

## TEACHING HINDI WITH COMICS

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### Abstract

The use of images has been a long established practice in language teaching. During the last year I have been experimenting with the use of online comics as a part of teaching Hindi and found that it has had very beneficial learning outcomes. I shall show how I am using comics in order to promote student engagement with dialogues. In an initial attempt at understanding how comics help in language teaching I shall also explore how theorists who work on comics characterise the notion of 'closure' as described by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1994), which refers to how viewers provide links between different panels in a comic and a possible parallel with the notion of an 'information gap' in communicative language teaching. Examples show how the use of comics and images can help to convey concepts in a non-verbal manner and how conceiving of a dialogue as a comic story board helps in creating meaningful dialogues. I shall also point out that there is a possibility with online comics to create opportunities for further studies of the impact of different forms of presentation of materials through studying web analytics. Finally, I suggest that however apparently haphazard comics maybe, they add to student engagement which may be helpful when seeking to motivate students in their language studies.

*Keywords:* Comics, Hindi, Language Teaching

### 1 Literature Review

There has been considerable interest in comic studies since Eisner's pioneering *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) on the study of comics as a serious story telling medium. Notable in this was Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994) which introduced a new level of sophistication in understanding the ways in which words and images combined in order to tell stories in comics. Neil Cohn has published a number of works including *Visual Language of Comics* (2013) which examined the language of comic story telling from a multi-cultural approach that draws upon linguistics. In addition a number of the studies of Japanese Manga, such as the collection of essays called *Japanese Visual Culture* (2015) edited by Mark W. MacWilliams have contributed to a range of valuable perspectives on how distinct cultural values can be depicted in comics.

In addition there have been a fair number of publications on the use of comics in ESL teaching, such as Stephen Cary's *Going Graphic* (2004) which explored the application of comics to language teaching. Alongside these mainstream publications there have been a number of other publications such as Andrew Smith's *Teaching with Comics* (2006), Jason Rankers study of comics in ESL *Using Comic Books as Read-Alouds* (2007-8) and David Recine's *Comics Aren't Just For Fun Anymore* (2013).

In relation to comics in South Asia there have been a number of studies of the role of images in narratives in South Asia. In a pioneering work in this area in Victor Mair showed in his work *Painting and Performance* (1996) how ancient Indic story telling traditions with pictures were influential in the development of story telling traditions through Asia. Other authors have also looked at how contemporary folk art is deployed in telling narratives such as Roma Chatterji's *Speaking with Pictures* (2012). There have been few studies of Hindi comics which have suggested that Hindi comics developed at the same time as western comics. Since the 1980s the style and substance of comics has also altered greatly and contemporary Hindi comics now resemble many western, American style, comics. This can be clearly seen in series such as Nāgrāj which began to appear in 1986 and was in a typical art style of the period and depicted struggles between the Indian superhero and patriots against bandits and cross border incursions from neighbouring countries. However, by 2012 Nāgrāj had become one of team of superheros fighting global terrorism under the guise of Neo-Nazi movements in Germany. Aruna Rao (1999-2001) argued that comics in India only rose to prominence in the 1970s and it was in the 1980s and 90s that they reached their greatest popularity with a genre of Indian superhero comics (1999: 165-166). Peterson (2010) also situates this development in relation to the popularity in the post war period of western superhero cartoons and the development of Indian comics based on the lives of gods, heroes and other characters in the series of comics called Amar Citra Katha as discussed in Karline McLain's *India's Immortal Comic Books* (2009).

## **2 Introduction: The context of this work**

The context for this paper is work I have been involved in for the teaching of Hindi as a foreign language and work towards developing Hindi language teaching materials. I have been involved in teaching Hindi since the early 1980s and since 2012 began to be interested in the possibilities of using comics in the creation of original teaching materials for Hindi. I have been working on Hindi teaching materials since the early nineteen eighties but these were always basically text based and it has only been more recently I started to include more illustrations and comics in my materials and teaching.

The key factor in this was that as a part of developing online materials in 2014-15 I started to consider what I first thought of as storyboarding the Hindi dialogues in the first year Hindi materials. This then developed into an interest in actually creating comic dialogues for the materials.

In 2013 I re-imagined the set of first year materials I had been teaching and changed the back story from a group of non-Indian friends arriving in India to a story about a group of non-Indian and Indian friends meeting in restaurants, cafes and each other's homes in a western country. The logic for this was in part that this reflected better the lived experience of most Hindi students in Western countries and in part it fitted with an idea that relating the materials to a real life context that related to the students might make the materials more accessible. The intention was also always to then move the story to India for the second year level materials when it was more likely that students might be able to also make visits to India as part of their studies. A second element in the re-imagining of the materials was a change from introducing lessons with dialogues which introduced several language points and which were around a page in length to dialogues which focused on only one construction at a time and which were typically around six to ten lines long. The dialogues were all written in

collaboration with native speakers and as part of the process of recording them the speakers were able to have input into what sounded to them authentic speech forms. The audio recordings were then divided into sound files and using HTML connected to the displays of them in pages on the internet.

This means as well the comics which illustrate the dialogues have turned out to be around a page or so, around six to ten panels and it has been possible to storyboard the story in a way that makes it as accessible as possible. When writing this paper I have had three major questions in mind: why use comics? Are there benefits? and can we measure the success of using comics?

### **3 Why use comics?**

In a sense the answer to why use comics is obvious, it makes them accessible in the same way as most people see comics as more accessible than text alone. However, as Scott McCloud has argued comics have a range of advantages over just text in telling stories, in particular the very fact that the characters are not cartoons means that it's possible for readers to make a connection with them in a way which is not possible if we use realistic photos. In addition this seems to also put them apart from video materials or photographs. Comics give agency to readers, they have to imagine for themselves how the drawings relate to reality and so they can imagine themselves into the story.

A second important benefit to using comics I realised as I was drawing the comics, comics make you think in a new way about teaching materials. I spotted continuity errors in the materials which I had never seen when composing the materials as text materials. In addition I began to see how it was possible when making drawings which illustrated dialogues which illustrated demonstrative constructions like 'this is' and 'that is' show how language related to practice in a way which was simpler than describing it in words. The benefits are more extensive though as well as readers of comics recognise conventions like thought bubbles and gestures and so it's possible to illustrate aspects of what characters are thinking as well as what they are saying. In addition I came to realise that working out how to make line breaks in speech bubbles meant that in a way that was better than punctuation it was possible to illustrate the 'chunks' of speech which are employed in everyday speech. There are also numerous aspects of Hindi grammar and levels of address and speech register which reflect who is speaking to who and in what context. When describing these in text it's necessary to explain these in words, in online comics the contextual use of language can far more easily be depicted by the mix of text, audio and image.

A third way in which comics are a benefit is that they make students engage in a new way with teaching materials. The ways in which students interact with the materials can be thought of as falling into two types of involvement, hopefully, in and out of the class room.

Out of the class room I hope that the students are using the online versions of the materials, so they can read the text, listen to the Hindi, and look at the pictures. In addition there are interactive materials where students will be clicking buttons and inputting text in order to solve the kinds of problems it is possible to set up using a simple scripting language like Javascript within a web browser.

In the class room there are also opportunities for students to access the materials online, and to use print versions of the materials. One of the first things I noticed when I introduced comics in 2015 was that if given a comic with empty speech bubbles in it students would want to fill in the speech bubbles with what should be in them. So this creates a new class activity, copying dialogue and creating new dialogues to go with the comics. In addition in 2016 I began to start classes with giving handouts of comics with the Hindi text in at the beginning of classes and students are much more ready to do initial pair work speaking and translating the dialogues if they are given it in this form than if they are given the dialogues as text alone.

It is self evident that in online materials there is a possible combination of sound, text and image which is likely to be of benefit to students learning a language. However, the implications of this need to be considered further. This is because in online learning there is also a tactile aspect, students click, or touch, on screen elements in order to hear sounds, or make other events take place such as text or images change. In order to have some sense of how students use the materials in 2015 and 2016 I set aside time to make the students use the online materials in class. This was beneficial to students and to myself.

To my surprise I quickly found that most students interacted with online activities as if the main function of them was to solve how the interface work, not the language forms in them, and in general the more complicated the interface, the less attention they paid to the language forms in the activity in their desire to solve the puzzle. The parallel I suggest is that of the notion of levels in a computer game, something all students are very familiar with. That meant I realised what worked best was activities with a simple interface which had an element of random change, so that emphasis was focused on the language forms rather than learning the interface.

One response to this I believe is embodied in some online language learning tools, such as DuoLingo, which present simple interfaces with only a limited number of variant activity formats. I believe that this is because may in part be because it is beneficial in helping students to focus on the language learning aspect of the materials rather than the interface itself.

A second aspect of watching the interaction with the activities, and answering questions about what to do with them was that it focused my attention on the need to integrate the activities on the language topics. Unless both were presented as one 'page' students would get lost in looking for where to find out what to do, and how, rather than doing the activities themselves.

However, observing students in a language lab interacting with the online activities also revealed though that the lack of the tactile element of students creating Hindi script themselves also severely limited their utility. In the second year of experimental practice I have found myself increasingly using the online materials as support to print and hand written activities in class and have the anecdotal sense that this is a better use of the online materials than having all the interaction online itself as students being involved in the creative aspect of writing their own texts gives them agency in the learning that the more passive online only learning experience lacks.

It is possible that one response to this might be to pursue an approach to developing online activities which are in some senses analogous to the approach taken by DuoLingo. However, there are clearly a number of issues with such an approach, and the way in which DuoLingo has not been able as yet to develop a Hindi program hints at some of the difficulties. There are issues such as script and audio recognition which are technical challenges. In addition I am not convinced that with a highly culturally distinct and inflected language such as Hindi that phonology, gender and case might present challenges for non South Asian learners without more explicit scaffolding in the learning materials. My provisional conclusion is that we may need therefore to look at other approaches as well such as developing learner communities where students interact more broadly with a larger community of learners in order to give support to the learning process.

#### **4 Examples of comic illustrations to support learning**

There are countless ways in which in language teaching illustrations can be employed. These include images for concrete nouns such as these where the roughness of the imagery can make them stand for general concepts, such as man and woman, and sufficiently recognisable to be appropriate for an Indian context whilst not being so precisely rendered as to raise issues of what sort of person is being represented. It is also possible to represent typical Indian household items such as certain types of cooking pots and plates

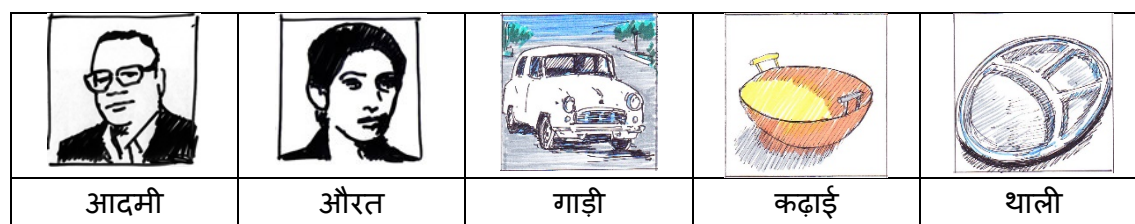


Fig. 1. Images for man, woman, vehicle, *karhāṭ*, and *thālī*

It is also possible through comic images to illustrate more abstract vocabulary concepts and in some cases to avoid issues like what the precise boundaries of India while still being able to use a map to symbolise India.

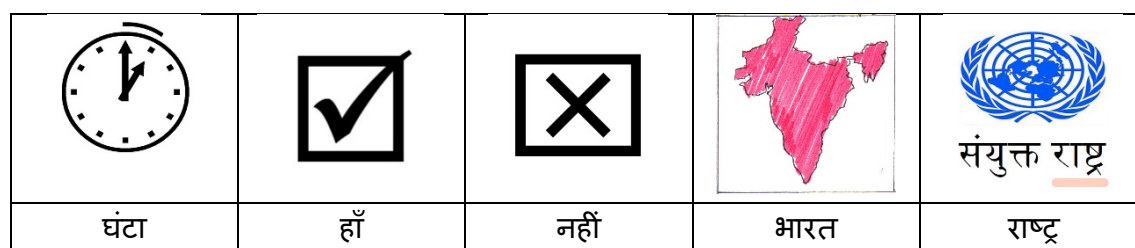


Fig. 2. Images for: hour, yes, no, India and nations

### 5 Demonstrating address levels and gender agreements

An issue which students need to understand is the way that Hindi has three address levels, for intimate, informal and polite contexts and that verbs, adjectives, and adverbs inflect to show the address levels being used. In textual expositions this has to be explained, but in pictures its possible to illustrate how people of different genders, ages and status address each other. This is clearly an area in which the use of comics enhances the accessibility of the teaching materials.



Fig. 3. Dialogue 20 showing address levels in pronouns verbs and adverbs



## 6 Demonstrating singular and plural direct and oblique forms

Another issue that students need to engage with is the way that nouns have belong to either masculine or feminine genders in Hindi and possessive pronouns and adjectives, inflect to show the gender of nouns and their are different patterns by which nouns show singular or plural number depending on whether they are governed by post positions. Evidently, as that last sentence suggests this is quite a fair set of language behaviours that need to be engaged with. In class this is often taught by using objects and demonstrating how to say singular and plural forms and saying things which illustrate the ways the words inflect like 'the books are in the bag' and the 'the boxes are in the box' etc. Again the use of comics allows student so see visual representations of situations where these kind of inflections of words have to be used in an intuitive and authentic contexts.



Fig. 4. Dialogue 28 showing singular and plural noun forms

## 7 Demonstrating conjunctions

Another good example of how comic imagery can be helpful in teaching Hindi is that comic conventions, such as thought bubbles, can be used when teaching some parts of speech. Thus when teaching 'X or Y' characters can be illustrated thinking of choices, and likewise 'neither X nor Y' can be illustrated as well as 'also X' and 'only X'. This last set of examples is also a good illustration of how unlike video or photographs cartoons actually offer a very useful way to express some ideas which is not possible using other media.



Fig. 5. Dialogue 27 showing a range of conjunctions and particle usages



## **8 Can we measure success in using comics?**

Clearly one question is are there benefits in all the work involved in creating online comics? Under this heading there are a range of questions which I do not have as yet answers for, such as can comics attract new students? Can comics encourage better retention of students? Can comics deliver better learning outcomes? In truth there is also a major problem in trying to do any quantitative studies of Hindi learners, there are simply not enough learners in Australia universities at the moment. It is impossible to eliminate the variables from small sample sizes, typically around twenty or so people in class, and variations in outcomes may be as much due to background and motivation as in any way related to teaching materials or teaching practices.

However, it is possible to provide new insight into reader behaviour when using online teaching materials. This is in this research partly due to a side benefit from using an open online platform for the development of the online materials. The aim in developing the materials in this way was in part to test them extensively before creating ePub versions to be used within the dedicated learning environment which the university sees as forming the basis of an integrated learning environment. As a side effect of this though I have access to some aspects of the web logs for usage of the site over the period June 2015 to October 2016.

Further possible developments for assessing the effectiveness of online materials is that there is them a new opportunity for page based feedback, including a feedback link on each page. In addition if readers were willing to have their behaviour tracked by ‘cookies’, something most web users are, it would be possible get a better understanding of how students use materials as a whole.

However, whether in the end such quantitative approaches can really tell us much about learning outcomes is unclear, as without data on the entry background of learners or tests of the learning outcomes this data may be in the end not highly meaningful. It is however, possible that qualitative analysis of user feedback on a page based basis might provide at least some data on what learners look for in language study materials.

There is also though some raw data, page view data, which may also indicate some aspects of what attracts users. Although like all such internet usage data is it hostage to a million unpredictable variables. Moreover, there were many factors that complicate an analysis, including that initially not all pages were actually online, they only became fully online by the end of 2015, and that in 2016 a number of pages were available in multiple forms, comic and not comic, and to make comparison possible these figures are not presented separately here. However, in the end the bottom line is that appendixes one and two show an increase in usage that parallels the introduction of cartoons. In addition the page views increasing from 6365 views during eight months in 2015 to 17373 views during ten months of 2016. It is of impossible using simple page views to tell how many of these were by students studying in the course, but it does appear that topics related to those being studied were being more accessed during periods when those topics were being studied.

## **9 Conclusion**

It is undoubtedly too early in this work to quantify what impact the use of comics in teaching Hindi is having. The main evidence for its impact is anecdotal, and currently based on

information I remember students saying to me about the materials. Further research on the student cohort would need approval to do some more substantial quantitative research work involving some sorts of survey based research on student feedback on usage of the comics.

However, I have as indicated above reservations about the utility of such research on such small research samples, typically of classes of less than thirty students. Due to this I want to explore possibilities for broadening the research base to include more Hindi learners and then seeing if research could be carried out on a larger group of students studying in diverse environments.

But my tentative conclusion after having used these materials fully now for a year is that they represent an innovative and useful development for Hindi teaching and what is needed is to explore how now to broaden usage of the materials in order to provide a basis for future studies of their effectiveness as teaching materials.

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Appendix 1: Hindi Express website Usage: May- December 2015

	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
<a href="#">/topic000.html</a>	62	39	39	147	128	113	61	90
<a href="#">/topic001.html</a>	8	5	7	16	17	16	17	78
<a href="#">/topic002.html</a>	6	2	6	14	20	20	15	132
<a href="#">/topic003.html</a>	3	1	5	13	18	8	15	137
<a href="#">/topic004.html</a>	2	3	6	11	11	4	15	87
<a href="#">/topic005.html</a>	4	1	7	10	9	3	15	67
<a href="#">/topic006.html</a>	2	1	7	9	9	3	15	48
<a href="#">/topic007.html</a>	2	1	7	9	6	1	14	59
<a href="#">/topic008.html</a>	2	1	7	8	3	1	11	50
<a href="#">/topic009.html</a>	3	1	5	8	3	2	8	57
<a href="#">/topic010.html</a>	4		7	9	2	1	6	41
<a href="#">/topic011.html</a>	2	2	5	9	4	1	5	34
<a href="#">/topic012.html</a>	1		5	9	2	1	4	33
<a href="#">/topic013.html</a>	2	2	6	6	2	1	4	33
<a href="#">/topic014.html</a>	3		4	6	3	1	4	31
<a href="#">/topic015.html</a>	3	2	5	7	2	1	4	29
<a href="#">/topic016.html</a>	3		7	7	3	1	4	23
<a href="#">/topic017.html</a>	3		5	7	3	1	4	13
<a href="#">/topic018.html</a>	4		7	8	4	1	3	7
<a href="#">/topic019.html</a>	4		6	8	3	1	3	4
<a href="#">/topic020.html</a>	5		5	9	4	1	3	4
<a href="#">/topic021.html</a>	4		5	8	6	1	3	4
<a href="#">/topic022.html</a>	9		5	8	2	1	3	4
<a href="#">/topic023.html</a>	5		6	8	2	1	3	4
<a href="#">/topic024.html</a>	12	2	5	7	3	1	3	5
<a href="#">/topic025.html</a>	6	1	5	6	2	1	3	4
<a href="#">/topic026.html</a>	5		5	6	1	1	3	4
<a href="#">/topic027.html</a>	10		4	14	2	9	3	10
<a href="#">/topic028.html</a>	5	1	5	7	17	1	2	5
<a href="#">/topic029.html</a>	8	1	4	6	1	1	2	6
<a href="#">/topic030.html</a>	9		4	6	3	1	2	5
<a href="#">/topic031.html</a>	13		4	6	2	1	2	5
<a href="#">/topic032.html</a>	8		6	6	2	1	2	7
<a href="#">/topic033.html</a>	8		4	6	9	1	2	4
<a href="#">/topic034.html</a>	8		5	7	3	1	2	4
<a href="#">/topic035.html</a>	10	1	6	7	2	1	2	4
<a href="#">/topic036.html</a>	15		4	7	1	2	2	4

<a href="#">/topic037.html</a>	10	1	6	7	2	1	2	4
<a href="#">/topic038.html</a>	13	1	5	6	4	1	2	4
<a href="#">/topic039.html</a>	6	1	5	6	2	1	2	4
<a href="#">/topic040.html</a>	7	1	4	8	6	1	2	5
<a href="#">/topic041.html</a>	5	11	4	8	5	1	2	4
<a href="#">/topic042.html</a>	8	5	4	9	4	2	2	5
<a href="#">/topic043.html</a>	5	3	5	7	4	2	1	6
<a href="#">/topic044.html</a>	9	2	8	14	7	3	1	7
<a href="#">/topic045.html</a>			38	108	11	32	1	13
<a href="#">/topic046.html</a>			27	37	49	29	1	4
<a href="#">/topic047.html</a>			16	27	18	15	1	5
<a href="#">/topic048.html</a>			12	40	19	14	1	4
<a href="#">/topic049.html</a>			9	56	32	23	1	4
<a href="#">/topic050.html</a>			5	42	42	9	1	4
<a href="#">/topic051.html</a>			12	60	22	10	1	4
<a href="#">/topic052.html</a>			5	54	15	10	1	4
<a href="#">/topic053.html</a>			39	50	31	10	1	4
<a href="#">/topic054.html</a>				65	24	15	1	4
<a href="#">/topic055.html</a>				66	29	8	1	4
<a href="#">/topic056.html</a>				61	21	9	1	4
<a href="#">/topic057.html</a>				53	17	18	1	4
<a href="#">/topic058.html</a>				57	18	10	1	4
<a href="#">/topic059.html</a>				50	19	14	1	5
<a href="#">/topic060.html</a>				42	17	11	1	4
<a href="#">/topic061.html</a>				56	21	26	1	4
<a href="#">/topic062.html</a>				40	39	13	1	4
<a href="#">/topic063.html</a>				36	27	9	1	4
<a href="#">/topic064.html</a>				27	28	10	1	4
<a href="#">/topic065.html</a>				22	26	25	1	5
<a href="#">/topic066.html</a>				25	44	14	1	8
<a href="#">/topic067.html</a>				19	27	11	1	4
<a href="#">/topic068.html</a>				22	27	12	1	4
<a href="#">/topic069.html</a>				10	27	16	1	4
<a href="#">/topic070.html</a>				8	22	14	1	4
<a href="#">/topic071.html</a>				7	31	16	1	4
<a href="#">/topic072.html</a>				7	20	16	1	5
<a href="#">/topic073.html</a>					23	37	1	5
<a href="#">/topic074.html</a>					28	26	1	4
<a href="#">/topic075.html</a>					33	17	1	4



<a href="#">/topic076.html</a>					35	15	1	5
<a href="#">/topic077.html</a>					31	16	1	4
<a href="#">/topic078.html</a>					31	9	1	4
<a href="#">/topic079.html</a>					32	10	1	4
<a href="#">/topic080.html</a>					27	10	1	5
<a href="#">/topic081.html</a>					21	10	1	4
<a href="#">/topic082.html</a>					15	7	1	4
<a href="#">/topic083.html</a>					13	5	1	4
<a href="#">/topic084.html</a>					13	7	61	4
total hits 6365	326	25	439	1657	1373	807	383	1355

Appendix 2: Hindi Express website Usage: January to October 2016

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct
<a href="#">/topic000.html</a>	119	160	231	167	306	157	130	180	124	155
<a href="#">/topic001.html</a>	89	86	97	57	51	16	27	18	12	25
<a href="#">/topic002.html</a>	44	79	62	20	30	12	24	13	12	23
<a href="#">/topic003.html</a>	43	70	54	16	24	17	25	8	9	15
<a href="#">/topic004.html</a>	35	54	59	13	18	11	21	9	8	14
<a href="#">/topic005.html</a>	33	41	59	10	17	8	22	6	7	14
<a href="#">/topic006.html</a>	26	28	51	6	19	13	11	4	7	9
<a href="#">/topic007.html</a>	23	25	57	9	17	6	16	6	7	18
<a href="#">/topic008.html</a>	24	26	58	19	29	8	16	4	7	12
<a href="#">/topic009.html</a>	21	15	67	9	20	6	18	5	7	14
<a href="#">/topic010.html</a>	23	16	81	10	23	9	18	6	7	11
<a href="#">/topic011.html</a>	27	15	77	8	19	7	19	4	7	9
<a href="#">/topic012.html</a>	30	15	78	9	20	7	18	8	7	12
<a href="#">/topic013.html</a>	30	11	87	10	18	8	20	9	9	11
<a href="#">/topic014.html</a>	26	5	79	12	20	10	19	7	11	12
<a href="#">/topic015.html</a>	31	11	88	16	18	12	26	5	8	14
<a href="#">/topic016.html</a>	57	13	109	23	46	34	25	13	13	18
<a href="#">/topic017.html</a>	50	14	94	17	33	27	24	10	10	20
<a href="#">/topic018.html</a>	28	12	84	15	22	29	21	11	7	17
<a href="#">/topic019.html</a>	31	12	95	13	20	40	21	9	6	21
<a href="#">/topic020.html</a>	25	11	91	18	34	34	19	11	5	16
<a href="#">/topic021.html</a>	27	8	74	19	22	27	23	8	4	15
<a href="#">/topic022.html</a>	21	9	66	21	24	25	17	10	5	15
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<a href="#">/topic026.html</a>	18	7	26	51	38	20	14	12	6	18
<a href="#">/topic027.html</a>	24	10	24	48	38	12	15	13	7	18
<a href="#">/topic028.html</a>	20	4	14	45	42	16	15	13	6	16
<a href="#">/topic029.html</a>	14	5	11	40	42	11	14	12	7	17
<a href="#">/topic030.html</a>	12	5	11	36	48	12	14	11	5	16
<a href="#">/topic031.html</a>	12	3	11	30	59	9	17	15	8	14
<a href="#">/topic032.html</a>	21	6	6	36	62	10	15	13	7	15
<a href="#">/topic033.html</a>	27	7	6	13	88	17	14	15	7	16
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