A Semantic, Syntactic, Grammatical and Cultural Description of Urdu Idiomatic Phrases

Sumaira Akhtar, M.Phil. Applied Linguistics
Muhammad Rizwan, M.Phil. Applied Linguistics
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Abstract

The nature of this think-piece is the investigation into the semantic, syntactic, grammatical and cultural unraveling of Urdu idiomatic phrases. For this object the researchers selected eighty idiomatic expressions from the Urdu language by following data driven approach. The data was analyzed qualitatively and presented in tables. The outcomes gathered from the data analysis indicated that Urdu idioms from the viewpoint of their semantics may be complex, semi-complex and translucent. As regards their syntactic structure, most of the idioms follow: noun + noun, noun + verb and noun + adjective structural pattern. In so far as the grammatical description of Urdu idioms is concerned, they can be verbal, adverbial, adjectival and nominal. A number of Urdu idiomatic expressions are cultural specific and they can only be used and comprehended by parties of shared cultural values.

Key Words: semantic, syntactic, cultural, grammatical, constituent, figurative, collocation.

Introduction

Idiomatic lexis and terminology transpire most recurrently in Urdu. This study carries the contribution and involvement of the depiction of Urdu idioms and their semantic, syntactic, cultural, grammatical traits to facilitate and govern their use and their configuration in the Urdu language. In a lexicon, idioms co-operate and participate to perform a dominant and noteworthy position. Idiomatic expressions and their description are not considered a new-fangled and innovative phenomenon across the languages. Hockett (1958) and Malikiel's (1959) contribution and input about the doctoral thesis and binomials were exceedingly advantageous towards idiomaticity. Alexander (1984, 1987), McCarthy (1992), and finally Moon (1998) highlighted a

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wide range of angles and perspectives of idioms and their authenticity and genuineness in the Urdu language. Systematically, words take place together in a shape of cluster. Collocational patterning is viewed in words. Because of collocational ties, the consequential cluster looks regular and simple in its structure accordingly. Words offer an impression of unaccompanied entity which performs the function of single lexeme having a particular significance of meaning. Because of such accomplishments and undertakings, these lexemes are categorized into "Multiword Units". Several types of such units are viewed. Along with these varieties, idioms are merely a solitary component of them.

Dubrovin (1995) discovers a novel and latest term specifically for idioms namely "phraseological units". Additionally he defines that the meaning doesn't depend upon its other components. Curry (1994) also elaborates his standpoint that units already have a meaning when we allot a latest meaning to a group of words. Moon (1998) delineates that idiomaticity can be segregated into three parts: idioms are (a) non-compositional expressions (b) typically institutionalized (c) lexico-grammatically predetermined and fixed. He further promotes his arguments that idiom expressions are fundamentally institutionalized. Idioms are a cluster of words that recommend an alternative and variant meaning when we occupy them jointly and consecutively. While enhancing his inspection, he says that typically idioms are utilized unceremoniously in verbal communication to transmit dissimilar concepts and expressions in a particular way which we cannot articulate in a single unit. Likewise, all these subclasses demonstrate the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic configuration of idioms. Providentially, the notion of semantic constituent is used non-circularly. Dominantly, two things are worthwhile to reveal: (1) it must be a minimal semantic chunk (2) it must be comprised of lexical constituents but more than one as well as it is requisite to be multifarious lexically.

Traits of Idioms

Under this perception, each and every idiom is principally measured as an elementary lexical entity. Amazingly, idioms include a bunch of vocabulary which can demonstrate an internal consistency and cohesion. For example, both disruption and ordering of parts are not permitted in them. Semantically, the restriction regarding syntactic potential and prospective is

aggravated and provoked in idioms. Phenomenally, some outstanding and leading features of idioms are viewed.

First, inexplicably, meaning of an idiom is defined as an intricate phenomenon. Additionally, it is believed with the intention that meaning of an idiom is a multifaceted and complex observable actuality because straightforward composition in meaning doesn't exist. For instance, *behti ganga main hath dhona* (to wash hands in a running stream). Now captivatingly, it has nothing to do with *Behti Ganga (running stream)* and *Hath Dhona (to wash hands)*. Successively, the non-compositionality into compositional process is involved when its meaning is recognized.

Second, substitutability is severely avoided in idioms. Even an interconnected and correlated utterance cannot be substituted in idioms. For instance, it doesn't confer an appropriate impression when we say that *behty dariyaa main hath dhona*. Although both *Ganga* (stream) and *Dariyaa* (river) are semantically synonyms, we can't make a substitution. As a result, we are not allowed to replace and exchange words in phrases already presented.

Third, neither can we apply a syntactic transformation nor do we modify any idiomatic phrase. For instance, *neeli ganga main hath dhona*. *Neeli* (blue) *ganga main hath dhona* has no relativity with 'Make hay while the sun shines'. Some of the idioms do not afford any internal variation and discrepancy because the internal structure and construction of idiomatic phrases are chiefly fixed. Somehow, the scale of internal variability is allocated in them but variable figure of elements is hypothesized to be mandatory.

Fourth, Grant and Bauer (2004) are of the view that the degree of recognition in idiomatic phrases is called institutionalization. The peculiar Noun Phrases (NPs), Adjective Phrases (APs), and Adverbial phrases (AdvPs) only come into contact when a community has the same speech. Cultural roots can be observed in idioms which are only understood for those societies that have shared and collective knowledge of cultural values at large.

Phrasal versus Lexical Idioms

On syntactic justification, an unambiguous and comprehensive distinction can be observed between two dominant and prevailing types: (I) lexical idioms (ii) phrase idioms. Syntactically, the former is the lowest grammatical category while the latter is quite opposite to a convinced extent. In this regard, the chunks *Behti ganga main hath Dhona* (make hay while the sun shines) or *Panchon ghee main* (his bread is buttered on both sides) are the innovative and original phrase idioms. Further tests can be viewed to assess whether the constituents can be alienated as we do in scrambling of sentences. For instance, can we split the chunks in *Chrag taley Andhera* (Nearer the church farther from God)? Is it containing the equivalent and identical meaning which may be reminiscent of the original utterance approximately? Unquestionably, it is impracticable and impossible to rotate. Indisputably and unquestionably, idioms cannot be utilized for grammatical patterns.

A few less compelling cases are organized and structured for tests in order to emphasize on the fact that idioms cannot be "fully formed" and produced syntactically. For instance, *Asman sey gira khajor main atka* (out of the frying pan into the fire) in fact seems to be an imperative sentence. Can we say *falak seey gir kar khajor main atk gaya*? Occasionally, meaning is lost when alteration appears in the structural units. One more test can be that either literal counterpart occurs more repeatedly and more frequently than idioms in text. But it is not necessarily the case in *Dil ko dil sey rah hoti ha* (love begets love) and *Do or do char hoty han* (two and two make four). Immediately, the non-native speaker will have to face complication and obscurity in the detection of anticipated meaning which underlies in majority of idioms.

Figurative Use of Idioms

Traditionally, idioms are defined as an impression whose fundamental meaning is not dependent upon its rest components, because meaning can never be inferred from its other parts (Cruse, 1986). Straightforwardly, this definition carries the concept of "circularity". Does it give the idea that the meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning that the parts hold in that expression to facilitate it? The meaning of an idiom is not accounted for performing a "compositional function". But specifically and precisely, the idiom expressions are required to be

chosen with full care. Consequently, we are in a position to discover a patent and lucid distinction between idiomatic and non-idiomatic expression. Likewise, this circularity is unadorned and natural now to grasp this definition.

Appropriately, tests can be applied before determining an idiom: (a) is it obscure (b) poetical (c) unchangeable. Literally, idioms cannot translate the precise and exact meaning and for that reason they are measured as unintelligible and obscure to an immense extent. For instance, *Babur Sher* (great lion) and *Kaali Billi* (black cat) are Urdu phrases not idioms because they can be translated merely by their superficiality and fineness of phrases. Actually, idioms are poetic and thus they have full preference and significance in Urdu. In addition, aphorisms and proverbs are not categorized into idiom domain. Several instances of slangs, euphemisms, colloquialisms, allusion, analogies, jargon, allegories, metaphors, and similes as well as a few other figures of speech are included in it. As a result, they don't avoid the actual and exact meaning of a phrase if we change a single word. For instance, "Huge fragments valuated like rebounding hale" to "rebounding hale like huge fragments valuated" which makes the meaning incorrect, because it isn't an idiom. But only a minor change in order can seriously disturb the actual order of meaning. Significantly, the meaning remains intact.

Grant and Bauer (2004, p.51) tried to lengthen and sustain a crystal-clear dissimilarity between idioms and figurative expressions. They further detailed their perception that although both have frequent subtypes of multi word units which are deemed as non- compositional, yet divergence and discrepancy are inevitable to sketch. While constructing a comprehensive comparison, they argue that figurative language is compositionally recognized as untrue which involves an interpretational process to make a contact with the actual and intended truth pragmatically. *(She is a small sparrow in a big forest)* but contrary idioms cannot behave like this usually. *(It is a yellow parrot).*

Figurative language cannot get to the exact meaning. Generally it has no capacity to catch it in the right way e.g. She's switched off the cell phone= she's no longer on cell phone= she's not taking a step in a restricted way and most commonly used idioms cannot pursue such a

pattern. Characteristically, it is not appropriate to determine the accurateness of meaning without both: (a) Non-linguistic (b) historical knowledge. Minutely, it seems relatively unfeasible and impractical in a certain context.

In brief, there are a number of idioms which cannot be interpreted but evidently their meaning can absolutely be guessed. Unquestionably and undeniably, figurative expressions can make a good judgment of sense by means of compositional meaning.

Methodology

The present study is a qualitative investigation to unravel Urdu idiomatic phrases with their semantic, syntactic, grammatical and cultural description. For the attainment of this object the researchers selected 80 idiomatic phrases from the Urdu language and analyzed their semantic properties such as their being intricate, less intricate, translucent, their syntactic structure which is followed by majority of Urdu idioms such as noun followed by noun, verb followed by noun, adjective followed by noun, their grammatical structure such as verbal, adverbial, adjectival and nominal idioms and their cultural specific characteristics. The data analyzed and presented in tables are not pre-set rather they are data driven.

Data Analysis and Discussion

As far as idioms are concerned, Urdu language is very rich in this regard. Though idioms are not used recurrently by the users of any language and Urdu is no exception in this; it does not follow that they are not referred to in case of text and speech production. Urdu idiomatic phrases can be described semantically, syntactically, grammatically and culturally.

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases: A Semantic Description

Although a number of ways are employed to give description of Urdu idiomatic phrases, the most significant one lies to their meaning. Consequently, it is not cared by a native speaker whether an idiom is grammatically inaccurate. The solution of it lies in the fact that if the source of an idiom is tracked, it becomes easier at times to have an access to its meaning. In his disparity between semantically decomposable and non-decomposable idioms, Fellbaum (2005)

clarifies that in a decomposable idiom the focus is not laid on if it is likely to infer the sense of an idiom coupled with its metaphorical motivation rather its focus is on the phenomena whether the meaning components of an idiomatic phrase correspond with the components of the idiomatic phrase.

A decomposable idiom focuses on the idea that the meaning parts of the idiom are corresponded with the parts of idiom e.g. *chota mun bari baat* (to talk big without having a lofty position), *lalach buri bla hai* (greed is a curse), *kar bura to hoe bura* (do evil and look for like), *doodh ka doodh pani ka pani* (milk of milk, water of water) are decomposable idioms in the Urdu language whereas a non-decomposable idiom in Urdu refers to one place relation e.g. *aap bhlay to jug bhla* (good mind, good find) in which the word jug has no role and the meaning good mind, good find is connected with the rest of the idiom except the word jug. In another instance such as *bhens kea age been bjana* (to cry in wilderness) the word *bhens* has nothing to do with the meaning of the whole idiom and thus shows one place relation.

But the question arises if it is possible to classify all the idioms in aforementioned two types, that is, decomposable and non-decomposable without confronting any problem. It is important to mention here that a number of idioms are vividly based on conceptual metaphorical sense. It is generally regarded that meanings of constituents of a majority of idioms are present during processing and play a significant part to understand the meaning of idiomatic phrases. This notion has emerged prominently within the study of the strings of idiomatic phrases in linguistics. In the Urdu language, idioms semantically possess all these traits mentioned above.

Categories of Urdu Idiomatic Phrases

Urdu idiomatic phrases can be categorized in accordance with the degree of structural and inner vagueness.

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1. Intricate Idioms: These are the idiomatic phrases of which meanings cannot be inferred from their constituents.

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Taarey Gin Na	To count up stars	To wake up night
Behti Ganga Mein Hath Dhona	To wash hands in running stream	To avail opportunity
Chor Ki Dari Mein Tinka	Straw in thief's beard	To be afraid of crime
Dal Mein Kuch Kala Hona	To be something black in pulse	To be suspicious
Lohey Ke Chaney Chbana	To chew iron grams	To do tough job
Gull Khilana	To come into flower	To make trouble
Andha Kia Chahe Do Ankhen	A blind wants two eyes	A wish coming true
Onchi Dukan Pheka Pakwan	high shop tasteless food	great cry little wool
Ount ke Mun Mein Zeera	zeera in camel's mouth	a drop in the ocean
Lakeer Ka Fakeer	a beggar of line	follow old path

The instances of complex Urdu idiomatic phrases cited above are an ample proof of the idea that it is unlikely to deduce meaning from their constituents because their literal meaning stands in sharp contrast to their actual meaning.

2. Semi-intricate Idioms: These idiomatic phrases being teemed with remote meanings are less intricate for no exhaustive effort is to be made to have an access to their meanings.

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Chota Mun Bari Baat	small mouth, big talk	small wit, great boost

Aik Chup Hazar Sukh	one silence, thousand peace	silence is gold
Angaaron pe letna	to lie on burning flames	to be in trouble
Hath Na Pohnche Thu Kori	far hand, vomit bitter	to be impossible
Chraag Gull Hona	to light out	to kick bucket
Baron Ko Dukh Bi bra	elders have great pain	load of responsibility
Khayali Pulao pkana	to cook imaginative pulao	to be unpractical
Swal Gandam Jwab Chana	Wheat question gram answer	irrelevant discourse
Mal-e Muft Dil-e Bereham	free money, cruel heart	easy come, easy go
Neem Hakeem Khatra Jaan	semi- quack, life in danger	little knowledge is risky

3. Translucent Idioms: The meanings in translucent idioms may be inferred in a very easy mode and no additional processing effort is required in this regard.

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Talwe Chatna	to lick feet	to humiliate oneself
Kismat Jagna	to wake fate	to be fortunate
Pani Pani Karna	do water water	to make ashamed
Bheegi Billi	wet cat	seeming miserable but naughty
Ankhen Pher Lena	to move eyes	to end regard for someone
Baat Pi Jana	drink talk	to bear harsh words
Dil Dukhana	to wound heart	to pique

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Aasman Se Baten Karna	to talk with sky	to increase
Ullu Ban Na	to be an owl	to be made a fool of
Aasman Sar Par Uthana	to lift sky on head	to make a lot of noise

Semantic Intricacy of Urdu Idiomatic Phrases

The semantic intricacy that is found in Urdu idiomatic phrases can also be explained in the way given below.

First Constituent of an idiom in its derived reading:

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Bal Bal Bachna	Toescape hair	To have a narrow escape
Erhi Choti ka zor lgana	To try with heal strongly	To Strive

Second Constituent of an idiom in its derived reading:

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Zindgi sey Hath Dhona	To wash hands from life	To lose life
Teri Kheer	Slant Dessert	A Herculean task

The whole expression in its derived reading:

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Asteen Ka Sanp	An adder of cuff	An unknown foe
Khoon Sufaed Hona	To whiten blood	Rot of feeling

Urdu Idioms: A Syntactic Description

It is very complex to surmise the type of syntactic processes through which an idiom undergoes. Perchance it is determined characteristically in some respects and predictable in other respects. It can be said as a first approximation that the syntactic behavior of an idiom is largely determined by two factors: the literal syntactic structure of an idiom if it possesses one and since

the apparent syntactic constituents are not semantic one and thus they are neither subjected to adjectival and adverbial alteration nor can they be separated for the sake of stress (Cruse, 1986). According to Cowie, Mackin and McCaig (1983, 1993), the description of idioms from syntactic angle is accommodating to provide information regarding syntax which can assist learners to observe a number of grammatical patterns which wrap the structure of an idiom. Though a great diversity lies in the syntactic structures of idiomatic phrases in the Urdu language, a majority of idioms comprise of noun followed by noun, adjective followed by noun and noun followed by verb. A few instances of this fact are cited in the tables given below respectively.

Noun + Noun

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Bandar ki Ashnae	Familiarity of monkey	A troublesome friendship
Dedey Ka Pani	Water of eye	Modesty
Raam Kahani	Passion tale	A long love story
Zuban Drazi	Long tongue	Abuse
Zafran Ka Khait	Field of saffron	Comic in speech
Shehr – e Khamoshan	Dwellers of silent city	A graveyard
Pathar par lakeer	Line on stone	Not to be changed
Shehad ki churi	Fork of honey	A wolf in sheep's clothing
Aasteen ka samp	An adder of cuffs	Swindler
Shaitan ki khala	Aunt of devil	A wicked girl or woman

Adjective + Noun

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Terhi Kheer	Slant pudding	Almost impossible
Chalta purza	Running part	Cunning or smart
Sabz Kdam	Green step	Accursed people
Kala Chor	Black thief	An unfamiliar man
Kafrana Azaem	Infidious aims	Evil designs

Kcha dil	Unripe heart	Timorous
Kushada dil	Wide heart	generous
Gram Josh	Hot passion	Determined or spirited
Kcha Khat	Unripe letter	Unformed handwriting
Kitabi Keera	Book worm	Fond of reading books

Noun + Verb

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Baat Katna	To cut talk	To interpose
Aankhen Churana	To steal eyes	To pretend not to see
Baat pi jana	To drink talk	To bear insult
Paani pher dena	To move water	To make vain
Phar katna	To cut mountain	To do a tedious task
Takdeer jagna	To wake fortune	To be lucky
Taswey Bhana	To flow tears	To shed crocodile tears
Ji churana	To steal heart	To shirk
Khabar Urana	To fly news	To spread rumour
Dil Bhujna	To extinguish heart	To be disappointed

A Grammatical Description of Urdu Idiomatic Phrases

Idiomatic phrase in the Urdu language can be Adverbial, adjectival, verbal or nominal.

Instances are cited in the table given below:

Adverbial Idiomatic Phrases

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Plak Jhpaktey Hi	Closing an eye lash	In no time
Chashme Zdan Mein	Glistening of an eye	In no moment

Nominal Idiomatic Phrases

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning

| Bharay Ka Tattu | Carpenter's animal | Expensive not beneficial |
| Kala Choar | Black thief | An unfamiliar person |

Verbal Idiomatic Phrases

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Aankhen Churana	To steal eyes	To pretend not to see
Paani pher dena	To move water	To make vain
Thanda Hona	To be cool	To expire
Chandi hona	To be silver	To attain great income

Adjectival Idiomatic Phrases

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Chalta purza	Running part	Cunning or smart
Dhunwa Dar	Fraught with smoke	Exciting

Urdu Idioms: Their Cultural Description

Since the essence of idioms is their being multiword, fixed expressions; they are often colloquial metaphors that need foundational knowledge, experience and information for their use in a culture of people who share common reference. The use of idioms for the purpose of communication in a culture requires a local context as culture is typically follows locality principle and the idioms cannot be of any use outside this. A number of idioms in the Urdu language possess cultural specific roots and that is why they cannot be used in those societies and communities which have no shared cultural knowledge of values. There is a large variety of this kind of Urdu idioms that generally come from everyday life. Such type of idioms has one specific word that wraps the total cultural context and considerably influences the whole sense of that idiomatic expression. A few instances of this are cited below:

Urdu Idiomatic Phrases	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning
Eid ka chaand hona	To be Eid moon	Few and far between

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Mulla ki doar Masjid Tak	Mulla's running to mosque	Someone with short vision
Daer Ae Drust Aye	Come late, come right	Follow right direction late

Inflection of Urdu Idiomatic Expressions

The most exciting claim is that collocations are called "lexical Units". Although they seem not to be cemented yet we can re-enact and re-establish them probably. From loose to set collocation, idioms are not measured by the set end of accessible range (Hatch & Brown, 1995, p .202). Possibly, idioms have a regular, irregular structure and sometimes they are erroneous grammatically. Although a native speaker cannot move towards this certain inconsistency but institutionally he always locates the exact meaning in spite of the unbalanced formation. But the fact is that most of the time, a regular form don't have the lucid meaning but sometimes both meaning and form go towards uneven structure. Traditionally, most languages don't follow inflections, but sometimes they inflect in a quite constrained and restricted manner in idioms. At the same time, Urdu language has inflection. Inside idioms, inflectional affixes have appropriate elements grammatically. Such elements have their semantic constituents as well as they have to maintain their grammatical distinctiveness. For the most part, idiomaticity is inflected according to their tense number and gender. By and large, Urdu idioms don't have inflection in all expressions.

Urdu Idioms	Gender		Number		Tense	
	Masculine	Feminine	Singular	Plural	Present Infinitive	Past
Baat Katna (to interfere)			Baat	Baaten	Kaatna	kati
Khabar Urana (to spread rumour)			Khabar	Khabrain	Urana	Urae
Thanda Hona (to expire)	thanda	thandi		thanday	hona	hua

Ullu Bnana (to befool)					bnana	banaya
Kcha Khat			khat	khatoot		
Asteen Ka Saanp (swindler)	ka	ki		Key		
Shehad Ki Shuri (Hypocrite)	Ka	ki	Shuri	Shurian		

Recommendations

The present study was conducted to highlight the features of Urdu idioms from the view point of their semantics, syntax, grammar and culture in which they are used. The upcoming studies can explore Urdu idioms more than the researchers of this article did or they can focus on the varieties of English-Urdu idioms and the similarities and contrasts involved in their syntactic and grammatical structures because there is rapid modernization in the Urdu language and it inserts in itself from the English language regarding idiomatic expressions. This is an important field to be explored for researchers and the students of linguistics because there are very few empirical studies in this domain.

Epilogue

The present study focuses on the semantic complexity, syntactic, grammatical and cultural features of Urdu idioms. The analysis of the selected idiomatic data revealed that the Urdu language idiomatic phrases are intricate, less intricate and translucent as regards their semantics. Syntactically, the majority of Urdu idiomatic structure is based on noun followed by noun combination, verb followed by noun combination and adjective followed by noun. Grammatically, Urdu idiomatic phrases can be verbal, adjectival, adverbial and nominal. Then there are idiomatic phrases that are cultural specific and are only comprehended and used by social groups that have shared knowledge of the cultural values.

Changes do occur in idioms with the passage of time because changes happen among generations as well. If an active use of a language takes place in certain dynamic domains e.g. expressions used in political domains, newspapers, theater, movies, fiction and dramatic art, dialogues used among various groups from different dialects of same languages or use any other language for communicative purposes, novelty in coinages takes place relentlessly.

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Sumaira Akhtar, M.Phil. Applied Linguistics
University of Management and Technology Lahore, Pakistan
illusivelife10@gmail.com

Muhammad Rizwan, M.Phil. Applied Linguistics
University of Management and Technology Lahore, Pakistan
malikje17@gmail.com

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