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Grammar Games and Bilingual Blends

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Grammar Games in the Classroom

IT LOOKED LIKE AN ERROR OF VOCABULARY. THE CLASS WAS READING A TEXT BY THE EAST GERMAN AUTHOR THOMAS BRUSSIG, *WASSERFARBEN*, and practicing the indirect discourse subjunctive. In the text, an East German school director, Schneider, summons a student to his office to reprimand him on his lack of motivation:

> Die Gesellschaft stellt . . . hohe Erwartungen an den Abiturienten. . . . Eine grundsätzliche Erwartung ist, daß er ein sinnvolles Studium aufnimmt und daß er in der Frage des persönlichen Beitrages zur Landesverteidigung Partei für den Staat ergreift. (18)

> Society places . . . high expectations on the graduating senior. . . . A basic expectation is that he engages in meaningful academic study and that he personally contributes to the national defense by standing up for the state. (my trans.)

On the blackboard, the American student wrote the following sentence:

> Schneider sagt, die Gesellschaft erwarte von den Abiturienten, daß sie ein sinnvolles Studium aufnehmen würden und *die Partei gut bedienen würden*.

> Schneider says that society expects of graduating seniors that they engage in meaningful academic study and that *they serve the party well*. (my emphasis)

The subjunctives were correct, but there seemed to be a double error of vocabulary: *Partei ergreifen* means not "to serve or embrace the party" but "to stand up for or defend someone or something," and the verb *bedienen* means "to wait on someone" rather than "to serve." The correct form for the italicized words should have been: "*. . . und für den Staat Partei ergreifen würden*." But wait, why did the word *Partei* evoke the Communist Party for this American learner of German when the text made no mention of any party? The East

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German student's lack of motivation was due not to a dislike of the Communist Party but to his resentment at having to conform to the director's political expectations. Was this lexical error in fact a conceptual interference? Grammar, then, would cease to be a matter of rules and dictionaries; it would be the way we conceive of and construct our experience or, as Gregory Bateson puts it, the way we shape the context (18). By transposing *Partei ergreifen* 'to take up a cause' into *der Partei dienen* 'to serve the Party,' the American student had blended his American stereotype of East German reality into the German language used by an East German school director, which he then ventriloquized in indirect discourse subjunctive on the blackboard (Byram and Kramsch). The result looked like a lexical error but was in fact a bilingual and bicultural blend (Fauconnier and Turner).

Language textbooks still give a structural description of grammar, one based on nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech. But for a number of decades now there has been another kind of grammar available—a cognitive grammar, which links grammar to lived experience, where form is indissociable from meaning, because the form is in fact mental structure or image schema (e.g., Lakoff; Johnson; Lakoff and Johnson).[1] For example, the phrase *Partei ergreifen*, like *das Wort, die Macht, die Gelegenheit, einen Beruf ergreifen* 'to take the floor, seize power, grab the opportunity, take a job,' is not just a phrase made up of noun and verb. The verb *ergreifen*, which is common to all these phrases and literally means "to take through grasping," is the bodily manifestation here of a concept that one could formulate as showing agency or commitment—in this case, political commitment, as contrasted with apathy or indifference, precisely what the school director was criticizing the student for. *Partei ergreifen* (lit. "to take the part of") can be translated by but is not the equivalent of, for example, "to stand up for something" (*sich für etwas einsetzen*), which evokes setting, putting, another bodily action. Despite the structural exercises presented in textbooks, which require students to give semantic or syntactic equivalents, like giving synonyms or transforming a passive into an active voice, grammatical forms have conceptual correlates that are based in bodily perceptions and that are not interchangeable.

There are, of course, elements of grammar that do not have any referential meaning—for example, the morphology of past participles or word order in German clauses—but they may carry subjective meaning based on our experience and the conceptual image schemas we associate with them. Bilinguals and foreign language learners are particularly prone to imbuing grammar with subjective meaning. For example, in a fifth-semester German class, a Spanish student marveled at how the difference between being in love (*verliebt*) and being engaged (*verlobt*) in German was created by the simple switch from the sound *ie* to the sound *o* in the two past participles. She also gave an unusual meaning to the typical German syntactic feature that separates a verb into two prongs in the construction of the present perfect: the first prong or auxiliary placed after the subject, the second prong or past participle placed at the end of the sentence. She wrote in her multilingual journal: "Yo no se ni como ni cuando, aber dieser Mann hat in meinem Herzen einen Platz gefunden" 'I don't know how or when, but this man has found a place in my heart.' She explained that having to describe her love affair through the rigid word order of the German two-pronged verb (*hat . . . gefunden* 'has . . . found') gave her bilingual passion a feeling of inevitable destiny that was conceptually realized through the sentence-final position of the past participle *gefunden* (Belz).

Another student, whose mother tongue was Czech and who had a knowledge of English, French, and German, wrote her journal in all four languages and gave subjective reasons for her code switches. Here is an ex-

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cerpt from a multilingual soliloquy she addressed in part to her estranged Czech (and equally multilingual) boyfriend: "Oh well, if you don't rob the state, you rob your own family. *Koneckoncú, kdo neokrádá stat okrádá vlastní rodinu* ["Ultimately, whoever doesn't rob the state robs his own family"]. Oh wait, that didn't go as well as it should you ever feel the need for a friend, *appelez-moi* ["call me"]" (qtd. in Kramsch 124). The student explained that her switch from English to Czech was the conceptual equivalent of moving from what was for her a purely functional language (English) to their emotionally shared native language (Czech). But because the Czech sentence was in fact a popular saying from Communist times, and she knew he hated that saying, it was meant to cajole and offend at the same time. Her ambivalence toward her boyfriend is expressed in her switch to French, which, as she explained, is their shared language of intimacy but which she uses here with the distance implied by the formal second-person plural. The modal *should* that serves to both end one clause and begin another was, she said, the grammatical expression of her need to stop sounding apologetic without acknowledging that she had apologized, or, as she said, "to pass from the defensive to the offensive" without missing a beat (qtd. in Kramsch 124).

The field of cognitive linguistics has explored the way language constitutes social and subjective reality through conceptual metaphors or image schemas based in our perceptual experience (Lakoff; Langacker; Achard and Niemeier). The notion of image schema, coined by Mark Johnson, refers to cognitive and affective patterns in the mind that are based on the parameters of our physical bodies and that recur in our sensory and motor experience. Because of the intimate relation of language and thought, these image schemas are manifested in the lexical and grammatical constructions of our language.[2] The examples given above show that they can be either expressed by the grammar of native speakers or read into that grammar by nonnative speakers in highly idiosyncratic ways. The first example, *Partei ergreifen*, a standard German phrase, reveals a deeper conceptual metaphor that we could formulate as COMMITMENT IS REACHING OUT, in which a concrete, physical act (reaching out) is mapped onto an abstract target (commitment). Even if German native speakers are not consciously aware of it, this conceptual metaphor is part of the image schemas they associate with phrases like *Partei ergreifen* or *das Wort ergreifen*. By contrast, the conceptual metaphor the Spanish student associated with the German two-pronged verb (DESTINY IS A TWO-PRONGED VERB) is not necessarily shared by every speaker of German, even though it might sound poetic. The question is, How can grammar be at the same time subjectively meaningful and socially intelligible?

Grammar Games in Literature

That question has been answered by bilingual writers who like to play with the grammar of monolingual readers. Franz Kafka, a bilingual speaker of German and Czech with a knowledge of French, English, Italian, and a little Yiddish, was a master at grammar games. For him, an assimilated Czech Jew living in Prague at the time of the dismantlement of the multilingual Austro-Hungarian Empire, German was the educated language spoken by his family and friends and the language he was taught at home and at school. German was also the language he wrote in, but it remained for him, as he said, a learned or "paper" language. Thus, although Kafka's German was that of a native speaker, he always had the feeling it was for him a borrowed or foreign language (Deleuze and Guattari 16).

Like many bilingual writers, who straddle two grammars or who have a detached relation to the language they grew up with, Kafka was particularly sensitive to the embodied image schemas evoked by grammar.[3] Having the protagonist of *The Metamorphosis*,

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Gregor Samsa, "find himself transformed" (*er fand sich verwandelt*) one morning into a cockroach (*Verwandlung* 1) instead of "having been transformed" (*er wurde verwandelt*) by some exterior power is the trick of a grammatically skillful narrator. As a neutral-gender cockroach (*das Ungeziefer*) and a masculine human being (*er*), Gregor occupies an ambiguous grammatical space. Since we usually stand on the floor (*auf dem Fußboden*) and look up to the fixture that is on the ceiling (*an der Decke*), it is both a grammatical question and a question of point of view as to whether he is crawling *an der Decke* or *auf der Decke*; whether, as in the text, he is hanging from the ceiling or walking on it (*auf der Decke*). Kafka's text retains the ambiguity of point of view (and hence the ambiguity of Gregor's identity) by having it both ways. The narrator writes: "Besonders oben *auf der Decke hing er gern*; es war ganz anders als das Liegen auf dem Fußboden" (32; my emphasis). The translation by Willa Muir and Edwin Muir reads, "He especially enjoyed hanging suspended from the ceiling; it was much better than lying on the floor" (Kafka, *Complete Stories* 115). But with the pronoun *er* referring to a human being, the prepositional phrase *auf der Decke* is a physical impossibility and *auf der Decke hängen* is ungrammatical. A human being can hang from the ceiling but not on the ceiling. The human grammar can be reconciled with the animal grammar only if one sees in Gregor Samsa both a cockroach walking on the ceiling (*oben auf der Decke*) and a human being suspended from the ceiling (*hing er gern*).[4]

Kafka plays with the gap between the structural grammar of the paper language that German is for him and the cognitive grammar of his lived experience, between the literate German grammar as it is used by the native speaker and the subjective grammar as it is appropriated by the nonnative speaker. His stories and parables are often about the grammatical and lexical metaphors of the German language taken literally in an exaggerated way. For example, the expression *vor Hunger sterben* 'to die of hunger' gets emplotted as the plight of the *Hungerkünstler* 'the hunger artist.' Prepositions reposition themselves as existential-ontogenetic positions: the German metaphor *sich vor dem Gesetz beugen* 'to abide by [or lit. to bend before] the law' is turned into the parable of a man from the country who spends his life literally bending before the doorkeeper in an effort to peek inside the law. The insulting metaphor *Ungeziefer* 'vermin' applied by Kafka's father to his son's Jewish friend Löwy (*Letter* 24) becomes under Kafka's pen a tale where the son of the family himself turns into vermin. The predilection for characters that are half human, half animals or objects (a cockroach, an ape, a mouse, dogs, a thread spool), enables Kafka to cast an objective gaze on everyday routine expressions and give them a new, estranged life. For example, in "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" 'The Cares of a Family Man,' a thread spool that lives in stairwells and hallways and names itself Odradek transforms a purely ritualized speech act sequence like the question-answer routine people engage in with small children ("What's your name? Where do you live?") into a strange real-life dialogue with an inanimate object. Odradek gives the questioner its name and address and laughs, but its laughter is that of a creature "without lungs." Its name, Odradek, is incomprehensible, and its address is an impersonal bureaucratic phrase: "Residence uncertain" (*Complete Stories* 427–29).

As a bilingual, Kafka makes German grammar into a foreign grammar. He recaptures the arbitrariness of the German linguistic sign, which for monolingual native speakers has become routine, and relocates it in his fictional creations with its own nonarbitrariness. That he found most of his stories "hilarious" and couldn't stop laughing as he read them to his friends (Max Brod qtd. in Begley 185) might very well be due to the malicious pleasure he took at inflating the German language to ludicrous proportions and

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thus poking fun at German while writing it in a masterly way. As he once wrote to a correspondent, "[D]on't you get pleasure out of exaggerating painful things as much as possible?" (Kafka qtd. in Begley 156).

Cognitive linguistics enables us to understand the conceptual and embodied nature of Kafka's grammatical imagination in yet another way. By bringing in two conceptual spaces, Kafka not only played games with the serious grammar of the native speaker but also constructed whole stories around those games. I give as an example a short story that is often read in second- or third-year college German.

Bilingual Blends: From Sentence Grammar to Story Grammar

In November 1917 Kafka published in the Zionist journal *Der Jude* 'The Jew' a short story titled *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* 'A Report to an Academy.' This report, narrated in the first person by Rotpeter, in the story a well-known variety artist, is a satire of an official speech traditionally delivered on invitation to the assembled members of the Austrian academy by prominent scholars and artists. The speech is to relate how they became the famous personalities they are now. Rotpeter's story, told in perfectly literate high German, is of an ape who decided to become human. It begins: "Honored members of the Academy, you have done me the honor of inviting me to give your Academy an account of the life I formerly led as an ape" (*Complete Stories* 250), and it proceeds to recount the events that led Rotpeter to become a human being and a successful artist. He tells of his animal life in the jungle of Sierra Leone; of his capture by the hunters of the German Hagenbeck Circus; of the shots he received; of his incarceration in a cage too small for him to stand, too narrow for him to sit; of being crushed against a locker; of his exhaustion and desperation; and finally of his decision to escape by the only means available—namely, by ceasing to be an ape:

> Immer an dieser Kistenwand – ich wäre unweigerlich verreckt. Aber Affen *gehören* bei Hagenbeck an die Kistenwand – nun, so *hörte ich auf*, Affe zu sein. (*Drucke* 304; my emphasis)
>
> All the time facing that locker—I should certainly have perished. Yet as far as Hagenbeck was concerned, *the place for apes* was in front of a locker—well then, I had to *stop* being an ape. (*Complete Stories* 253; my emphasis)

The ape's metamorphosis is nothing but a grammatical feat. From *gehören* 'to belong in a place' to *hören auf* 'to stop,' there is in German only a difference of a few letters, yet in the story the difference is between life and death. *Hören auf* erases *gehören*, and the dash is the trace of a metamorphosis that is at once linguistic and existential.

The ape starts learning the body language of his captors; he imitates their every gesture, is rewarded for his progress. He masters the sociopragmatics of the human handshake, the smoking, drinking, and grunting of the sailors on board. One day, as he has at last managed to gulp down a whole bottle of vodka and throw the empty bottle dramatically behind him, not as a desperado but "as an artistic performer," the word "Hallo!" bursts forth from his lips—his first human word (257). Thus begins his career as a human artist. His linguistic breakthrough is the first milestone on the path to becoming a fully assimilated speaker of German. He takes German lessons and wears out many language teachers. He makes spectacular progress. He earns honorary doctorates. He becomes undistinguishable from a human member of the academy. He only has the bad habit of reminding visitors of his origins by lowering his pants in public and displaying the wound he received during his capture.

This story was immediately understood by the readers of the time as a parable for the assimilation of Jews in German-speaking Czechoslovakia. Since the 1990s there has been a dramatic increase in the number of

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theater performances of the "Report" in Vienna, Weimar, Berlin, and many other cities, featuring Turkish and Kurdish actors in the role of the German-speaking ape. It has been read as a metaphor for the plight of immigrants and the problems of identity associated with their acquisition of the dominant language. Cognitive linguists account for this interpretation through the conceptual blends elicited by Kafka's use of grammar. Mark Turner in particular shows that the literary imagination, especially one nourished by a multilingual disposition like Kafka's (see Nekula), constructs stories by mapping various image schemas onto one another: the image schema of the ape onto that of the Jew, of the cage onto social discrimination, of the gibberish of the ape onto foreigner talk. This mapping is done through three basic cognitive processes: story, projection, and parable.

Story

We construct stories through idealized cognitive models (ICMs) or prototypical image schemas evoked by the words. Typical image schemas are motion along a path, bounded interior, balance, symmetry, space, time, causality. Actions like hunting or capture evoke schemas of physical violence along a path; objects like locker or wall evoke schemas of enclosure and containment; prepositions like *against* (the locker wall), *facing* (the locker), *in front of* (the locker) evoke physical coercion and constraint. We recognize and empathize with the events in the Kafka story, because we share with the narrator some of the basic image schemas of human perception and interaction: space, time, causality, motion along a path, container and containment, up and down, in and out—all are expressed through our grammars.

We combine various image schemas into a coherent narrative imagining of possible worlds or mental spaces. In a given cognitive or mental space, we construct using cognitive operations. We predict—that is, imagine—the consequences of the event narrated: for the ape, for example, we imagine fear of death, the decision to become human, the effort to learn the human language. We evaluate the actions taken by the narrator, their folly or wisdom: for example, the options open to the ape after his capture. We follow the narrator's subsequent paths of action: the ape learns the language of his captors and ultimately makes an official report to the academy in that language. Ultimately, we explain paradoxes and inconsistencies: that for the ape the foreign language was both a way out of bondage (*Ausweg* or *Weg heraus*) and a way into the opportunities and constraints of a speech community. This speech community negated him as an ape but rewarded his linguistic performance and applauded his story.

Projection

As readers, we not only construct a story through image schemas, we also project the overt source story onto a covert target story. In Kafka's "Report," the readers of the time projected what Turner calls "a spatial action-story" of physical capture, transportation by ship, and human language instruction onto the more abstract "nonspatial event-story" of the assimilated Jew in the Prague of 1917 (31). The source story, of a successful language learner and renowned artist, was projected parabolically onto a target story, the story of Jews in 1917. In the last thirty years, the audiences at the staging of this story have had no difficulty projecting the Kafka source story onto the target story of immigrants in Germany, people forced to leave their countries of origin through political or economic necessity, forced to learn German, sometimes trying to bend the German language to make it say things native speakers would never say (see, e.g., the Italian Gino Chiellino [*Sich die Fremde*]; the Brazilian Zé do Rock; the Afghan Feridun Zaimoglu).

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By projecting one story onto another, we blend two mental spaces. In Kafka's "Report," at least two stories are blended, on the basis of such metaphors as NATURE IS CULTURE, AN APE IS A HUMAN BEING, A JEW IS A GERMAN, A NONNATIVE IMMIGRANT IS A NATIVE SPEAKER. Each blend in turn creates and is created by the metaphoric reading of everyday verbs like *gehören* and *hören auf*. The cognitive and rhetorical process by which we construct stories, project them onto other stories, and blend one story into another is what Turner calls parable (5). Parable is here a cognitive process or mental instrument; it begins with narrative imagining, then combines story with projection.

Parable

We make connections across more than one mental space. Turner writes, "Parable is the projection of story" (7). It is a mental instrument: "Meanings are not mental objects bounded in conceptual places but rather complex operations of projection, binding, linking, blending, and integration over multiple spaces" (57).

In Kafka's story as in many other parables, a talking animal is a conceptual blend. The ape uses the human language to make fun of the language's most respected native speakers. Like the students who played semantic games with German grammatical structures and with code-switching between languages, Kafka's narrator plays grammar games with the reader. The ape's speech is alternately obsequious, ironic, lyrical, tragic. He adopts in turn the respectful tone of a circus director, the macho tone of military camaraderie, the lofty metaphysical-philosophical tone of the sage, and the conceited tone of the academic. He insults his audience as he praises them.

As he tells the story of his captivity, the ape both uses and rejects the language of the native speakers by opening up unexpected narrative spaces behind the words of everyday use, in this case the German noun *Ausweg*:

> Ich verlangte Freiheit weder damals noch heute. Nebenbei: mit Freiheit betrügt man sich unter Menschen allzu oft. . . . Nein Freiheit wollte ich nicht. Nur einen *Ausweg* . . . sollte der Ausweg auch nur eine Täuschung sein. . . . Nur nicht mit aufgehobenen Armen stillestehen, angedrückt an eine Kistenwand. (*Drucke* 304–05; my emphasis)

> For my part I desired freedom neither then nor now. In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. . . . No, freedom was not what I wanted. Only *a way out*. . . . [E]ven should the way out prove to be an illusion. . . . Only not to stay motionless with raised arms, crushed against a wooden wall. (*Complete Stories* 254; my emphasis)

In the action space of the story, *Ausweg* in German could have the literal meaning of "exit." But the noun doesn't mean what its etymology suggests (*ein Weg heraus*); it can be used only figuratively, as "a way out of a dilemma." In the nonspatial event space of the target, it takes on a metaphysical connotation of escape, which is contrasted with *Freiheit* 'freedom.' Kafka plays with the literal and figurative meanings of *Ausweg*. In the ape's words, "a way out" is the only thing humans can hope for, whereas freedom is associated with animal nature, paradise lost, and an ape's distant memory of perfect happiness.

As he concludes his report, the narrator once again uses the language of his masters to both report (*berichten*) and pass judgment (*richten*) on his development from ape to human being:

> Überblicke ich meine Entwicklung und ihr bisheriges Ziel, so klage ich weder, noch bin ich zufrieden . . . *ich berichte nur*, auch Ihnen, hohe Herren von der Akademie, *habe ich nur berichtet*. (*Drucke* 313; my emphasis)

> As I look back on my development and survey what I have achieved so far, I do not complain, but I am not complacent either . . . *I am only making a report*. To you too, honored Members of the Academy, I *have only made a report*. (*Complete Stories* 259; my emphasis)

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In standard German, the transitivity prefix *be-* in the verb *berichten* 'to report' is used to make someone or something the target of a nominalized action. The Indo-European root *recht-* 'right, correct, lawful, upright, forthright' invites the reader to explore alternative mental spaces related to making things straight, setting the record straight, saying it right, correcting someone, or even making an ape stand upright. So even as he claims to be only reporting, the ape is always already passing judgment, settling scores, correcting the record by drawing on the multiple conceptual spaces afforded by German grammar.

Conclusion

If grammar is not, as many language textbooks present it, merely a system of linguistic structures, if it has conceptual meanings that are grounded in our experience, foreign language learners are faced with the challenge of catching native speakers' conceptual world in the vocabularies of their own experience. Meeting this challenge is exactly what the MLA recommends when it enjoins all foreign language majors to acquire translingual and transcultural competence—that is, to learn how to operate between languages (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Langs. 237; see also Kramsch; Kramsch and Huffmaster). But, as I asked at the beginning of this paper, how can a learner's grammar be at the same time subjectively meaningful and socially intelligible or culturally acceptable?

There have been some proposals to use metaphor theory to teach foreign languages (e.g., Cameron and Low; Achard and Niemeier). Such a pedagogy is attractive, as it gives meaning to otherwise arbitrary-looking features of grammar. It can give language learners a glimmer of an answer to the ever-tantalizing question, Do you think differently when you speak differently? It is fruitful to teach students how to recognize and evaluate the attested, conventional metaphors of a speech community's grammar, but one should be cautious in trying to deduce grammatical structures from conceptual schemata: the attempt risks propagating stereotypes and reifying meanings that remain multiple and polysemous. Fortunately for nonnative speakers, the socially sanctioned and subjectively creative will always be in tension with each other. It is against the conventional metaphors of a speech community that the more subjective grammars of writers like Kafka and students' grammar games will be understood and appreciated, and it is against the bilingual blends of nonnative speakers that monolingual grammars will find their raison d'être.

Notes

1. Between the structuralist-philological view of grammar and the more recent cognitive grammars, there has been of course the very influential transformational-generative grammar proposed by Noam Chomsky, which served language teachers well in the days of the audiolingual method.

2. Cognitive linguistics does not distinguish between grammatical and lexical structures, since both have conceptual meaning, based in our embodied experience, and the mind apprehends both through metaphoric processes.

3. See, for example, the Algerian writer Adbelkebir Khatibi, who writes of his ambivalence toward French in *Love in Two Languages*: "Speaking to you in your own language, I am yourself without really being you, fading away in the tracks you leave" (5). We find the same ambivalence toward French in Jacques Derrida, toward German in Gino Chiellino (*Fremde*), and toward language *tout court* in Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*.

4. Whether Kafka intended it or not, the thorough ambiguity maintained throughout the narrative regarding the human and animal characteristics of Gregor Samsa makes such a reading plausible. It is of course possible, although not mentioned in Marek Nekula's thorough study of Kafka's German, that the expression *auf der Decke hängen* was a Prague German variant at the time.

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