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Trump's First UN Address: A Discourse Analysis

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By

Niko Costantino

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Donald Trump, a few days ago, gave a passionate, and daring speech at the United Nations headquarters in New York, in front of political leaders and heads of state from the five continents. Singular were the concepts he put forward, and the technique he used to do it. To understand them, a rational discourse analysis is the most reliable tool.

TRUMP'S DISCOURSE: LANGUAGE AND STYLE

The scope of this paper is not enough to provide a complete discourse analysis of a speech that endured more than forty minutes, instead it will depict its most salient aspects.

Before the actual discourse analysis, a few premises are necessary. Trump's speech at the UN General Assembly is characterised by the same style that his speeches in domestic politics have, in tone, language, and argument. This comes as most singular and, arguably, undiplomatic. However, it opens to interesting implications for the discipline of political communication and for the concept of public diplomacy. Does Trump represent the way of doing politics and public diplomacy of the future? The effect of that in international politics is debatable. Still, the United States are arguably great drivers of change in the West. A capacity like Trump's of holding to any opponent and having the face to humiliate them attracts the electorate. This is how his style proved winning at the elections¹.

Donald Trump has brought a new dimension to political communication. He is the first to have made such massive use of anger as a persuasive tool in his discourse. The bluntness, every-day and distinctively brutal style Trump displays is extremely appealing to contemporary politics. When an opponent is challenging him, he goes further and completely speaks up for his opponent's haters in an undiplomatic, disrespectful yet sharp manner². Most times he even exceeds their expectations. And that is the style angry people like³.

BODY LANGUAGE

Trump's body language alone is quite an appealing persuasive tool. During the address to the General Assembly, his face expression was very linear, with no significant changes, which communicates a control and firmness over the matter being discussed. His hands shake with precise movements that he repeats cyclically, according to the passage of the speech he is pronouncing. There are five kinds of hand gestures in Trump's body language⁴:

- 1) 'L shape' and pinch: they 'sharpen' the eyes, capturing them into trying unconsciously to look more closely. Similarly, he uses that gesture when he is trying to draw the attention on a detail;
- 2) Open hand, palms out: this gesture is cautionary. He particularly uses that when he wants to introduce that he is denying something or his judgement is clashing with something that is untrue. It is usually introductory to the solution he proposes;
- 3) Pointing: it is accusatory, and allows Trump to accuse someone or a group of people subliminally, even without saying it explicitly;
- 4) 'Slicing': it communicates precision;
- 5) Uncontrolled hand gestures: it is used to transmit chaos. It enriches the meaning of Trump's references to choices he frames as complete disasters.

¹ Ott (2017).

² Ahmadian, Azarshahi, Paulhus, (2017)

³ Ott (2017).

⁴ Civiello (16.08.2016) <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/election-us-2016-37088990/what-trump-s-hand-gestures-say-about-him>

Especially number 3, 4, and 5 are quite down-to-earth gestures that people use every day. This is one reason of Trump's very successful communication⁵.

In his UN address, he used most soft gestures, and only from kind 1, 2 and, very lightly, 3.

The US flag brooch he was wearing on his revers is also a piece of discourse: it visually communicates the primacy of the US nation to Trump's vision, and combines with his arguments to convey meaning.

DEFINING THE CONTEXT

AUDIENCE

Notwithstanding the 'live' audience of a piece of discourse, today's mass media contribute to dramatically enlarge the overall audience. The politician, and most of all in 'important' passages, does direct his speech not only to the audience (s)he has in front, but also to the kind of audience that would listen to their words through media⁶.

Edwin Black defines the audience as a 'second persona'⁷, namely not in terms of physical context, but of themes recurring in the discourse: the audience does not 'exist' outside of his speaker, indeed it exists in function of a speaker addressing it. And addressing an audience is first of all creating it, to propose a theme to which a group of people can relate. In other words, without the speaker, the audience does not have substance.

Donald Trump, either willing or not, created an audience according to the contents of the speech, the way the content was put, the group(s) of people that are involved in that speech, direct or indirect audiences. Yet, since very beginning, he created it explicitly saying, '*it is a profound honour to stand here (...) to address the people of the world*'. According to Black, the consequence for persuasion is that the speaker tries to manipulate and create identities through the speech, such as, for example, when Trump 'makes' an audience of US citizens for himself referring to them as 'proud Americans'. In the same manner, Trump addressing the UN member states with words displaying the US army capacity is also creating an audience in them, trying to show them his country's prosperity and power, with a view to make his arguments more persuasive⁸.

In the light of the Black's theory, I will move to defining Trump's audience during his UN address, also specifying whether direct or indirect (according to the way Trump was listened to).

The overall audience surely had notice of Trump's words as reported by the media – even more massive than usual, as many media chose to stream the address integrally and live. However, there is a basic distinction: US citizens were a particular kind of audience, as Trump's message for them – and singularly in a UN address – was heavily characterised, compared to the message for rest of the world. This, in itself, will give a measure of Trump's value of national identity – as himself repeated throughout the address. Therefore, I will consider there are three basic audiences of Trump's speech.

The first, direct audience is the political leaders and heads of state present at the UN General Assembly. They were from all UN member states, and all of the five continents. The second kind of audience is indirect, and heard of the speech through the media. This second audience splits into two groups: the US electorate, and the rest of the world citizens.

⁵ Perloff (2010).

⁶ Napoli (2010).

⁷ Black (1970).

⁸ Burke (1973).

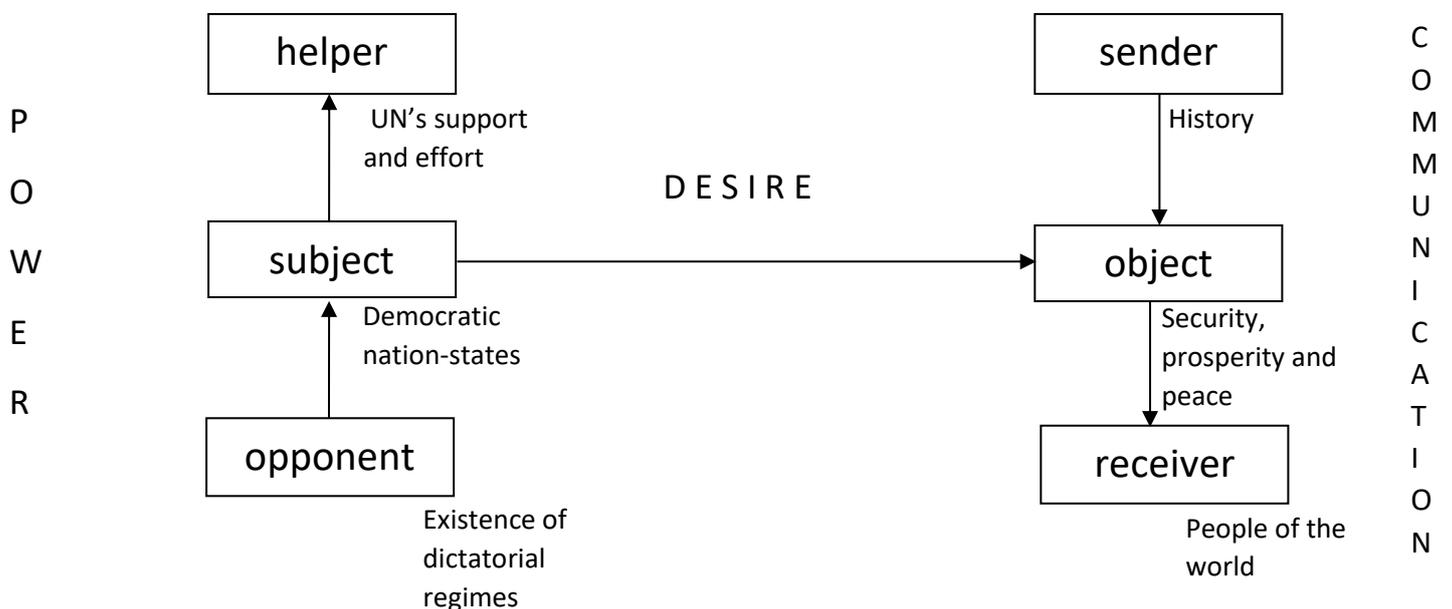
The role of the audience is that of a ‘receiver’ of a message, while the speaker is the ‘sender. A fourth component is the ‘medium’, the means of transmitting information between the sender and the receiver. This can be direct speech, radio, television, newspapers and so forth. To Aristotle’s standards, Trump’s would be a highly deliberative kind of speech (*symbolēutikòs*), namely arguing for a course of action (‘persuasive’ in Cicero’s terms). That is not true for most of the annual Security Council speeches: they are usually mostly epideictic, that is, their scope is showing the quality of something, while avoiding suggesting concrete actions (‘informative’, for Cicero).

For the speech to be effectively prepared, the speaker needs to know its audience. For that purpose, being able to determine the *identity* of the audience gives the speaker power. Identity, meant as ‘the set of labels, patterns of behavior, and ways of representing yourself that make up your public persona’⁹. Recognising the identity categories by the speaker means to be able to convey greater meaning with his/her words so as to achieve greater persuasion on the audience. Certain identities are persuasive, while others are not.

GREIMAS’ ACTANTIAL SCHEME

The Actantial Scheme is a model of structural semantics that allows to identify an action and its story¹⁰, and look more deeply into the structure of Trump’s speech and its critical elements.

ACTANTIAL SCHEME



The speech has some oppositions, of which I below recognise the most salient. The implicit oppositions are listed in brackets:

⁹ Keith & Lundberg (2008).

¹⁰ Greimas (1983).

- rogue states / legitimate governments;
- regimes / democracies;
- peace / (war);
- prosperity / (ruin);
- opportunity / dangers;
- immense promise / great peril;
- new heights / valley of despair;
- terrorist groups / innocent people.

As the Actantial scheme highlights, the actants are six. They are constituted by a subject (the democratic nation-states) wanting something to happen, the object (security, prosperity and peace) is what the subject ultimately desires, and whose desire is prompted, originated by the sender (history), the receiver (the people of the world) is who is going to benefit from the happening. Significant is a passage clearing that the UN is viewed as the helper: ‘Our success depends on a coalition of strong and independent nations’.

The scheme also highlights in itself an enthymeme between the object and the receiver: are we sure all the people of the world are going to enjoy peace, prosperity and security after Trump and his prospective allies triumph? In this, the US president transmits his own worldview. The reasoning also presents a *topos* of hypocrisy: if a standard applies to a part of the world, Trump wishes to transmit that it would apply also to the rest of the world.

LOGOS, ETHOS, AND PATHOS

Trump’s address, as any piece of rhetoric, was aimed to persuade a certain public. In this view, it revolves around three dimensions: *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*¹¹. These are the fundamental dimensions of persuasion.

The *logos* is the way the speaker puts forward the reasoning, its logic, and may be formal (based on syllogisms, which may well be false) or non-formal. The latter consists of ‘adaptable’ reasonings that are adapted according to the audience, and are, in turn, of two kinds: enthymemes, involving correct reasoning but missing passages. They rely on commonly accepted patterns of reasoning. For example: ‘Kim Jong Un has killed before, so he will kill again’. Another kind of non-formal reasoning is the example. Differently than enthymemes, examples are inductive reasoning, used to prove the speaker’s argument right.

The *ethos* is a more unconscious dimension of persuasion. It represents the inclination of an audience to trust that particular speaker as such, it is the speaker’s credibility. For example, when an address involves an appeal to courage, an audience will be more inclined to listen to someone with a proven record in that quality (e.g. a war veteran). A good speaker is able to create ethos by the combination of four factors: action, namely the evocation of speaker’s actions, deeds, that is the remembrance of the speaker’s deeds (e.g. making donations to charities), understanding of the audience’s point of view, and expertise.

The *pathos* corresponds to the capacity that the speaker has of understanding the emotional state of the audience and calibrate his/her arguments to that state. A speaker is successful when, for example, (s)he foresees an emotional state of irritation in his prospective audience, and addresses that irritation by making arguments to soften it.

¹¹ Keith & Lundberg (2008).

Once defined the role of logos, ethos and pathos, I am moving to tracing them Trump's address.

Logos. It is put forward especially through *topoi*, namely commonplaces used to support a statement (of more or less likely¹², consistency of motives¹³, and hypocrisy¹⁴), enthymemes, real and hypothetical examples, syllogisms.

Ethos. Trump has a strong and solid manner of communicating his *ethos*. He primarily derives it from his charming success in business (for strict politics, emblematic are the many occasions when he cites his book '*Trump: The Art of the Deal*'¹⁵, and his wealth as proof of his negotiation skills). The fact itself of being the president of the United States (alluding to a US hegemonic power) constructs the ethos Trump creates for his figure.

Pathos. One of the most emblematic examples of Trump's achievement of pathos is '*Jungles of Asia [pause]*'. The pause is clearly intended as a moment of mourning and homage to the victims of the most soundly ruinous war the United States ever participated to, that of Vietnam¹⁶. Trump also creates pathos with the other heads of state by making continuous and strenuous appeals to cooperation and peace.

Motifs are recognisable throughout the speech, which are enforced by the combination of Trump's logos, ethos and pathos:

- 1) Celebration of US supremacy;
- 2) Threats and response to them;
- 3) The nation-state as fundamental;
- 4) The centrality of citizens.

FORMAL-SEMANTIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Below, a cloud words map¹⁷ schematises the word recurrence in Trump's speech.

¹² 'If the more likely thing does not happen, the less likely thing will also not happen' (Keith & Lundberg, 2008).

¹³ 'If a person has a reason to do something, he or she probably will do it' (*ibid.*).

¹⁴ 'If standards apply to one person, they should apply to another' (*ibid.*).

¹⁵ Trump & Schwartz (1987)

¹⁶ Burke (1937).

¹⁷ Produced with the aid of ATLAS.ti software for discourse analysis.



Word frequency ranges from four (the words from the outer circle) to forty-eight (the word ‘nations’).

The semantic unit of the national state is central to Trump’s address. ‘Nation(s)’ (60 times), ‘states’ (24), ‘people’ (45), ‘country/countries (28)’.

Not casually, ‘united’ (38) and ‘nations’ (48) are the among the three single words that most appear throughout the speech. A strategic choice, seen the singular charge these two words acquire when spoken at the United Nations General Assembly.

People are central to Trump’s discourse, making explicit and massive references (sometimes resulting in overstatements) to their importance: it is the case when he says, ‘*in America, the people govern, the people rule, and the people are sovereign. I was elected not to take power, but to give power to the American people where it belongs*’. Another highly symbolic sentence in this regard is ‘*the greatest in the United States Constitution is its first three beautiful words. They are "We the people"*’.

Interesting is the choice of exclusive use of the personal pronoun ‘we’, chosen instead of its singular form ‘I’. It succeeds in transmitting representativeness, a unity of intent and support in the United States, while at the same time communicating a firmness of positions.

The word ‘regime’, appearing fifteen times, is charged with a negative acceptance only to refer to the countries Trump frames as dictatorships: primarily North Korea, Iran and Venezuela. This use comes opposed to that of the word ‘nation’, which he uses to refer to ‘legitimate’ states. This way, Trump enforces the positive meaning of the concept of nation, further than his argumentation does.

To the US president, the challenges that the UN has is promoting security (appearing 11 times), prosperity (15) and peace (12). He repeats that multiple times.

Trump’s central theme is the necessity of the defeat of ‘rogue regimes’ such as North Korea, Venezuela and Iran. The speech’s tone is a constant rise of solemnity and allusions until it peaks in what could feel as a manifesto: ‘*We want harmony and friendship, not conflict and strife. We are guided by outcomes, not ideologies. We have a policy of principled realism, rooted in shared goal, interests, and values*’ Particularly,

the anaphora of the personal pronoun 'we' much personalises the declaration and increases its solemnity and 'spiritual stakes'.

In the following passages, the auxiliary verb 'must' appears frequently, overall 16 times. It is Trump's plea before the Assembly, coming, interestingly, before the exposition of the details of the problem (North Korea above all). This indicates Trump's deductive strategy, coming from the awareness that the values he makes appeal to are more widely recognised than a call for drastic policies (which he justifies by the widely accepted values) against North Korea, Venezuela and Iran. In doing this, he succeeds in making a deductive introduction from the universally shared principles, to the particular situation.

The plea comes before the actual details of the problem. If the problem had been more widely recognised than the values that would justify that action, the order of exposition would have been opposite, inductive (for example in tribunal pleadings).

After the apex of solemnity, Trump descends bluntly into an aggressive dialectic against North Korea, Venezuela, and Iran. Explicit threats are not saved.

Aware of the heaviness of his words, Trump alleviates tension (but not the tone) and displays rhetoric competency by introducing puns and creative terms. It is the case for '*Kim regime*', a successful formula aided by a rhyme.

SOCIAL GOODS

When Trump perorates his cause, he grants or denies social goods to other entities¹⁸. Social goods are any abstract quality that a society values, and are always at stake in a speech. Granting or denying them is the burden of argumentation. The desired outcome is twofold: the speaker denies his opponents a social good, while implicitly granting it to himself. This way, the speaker positions himself in an issue by denying or recognising social goods. Some of the social good at stake in Trump's speech are: peace, integrity, prosperity, economic growth, democracy. The speech revolves around them to achieve a clash with the supporters of moderation and persuade them.

Some of the most clamorous denials of social goods are to the United Nations: it is the case when he states, '*Rogue regimes represented in this body not only support terror but threaten other nations (...)*'. Here, he denies the UN the social good of integrity. In another passage, he goes further when he refers to '*mammoth multinational trade deals, unaccountable international tribunals*'. The phrase denies the UN the social good of functionality, as it refers to the World Trade Organisation, with which the UN has a strong level of integration¹⁹ (despite not being a UN agency), and to the International Court of Justice, an international tribunal instituted by the United Nations.

However, Trump also grants social goods to the UN: '*it is a profound honour to stand here*' grants the UN the social good of importance and prestige (resulting in a *captatio benevolentiae*), while '*This institution was founded in the aftermath of two world wars, to help shape this better future*' grants the UN the social goods of nobility and worthiness.

INTERTEXTUALITY

Intertextuality is the level of connection that one piece of rhetoric has with other texts. Its aim is evoking certain ideas in the listener, in order to make them identify with the speaker – either in a mechanism of

¹⁸ Keith & Lundberg (2008).

¹⁹ WTO, *The WTO and the United Nations*.

“common ground” or personal branding. Trump’s choice of words and formulas makes his speech one of great intertextuality. This is characteristic of Trump’s communication style.

Below are some examples of intertextuality in Trump’s speech.

- 1) ‘Billions and billions’. This is one example of both Trump’s capacity of creating connections with audience and of personal branding. In fact, the phrase is typical, widely known among his habitual audience²⁰, and reinforce his personal brand by alluding to his great wealth-derived entitlement for talking about great amounts of money.
- 2) ‘Rocket man’. Intertextuality, with popular culture (it can create intertextuality with the imaginary character of cinema serials, and with the song by Elton John ‘Rocket Man’). In both cases, it minimises the seriousness of Kim Jong Un capacity and ridicules him. The power of Trump’s intertextuality has the aim to communicate power and control over the situation.
- 3) ‘God bless the United States of America’. Intertextuality: address to the nation. Trump shows here, once again, that his central theme, even in the UN, is his nation, the USA. Combination of intertextuality and argumentation are the tools that Trump uses to persuade his audience of the centrality of the nation.

Trump is an excellent user and creator of soundbites. These examples of intertextuality are also great example of successful soundbites.

FRAMING

Trump chooses carefully his words to make connections between them and convey his own sense of the events he describes. The choice of words and phrases is directed to give his arguments a ‘frame’, a core organising idea that displays the events with a language to persuade the audience of his interpretation²¹. A few frames are recognisable throughout Trump’s speech.

One frame is one that aims to communicate that ‘the action against authoritarian regimes is a necessity for the entire world’. The would bring *security, prosperity and peace*, while they would only apply to the nations that ally with him. The purpose is to grant his arguments greater legitimisation.

Another frame delivers about Trump’s opposition to migration with a motivation of ‘loving and care’: ‘*horribly treated people*’, ‘*We seek an approach to refugee resettlement that enables their eventual return to their home*’. The frame communicates that Trump cares about protecting migrants (refugees) and prioritises their well-being. It allows Trump to justify his strong opposition to immigration with an act in the interest of the migrants, not in the interest of his own country. In doing this, Trumps produces a frame transformation²², aiming at a better chance to persuade the audience of the necessity of the restriction of migration.

Another frame communicates the ‘goodness of the American people’. He constantly frames any intervention of the United States of America out of ‘the goodness of Americans’ hearts. It is the case when

²⁰ Exemplary is one video collecting some of his ‘billions and billions’ moments: ‘Trump says billions and billions and billions’, VICE News, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_aLESdq1U.

²¹ Entman (1993).

²² It verifies when a proposed frame ‘may not resonate with, and on occasion may even appear antithetical to, conventional lifestyles or rituals and extant interpretive frames’ (Snow et al., 1986). In this case, the conventional response to the caring of refugees would follow an appeal to grant them hospitality in one’s home country. Trump transforms that vision by insisting that ‘if we care about refugees, we need to allow them to stay in their home country’.

he talks about the Marshall plan, the 22% American budget of the United Nations, the financial assistance to nations hosting refugees. This is, indeed, a clear organisational pattern of information.

Another important frame is one aiming to change a common perception regarding him, by conveying the message that ‘Trump loves and Muslims’. It is recognisable in sentences such as *‘its oil profits go to fund Hezbollah and other terrorists that kill innocent Muslims and attack their peaceful Arab and Israeli neighbours’*, *‘will the Iranian people return to the nation's proud roots as a centre of civilization, culture, and wealth’*, and *‘I was greatly honoured to address the leaders of more than 50 Arab and Muslim nations’*.

Familiar to this frame is the ‘Trump stands for peace’ frame. Trump uses the speech to communicate his ultimate willingness for and commitment to peace-building. Sentences that contribute to convey that frame are *‘Those these beautiful pillars, they are pillars of peace, sovereignty, security, and prosperity’* *‘We want harmony and friendship, not conflict and strife’* *‘The United States is one out of 193 countries in the United Nations, and yet we pay 22 percent of the entire budget and more (...)’* *‘The United States bears an unfair cost burden, but to be fair, if it could actually accomplish (...) the goal of peace, this investment would easily be well worth it’*.

The ‘patriotism’ frame also recurs the entire speech. It is devisable in sentences such as *‘As a responsible neighbour and friend, we and all others have a goal (...) to help them regain their freedom, recover their country, and restore their democracy’* (this could be viewed as an allusion to the Monroe doctrine ‘America to Americans’)²³, *‘Our citizens have paid the ultimate price to defend our freedom’*, *‘it is an eternal credit to the American character that even after we and our allies emerge victorious from the bloodiest war in history, we did not seek territorial expansion’*, and *‘it is an eternal credit to the American character that even after we and our allies emerge victorious from the bloodiest war in history, we did not seek territorial expansion’*.

It succeeds in making the American public a primary audience of the speech. By doing that, Trump gives a demonstration of how the national state is fundamental to his policy.

Framing also allows to define agenda setting. By framing, in fact, Trump sets the priorities on which, according to him, the United Nations would need to work on.

RHETORICAL DEVICES

Attention is also deserved by Trump’s use of rhetorical devices, which were excellent manners of putting forward his messages. Among them:

- 1) Topoi *‘the whole world is safer when nations are strong, independent, and free’*, *‘the entire world understands that the Iranian people want change’* (it is actually just Trump’s opinion, Trump takes spokespersonship for the entire world – displays authority and solemnity);
- 2) Rhymes (such as ‘protect/reject’, ‘Kim regime’);
- 3) Anaphora (‘We... we ...’, ‘must... must...’, ‘strong sovereign nations... strong sovereign nations’)
- 4) Climax (ascending), peak: *‘no choice but to totally destroy North Korea’*;
- 5) Alliteration (‘rogue regimes’, ‘shock the conscience’, ‘refugee resettlement’, ‘produced poverty... people stealing power’);
- 6) Polyptoton (‘peace... peaceful’, ‘threat... threaten’);
- 7) Antithesis (‘righteous many / wicked few’, ‘protect people / reject threats’);
- 8) False syllogism: innocent Muslims: not all Iranians are Muslim. Frame, he is not anti-Muslim, he is anti-terrorist – it is a simplification aimed at persuasion;

²³ Murphy (2005).

- 9) Periphrasis and allusion, especially in all the passages where Trump makes references to North Korea without mentioning it.

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