

Rules, Rules, Rules: Why do students hate grammar?

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Abstract

This paper discusses three possible roles of grammar rules in the classroom and argues for a less scientific approach to language learning. Language is an art, like music or dancing. A simple four-slot framework with a solar system metaphor to explain it can help students to master the patterns for noun phrases and declarative sentences, so that they can communicate their own thoughts, feelings, and knowledge in English.

Many of my students hate grammar. They think it's useless and boring. Those that have an interest in oral English sometimes tell me that they just want to learn English conversation, without any grammar, as though a language and its grammar have no connection at all. I studied English grammar in junior high school and syntax in graduate school, but none of my teachers or professors attempted to provide an overview of grammar as a unified system. My students, like their teacher, I suppose, have their own inductive notions of what "grammar" consists of. I've been thinking about it, but as always wondered what my students think.

To clarify the situation, I decided to put the question—What does grammar mean?—to them to be discussed in groups. Some groups merely gave me a translation—文法¹—until I pointed out that the verb "mean" can

be asking for (a) a translation, (b) an explanation, (c) their interpretation, or (d) implications. In this case, I was asking for an explanation or their interpretation of the concept of grammar. Many groups then dove straight into their dictionaries and copied the definition they found into their reports, or translated the definition into English. Yet they were unable to give specific examples to illustrate many of the terms that they copied down—terms like form (形態), function (機能), and interpretation (解釈)². Those that actually thought about the question for themselves and discussed it, however, seemed to agree that grammar is a collection of *rules* about a language that tells speakers and writers how to put *words* together to make *sentences*.

On reflection, it occurred to me that there are at least three kinds of rules. Some try to *control* patterns of behavior (laws), others actually *create* those patterns (games), while a third tries to *describe* patterns that exist naturally (science). Rules are intimately connected with patterns of behavior. I decided to consider the possibility that the perception of grammar as *a large fragmented set of universally agreed upon rules* might have a negative impact on Japanese students' motivation to learn English. Perhaps *a small set of simple, user-friendly grammatical patterns* could be a more inspiring approach to language learning. I begin with the rule of law.

Rules that Control

The statutes that are enacted in legislatures best symbolize the rules that govern people's daily lives. Laws try to *control* the natural patterns of life. They tell citizens what they *must* do and *must not* do. In addition they provide incentives—punishment for undesirable behavior, including imprisonment,

finer, and even execution. The rule of law is enforced by the courts and police, or sometimes by soldiers. Laws are designed to protect people and property from violence and theft. It is assumed that without them humans would behave like other animals, obeying only the Law of the Jungle, ruthlessly fighting for the resources needed for their own survival and taking every opportunity to reproduce. Laws don't actually eliminate these behavior patterns. People still fight for resources and reproduce. Laws, however, channel intra-species competition among *Homo sapiens* into a socioeconomic system that, ideally, promotes the interests of the entire group (city, state/prefecture, nation). Although robbery, rape, and murder still occur and appear in the news day after day, this kind of destructive, antisocial behavior is greatly reduced by the fact that such incidents have become crimes in civilized societies.

When I was a child we were taught, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Most societies view language as relatively harmless. There are laws against perjury and slander. Yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater when there is no fire makes you liable for any injuries that might result. Such laws, however, are limited to the *content* of speech. Only the most authoritarian governments even attempt to dictate the choice of language that their citizens use in their lives, while liberal courts often cite freedom of speech to protect it (see Blair, 2001 and 2002). Grammatical choices, it seems, are simply beyond the reach of legal systems, but *not* educational systems.

Teacher as police officer. Schools *do* try to mold the way students use language. Although they kick in too late to make more than a slight dent in a native speaker's use of their own language, they try to teach children how to analyze their language and apply grammar rules to their written work. Teachers *teach* these concepts and *evaluate* how well their students apply them. Those students that display good grammar get higher grades, while those who violate

grammatical standards receive lower grades. Linguists call this approach to grammar *prescriptive grammar*. Heavy reliance on grammatical rules to teach a second language runs the risk of turning the teacher into a kind of police officer, controlling the students' language and, possibly, exerting undue influence over the content of their language production as well. Some students may fear to express their true feelings, or come to think such expression inappropriate in the regimented atmosphere of school. When questioned by a teacher many of them resort to a strategy familiar to criminals everywhere—when questioned by the authorities, keep it short, always be vague, and *play dumb*. Alternatively, they may second guess their teachers and tell them what they imagine the teachers want to hear. Criminals never question police officers; they avoid them, staying as inconspicuous as possible. Likewise Japanese students hardly ever ask their teachers questions. In classrooms they seem to depend heavily on the authority of dictionaries, textbooks, and teachers. They search for a *single officially correct answer*, rather than formulate *their own* answers to questions.

When given the freedom (and responsibility) to express *their own thoughts, feelings, and knowledge* many students are at a loss. On the class surveys at the end of the terms I have found that some wanted me to “*explain*” the homework in detail or give them an elaborate “*commentary*” on the video clips that they watched. Such students seem to be probing for *my* thoughts, feelings, and knowledge, so that they can avoid the hassle and vulnerability of expressing *their own* ideas and interpretations—ideas and interpretations that they believe the teacher may consider “*wrong*”.

As long as grades are a fact of academic life, language teachers will need to look at each student's performance on examinations and *evaluate* their communicative competence. Consequently, to that extent, they cannot avoid being judge and jury at the end of each term. Crimes, however, have

to be willfully committed, rather than a matter of incompetence or faulty performance. I as a teacher am not blaming or finding fault with my students, or looking for offenders to throw the book at. I think of myself as a coach rather than as a police officer. Then when it comes to exams, I become more of a scorekeeper than a judge or jury. Game rules add something extra to the rule of law—a dimension of unreality—and that can be a problem, too.

Rules that Create

The rules of a game, like baseball or basketball actually *create* the sport. In a baseball game the batter hits the ball and runs around the bases to score points. In basketball players try to throw the ball through their hoop and prevent the opposing team from scoring in a similar way. People make the rules and can change them at will. This happened when basketball added the 3-point rule for longer shots. Rules tell players how to score points to *win the game*. They go beyond rules that control, because they actually create *artificial patterns* of behavior. In real life people do not normally shoot baskets, hit balls with a stick, or run around tagging bags on the ground. These activities are reserved for special places—artificially created areas called basketball courts and baseball stadiums.

Teacher as score keeper. Schools can be viewed as artificially created areas—constructed on the factory model—to mass produce responsible citizens and efficient, productive workers. Ideally they prepare students for real life outside of the classroom. The biggest difference between an ESL classroom and an EFL classroom in Japan is the environment. People speak English outside the ESL classroom, while in Japan people speak Japanese. As soon as you hit the hallway you are back in a world of Japanese. All the professors speak

Japanese, unless a couple of foreign teachers happen to bump into each other.

On the streets and in trains, you see people studying English, but you rarely ever hear it spoken unless you accidentally run into a group of foreigners or a new foreigner with a Japanese colleague. You may hear Japanese people speak English in border towns like Tokyo, Osaka, or Kobe, maybe even in a tourist town like Kyoto, but in the heart of Japan, even in big cities like Nagoya, English is very rarely spoken. One bilingual businessman recently complained to me that he was spending almost all his time translating documents and correspondence from English into Japanese for his co-workers in the *International Department* of a large company that manufactures medical equipment and whose products have captured large shares in overseas markets.

In addition to English being exotically foreign to most Japanese, classrooms seldom succeed in creating an atmosphere of authentic communication. When I started teaching English in Japan in the late 1970s, dialogs and drills were still a popular staple in the English curriculum (see Cosgrave and Horrigan, 1978). Students repeated sample sentences then changed them according to the cues they heard on tape. There were substitution drills, transformation drills, expansion drills, and more. It was hoped that the grammar patterns that they practiced would become effortless and automatic. There was, unfortunately, no *context* and no *communicative purpose* to these isolated sentences. The only purpose was to produce well-form sentences.

In addition to the drills students memorized and acted out dialogs. The performances, however, were mechanical, with students concentrating on memorizing their lines verbatim. The dialogs were often situated far from the students' real day-to-day concerns and, thus, soon forgotten. They might practice asking directions to the post office in a foreign country. Sometimes students wrote their own lines in an attempt to make dialogs more natural and meaningful to them, but the spontaneity was still missing.

Talking about events in their own lives can become repetitious and quite boring for students. People in modern societies often spice up their humdrum lives by watching television and movies. In fact, it is quite common to talk about popular programs with your friends. These provide dramatic topics of conversation. People talk about them, in a natural way, as if the events actually happened in real life. Thus, for homework, I often have my students watch video clips on YouTube, family situation comedies—like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Family Ties*—which they can watch at their own pace. They must then write ten sentences, “conversation starters” about the assigned video to prepare for (what I hope will be) natural conversations within their groups. First they write their sentences in Japanese. This is to encourage them to say what they really want to say, rather than just produce some easy English sentences. Then on a separate piece of paper they put those sentences into their own English as best they can.

In the classroom I collect the English pages at the beginning of class. During the 30-minute English Only Time they refer to their Japanese sentences to get their conversations started. We warm up with a practice demonstration to show what a natural English conversation is like, and I am finding that natural conversation is a difficult concept to get across in the classroom. Recently I called on a student who had watched the wrong video. He started the conversation with the question “How did Beaver get injured.” I asked a student across the room to respond. Despite the fact that Beaver did not get injured in the assigned video, this second student concocted an answer. Using what he knew—that Beaver had been hiding from his parents in a tree—the student blatantly ignored the fact that Beaver had not been injured saying, “He tried to pick an apple and fell out of the tree.” It seems that in the artificial atmosphere of a classroom all questions must have answers, that the questions can never be questioned. Reality, or the pseudo reality of the video clip, simply does not matter. Another student had prepared for a make-believe conversation in

some imaginary world where students would be members of Beaver's family. He asked the question "Are you Beaver?" The TV Beaver is a student in the second grade of elementary school, a situation far removed from a university classroom.

Students often prepare sentences that are so vague (ex: A boy talked with a man.) that they could be talking about almost any video. That would be fine, if the other students asked questions, but there seems to be an unwritten "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the classroom. Students often fail to ask even the most obvious questions. Years ago at the junior college one group of four students was using a list of questions to stimulate their discussion. It was towards the end of their first year. They were all good friends, so when one of them answered yes to the question "Do you know anyone who has been in a traffic accident?" and that it was her father, you would expect the group to show some interest. They did not. They continued on to the next question. It was only a week later, when I returned their group report and told the student, "Gee, I hope your father wasn't hurt," that the members of her group found out, to their great surprise, that her father had become paralyzed from the waist down and was confined to a wheelchair.

Despite the fact that most university classrooms are rather stark places, as long as students have access to a rich source of linguistic input, such as video clips and webpages posted on the Internet, they can use class time to practice real communication. That is the only "game" they should be playing, and their teacher can help them by coaching their use of the target language. But many of our students, particularly in required English classes, are not there to enjoy a pleasant conversation with their classmates. They only care about the score. They only want to win—that is, earn credit towards graduation. For them the real game is the examination.

Unfortunately testing is usually even more artificial than the classwork that is supposed to prepare students for the exam and life after graduation. Exams that test memory encourage the kind of students who pay little attention in class and then, a couple of weeks before the exam, ask their professors how to “study”. What they really want is for the teacher to pinpoint what material from the handouts and textbook they should memorize. Any answers that they manage to memorize, however, will soon be forgotten.

Multiple choice answers and empty blanks to fill in make the evaluating process much easier, but the skills involved are only remotely connected to real communication. Perhaps the most unnatural, bizarre exam questions that I have ever seen are those that ask students to reconstruct the word order for sentences whose words have been mixed up randomly or put in alphabetical order. Students get points if words in one of the designated slots match the words in the answer key. Even in my own native language I find this kind of sentence reconstruction quite difficult and time consuming. The meaning of the sentence is incidental in the search for a well-formed string of words.

While students do want to score enough points to win credit for their courses, most are just as happy with a C grade as with the best grade their effort and ability can earn them. In fact some seem to make a point of *aiming* for the *lowest* passing score possible. I try to motivate my students to do the things that will help them learn to communicate: pay attention and practice. They get a percentage score for effort in class and on their homework. The average value of these two measurements of effort are multiplied with the percentage score for ability as measured by tests. This product has to be 60% for them to pass the course.

I try to give my students an incentive (a) to space their practice out evenly over as much of the course as possible and (b) to practice spontaneous communication, rather than memorize. One way I do this is by breaking the

exam into three parts, given at three-week intervals (week 10, week 13, and the final exam week). Hopefully those who practice for only two weeks before exams will do so before each part—six weeks in all. There is nothing that they can memorize. The exams, like conversation, are spontaneous. For part one they produce *questions* after watching a video clip. They do not know what video clip will be used, often it is one they have never seen. In part two they answer questions. They get more points for *adding relevant information* to continue and lengthen the conversation. Short answers get few points. Finally they correct written sentences. Any improvements that make the sentence *clearer and easier to understand* get points. The idea is to test natural use of the target language.

Rules that Describe

Through *prescriptive* rules people attempt to control human natural behavior and create artificial environments. Humans are ambitious, creative animals that seek to control everything around them. Developments in science, nurtured by universities, have brought an amazing string of successes, including steel, engines, electricity, television, and computers. The list goes on and on. Now everyone wants to jump on the scientific bandwagon, especially the people in academia. Even physical education, the least academic class imaginable, is now called “sports *science*”. This brings us to another kind of rule. Scientific rules are *descriptive*. They neither create nor control the patterns that are observed. They try to isolate, analyze, and describe them, using the simplest set of rules possible.

Theoretical mathematicians, by the way, go in the opposite direction. Starting with a just few abstract (prescriptive) rules, called axioms, they create an imaginary world, then try to figure out what patterns the axioms generate

and what other (descriptive) rules must necessarily apply to those patterns. When physicists find a mathematical world whose axioms conform to their observations in the real world, then all the mathematically generated rules will also apply.

Unlike mathematicians and law makers, scientists cannot change the rules at will. The laws of physics describe those patterns in the real world that *never change*. Experiments have to be reproducible and must always give the same results. In science laws that change are, by definition, not laws at all. Patterns of *force* and *motion* are analyzed and reduced to mathematical equations—the *Laws of Motion*. Mathematical notation gives the laws of physics precision and prestige. You cannot argue with an equation. You plug in the numbers. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't. Then you test the theory with experiments in the real world. As long as the predicted outcomes occur, your theory remains valid.

The real world, however, is complex and chaotic. Early scientists worked hard to reduce their models to the bare essentials—one or two steel balls rolling or colliding on a smooth, flat surface. Reducing variables to the minimum, they were able to explain the motions of moons, planets, and the stars. They were also able to imagine the motion of atoms. Chemical changes remained a mystery until chemicals were reduced to their constituent elements and Dmitri Mendeleev brought order to chemistry with the *Periodic Table*. The regularity was eventually explained by structure at the subatomic level. Just as physics helped explain chemical bonds, chemistry helped explain the building blocks of biology: *proteins and genes*. Enzymes and other proteins were found to be long, folded strands of amino acids. The blueprints for these bio-chemicals were discovered: *RNA and DNA*, with their long sequences of nucleotides.

Teacher as scientist. The study of language, like the rest of academia has

been dazzled by science. Everyone, linguists included, wants to be a scientist. Linguists have been diligently trying to proceed scientifically—painstakingly identifying patterns, analyzing them, and formulating the rules of specific languages, in other words, *descriptive grammars*. While this may be a fruitful approach for research, its usefulness for foreign language acquisition is open to question. English is perhaps the language that has received the most attention. Yet no unified theory of English grammar has emerged, no simple set of rules. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983, 2) point out that there are several different general approaches, including traditional, structural, systemic, and transformational. They recommend the transformational approach for classroom use.

Central to transformational grammar are the phrase structure rules (see Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983, 9–32 and Jannedy, Poletto, & Weldon, 1994, 192–203). The notation, which is decidedly mathematical, gives transformational grammar the aura of a hard science. The large number of lexical and phrasal categories and subcategories is anything but plain and simple. It is confusing. Thankfully textbooks published in Japan avoid most of this scientific decoration, reducing it to a more manageable set of symbols—S, V, O, C, IO, DO—with gratuitously inserted + signs between the elements (see Konaka, 2008). Yet the massive array of grammar points (see McConnell and Takeda, 2011 for an example) presented in most textbooks places an overwhelming burden on any student’s memory. This *general catalog approach* to grammar patterns breaks grammar down into numerous small chunks to be learned bit by bit. Unfortunately each bit tends to be memorized for the next exam and then forgotten.

No Rules, Just a Few Patterns ... and Practice

Japanese students are used to lectures, where teachers write information on the board that they copy into their notes, to which they refer shortly before exams. Some university students enter my classes with their brains set on automatic pilot (to lecture mode). I find them slavishly copying down whatever I happen to write on the board. When I distribute handouts with grammar explanations, some just squirrel them away, unread, hoping they'll be useful for a last-minute review before the exam.

The purpose of foreign language classes is not to lecture students, but rather to get them to *produce* well-formed sentences that native speakers can easily understand and to *understand* the sentences that native speakers produce. The natural patterns of a language are not rule-governed. Children learn to speak grammatically accurate sentences years before they enter school and before they begin to study any syntax. At most, rules help teachers to explain and students to remember some useful grammatical *patterns*, patterns that can then be *mastered through use*.

There is no perfect set of rules that all the experts agree upon, so teachers and students are free to improvise their own grammars. Whatever explanations generate well-formed sentences and *make sense to the user* are acceptable.

十人 ... 十文法³

(People need to have their own grammar.)

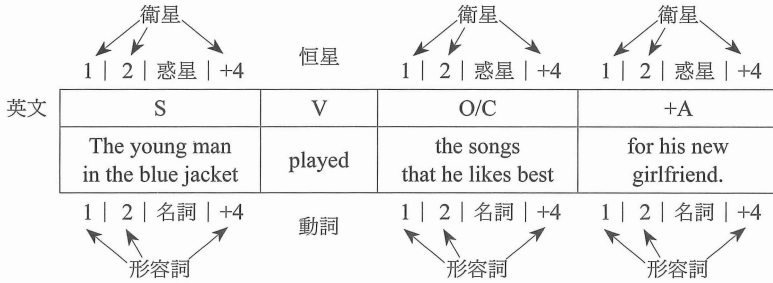
The best explanations, of course, will be the ones which are easiest to remember and to apply when analyzing linguistic input and when speaking or writing. Like any good scientific theory, they should be simple and elegant. Yet they cannot be completely scientific, because language is not scientific.

It slowly changes over time. The patterns of each language are *shaped by the interactions* within each discourse community, rather than some *formal set of rules*. Language is an art, not a science. In many ways it is like music or dancing.

言語は 科学じゃなくて、音楽のようです⁴。

The basic sentence as a solar system. Although language is not a science, the sentence structures of both Japanese and English, exhibit patterns at two different levels, much like the pattern of solar systems. Allow me to explain how this metaphor can provide a conceptual framework for Japanese students of English. In any solar system, there are three kinds of 星⁵ (heavenly bodies): 恒星 (one *star*), 惑星 (some *planets*), and 衛星 (some *moons*). In the same way three kinds of content words⁶ dominate the basic sentences university students produce: one *verb* (動詞), some *nouns* (名詞), and some *adjectives* (形容詞 including determiners).

At one level, which I call *macro grammar*, the several nouns (S, O, C, and other nouns in prepositional phrases (+A)) are attached to *the single verb* which acts as the center of any basic sentence, like planets orbiting a star. If we look more closely at *a single planet*, we may notice some moons, in turn, orbiting it. The grammar equivalent would be the adjectives (1, 2, and +4) attached to *the single noun* within a noun phrase (which may include adjectival phrases (+4)). This more detailed adjective-noun level of grammar I call *micro grammar*.



+A stands for prepositional phrases

This dual level grammar provides a very useful four-slot framework (see Blair, 2011 for details) to talk about students' grammar problems and the transformation of simple Japanese sentences to basic English sentences. The macro grammar for declarative sentences in Japanese or in English contains one (star) slot for a verb or verb cluster and three slots (planetary orbits) for nouns. Slots can contain multiple noun phrases (planets).

It is a simple matter, whenever students write sentences, to have them fold their papers in half twice in order to create four equal columns. Dividing both Japanese and English sentences among the four slots forces them to focus on the macro grammatical structure. Their misconceptions are then easily spotted typically when (a) noun phrases or verbs and their modals are split up between two or more slots—*ばらばら事件*⁷—or (b) the object and/or prepositional phrases are placed in the wrong slots.

While this *solar system metaphor* is useful to explain the 4-slot grammar, another scientific metaphor can be used to explain a handy first approximation method for translations between Japanese and English: the *digestion* and *synthesis* of proteins, *meat to muscle*. Just as proteins are composed of a string of amino acids, basic sentences are made up of a string of noun phrases (with a verb complex). Meat has to be digested, that is, broken down into amino acids

to be absorbed across the intestinal walls into the blood stream. Only then can those amino acids be reassembled into useful protein structures within the body, such as muscle. Likewise Japanese sentences (students intended meaning) may first need to be broken down in order to be translated into English phrases, and then those phrases reassembled into English sentences. Noun phrases (and the verb complex) can be thought of as the *amino acids of language*.

Translating a simple sentence orally is a much more manageable task, if students do this slot by slot (see below), looking at the Japanese and saying it in English, phrase by phrase. This puts *English only conversation* within the reach of students with limited proficiency. Even when this mechanical approach comes up short, it often provides useful insights into differences between the two languages. The slots are read in the same order when translating Japanese into English or English into Japanese.

和文	S+	A+	O+/C	V
	兄が ^s	自分の机に	白い本を	置いた。
和英	1	4 ←	3 ←	2
英和	1	4 ←	3 ←	2
英文	S	V	O/C	+A
	My brother	put	the white book	on his desk.

+ in my Japanese grammar system this stands for 助詞

+ in my English grammar system it stands for prepositions

Conclusions

Rules are of limited use in explaining grammar patterns. They can distort the artistic nature of language, presenting students instead with a cold, scientific

and authoritarian image of language learning. They can also create an artificial atmosphere in the classroom that makes English seem remote and unrelated to real life. Yet, like do-re-mi ... and the Circle of Fifths in music, these patterns must be understood and practiced to master a language.

This four-slot approach to grammar has the potential to be a powerful analytical tool for explaining and understanding languages (English, Japanese, and probably others as well), because it furnishes Japanese students a broad overall framework for their native language and the target language. It can provide an alternative to the massive collection of rules or patterns normally presented in the general catalog approach to language, which most English language textbooks now use.

Notes

- 1 文法 (bunpo) grammar.
- 2 形態, 機能, 解釈 (keitai, kino, kaishaku) form, function, and interpretation.
- 3 十人 ... 十文法 (junin toibunpo = ten people, ten grammars) is a play on the words of a well-known proverb 十人十色 (ten people, ten colors), which means everyone is different. The meaning here is that everyone needs their own grammatical system. It may be an overstatement, but the idea is that there may be a variety of different and valid grammatical explanations for any particular language pattern.
- 4 言語は 科学じゃなくて、音楽のようです (gengo wa kagaku ja nakute, ongaku no yo desu) language is not a science, it is [an art] like music. The meaning here is that the patterns of language are not governed by any simple set of scientific laws that can be formulated like the laws of motion in physics. Basic patterns exist, but—like the patterns in music—they can be broken and tend to change over time. There is also a play on words. The gaku in kagaku (science) sounds the same as the gaku in ongaku (music), but the gaku in science means “to study”, while the gaku in music means “to enjoy”.
- 5 星, 恒星, 惑星, 衛星 (hoshi, kosei, wakusei, eisei) heavenly body, star, planet, moon. “Hoshi” by itself is often translated as star, but includes planets and moons,

which is why many students will say that planets *are* stars.

- 6 動詞, 名詞, 形容詞 (doshi, meishi, keiyoshi) verbs, nouns, adjectives.
- 7 ばらばら事件 (bara bara jiken) a murder case where the body has been dismembered. When students split up noun phrases and scatter the words into two or more slots I jokingly refer to it as dismemberment.

Acknowledgments

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This paper is dedicated to memories of my high school roommate Jeff Marxen (1951–2012), my sister-in-law Denise Nip Blair (1955–2012), and my Aunt Martha Connelly Toner (1919–2012). One very basic rule (science) of life has been stated in a number of ways: Life is change; all things must pass; everything is dust in the wind. It is inevitable, but sad. They will be missed.

Points of Contact

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