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On the agreement pattern

Varium et mutabile semper femina^{*}

Silvia Pieroni (Siena)

1. Seeing that Latin subjects generally trigger agreement on finite verbs (person and number agreement) and on nominal predicates (case, gender and number agreement), cases where a nominal (i.e., adjectival) predicate occurs in the neuter form in relationship with a masculine or feminine noun demand explanation:

- 1) Verg. *ecl.* 3.80–84: DAM. *Triste lupus stabulis, maturis frugibus imbres, / arboribus venti, nobis Amaryllidis irae.* / MEN. *Dulce satis umor, depulsis arbutus haedis, / lenta salix feto pecori, mihi solus Amyntas.* ('Damoetas: Terrible is the wolf to the folds, the rains to the ripened crop, to the trees the gales, and to me the anger of Amaryllis! / Menalcas: Sweet are the showers to the corn, the arbute to the new-weaned kids, to the breeding flock the bending willow, and to me none but Amyntas!')¹
- 2) Cic. *off.* 1.11: *Commune animantium omnium est coniunctionis appetitus procreandi causa et cura quaedam eorum, quae procreata sint* ('A common property of all creatures is also the reproductive instinct (the purpose of which is the propagation of the species) and also a certain amount of concern for their offspring.')

The neuter predicate tends to be in the initial position and the nominal follows, but this is not a rule:

- 3) Cic. *Tusc.* 2.30–31: ... *ne malum quidem ullum, nec si in unum locum conlata omnia sint, cum turpitudinis malo comparanda. Quare si, ut initio concessisti, turpitude peius est quam dolor, nihil est plane dolor* ('no evil, even if all evils were heaped together, is to be compared with the evil of disgrace. Therefore if, as you admitted at the outset, disgrace is worse than pain, pain is clearly of no account')

This pattern, which tends to occur in gnomic contexts (copular and, often, nominal clauses), is not equally distributed among all Latin authors, e.g. it is not found in Caesar. As for Cicero, the whole list of occurrences may be found in grammars (Kühner & Stegmann 1955: 32). Subsequently, the pat-

* I wish to thank Anna Orlandini, Harm Pinkster and Hannah Rosén for suggestions and comments on a previous version of this paper. It goes without saying that the way I have tried to follow their suggestions is my entire responsibility. Many thanks to Ronald Packham for his help with the English of this article. — The proposals discussed in this paper have been developed within the research project PRIN 2008 "Contact and change in the history of Mediterranean languages".

¹ The translations are taken from the Loeb editions.

tern becomes more common in Augustan writers, and Greek influence has been sometimes invoked to explain this (Hofmann & Szantyr 1965: 444).²

Though I will focus my analysis on cases such as (1)–(3), where the neuter predicate is a qualifying adjective,³ it is worth mentioning that an indefinite or interrogative pronoun may also be found as predicate:

4) Plin. *epist.* 1.20.9: *At aliud est actio bona, aliud oratio* ('But ... there is a wide difference between a *good* spoken and a *good* written oration.')

5) Cic. *dom.* 72: *Quid est enim exsul?* ('For what is an exile?')⁴

The neuter predicate which characterizes the pattern under investigation is described in grammars as having an abstracting function, as in Juret's (1933) subtle description, or a generalizing value, as explained by Ernout & Thomas (1953):

"Le genre est vide de sens concret en latin, sauf, 1^o quand il sert à distinguer les sexes: *lupus, lupa* et dans le cas des personnification; 2^o quand des prédicats ou prédicatifs neutres sont affirmés de substantifs masculins ou féminins pour indiquer que ces sujets sont considérés comme des choses ou des abstractions: *triste lupus stabulis* «le loup est un être funeste aux étables»." (Juret 1933: 121)

"L'attribut — comme le verbe — n'avait pas un lien étroit avec le sujet, et son caractère d'apposition est encore sensible dans la phrase nominale [...] Cela permet à l'adjectif attribut de se trouver au neutre avec valeur généralisante en face d'un sujet masculin ou féminin." (Ernout & Thomas 1953: 127)

From a strictly categorial point of view, the neuter form is considered as a substantivized adjective (cf. Touratier 1994: 365). It is also traditionally believed that the structure under discussion has a paraphrastic alternative in the type exemplified in (6)–(7) (cf. Hofmann & Szantyr 1965: 444–445; Ernout & Thomas 1953: 128):

6) Ov. *Pont.* 2.7.37: *res timida est omnis miser* ('every unfortunate is a thing full of fear')

7) Sen. *benef.* 4.38.2: *sacra res est mensa hospitalis* ('how sacred a thing is the table of hospitality')

² The pattern seems to be favoured by poetic texts, and metrical reasons could sometimes be invoked. I would nonetheless assume that poetry is, as always, exploiting (and so revealing), not violating grammatical possibilities, which are in fact not confined to this text-type.

³ I will also set the cases under discussion apart from those where a complex predication which includes a predicative complement is involved, as in *parentes, pueros, fratres vilia habere* (Tac. *hist.* 5.5), and in general from cases with coordinated nominals, where the agreement mismatch may be ascribed to overlapping factors.

⁴ In this latter case, Cicero prefers the neuter interrogative to the pattern with agreement, which may nevertheless be found: *quae servitus est, si haec libertas existimari potest?* (Cic. *Tusc.* 5.41).

Here, instead of the neuter, the substantive *res* functions as a support for the adjective, which agrees with it.

2. The pattern exemplified by (1)–(3) is by no means restricted to Latin. As has already been said, Greek is sometimes considered to be the model. As a matter of fact, in Greek we find both the pattern with the neuter, as in (8), and a pattern with an equivalent of Lat. *res* (with some variations, e.g., κτήμα, χρῆμα, πρᾶγμα), as in (9) (cf. Kühner & Gerth 1955: 59–60):

8) *Il.* 2.204: οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίη ('No good thing is a multitude of lords')

9) *Hdt.* 3.53: φιλοτιμία κτήμα σκαιόν ... τυραννίς χρῆμα σφαλερόν ('Pride is the possession of fools ... Despotism is a thing hard to hold ...')

A comparison might be also made, *mutatis mutandis*, with so-called 'pancake sentences' in Scandinavian languages. The example which gives the name to the phenomenon is (10), from Norwegian:

10) *Pannekaker er godt.*
pancakes-PL is good-NEUT.SG

This Scandinavian phenomenon has received a fair amount of attention in the last century, including normative pronouncements (the 'pancake' structure has risen from low esteem to full acceptability). The analyses may be classified into two types: the first explains the peculiarity of the pattern by some semantic property of the nominal (namely, *pancakes* in ex. 10), e.g. its non-referential nature, its collective or uncountable value, or its low individuation (cf. Widmark 1971, Källström 1994, Corbett & Fraser 2000, Enger 2004, Corbett 2006: 150 and the works referred to in these studies). The second is a transformational approach, which considers the construction as the reduction of a fuller sentence: e.g., as regards *pancakes is good* in ex. (10), Faarlund (1977) claims that the full sentence could be something like 'to eat pancakes is good' (cf. also Eriksson 1979).

Besides the claim that nominals occurring in these structures are non-referential or indefinite, another recurring claim is that there are restrictions against adjectives denoting objective properties (such as colour, size, etc.) as predicates: possible adjectives, it has been claimed, are "those that can take a dative or a constituent that denotes some kind of involvement in the content of the adjective, such as impression, sensory perception, etc." (Faarlund 1977: 246). Actually, it is not quite clear whether these restrictions stand or not, and it could also be argued that, given appropriate pragmatic conditions, both instances with definite subjects and instances with adjectives denoting objective properties are possible (cf. Enger 2004).

Another point at issue is whether the neuter has to be considered as a failure to agree, i.e. a default case (cf. Corbett 1991: 212; Corbett & Fraser 2000), or as a specific agreement pattern. In the second direction, some generative accounts assume the presence of a generic Determiner specified as neuter, which would thus trigger neuter agreement (cf. Delsing 1993). Cross-

linguistic comparisons may be multiplied, but this will suffice for the purpose of this paper. It may be worth remarking that in languages with more covert and less articulated gender systems, such as Italian and French, 'pancake sentences' may be rendered by the *res* strategy (*cosa* in Italian, *chose* in French), as the translations of the Latin examples in (1), (2), (3) also show: e.g., *triste* in (1) could be rendered by It. *una cosa triste* 'a sad thing, something sad'.⁵ It is therefore also interesting to note that French *chose* may be in correlation with the neuter demonstrative *çalc'ice*:

11) *Les femmes, c'est une chose fascinante*

The example is taken from Kleiber (1987), who states that *chose* behaves here as a 'postiche' noun, a classifying support which, as such, may apply to an animate entity (cf. Milner 1978):

"La raison en est [...] le statut ontologique de tels référents: un référent générique constitue directement, c'est-à-dire sans intermédiaire, une chose, les choses étant, on s'en souvient, destinées à être nommées, classifiées et organisées." (Kleiber 1987: 125)

Again, the referential — ontological — properties of the nominals are invoked, as well as the preference for the occurrence in these structures of so-called *interpretierende Adjective* (cf. Lüdtke 1984: 64), i.e. adjectives implying a subjective evaluation.

3. Inspired by Kleiber's analysis, Anna Orlandini (1994, 1995) specifically studied the Latin phenomenon, also taking into account cross-linguistic comparisons. She highlighted the occurrence of the neuter in relationship with non-referential nominals, i.e. in generic statements:

"Le neutre résume un ensemble qui peut être représenté par une proposition entière, p. ex. *humanum fuit errare, diabolicum est ... in errore manere* (Aug. *serm.* 164.10.14), *triste lupus stabulis, maturis frugibus imbres* (Verg. *ecl.* 3.80), *Quod expetendum, id certe adprobandum; quod vero adprobaris, id gratum acceptumque habendum* (Cic. *Tusc.* 5.45), ou bien par un substantif (p. ex. *turpitude* (*si ... turpitude peius est quam dolor* (Cic. *Tusc.* 2.31)) à valeur 'non-référentielle' (justement la même valeur que celle des sujets des énoncés génériques [...]). L'emploi du neutre pour souligner le renvoi à un ensemble sémantiquement 'non-référentielle', marquant la généralité, caractérise aussi plusieurs langues modernes." (Orlandini 1994: 173)

⁵ This fact is observed e.g. by Orlandini (1994, 1995). The comparison could however also be extended to cases such as It. *Donna è bello* (woman-F.SG be-3SG beautiful-M.SG), where the predicative adjective has not the form of the feminine gender but an unmarked form, which is superficially the same as that of the masculine gender.

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Moving from Orlandini's observations, in the remainder of this paper I will attempt a syntactic — and functional — analysis of the cases discussed, which aims at focalizing the proposition as a whole rather than its single parts: and thus, to look at semantic values not in opposition to, but in correlation with syntax.

Among the reasons for taking this point of view is the consideration that the non-referentiality of the nominal sometimes appears to be unnecessary. Let us consider again the whole passage where *triste lupus stabulis* is found: *Triste lupus stabulis, maturis frugibus imbres, / arboribus uenti, nobis Amaryllidis irae* (and consider *dulce ... mihi solus Amyntas* in the following lines). It would be difficult to claim that *Amaryllidis irae* or *Amyntas* are not referential, and it could only be argued that it is the repetition itself of the structure that triggers it even in case a proper name is involved. However, the idea that poetic licence may force, but not violate grammar, makes me rather incline towards the consideration that the proposition is non-factual and so to speak hypothetical (and thus, in this specific sense, a generic statement).

The inescapable starting point for the analysis seems to be the fact that neuter adjectives in a predicative function canonically appear in certain syntactic contexts, namely when they are predicates of a clause:

- 12) Sen. *benef.* 4.38.2: *Non est turpe cum re mutare consilium* ('There is nothing wrong in changing a plan when the situation is changed.')
- 13) Plin. *epist.* 3.5.1: *Pergratum est mihi quod tam diligenter libros auunculi mei lectitas ...* ('it is with much pleasure I find you are so constant a reader of my uncle's works')

Occurrences of this kind are labelled by Jespersen (1924: 241–243) as examples of a 'conceptional neuter'.

3.1 As a matter of fact, many of the examples under discussion may be considered as cases where the neuter adjective is predicated of a complex unit involving a predication, not of a simple noun. In such cases, the predicate may be considered as referring to a (virtual) relationship rather than to an entity. For example, what is *triste* is not the *lupus* in itself; rather, the relationship between *lupus* and *stabulis*, and likewise the relationship between the *imbres* and the *fruges*, and between Damoetas and Amaryllis's anger. In other words, *lupus* and *stabulis* are not in a relationship with *triste* on a flat plane. This means that *lupus* is not *per se* the subject of *triste* (nor the pivot, were the structure to be considered as impersonal).⁶ The subject (or pivot) of

⁶ The issue of the possible impersonality of these structures has been disregarded in this paper (many examples such as *triste lupus stabulis* could in principle be considered impersonal, but not all of them, e.g. not *turpitudine peius est quam dolor*), as well as the (probably) related issue of word-order (as has been said, the neuter predicate is often in the initial position). It is however worth mentioning that the presence of a neuter in some impersonal structures is sometimes considered in correlation with the *triste lupus stabulis* type (Ernout & Thomas

triste is rather the predicative complex *lupus stabulis* which may be considered as a 'relational nexus' *sensu* Jespersen (1924: 86 ff.), or, in this specific sense only, a syntagmatic unit. Actually, to refer to Bloomfield's (1933: 194) notions, *lupus stabulis* would be a non-endocentric construction, i.e. a headless construction, which does not have the same form class as one of its immediate constituents (i.e., *lupus* is not a head in relation to *stabulis* and *stabulis* is not a dependent of *lupus*).⁷ The occurrence of the neuter in cases such as *triste lupus stabulis* would thus be consistent with the agreement pattern shown by propositional subjects.

This kind of description would also apply to a case such as (14), where *turpe* stands in a predicative relationship to *senex*:

- 14) Ov. *am.* 1.9.3–4: *Quae bello est habilis, Veneri quoque conuenit aetas. / Turpe senex miles, turpe senilis amor* ('The age that is meet for the wars is also suited to Venus. 'Tis unseemly for the old man to soldier, unseemly for the old man to love')

In *turpe senex miles*, shamefulness is not predicated of an old soldier, but rather of the very fact that a soldier might be old (cf. Pinkster 1983; 1990: 142–162). The comparison between *turpe senex miles* and *turpis haec culpa* in (15), where *haec* is a determination in relation to the nominal *culpa*, can make the point clearer:

- 15) Cic. *S. Rosc.* 112: *Ergo idcirco turpis haec culpa est, quod duas res sanctissimas violat, amicitiam et fidem* ('That is why one who does not carry out a trust is guilty of a disgraceful fault, because he violates two things that are most sacred — friendship and good faith.')

To use the term coined by Bloomfield, *haec culpa* in (15) functions as an endocentric construction, whereas *senex miles* in (14) as a non-endocentric one.

3.2 The predicative adjective may also take the neuter form when predicated of a simple nominal, i.e. an apparently viable controller. This happens, e.g., in (3), where the neuter is the predicate of the abstract noun *turpitudine*. It could however be argued that the abstract noun *turpitudine* conceals, at a lexical level, a predicative process whose interpretation surfaces as a propositional complex itself, i.e. 'to be, being shameful'. In other words, an adjectival element (i.e. *turpis*) enters the noun as a predicative and the de-adjectival noun *turpitudine* includes, in its nominal form, a propositional con-

1953: 128), e.g.: *rel(iquum) erit p(edes) XLVI* (Cato *agr.* 135). As a presentative and 'thetic' sentence, such a case could be analysed as a structure where the nominal covers a predication function at some level. On the overlapping between factors such as word order or topicality and agreement conditions, cf. Corbett (2006: 185–188).

⁷ The adequacy of Jespersen's notion of 'relational nexus' was emphasized by Eriksson (1979) and I owe this intuition, as well as that of the possible usefulness of the idea of an 'exocentric construction' (which I would rather label as a non-endocentric construction, suggesting the possibility of a binary parametrization of Bloomfield's notion) to the reading of his article.

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tent (i.e., *turpis esse*; cf. Rosén 1981, in particular 34 ff.). To borrow again Jespersen's notions, abstract nouns can be considered as predicative-substantives, i.e. *nexus*-substantives: though they consist of a single element, they contain a relational *nexus*. To explain the appearance of the neuter in (3), it would therefore suffice to assume that propositional syntax may see this process and be sensitive to it: the neuter reveals, syntactically, a process which develops within the lexical unit.

In fact, the pattern with the neuter predicate is also found in a case such as (16):

16) Verg. *Aen.* 4.569–570: ... *Varium et mutabile semper/ femina* ... ('A fickle and changeful thing is woman ever')⁸

Here we find again a simple nominal, and this time it is a noun which may denote an animate being, and thus in principle a first-order entity in the sense of Lyons (1977, II: 438 ff.). The question could therefore be raised why this nominal may nonetheless behave as a nominal denoting an event or as a proposition. Such cases are obviously the most difficult for any syntactic analysis.

To explain the occurrence of the neuter, the idea that may be deduced from literature (based mainly on the Scandinavian phenomenon, as we have said) is to postulate some abstract verb with a very general meaning "to allow for all the necessary interpretations or specifications" (Faarlund 1977: 246): e.g., *pancakes is good* would be the result of a transformation, a deletion, from *to eat pancakes is good*. The shortcoming of this hypothesis is that the abstract verb is an ever-changing variable and, as soon as we leave *ad hoc* examples, the suitable verb may be very difficult to find. This is the case, e.g., in (17), from Norwegian, where, as Faarlund himself admits, one should resort to a very vague verb such as *have*:

17) (Ein) bil ville ikkje vere så dumt – (a) car would not be so stupid (= 'Having a car wouldn't be such a bad idea')

Coming back to Latin, what could in fact be the suitable verb in (16)? If a verb emerged in possible paraphrases (or interpretations), it might be *sum*: e.g., "*Being* a woman is a fickle and changeful thing" or also, as Anna Orlandini suggested to me, "*When there is* a woman, (you cannot but expect) changes". *Have, sum*: auxiliaries, the lightest verbs we could imagine.

If this is the case, however, we may wonder whether the postulation of an abstract verb is really necessary or not. The proposal could be made that there is nothing implicit in (16) and (17) and that, more simply, a predicative process is concealed within these nouns, exactly as in the case of abstract nouns. This is to say, and it is a trivial observation, that a nominal which *may* refer to an entity is not *per se* a nominal which denotes a first-order

⁸ Cf. *per se inbecilla res est femina* (Quint. *decl. min.* 338 p. 8,3).

entity: the ontological reference to an entity is, obviously, nothing more than a possible circumstance. In a context such as (16), as has repeatedly been noted, *femina* does not denote any woman and rather expresses a predicative process whose interpretation is: '(the fact, the essence of) being a woman'. The appearance of the neuter would thus precisely reveal that this process of predication is at work, marking — by the absence of agreement — the fact that the nominal to which it is related, though an argument, is not a simple argument and is seen by propositional syntax in its inherent predicative function.

4. This hypothesis is strongly indebted to the idea of the predicative nature, in the relevant syntactic domain, of all linguistic expressions and thus of nouns as well (cf. Rosen 1987). In particular, it is indebted to the idea that 'argument' and 'predicate' may be considered not as absolute notions, but as functional features ([± argument], [± predicate]), which, as such, may either relate to different propositional elements or also combine in one and the same element (cf. La Fauci 2000). The combination of the positive values of the two traits may be found at the propositional level, e.g., in existential constructions, where the nominal functions both as the argument and as the predicate of the structure, as already shown by La Fauci & Loporcaro (1997) on Romance varieties.⁹

Consistently, my hypothesis on *varium et mutabile semper femina* would bring out a further structure where the predicative function of a nominal, even in combination with the argumental one, is relevant to propositional syntax, as if a compressed existential construction were implied by the nominal itself.

4.1 As an independent piece of evidence in favour of my proposal, and in addition to the fact that the neuter canonically appears as a predicate of propositional units (cf. exx. 12–13 above), I would also emphasize that there are other contexts where the neuter is found precisely in relation to a nominal in a predicative function (a nominal which is not neuter). Consider, e.g., the following neuter pro-predicates:

18) Cic. *fin.* 4.65: *nec tamen ille erat sapiens. Quis enim hoc aut quando aut ubi aut unde?* ('But still the elder Gracchus was not a wise man; who ever was? or when, or where, or how?')

⁹ As a matter of fact, the same could be stated for Latin as well: in cases such as *sed erant agminis coactores* (Tac. *hist.* 2,68,16), *coactores* functions both as the argument and as the (initial) predicate of the structure, whereas *erant* is simply an auxiliary which gives the proposition its finite final form. — The combinations [+ argument][– predicate] and [– argument][+ predicate] are exemplified, e.g., by the first and second nominal, respectively, of the following passage: *vita autem haec rustica ... magistra est* (Cic. *S. Rosc.* 75). As for the combination of the negative values of the traits, which is however not relevant here, it is found in expletive pronouns (La Fauci 2000: 15–16).

nothing more than as repeatedly been used as a predicative (being a woman). That this process of agreement — the fact that it is not a simple predicative func-

predicative nature, and thus of the idea that the notions, but as such, may either be in one and the positive values of in existential comment and as the Lopporcaro (1997)

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19) Mart. 1.54.5: *omnes hoc ueteres tui fuerunt (scil. noui)* ('All your old friends were that (*scil.* new) once')

Neuter interrogative pronouns may be found in other predicative contexts as well, e.g. to ask about one's job (if somebody is an orator, the correspondent question is not *quis est?* but *quid est?*):

20) Mart. 2.64.10: *dum quid sis dubitas ...* ('While you are dithering about what to be', i.e. what career to follow, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*)

21) Cic. *de orat.* 2.274: *quid est tibi ista mulier? – uxor* ('And what to thee is yonder dame? – My wife!')

A further example of consistency with the general hypothesis would seem to be the occurrence of the pattern with neuter agreement in contexts of meta-linguistic definitions, as in (22):

22) Cic. *Phil.* 8.3: *Quid est enim aliud tumultus nisi perturbatio tanta ut maior timor oriatur? Unde etiam nomen ductum est tumultus. Itaque maiores nostri tumultum Italicum quod erat domesticum, tumultum Gallicum quod erat Italiae finitimum, praeterea nullum nominabant. Grauius autem tumultum esse quam bellum hinc intellegi potest quod bello uacationes ualent, tumultu non ualent. Ita fit, quem ad modum dixi, ut bellum sine tumultu possit, tumultus sine bello esse non possit* ('For what else is a tumult than a confusion so great that greater fear arises from it? From which the very word "tumult" is derived. Accordingly our ancestors called a tumult that was a domestic one "Italic", a tumult that was on the border of Italy "Gallic"; and gave the name to no other. Now that a tumult is more serious than a war can be understood from this, that in a war exemptions from service are valid, in a tumult they are not valid. Whence it comes, as I have said, that there can be a war without a tumult, but not a tumult without a war.')

Here, in fact, it is not the *tumultus*, ontologically meant, which is *grave*. The purpose of the passage is to define what a *tumultus* is and, insofar as translations can be revealing, a proper translation of the passage where *gravius* occurs could be the following: "The fact that when there is a *tumultus* the situation is more serious than when there is a war can be understood from this"; then the text continues: "there can be a war without a *tumultus* but there cannot be a *tumultus* without a war".

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, this analysis is a contribution to the consideration of agreement (and *a fortiori* of what might appear as an agreement mismatch) as a manifestation of syntactic relations. In all the structures under investigation, both the occurrence of the neuter and the interpretation suggest that the nominal (i.e., adjectival) predicate does not apply to a simple argument, but to an argument which is made up of a predication, as in *cum re mutare consilium* in ex. (12): a relational nexus in cases such as *lupus stabulis* in ex. (1) or an intrinsically predicative nominal (i.e., a nominal expressing a propositional content), such as *turpitude* in ex. (3) and *femina* in ex. (16).

Though from a very marginal area, this would also suggest that a theory about gender agreement should take into account functional parameters, besides categorial notions. In relation to gender, we may tentatively propose that the canonic case of a controller nominal is when the noun functions as a simple argument (or as an argument the predicative function of which remains bound within its nominal form): this nominal argument triggers full agreement. On the contrary, the nominal may also have a predicative function relevant to propositional syntax and seen by it: in this marked case, the relationship between the nominal and the predicate may not be determined by subject features, as in other cases where a relational nexus is implied. Hence the neuter, as a degree-zero of agreement.

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