THE LANGUAGE OF HUMOUR – THE HUMOUR OF LANGUAGE
IRONY AND HUMOUR IN INTERPERSONAL VERBAL ENCOUNTERS

Zsuzsanna Ajtony

Abstract: In this paper the problem of verbal humour and irony is approached from a sociolinguistic perspective, starting from the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (Raskin 1985), which establishes that all humour involves a semantic-pragmatic process. Humour should be understood and appreciated shared socio-cultural knowledge; a common code should exist between speaker and recipient. As humour is subjective, this is especially true for the humour of nations, the root of which is hiding in national or ethnic stereotypes, in close relationship with ethnic and national prejudices. All these theoretical issues are put into practice in the analysis of G.B. Shaw's humour as displayed in *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Concentrating on the target as one of the knowledge resources, it is concluded that choice of the target person has an effect on the identity of the person uttering the humorous remark.

Keywords: *general theory of verbal humour, script opposition, target; solidarity, in-group identity*

1. Introduction

The central topic of this paper is to apply the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) to conversational narratives and to relate it to socio-pragmatic approaches. Script oppositions are considered as the necessary preconditions of humour while its perlocutionary effect (i.e. eliciting laughter) as the characteristic feature of the humorous text. Although one of the most frequent social functions of humour is exactly the construction of solidarity and in-group identity, relatively little sociolinguistic research has been conducted in this respect. Therefore, one of the particular aims of this paper is to illustrate how can / does humour become a flexible discourse strategy in constructing certain aspects of social identities, focusing on the TARGET, as one of the knowledge resources of the general theory of verbal humour.

Research of humour is a very serious and complex issue. In order to understand the simplest joke, one needs to be conscious of several background information, social competencies and certain intellectual operations need to be executed. Although nothing extinguishes humour as fast as the theory about it, it can still be a challenge to try to explicate it. Similar to the power of speech, the skill to calculate, the ability to produce tools or the thumb able to grasp, humour is also a feature characteristic to humans. It is a defensive or offensive instrument necessary in life, a method for raising different issues and for criticising, a way of expiation and conciliation. Humour has several forms of manifestations (both verbal and non-verbal), among which mention can be made of witty remarks, puns, slogans, captions, hints and parody, irony, satire, graffiti or a typically English "genre", the so-called "limerick" (a five-line absurd poem rhyming *aabba*), but also of other humorous elements, such as jumbled spelling, "back-talking" rhyme or foreign or strange accent.

The corpus of my research is the text of G.B. Shaw's plays where I analyse the linguistic manifestations of ethnic identity, specifically the verbal means of expressing ethnic humour. In this paper, first I give a brief summary of a linguistic theory of humour based on script oppositions, then through examples I would like to show the presence of verbal humour and irony in one of Shaw's plays, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, highlighting the target of these humorous utterances, as – in my intuition – the person who the speaker selects to be the target of his / her humour, in the same time qualifies the speakers themselves, the option will

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become part of the speakers' identity. In this way a clearer image of the speaker can be formulated, based on his / her humorous utterances.

2. Theoretical background

Humour is a very serious form of communication. Exploring the many-layered semantic structure of a humorous discourse is the core of the linguistic research of humour. It is Freud (1960) who starts the linguistic analysis of humour. He identifies the techniques of jokes expressed in sounds, syllables, repetitions and variations. He also relates the condensation found in joke techniques with the saving of psychic energies, the result of which is laughter, as a form of release of repressed feelings.

Today, the literature in the field considers Raskin's (1985) book to be the source of the cognitive approach to humour research. According to Raskin, each humorous manifestation has a semantic-pragmatic process inherent in it, therefore his theory is called the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH), in spite of the fact that certain humorous texts contain phonological, morphological or syntactic aspects as well. The SSTH – according to Attardo's classification (Attardo 1994) – is an essentialist theory trying to answer the question: what is the essence of the humorous phenomenon, i.e. what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be considered humorous and at the same time, eliciting laughter. At the same time, the SSTH is a linguistic theory because it examines verbal humour based on the theoretical basis of generative grammar. Finally, the SSTH is a competence theory as well, because analogous to language competence, it strives to achieve the modelling of a so-called humour-competence: the ability to reconstruct a certain kind of knowledge which allows the speaker to understand and create humorous texts (Riszovannij 2008). Due to its generative background, this theory does not consider the performance of humour (i.e. humorous language use, humorous conversation) although everyday humorous encounters are actually performances of humour.

The central category of this theory is the **script**, a cognitive category, containing information which is typical, such as well-established routines and common ways to do things and to go about activities. A script contains knowledge about the normal course of events, a certain type of schedule (e.g. behaviour in a restaurant, visiting the doctor, etc.). The main hypothesis of SSTH is that a text can become single-joke-carrying, i.e. funny if and only if two essential conditions are met: 1. the given text segment is compatible, fully or in part, with two different but overlapping scripts; 2. the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (Raskin 1985: 99, Attardo 1994: 197). Raskin developed an adequate technique for the special analysis of humour effect, the so-called "semantic script", which at the same time considers the "deep structure message", i.e. the message built on the semantic script. "[I]n order to be a joke, any text should be partially or fully compatible with two different scripts and […] a special relation of script oppositeness should obtain between the two scripts" (Raskin 1985 xiii). The script is such a semantic bundle of information which became interiorized in the native speaker and it includes knowledge referring to a small part of the world (Raskin 1985: 81). The cognitive approach becomes evident in the fact that the linguistic (semantic) and the encyclopedic information are connected. The communicative factors operating in a humorous text should be treated uniformly as each speaker has a given script-repertoire which encompasses knowledge about the world. Social – and as a result, humorous – communication is made possible due to the fact that the script-repertoires of speakers substantially coincide. In the same time, however, there are scripts which are typical only for one community, social, ethnic, professional or age group and for an outsider they are

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very difficult, or impossible to comprehend (consider, for example, foreign jokes which are sometimes untranslatable). The basis of Raskin's theory of humour is *semantic recursion*: "the meaning of each sentence – except its own constructing elements and their modes of combination – originates from the function of at least two factors:

1. the grade of understanding of the previous context (if there is one)
2. the background information of the listener regarding the given topic (Raskin 1985: 71)"

The so-called semantic *script-switch trigger* plays an important role in the functioning of a humorous text, which switches over from the script constituted by the text and carried by the surface structure to the humorous script (Raskin 1985: 117). The contrast of the two scripts, an incongruity between the two induces a humorous effect, to which people react in different ways, one of which is laughing.

Another pragmatic element of the theory is the premise of the so called *non-bona-fide communication*. Jokes flout the Gricean cooperation principle and its maxims (Grice 1975) and they apply a cooperation principle of their own. Thus the classical maxims are modified in the following way:

1. Maxim of quantity: Give as much information as is necessary for the joke.
2. Maxim of quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke.
3. Maxim of relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke.
4. Maxim of manner: Tell the joke effectively (Raskin 1985: 103).

In this sense, Grice's model with its special conversational implicatures serves as the basis of humour analysis, because humorous declarations always need to be applied to the given co- and context.

Humorous communication is postulated by Raskin from a psycholinguistic perspective. He distinguishes between innocent and joking, i.e. purposeful humorous communicative modes. The latter gives way to criticism blended with humour, "the bitter pill covered with humorous icing", which is one of the basic features of Shavian texts.

The semantic script theory of humour (SSTH) is further developed by Attardo and Raskin (1991) into the General Theory of Verbal Humor. This theory defines humour by focusing on the semantic/pragmatic content of humorous utterances and texts and not on their paralinguistic or prosodic aspects. Attardo (2001: 28) claims that unlike the SSTH referring only to jokes, "the GTVH is broadened to include (ideally) all humorous texts, of any length. Specifically it is not limited to narrative texts, but also to dramatic and conversational texts […]". As it is adaptable to every kind of text type, it unites the methods of several linguistic disciplines, like textual linguistics, the theory of narrativity, and pragmatics.

The GTVH suggests that humorous texts are divided into two classes. The first class includes texts which are structurally similar to jokes and terminate with a punch line. The second class includes texts in which humour is not necessarily restricted to their end, but may be diffused throughout those texts, encoded through words, phrases or sentences. In the first case, humour is based on the punch line that brings a *script opposition* to the surface and causes the reinterpretation of the whole text. The texts in the latter case contain both a humorous and a non-humorous component, the latter being called *serious relief* (Attardo 2001: 89). Attardo introduces a second kind of humorous line, the *jab line*, which is a word, a phrase or a sentence including a script opposition. Thus, the jab line is semantically identical to a punch line, their main difference is their position: punch lines are always final in a humorous text, while jab lines may occur in any part of it except for the end. Therefore, their function is also different: punch lines disrupt the flow of the humorous text, while jab lines are fully integrated in it and are indispensable to the development of its plot (Attardo 2001: 82-83)

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Beside the above mentioned scripts, the authors of this theory have added new elements into humour-competence, the so-called 'knowledge resources'. Both kinds of humorous lines (punch as well as jab lines) can be analysed using these six knowledge resources (KRs):

- the *script opposition (SO)*, which is the necessary requirement for humour: a humorous text is fully or partially compatible with two different and opposed scripts (see also Raskin 1985);
- the *logical mechanism (LM)*, presenting the distorted and playful logic that causes the script opposition;
- the *situation (SI)*, including the objects, participants, instruments, activities, places, etc. presented in the humorous text;
- the *target (TA)*, involving stereotypes of persons, groups or institutions ridiculed by humour, the 'butt' of the joke;
- the *narrative strategy (NS)*, referring to the text organization of the humorous text (narrative, dialogue, riddle, etc.);
- the *language (LA)*, which contains all the information necessary for the verbalization of a text, it is responsible for the exact wording of the humorous text (for details, see Attardo 2001: 1-28).

Focusing our investigation only on one of these knowledge resources, the TARGET, it can be stated that the presence of the target in humour implies that humour can be considered as the expression of an aggressive intention. The superiority/hostility theory of humour (see Raskin 1985: 36-38, Attardo 1994: 49-50) maintains that humorous effect (in certain cases, laughter) results from a cooperation between us and the others or between our former self and our present self. Humour occurs when this comparison reveals that we are in some way "superior" to the others or that our present self is "superior" to our former self. Through humour, the "superior" person can "attack" and attempt to modify the behaviour of the "inferior" one. This is actually the realm of irony or even self-irony.

Since humour is based on incongruity, a humorous event has to deviate from the norm, i.e. to contradict what is expected or normal in given circumstances. Due to this deviation, it is directly related to and results from evaluation and criticism procedures. Thus, humour can actually be used as a means of *(attenuated or covert) criticism*, a typical means used by Shaw in his plays.

In the ensuing part of this paper, the above described theoretical background is illustrated by G.B. Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898/1965), considered as a micro-sociolinguistic corpus, highlighting the linguistic relationship of its characters to each other. As the paper is going to discuss Caesar's verbal encounters with other characters, it can be maintained that there are two sociolinguistic groups outlining around him: one is his own social-ethnic group (in-group), consisting of the conquering Romans, the other is made up of the subjugated Egyptians who can be considered as an external social-ethnic group (Caesar's out-group).

Within the frame of the present paper, verbal humour of the characters in *Caesar and Cleopatra* will be analysed, focusing on the target of humour, because it is believed that this approach may reveal important aspects in the definition of social identity. More precisely, some of the characters' humorous, in certain cases ironical language manifestations will be closely examined, concentrating on the target persons these characters select as the object of their irony / humour because it is suspected that this will enhance a better definition of the speakers' identity.

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3. The target of humour: a constructing element of the speaker's identity

In Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* the main character Caesar's humorous utterances aim primarily at his secretary and slave called Britannus. This is possible due mainly to their social relationship. Though he is Caesar's inferior, the latter often calls him Britannicus: "[*This magniloquent version of his secretary's name is one of Caesar's jokes. In later years it would have meant, quite seriously and officially, Conqueror of Britain*]" (p. 180). This paradox in itself is a source of humour. In Caesar's words the script about the **secretary** clashes with the **conqueror-**script, this opposition is the locus where the humorous effect emerges from.

Similarly, Caesar completes the background knowledge so far acquired about Britannus calling him "thou British islander", thus differentiating him from his own ethnic group, the Romans. It is important, however, to remark that in spite of the humorous form of address, mentioning the geographical affiliation of the addressee, it also contains the personal pronoun "thou", a polite form of address, which are in semantic opposition. This opposition reveals Caesar's double attitude towards Britannus, considering him both an inferior and an equal conversational partner.

A similar dissociation appears in the introductory monologue of the drama where Ra, the hawk-headed god addresses the audience, the listeners themselves, calling them "ye quaint little islanders". It would take a separate chapter to release those layers of humour which come together in one single monologue, where irony, moreover sarcasm emerges from the fact that a stage character uses the audience themselves to be the target of his irony and where it is the theatre-script that does not allow that the addressee could use any kind of verbal means in order to defend their "faces"[1] (in Goffman's sense, see also Brown and Levinson's politeness theory).

Caesar never calls Britannus a slave, moreover he treats him with the politeness that would be in the case of a free Roman citizen. He treats him as if he were an equal interactional partner to him:

(1) CAESAR (*blandly*): Ah, I forgot. I have not made my companions known here. Pothinus: this is Britannus, my secretary. He is an islander from the western end of the world, a day's voyage from Gaul. [*Britannus bows stiffly.*] (p. 162)

We could even take this statement seriously, but "the western end of the world" acts as a jab line, which establishes a new, humorous script, opposing the previous, introductory one. This incongruity creates a humorous effect through which the background knowledge about Britannus changes and this knowledge will be activated whenever he appears on stage.

Actually, it is stereotyping that works in Britannus' evaluation, stereotypes being an excellent means of achieving humorous effect. "Stereotypes are funny because they take small differences that everyone half-consciously notices and blow them all out of proportion, they create a normal/abnormal opposition script opposition" (Triezenberg 2004: 414). Whenever Britannus appears, as a stereotypical British character, he expresses his indignation about the violation of certain moral norms, giving voice to his moral superiority. Caesar always defends him, giving a humorous colouring to his statements:

[1] According to Goffman's (1967) theory the face is the symbol of each individual's self-respect and self-image. Politeness is the manifestation of the ways or strategies we are using to threaten or save our listener's face and to defend our own (Brown and Levinson 1987: 70).

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(2) CAESAR [...] Pardon him, Theodotus; he is a barbarian, and thinks that the customs of his tribe and island are the laws of nature. (p. 165)

Caesar knows very well that he is the lord of the civilized world, therefore he has a contemptuous attitude towards the "poor" barbarian. It is his social superiority and ethnic belonging which define their relationship. Based on the principle of power and solidarity, Britannus would not be allowed to use the same technique with him, as their social situation is not symmetrical. In spite of this, due to his moral superiority, Britannus often rebukes Caesar; however he achieves his criticism not with the subtle means of humour and irony, as Caesar does, but he swings into direct attack, counting in the same time on his superior's understanding and tolerance:

(3) BRITANNUS [*shocked*] Caesar: this is not proper. […] On the contrary, Caesar, it is these Egyptians who are barbarians; and you do wrong to encourage them. I say it is a scandal.
CAESAR. Scandal or not, my friend, it opens the gate of peace. (p. 165)

Britannus often reminds Caesar of his duties, which the latter openly and smilingly accepts. It is not the secretary's words but his behaviour that makes him smile:

(4) BRITANNUS. Caesar: this is not good sense. Your duty to Rome demands that her enemies should be prevented from doing further mischief. (p. 170)

Britannus' warning is funny because his behaviour and indignation is incongruent with the stereotypical image of a secretary, the secretary-script, first of all because it is his superior whom he calls to account. Secondly, beside being British and despite being the Roman's slave, he completely identifies himself with the Roman "ideology", attitude and, as a result, the enemies of Rome are also his. Therefore the emperor never takes offence at such remarks and "*Caesar, whose delight in the moral eye-to-business of his British secretary is inexhaustible, smiles indulgently."* (p. 170)

Along with Caesar, Rufio, the Roman officer also considers these remarks to be humorous. According to his ethnicity, he belongs to the same in-group as Caesar, so he can pick the same target as the object of his irony:

(5) RUFIO. It is no use talking to him, Britannus: you may save your breath to cool your porridge. (p. 171)

In this ironic remark ("it is no use talking to him") the literal and the metaphorical meaning are opposing each other as two incongruous scripts. In its secondary meaning it cataphorically rhymes with the phrase "you may save your breath", meaning "stop talking". This secondary script switches into the script of the primary meaning, namely it refers to another use of the speaking organ, this time to cool one's hot meal. Another argument to strengthen the humorous turn is the mentioning of the word "porridge", as something to be cooled with one's breath: the cultural background information[2] it carries deepens the humorous effect already established by Britannus' personality and statements.

[2] **Porridge** is a typical British stereotype: it is the typical breakfast meal usually eaten by adding some salt to it (but also with milk or sugar to make it more edible) which – after it gets cold, which often happens in its most frequent places of appearance, i.e. in boarding-schools and prisons – turns into a grey mass. Dr. Johnson says,

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Another target of Caesar's ironic detachment is Pothinus, the Egyptian aristocrat, who he tries to come to agreement with. Caesar's self-assured superiority is supported by several factors. On the one hand, he is the head of the Roman army invading this foreign country, therefore has a favourable position as opposed to Pothinus. On the other hand, he is his superior in rank as well. Last, but not least he represents western civilization facing the Egyptian "barbarian", representing a culture with a negative ethos of communication. In the present situation irony is the form of respect: Caesar is trying to prevent Pothinus from losing face by embedding the direct attack into irony:

(6) POTHINUS. This is a trick. I am the king's guardian: I refuse to stir. I stand on my right here. Where is your right?
CAESAR. It is in Rufio's scabbard, Pothinus. I may not be able to keep it there if you wait too long. (p. 168)

The script incongruity is quite obvious in this case, as well. The semantic frame of the question word "where" switches from the concrete to the abstract realm: though Pothinus would rather use a rhetorical question addressed to Caesar, the Roman's threatening reply refers to a concrete place as the locus of law and right, referring to the fact that in this situation it is only with the help of a sword, by overt aggression that his rights can be secured. This is what Rufio ensures him, as his loyal subject. In fact, it is an overt threat that he warns his interlocutor with and with this ironical remark Caesar can continually keep his power superiority. Pothinus on his part, has no other choice but to accept the offered solution.

Caesar exploits irony in his conversations also with other Egyptians of high rank. In his dialogues with Ftatateeta, Cleopatra's nurse, he causes her to appear in a funny position by mispronouncing her name. For example, when he is calling her, she *"enters the loggia, and stands arrogantly at the top of the steps"*:

(7) FTATATEETA. Who pronounces the name of Ftatateeta, the Queen's chief nurse?
CAESAR. Nobody can pronounce it, Tota, except yourself. (p. 163)

Caesar's answer brings two opposing scripts to the surface. While the queen's nurse is inquiring about her caller, with the ascendancy due to her function, in Caesar's reply the word "pronounce" appears in its primary meaning. This word becomes the jab line of the humorous fragment switching to the script-change. Here the semantic frame of the phrase "to pronounce a word" is established, to which the humorous "nobody […] except yourself" is added, on top of which appears Caesar's version of Ftatateeta's name (Tota), which due to its phonetic form adds an extra humorous effect to the whole utterance. The humorous outcome is further developed in the following lines. The other Romans (perhaps picking up courage from Caesar's mispronunciation), call her by similar incorrect names: Totateeta (Caesar), Teetatota (Rufio), then the simplest version of all: Tota (Caesar). Thus Ftatateeta's face is maximally endangered, not only in front of an out-group, the Romans, but also for her own in-group, the Egyptians. For her, this could be considered as the beginning of the end as well, as in the end she not only morally but also physically loses her face / her life.

In the same time, Caesar has an ironic attitude towards Cleopatra, as well, who has the same social rank as himself. The spoilt queen-child, sensing the potential in power, suggests an extremely cruel solution to Caesar about how to treat his subjects:

"… oats is a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people"; no further comment needs adding if we just mention that in prison-slang served time is called "porridge" (Bart 1998: 191)

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(8) CLEOPATRA [*contemptuously*] You can have their heads cut off, can you not?
CAESAR. They would not be so useful with their heads cut off as they are now, my sea bird. (p. 202)

The background information hiding in Caesar's ironic response is that the Roman commander-in-chief is totally aware that his military successes are indebted to his soldiers' capability and efficiency, they are useful to him. For instance, if he answered to Cleopatra in an indignant way, saying "How can you think that I would deprive myself of my best soldiers?", this would not support the image created so far about him, i.e. the identity of the aging, wise Roman emperor, who does not express his discontent reacting to the suggestion of the naïve and aggressive Cleopatra, but declines it with an ironic remark. Naturally, the implicit meaning of his statement is exactly that they (i.e. the soldiers) would not be so useful if they were beheaded; therefore this can be considered a good example of an understatement, saying less than required, a typical means of expressing off-record politeness: this is how he expresses that he does not want to coerce Cleopatra but wants to give her the opportunity to see that he cares for her.

In the same time it is interesting to note that Rufio also uses irony as a means of expressing covert criticism of his superior:

(9) CAESAR: Go, Ptolemy. Always take the throne when it is offered to you.
RUFIO. I hope you will have the good sense to follow your own advice when we return to Rome, Caesar. (p. 164)

In Rufio's words a historical allusion is hiding, referring to Caesar's future fate in Rome after not having accepted the throne. The dominant element of Rufio's remark is exactly this anachronism: he proves to be a wise prophet looking ahead into the event awaiting the emperor. This mingles on the following linguistic level with an arrogant language use, which has a humorous effect coming from a subject's mouth.

Last but not least, Caesar's irony does not spare himself, either. For instance, in the scene when the library of Alexandria is in flames, Caesar's remark is only "Is that all?"

(10) THEODOTUS [*unable to believe his senses*] All! Caesar: will you go down to posterity as a barbarous soldier too ignorant to know the value of books?
CAESAR. Theodotus: I am an author myself; and I tell you it is better that the Egyptians should live their lives than dream them away with the help of books. (p. 179)

or later:

(11) THEODOTUS. What is burning there is the memory of mankind.
CAESAR. A shameful memory. Let it burn. (p. 179)

He considers books as "a few sheepskins scrawled with errors" in spite of the fact that he is the writer of similar "errors". This is how he questions his own art, his own work with words of wise resignation. In these words his self irony is not covert at all, it is more overt than with anyone else before. He does not have to employ face saving mechanisms either with his own social-ethnic group (in-group) or with the other ethnic group (out-group) in order to remain the same personality known by his interlocutors.

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4. Conclusions

In my analysis I have examined how much the person, institution or concept chosen as the target of verbal humour and irony qualifies the speaker employing them. Taking Caesar as an example it can be concluded that – either aiming at his own sociolinguistic group or at an external one – due to his social position and human integrity, his identity remains untouched. At the same time we can also see, that – as the representative of western civilization - his ethnic affiliation authorizes him to use irony as a means of expressing a distancing, polite, and at the same time disparaging attitude towards others. This kind of communicational ethos gives evidence to assume that in spite of the fact that he appears as a Roman in the drama, actually he can be regarded as the representative of another ethnic group, the British. Paradoxically, he perfectly completes the overt British character, Britannus. Caesar and Britannus are the two faces of the same ethnic stereotype, they are organic parts of each other. The only difference between them is that while Britannus possesses exaggerated British characteristics, his exaggerated moral attitude makes him a humorous character, Caesar is the representative of calm power (reference to the 19th century British imperialism in Shaw's time), whose humorous and ironic remarks multiply this power and his sparkling sense of humour only raises his human dignity and originality (cf. Shaw's postscript to the play, 1965: 252-253).

Zsuzsanna Ajtony
"Sapientia" Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca
ajtonyzsuzsa@yahoo.com

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