Grammar of Loss

A Study in Liminal Linguistics

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Chapter 10

What can no longer be known

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10 What can no longer be known

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Old, faded and yellowed photographs have an effect that conjures up something that may not have been visible before, like a certain force or energy that was at work at the time the photograph was taken and only now becomes imaginable. A set of photographs by Leo Frobenius, taken in 1911 in Yelba, shows different stages of a performance of a Chamba masquerade. Emerging from a small crowd, a creature wearing a garb made of long raffia fibers and a horizontal mask with sculpted cow horns and a big, almost beak-like mouth comes forward and then passes by the lens of Frobenius' camera. Trampling along, this big creature, dwarfing everyone around it, seems to be in connection with other powers than those we seem to know. There are patches of light as if the world is already exploding in the presence of this powerful cow-plant creature, which is sending fiery flares into the pale afternoon sky of the black-and-white photograph. And then this is over, and we see the mask itself, the very originator of this cosmic force, on a plate, in front of a neutral white background and unable to move.

Richard Fardon, in his work on *Fusions*, which is about masquerades and thought styles east of the Niger-Benue confluence (2007), takes this type of mask and the theranthropic masquerades that it helped to create as a starting point. From here, he shows how this mask, depicting the highly abstracted skull of a cow, and fusing the characteristics of bovine animals with those of people and spirits, also undergoes multiple fusions in other communities and societies where it is also present. Wherever it is taken out, it "occupies the centre of a web of associations which relate to the living, the dead and the wild, the feminine and the masculine" (Fardon 2007: 42) and points to the presence of contingency and the connectedness of people and the world.

The mask is also present in Jukun societies, especially along the Benue and south of it. It has two genders, the male mask continuing to be carved from wood and retaining its horizontal shape. The female mask may also be made in basketry and then looks more like a cap. Some masks fuse with other animals, which always retain their horns; this makes them look like the cosmic figures they represent, sometimes highly abstracted to mere geometrical forms, an essence difficult to decipher.

In Pindiga, these masks were no longer present. But one day, Barunde Galadima came up with a song (Figure 10.1). The soft, feeble voice of the old man resonated

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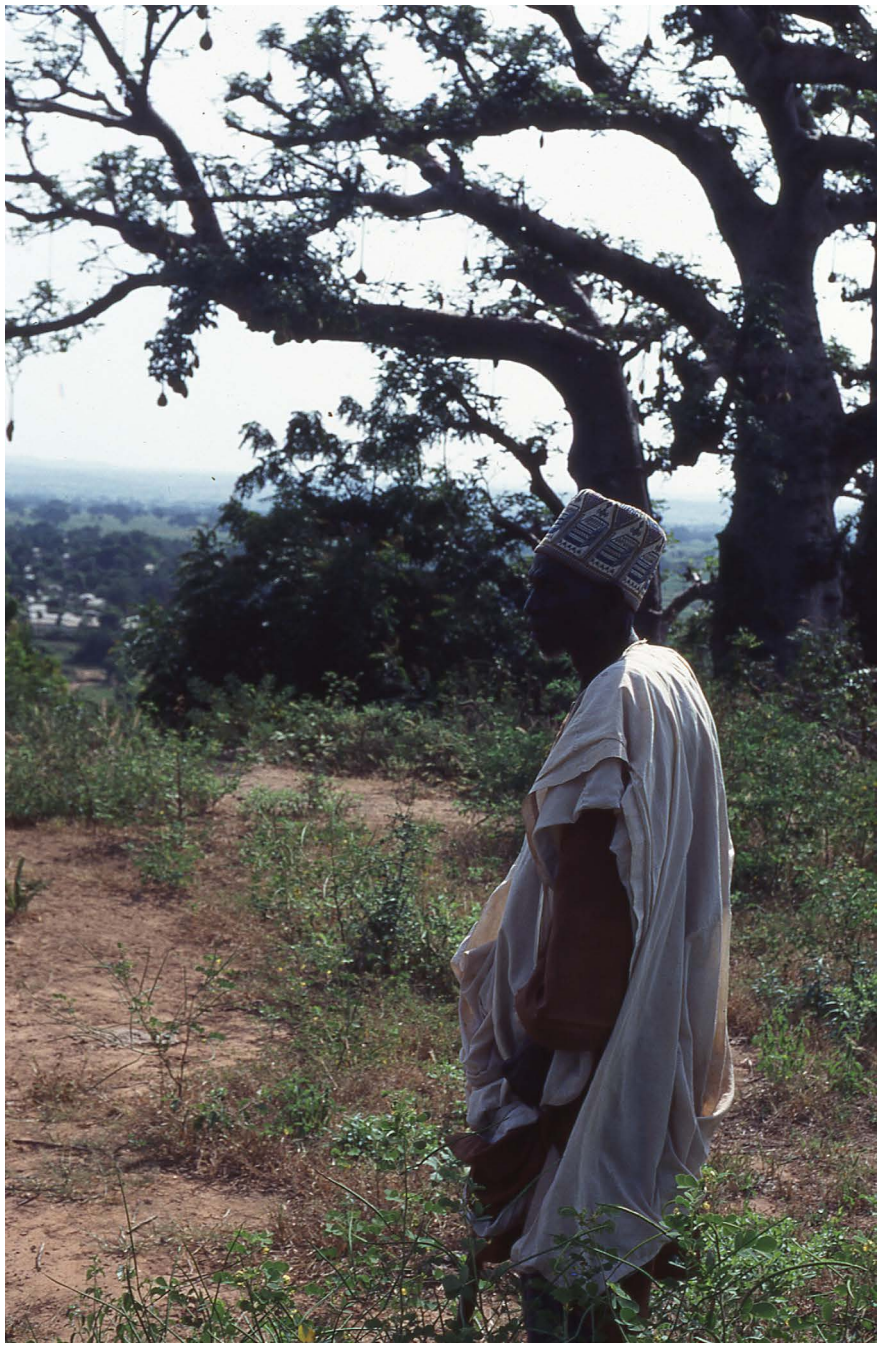

Figure 10.1 Barunde Galadima on Mur Fuli.

with joy when he sang it to us. It was called *Zɔ́mdə̀u yak shɔ́náá lɔk* 'Hare went to his uncle's house' and was an old song he might have decided to sing only now, after a long time of singing different tunes:

Wòòòòò	Zɔ̀mdə̃́u	yak	shɔ́náá	lɔk.	'Wòò, Hare went to his uncle's house.'
wòòòòò	Hare	go	his uncle	house	

Zɔ̀mdə̃́u	yak	shɔ́náá	lɔk.	'Hare went to his uncle's house.'
Hare	go	his uncle	house	

Bəyáà m̀pə̀r bə́ jin à kíní.	'They gave him a person with hair on the head.'
Kùù Zɔ̀m ŋáŋ.	'He, the Hare, refused.'
Bəyáà záà à bání.	'They gave him guinea corn from the granary.'
Kùù Zɔ̀m ŋáŋ.	'He, the Hare, refused.'
Bəyáà də̃́wò à bání.	'They gave him sesame from the granary.'
Kùù Zɔ̀m ŋáŋ, ŋáŋ.	'He, the Hare, refused, refused.'
Kuzə̀m káá?	'What does he want?'
Kùù Zɔ̀m ŋáŋ ŋáŋ.	'He, the Hare, refused, refused.'
Kuzə̀m hírú.	'He wants cow horns.'
Hír bú ni saa kááyí rí?	'The horn of the thing, what does it do?'
Hír bú bár Wàyì rí.	'The horn of the thing calls for Wayi.'
Wàyì mááyak dár kupáŋ kə̃̀ŋ.	'If Wayi goes to the field he returns quickly.'
Kumááyak bə̰u kupáŋ kə̃̀ŋ.	'If Wayi fetches water he returns quickly.'
Kumááyak híní kupáŋ kə̃̀ŋ.	'If Wayi collects firewood he returns quickly.'
Hír bú Wàyì bár Jaa.	'The horn of the thing of Wayi calls Jaa.'
Hír bú Wàyì bár shàtàtà.	'The horn of the thing of Wayi calls shatata.'

This appears to have been the last trace of the once powerful masks to be found at the time. The thing with the horns belonged to someone called Wayi, a name that may have left a trace in Meek's *Sudanese Kingdom*:

> Wayu is another cult for the maintenance of which the king is responsible. The priest is called Akû, and the symbol of the cult is a mud pillar surmounted by a piece of iron. Neolithic axes are used sometimes as accessory symbols. Rites are performed at the millet harvests, and when any member of the royal family falls sick.
>
> (Meek 1931: 284)

The ethnographic explanations do not shed much light on what must once have been bursting with light and energy. Only a few decades later, the faint resonance of a ritual that only one or two generations ago was deeply connected to thought about existential matters of the human condition and the connections of humans with the world and cosmos now appears as opaque as the meanings of the fabric

that holds together places in the east and west. Mohammed Ahmed (n.d.: no page), who lived in Pindiga and was interested in its history, describes the actions resulting in this loss as colonial violence perpetrated by their own leaders, who were supposed to protect their cultural and spiritual heritage:

> The period of the 1940's witnessed the accession to power by the late Sarkin Pindiga [King of Pindiga] Ahmadu (1942–1984) who was credited singularly for exhibiting great courage and strong faith in Islam, by daring to kill, burn and burying the ancient Jukun gods, in order to pave way for a truly Islamic society, despite all the oppositions that were mounted against him.

The once stunning theranthropic masks and statues adorned with beads and clothes were killed and burned and later thrown away like trash. This connection between actions that resemble war and practices that resemble the removal of waste is a core feature of capitalism in its colonial context, argues Ali Kadri (2023) in his work on the *Accumulation of Waste*.

Yet, this constant production leaves behind its own specters. And thus the traces of what one can no longer know, however, seem more intriguing to ponder about than what lies open and bare for us to make sense of. They invite us to look at change and the opacity it creates, not only as change as malice, or change gone wrong in its disruptiveness, but as something magical. There is something that resists the wasting and ruining of that what once sustained life in places like Pindiga, based not only on colonial violence but also on racial capitalism (Vergès 2024). Because in these songs, as well as in the stories, the original meanings endure somewhere. It is certainly a question of dealing with the danger that the secret and the forgotten harbor. Who knows what lies behind the hidden? In the story about a young woman who, against the advice of her parents, decides to choose her spouse herself, a strange and beautiful man who plays the algaita on the market is her future husband. She follows him to his home, far away from the village on the other side of a small river, in the midst of the forest. Once they are in the house, he undresses – removes his beautiful skin and exposes his real skin, that of a leper. "Àmáá hwáù kə̀ná ní kə̀m hwáù saan, àkə̀m yâwwà …", said the storyteller – 'but his leprosy skin was different from his skin of beauty, different yeah …'. Such an ugly man is not an adequate husband, and so he will sleep on a torn mat and be served poor food in a broken calabash.

Opacity here is connected to the experience of change. The promise of an enchanted life at the side of a beautiful husband is not fulfilled. What lies underneath the surface here is not simply ugly, but deadly, disconcerting and uncontrollable by ordinary humans. Although the song performed by Barunde does not torment us with the sight of what lies behind the mask, the opacity that becomes conceivable once the mask calls names that have no real existence bears in itself the possibility of horror as well. The traces that remain uncommented on in a little song, the spoils that sit within walls and support other structures than those they were originally made for and the forms that no longer can be dismantled into individual components – they continue to have their hidden existences,

regardless of the new meanings they are endowed with in their current positions and usages.

In Hone, there were very few instances of spoils and traces that might create curiosity about what lies underneath, and curiosity here did not result in the realization of certain regular patterns. An example was the verb *fuu* 'open', which stood in a semantic and etymological relation with fun 'loosen' and *fuk* 'hollow out'; yet the nature of this relation was not conceivable, neither by comparing other forms in Hone nor by including other Jukun languages in the comparison. The existence of old, now defunct verbal derivations, as well as the different constructions of autobenefactive meaning, or pairs such as *kəp* 'defend, justify' / *kən* 'accuse', *kwar* 'tie up' / *kwor* 'pack', *gyàn* 'lose' / *gyán* 'escape', *dáp* 'beat, tap' / *táp* 'tap, patter (rain)', *zɔ́k* 'weave a basket / *sɔ́k* 'weave mat, rope', *wúp* 'pray, worship' / *búp* 'ask, beg' suggested that there were complex ways of modifying a verb's semantics, for example, by creating forms with a more intensive meaning. But they were no longer productive and represented little trace of what was once something salient in the language. Similar traces were present in the nominal lexicon, where a small group of nouns had been derived from verbal bases by suffixing different morphemes, for example, *fɔ̃mríí* 'taboo' (*fɔ̃m* 'allow') and *nùmsìì* 'heat; dryness' (*nùm* 'be hot'). Without the simplex forms, the "ordinary" bricks in the wall, we would not even be able to know that the more complex forms were spoils, traces of a different building, a different morphology, which we could present to one another in a little song, which itself may remain a trace. Interestingly, the very few examples of morphology having lost its productivity were never met with any excitement about something ancient in the language being recognizable, nor did they result in a desire for reconstruction – which I found remarkable.

All productive ways of deriving verbs, nouns or members of other word classes, in contrast, were perfectly transparent, rich and creative: nouns changed their status and became verbs merely by changing their position in the clause, and verbs changed their semantics through combination with other verbs. The simplest way to do this was the construction of an intensive form of the verb, which was based on a repetition, for example, *nsaasaasaa* 'I did-did-did, i.e., I tried very hard', or *bəbìy Dvin bìybìybìy* 'they came to Dvin continuously and in large numbers'. In the imperfective, the construction would be *ntíkyék àkyék kyékyékyék* 'I cut cutting cut-cut-cut, i.e., I cut down everything'. An intensive form of an exclamation would be *igòdéʔ igòdéʔ igòdéʔ* 'we thank you very much'.

A way of expressing completive meaning was the combination of the main verb of the phrase with *zək* 'take', such as in *ɔnaazə naa* 'you lie-take lying, i.e., you sleep'. A combination of the main verb with *gyèn* 'be lost' helped to express the complete finalization of an action, as in *ɔyakgyèn* 'you went lost, i.e., you have gone away (forever)'. Applicative meanings were expressed with the help of *yá* 'give', such as in *ták* 'explain' – *tágíyá* 'explain something to somebody', *shɔ̀n* 'learn' – *shɔ̀níyá* 'learn-give, i.e., teach', or *dǎŋ* 'say' – *dǎŋíyá* 'reply'. Other ways of modifying the meaning of the verb phrase were based on the use of verbs expressing specific modalities, such as *kǎŋ* 'come again; become', which preceded the main verb of the clause, as in *ɔmáákǎŋbìy* 'if/until you come again'.

Nominal derivation was based on the same principle of transparency. The only exceptions, where a bound grammatical morpheme came into play, were genitive constructions, which involved a suffix marking the second part of the construction, which was a noun. The first noun, which denoted the possessee, lost its final vowel (unless it belonged to a small group of nouns denoting referents and concepts related to magic and the spiritual realm, where the final vowel was not lost). Genitive constructions tended to express relationships and possession with overtones of inalienability, as in *shár záapàrì* 'well' (hole of water), *nú lɔ̀gì* 'door' (mouth of home), *àtɔ́r búnìì* 'saddle' (stool of horse). Another strategy was juxtaposition, which helped to encode ownership (*bɔ́ní Zɔ̀mdə̌u* 'granary of the Hare'), location and time (*záámàníʔ násàáráʔ* 'time of the Europeans; era of colonialism'), association and origin (*nám Hɔ̃ne* 'tongue of the Hone; Hone language') and kinship relations (*no yáyíí* 'husband of our mother; stepfather'), as well as part-whole relations and attributes. Such forms of compounding were the basis of the construction of agent nouns, such as *m̀pàrà àtur jéy* 'person catching fish; fisherman', *m̀pàrà ànáám nɔ́y* 'person tilling (with the) hoe; farmer', *m̀pàrà àtar tawu* 'person shooting gunshot; hunter', and so on.

Another specific group of nouns was associative constructions that followed suspiciously stereotypical patterns. The modifying part of the construction was a noun that could not be modified any longer itself, for example, by possessive suffixes, but the second part of the combination was usually a regular noun that could also be used on its own. The resulting constructions resembled nouns marked by class prefixes that were reminiscent of rather "prototypical" Benue-Congo classes both in form and meaning. In some instances, the modified second member of the construction had also become a bound morpheme and no longer carried any recognizable meaning outside the associative construction. By analogy, this type of word formation was partly productive, but it is impossible to say to what extent, given the relatively few examples in the collection of texts that could be analyzed. Thus, a picture of innovative forms that resemble classes for liquids (with *zaa-* 'liquid'), collectives of human beings (with *jee-* 'people'), diminutives (with *ján-* 'child(ren)'), inanimate referents (with *bú-* 'thing'), locatives (with *bɛr-* 'place') and animate referents (with *wii-* 'animal') emerges. Examples include *zaapàrè* 'water', *zaadɛ́́yı* 'liquid of bee; honey', *Jeepìŋgé* 'village people; population of Pindiga', *Jeetáŋàlə* 'Tangale people', *jánnay* 'child of cow; calf', *jánkùnì* 'child of hen; chick', *búhwɔ́y* 'thing of neck; necklace', *búhwãì* 'thing of dressing; clothing', *bɛrgìní* 'place of bottom; country', *Bɛrnáŋì* 'place of sea; Benue', *wiigírí* 'animal of buffalo; buffalo', *wiipɔ̌́wù* 'animal of wilderness; name of a deity'. Whether such forms were constructed in analogy with still productive noun classes or evolved after the noun class system had become defunct remains an unresolved question. Their structure, however, was perceived as being transparent, as the single components, morphologically constrained or not, could be easily identified and explained by speakers.

Another group of lexical items that were rare in the language were adjectives. This is rather unsurprising, given the absence of larger inventories of adjectives

both in other members of the Jukun group and cross-linguistically (Dixon 1982, Dixon & Aikhenvald 2004). The few true adjectives that occurred in conversations, stories and so on exhibited some form of "old morphology" as well. They were marked with a prefix *à-* in the singular and a combined prefix *bá-à-* in the plural; the latter had a second, alternative prefix *bək-à-* – reminiscent of the third person plural pronoun that is also documented for Jibə ("Kona Jukun"). The adjectives taking these prefixes were *-báyì* 'bad, evil', *-pyŭ́* 'new', *-pyúke* 'foreign', *-kànìì* 'much, many', *-péne* 'front, first', *-gɔ̀ŋlɔ̀ŋ* 'empty', *-pyáwù* 'deceased' and *-kátíp* 'barren'. They were rarely used, but appeared in constructions such as *wurà àpyŭ́* 'a new woman; second wife' and *báwɔ́rùp bəkàpyŭ́* 'new women (in style, social attitude etc.)'. All other adjectives were derived from either nouns or verbs and lacked the property of number marking. Denominal adjectives were constructed with a prefix *à-* and the suffix *-e*, which was also used to construct verbal nouns, for example, *jírí* 'matter, speech' – *àjíre* 'mattering', as in *bá àjíre* 'mattering thing; truth'. Deverbal adjectives exhibited the same morphological markers, but were more complex insofar as they consisted of the verb and its cognate object. They were usually derived from property verbs, such as *saan* 'be good' – *m̀pə̀rà àsaan saane* 'a good person'. Some ideophones served as a source for analogical constructions, but rarely. They were then used as a complement of the verb *saa* 'do, put, make'. One form that occurred more often at the time, in conversations, was *m̀pə̀rà àsaa sákàm* 'greedy person', from the ideophone *sákàm* 'greedily snatching something away'.

There was nothing playful in the joint work on morphology and the construction of new words, and nothing that invited any creativity, it seemed. Amazement and wonder had their sites elsewhere, in the deliberations over a rich plurilingual lexicon, the artful combination of speech styles based on it, or the many ways of compounding. The probably once rich and manifold repertoire of constructing words and meaning on the basis of morphology, which was at the center of linguistic historical work, now, in this bird's eye view, seemed as lonely and detached as the isolated mask on the plate in Fardon's book. Removed from context and, ultimately, life, the former beauty of all these abstractions and formations could hardly be grasped. They needed connections and relations, like the mask that mimics the body of a deceased king, or a skull, in order to unfold their power to fill the world with meaning. In Hone, old morphology, like the masks that were gone or had been thrown away – who knows – that was once most likely a central part of language structure, now seemed lifeless, like the mask mounted on a stand in a private collection. It was only when describing those forms that had become ossified, and with which nobody played any longer, as something that belonged to a language family identified, constructed and reconstructed by linguists at institutions in Europe and the Global West, that their hidden existences unfolded their uncanny appearances. Like the horns in the song and the true skin of the disguised leper, they could suddenly reveal their connections with something and someplace that it was better not to further explore. The academic concepts of morphological rubble and rare finds being proof of a former existence of the regularity of a closed system, a system of

noun classes and regular number marking, a Manichaean construct of endless binaries with participants that excluded one another, made no sense to people who used language as something that was radically porous, hospitable and open. And the idea that these rare spoils and finds in the heap of things at the side of the market, which could be used in order to say things that now needed to be said, were precious indicators of the membership of their "language" in a family called "Benue-Congo" by some foreign people, who drew images of trees with Hone now somewhere on it, were ridiculous. The Hakimi's rejection of the word "Congo" was one aspect of it – based on his ability to see the difficulty in the colonial constructions of language families connected to ethnicities and borders, which, now, in his time and age, had all exploded in violence. But the idea that Hone and all the ways of speaking associated with it, at any moment when people were sitting together and speaking, would be a member of a family that consisted of units nobody saw any relation with, historically or in terms of mutual comprehensibility, seemed pointless. There were different ideas about language history, informed by relations and shared experiences, and these had nothing to do with little things such as a few rare prefixes. And who could know that these few rare little things had always been there? Maybe there could be an agreement on these things being among all the things that cannot be known. Wouldn't this leave the dead in their graves, rather than us giving ourselves permission to dig them up for research – what a terrible thought! – and wouldn't it leave the spirits in peace in their forests and their invisible landscapes instead of us coming along to do some archeology there? Hasn't it been enough? All the statues, pots and masks now in the museum of Jos, all said by the elders to have been forcefully taken away by some colonial authority or, later, by agents of the state – hasn't this been terrible enough? The mere idea that Hone itself should be included in this paradigm of "research" and "reconstruction" that so closely connects with the fate of the material culture associated with it was met with powerful indifference. And while the different perspectives on language history and change that became conceivable in the conversations on utterly marginal features of Hone were part of a shared experience of difference that was also present in other contexts, it remained contentious. If I needed to situate my analysis in this paradigm, in an inaccessible text, then this should be so, but it could not – in any form – be integrated into epistemological thought in Hone. It was a dead branch on a tree, like the dead branches that stand for lost languages that can also no longer be known.

My microphone was still placed on the mat. A neighbor came and sat down in front of it and asked me to switch it on once more so she could sing. I did as requested, and she sang, with a loud and beautiful voice and with a wonderful mischievous expression on her face. In her song, she first described work done together, then sang of eating and drinking, and then, after praising the sweetness of water, used expressions that nobody would be able to explain later on. And embedded in opacity, the wife of Kere made her appearance, a powerful spirit of the not-so-long-ago past. And as the belly filled with food and drink feels good, she begins to chuckle and interrupts herself and declares that this is oh so silly. Was it really? Or was she hiding the spirit again after quickly showing her to us? What remains

are fragments of a voice speaking from a space in-between, where both, comforting conviviality and mocking rejection, are audible.

Ináám	záà	yúú	kàrí	dìrìkùù.	Yìì	yúú	kàrí.
we farm	guinea corn	inside	it is	our body	we	inside	it is

'We farm guinea corn, we are at it. We are at it.'

Iɾjìì	zə̀ŋ	mə̀ɾwàà	zaapə̀rè	zə̀ŋ.
we are eating	together	and are drinking	water	together

'We are eating together and we are drinking together.'

Bə̀n:	fún	hali wə nə	mə̀saan	awawawa	wà	Kéré	ŋwù
they said	belly	(opaque)	and is good	(opaque)	wife	Kere	child

àdɔ̀ddɔ̀re	məǹ:	iɾjìì	záà	mə̀wàà	zaapə̀rè	fún
being sweet	and say	we are eating	guinea corn	and drink	water	belly

hali wə nə	mə̀saan.
(opaque)	and is good

'They said: belly … and is good … wife of Kere … sweet child and said, we are eating guinea corn and drink water into the belly … and is good.'

Ábababababab,	úú	áy	ákídɔ́ŋ!
blah blah blah	wow	oh	god

'Blah blah blah, wow oh god!'

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