transitivity of the lexical verb, but of the light verb. This claim can be substantiated in the example (24), where the transitive light verb ‘to take’ allows an ergative marked subject. Alternatively, in (25), the subject cannot be marked ergative due to the unaccusative nature of the light verb ‘to go’.

24. *jɔn-ne/*jɔn miira-ko dek^h liyaa hai*
 John-erg/*John-nom Meera-acc see take.perf.m.sg be.pres.3.sg
 ‘John has seen Meera.’

25. *jɔn/*jɔn-ne miira-ko kitaab de aayaa*
 John-nom/*John-erg Meera-acc book.f.sg give come.perf.m.sg
 ‘John has given the book to Meera.’

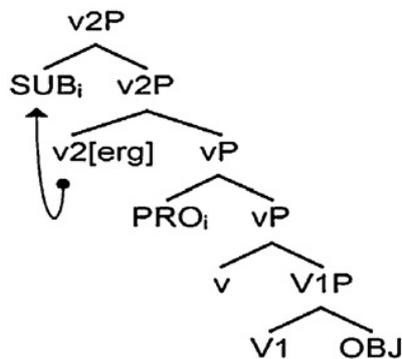
Once again, the problem with assuming transitivity of the light verb incorrectly predicts that transitive light verbs will always trigger ergative marking on the subject. This is grossly incorrect, since certain transitive light verbs fail to trigger ergative case-marking.

Another important take on Hindi-Urdu ergativity is by Mahajan [2012]. He claims that the transitivity of the lexical verb is crucial for ergative marking on subjects. However, what is most crucial is the case-assigning property of the light verb; if the light verb assigns an ergative case while acting as a lexical/ main predicate, it necessarily marks the ergative subject when acting as a light verb.

Mahajan’s structure for ergative case-light verb complexes has a double vP layer where the role of the lexical verb is to merely supply a transitive predicate. The assignment of the ergative case is actually determined by the light verb, which is responsible for assignment of the ergative case as its lexical property. This proposed structure of a complex predicate construction as in (26) is given in (27).

26. *jɔn-ne rotii k^haa lii*
 John-erg bread.f.sg eat take.perf.m.sg
 ‘John has eaten bread.’

27.



Mahajan opines that ergative light verb constructions in Hindi-Urdu constitute a double vP structure where the lexical transitive verb is contained in a normal light verb shell v2P. The higher v2P layer contains the external argument in its specifier position, which relates to the PRO subject of the lower vP via control. The transitivity of the vP is responsible for theta assignment of the arguments, while ergative case is licensed by the higher v2P head. A crucial feature of this analysis is the clausal bifurcation of perfective constructions in Hindi-Urdu, where the two arguments (external argument and PRO) are related via a control relation. In the following section, we provide evidence to reject the role of the light verb in determining ergative case marking on the subject.

4. The problem of light verbs

Mahajan [2012] instantiates his alternative proposal by illustrating that transitive verbs like ‘to know’ may appear with either ergative subjects or nominative subjects as lexical verbs, as in (28)-(29). However, when paired with v2s that obligatorily take ergative subjects as lexical verbs, these verbs must appear with ergative subjects (30).

28. *vo yah baat samjhaa*
 he-nom(masc) this matter(fem) understand-perf-masc
 ‘He understood this matter.’
29. *us-ne yah baat samjhii*
 he-erg(masc) this matter(fem) understand-perf-fem
 ‘He understood this matter.’
30. *us-ne/*vo yah baat samajh lii*
 he-erg(masc) this matter(fem) understand take-perf-fem
 ‘He understood this matter.’ [Mahajan 2012: 207]

However, this claim is refuted if we take the light verb ‘to find’ in Hindi-Urdu, which appears with an obligatory ergative subject as a lexical verb (31), but with an obligatory nominative subject as a light verb (32). If Mahajan was right, then the second sentence would have an obligatory ergative subject, contra facts.

31. *us-ne aashram me shānti paayii*
 3.sg-erg ashram in peace.f.sg find.perf.f.sg
 ‘He/ she found peace in the ashram.’
32. *vo/*us-ne aashram me shānti dhūnd paayaa*
 3.sg-nom/*3.sg-erg ashram in peace.f.sg search find.perf.m.sg
 ‘He could find peace in the ashram.’

Next, Mahajan [2012] takes up the case of transitive lexical predicates ‘to know’ which, according to him, do not appear in the perfective and therefore cannot license ergative subjects as a main verb. When combined with v2s that obligatorily take ergative subjects as main verbs, the subject of the ‘know’ verb must obligatorily take ergative subjects in the perfective (33).

33. *us-ne yah baat jaan lii*
 3.sg-erg this matter.f.sg know take-perf-masc
 ‘He knew this matter.’ [Mahajan 2012: 208]

However, a closer enquiry reveals that the predicate ‘to know’ can be used in the perfective aspect in Hindi-Urdu, as in (34). However, the transitivity of an accompanying light verb does not always guarantee the presence of an ergative case morpheme on the subject, as can be witnessed in (35). Note that the predicate ‘to pay’ takes obligatory ergative subject as the main verb in the perfective aspect (36).

34. *jɔn-ne apne-aap-ko tab jaanaa jab vah fel ho gayaa*
 John-erg self-acc then know.perf.m.sg when 3.sg.nom fail be go.perf.m.sg
 ‘John got to know himself after he failed.’
35. *jɔn/*jɔn-ne hamaara raaz jaan cukaa hai*
 John-nom/*John-erg our secret know pay.perf.m.sg. be.pres.3.sg
 ‘John has found out our secret.’
36. *jɔn-ne ek mahiine mē saaraa udhaar cukaa diyaa*
 John-erg one month in all debt.m.sg. pay give.perf.m.sg
 ‘John paid all the debt within a month.’

Mahajan’s next piece of evidence comes from the transitive verbs like ‘to meet’ that cannot take ergative subjects as main verbs in perfective constructions (37). However, when such predicates appear with light verbs that take obligatory ergative subjects as main verbs, the subject must obligatorily take ergative case (38).

37. *jɔn/*jɔn-ne mary-se milaa*
 John-nom/*John-erg Mary-with meet.perf.m.sg
 ‘John met Mary.’
38. *us-ne/*vo mary-se/-ko mil liyaa*
 3.sg-erg/*3.sg-nom Mary-with meet take.perf.m.sg
 ‘He had met Mary.’

We contradict this claim with (40), where the light verb ‘to pay’ fails to trigger ergativity, even when it has been shown that it allows obligatory ergative subject marking as a main verb (39).

39. *jɔn-ne/*jɔn dukaandaar-ka udhaar cukaa*
 John-erg/*John-nom shopkeeper-poss debt pay.perf.m.sg
 ‘John paid the shopkeeper's debt.’
40. *jɔn/*jɔn-ne mary-se mil cukaa hai*
 John-nom/*John-erg Mary-with meet pay.perf.m.sg be.pres.3.sg
 ‘John has met Mary.’

Lastly, Mahajan [2012] claims that certain transitive verbs like ‘to meet’, ‘to bring’ cannot take an ergative subject as main verbs (41) and block ergative

case marking even when taken as a light verb with otherwise obligatory ergative subject licensing predicates (42).

41. *jɔn/ *jɔn-ne bazaar-se p^hal laayaa*
 John-nom/*John-erg market-from fruit bring.perf.m.sg
 ‘John brought fruits from the market.’
42. *jɔn/ *jɔn-ne pahaaRii-par gaaRii caRhaa laayaa*
 John-nom/*John-erg mountain-on car.f.sg climb bring.perf.m.sg
 ‘John drove the car up to the mountain.’

We contend that predicates like ‘to meet’ can never occur as light verbs, and therefore cannot be used as evidence to show the ergative case-retention or licensing properties of light verbs. Light verbs, as has been demonstrated by many linguists (including [Butt 2010]) lose their argument structure properties and contribute additional meanings such as completion, directionality, agentivity. Hence, the light verb *to take* in a construction like *to take a bath* may not mean literally taking a bath, it renders an extra completion reading to the entire event. However, these properties are absent with *to bring*, which instead possesses a different semantic interpretation as it involves an action on the object, and gives a serial verb rather than light verb interpretation, see (43).

43. *jɔn paṭṭ^har d^ho laayaa*
 John-nom stones carry bring.perf.m.sg
 ‘John carried the stones.’ (lit. ‘John brought/ picked up the stones from somewhere and carried them to some other location.’)

Given the evidence in the preceding section, we contend that the transitivity of the light verb does not decide the ergative case assignment on the subject in the perfective aspect.

5. Bi-clausal status of ergative constructions in Hindi-Urdu

We shall now use the diagnostics of anaphor binding, anti-subject pronominal orientation, and long distance agreement (LDA) to show that the ergative constructions in Hindi-Urdu are mono-clausal. In (44), we can see that the anaphor is co-indexed with its antecedent ‘John’ which occupies the subject position. Hence, using Condition A of the Binding theory, we argue that the anaphor and its antecedent ‘John’ are in the same clause.

44. *jɔn_i-ne mēri_j-ko k^hud_{i/*j}- dek^haa*
 John.nom Mary.acc self see.perf.m.sg
 ‘John saw Mary himself.’

Similarly, in (45), the pronominal ‘us’ does not take reference from the subject as both arguments are present in the same clause. Hence, Condition B of the Binding Theory also provides evidence for a mono-clausal structure in the perfective constructions in Hind-Urdu.

45. *jɔn_i -ne meri_j-ko us_{*i/*j}-ko dik^haayaa*
 John.erg Mary.acc 3.sg-dat show.perf.m.sg
 ‘John showed Mary to him.’

The next piece of evidence against positing an intervening PRO comes from the contrast between simplex ergative subject constructions and bi-clausal constructions without long-distance agreement between matrix predicates and embedded objects. Bhatt [2005] and Chandra [2007, 2011], among others, note that Hindi-Urdu shows instances of ergative subject constructions in the perfective with and without long-distance agreement (LDA (46) and non-LDA (47), respectively).

46. *jɔn-ne film dek^hnaa caahaa*
 John-erg movie.f.sg.nom watch.inf.m want.perf.m.sg
 ‘John wanted to watch a movie.’
47. *jɔn-ne film dek^hnii caahii*
 John-erg movie.f.sg.nom watch.inf.f want.perf.f.sg
 ‘John wanted to watch a movie.’

Bhatt [2005] posits a PRO in the embedded structures of (46) that acts as an intervener between matrix *v* and the lower argument. Thus, the construction shows default agreement on its main and embedded verbs. For a schematic representation, see (48).

48. Subject [*v* [_{VP} *V* [*Inf*⁰ [_{VP} PRO *v* [_{VP} *V* OBJ]]]]]]

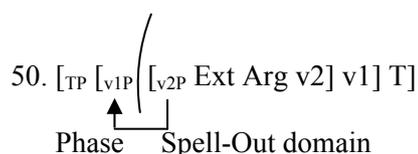
On the contrary, (43) shows object agreement on its main and embedded verbs, as there is no intervening element PRO to prevent a long-distance phi-relation in such a construction. For a schematic representation, see (49).

49. Subject [*v* [_{VP} [*Inf*⁰ [_{VP} *v* [_{VP} *V* OBJ]]]]]]

According to this analysis, the absence of PRO does not have any impact on the ergativity of the construction in the non-LDA constructions. The matrix subject is still marked ergative, but the matrix verb cannot agree with the embedded object. In Mahajan's control representation of simplex transitive constructions, object agreement is necessarily attested. The presence of a PRO does not intervene object agreement from appearing in the sentence. This is a crucial difference between bi-clausal non-LDA structures and the simplex transitive constructions. Hence, these two should not be given the same (bi-clausal or control) underlying representations.

6. An alternative analysis

As part of the alternative analysis, we would like to propose the following representation for the ergative light verb constructions in Hindi-Urdu, see (50).



As shown in (50), we propose a double vP structure, where the higher vP is a perfective head with uninterpretable features (minus person), while the lower vP has a complete phi set of uninterpretable features. Our analysis is based on the mechanism of phase sliding posited in Gallego [2010], according to which phase heads can be extended (or «slided») to the next higher head. This kind of head-movement can be understood as a sort of «upstairs inheritance» with the following consequences: (i) the higher vP becomes the new phase, in the sense of Chomsky [2000, 2001, 2004] and (ii) the lower v2P becomes the complement to be spelled out. This will disallow the external argument from being accessed by the higher C-T head as it will be spelled out along with the lower verbal head. The verbal complex v₂-v₁, formed as a result of phase sliding, enters into an agreement relation with the internal argument and values it accusative. The verbal complex cannot agree with the external argument as the DP received a theta-role by the same head. It is thereby assigned an inherent ergative case from the theta-checking v head. It is to be noted that the external argument cannot move to the specifier of the v₁P as the movement would disobey anti-locality restrictions, in the sense of Abels [2003] and Grohmann [2003].

The uninterpretable features of C-T are inherited from the feature values of the perfective v₁, after the latter (v₁-v₂) has entered into Agree with the internal argument (and after v₂P spell-out). The Hindi-Urdu tense auxiliary thereby shows gender-number agreement with the object in ergative subject constructions.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that morphological ergativity in transitive light verb constructions in Hindi-Urdu cannot be attributed to the transitivity of the lexical or the light verb. Using evidence from binding and long distance agreement, we have argued against an underlying control representation for ergative constructions in the language contra Mahajan [2012]. We have provided an alternative phase-based analysis and posited that ergative is an inherent case assigned to the external argument as an outcome of lower v₂ phase head sliding to the higher perfective (person) v₁ head.

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