

How far can we deviate from the performative formula?

Lisa Hofmann

Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

1 Introduction

Austin (1979) proposes that performatives are unique in making explicit their illocutionary force. For example, in *'I hereby promise to bring beer.'*, we understand the illocutionary force of a promise to be explicit. Searle (1989) builds on that analysis by proposing an ontology of speech acts as actions, which can be performed by manifesting the intention to do so, and performative verbs, which denote speech acts and therefore can be used to manifest such an intention (such as *promise, order, thank* or *advise*). He suggests that performative sentences are composed with a performative main verb and some self-referentiality and could therefore potentially serve as performative utterances. In contrast, Eckhardt (2012) shows that self-referentiality can be understood as a property of utterances rather than sentences. Because self-reference is a necessary condition for performativity, also performativity can be understood as a property of utterances.

An event-based account of performative self-referentiality, in which the event-argument of the performative verb refers to the utterance raises the following questions:

- What restrictions does compositionality impose on the reference of verbal arguments in self-referential utterances?
- What can self-referentiality tell us about the properties and structure of performative events (or explicit speech acts)?

In section two, I give an in-depth critique of Eckhardt's account of performatives, which is an

effort of a sufficient characterisation, of which I will adopt some parts and reject others. Section three is a proposal to extend Eckhardt's event-based account of self-referentiality along the lines of the consequences of that account, principles of event individuation and compositionality. In the third section, I will attempt to answer the first of the above questions: Coreference of the event denoted by performative verbs with the utterance event leads to restrictions on the reference of participant-arguments of performative verbs: they have to be anchored in context. Section four will conclude my proposal with a discussion of my claims and of their relevance for the semantics and pragmatics of communication and dialogue: eventive self-referentiality and context-anchored arguments tie performative meaning to the utterance and its context.

2 Eckhardt's account

2.1 A formal analysis of self-referential utterances

Eckhardt (2012) provides a truth-conditional analysis of performatives on the basis of Davidson (1980). His basic assumption, that verbs take an event-argument, allows for a straightforward implementation of self-referential utterances: because utterances are events, they are possible referents for the event argument of the main verb of the uttered sentence. The adverb *hereby*, which characteristically is taken by performative verbs, introduces a context-relative constant ϵ , referring to the utterance. It saturates the event argument of the verb and thereby induces performative self-referentiality.

- (1) a. I (*hereby*) [*promise to bring beer*]_{VP}
 b. $\llbracket \text{promise to bring beer} \rrbracket^{w,c} = \lambda e \lambda x. \text{PROMISE}(x, e, \lambda w'. \text{BRING}(x, \text{BEER}, w'), w^0)$
 c. $\llbracket I \rrbracket^{w,c} = \mathbf{sp}$ (speaker in context c)
 d. $\llbracket \text{hereby} \rrbracket^{w,c} = \varepsilon$ (ongoing act of information transfer in c)
 e. $\llbracket I \text{ hereby promise to bring beer.} \rrbracket^{w,c} = \text{PROMISE}(\mathbf{sp}, \varepsilon, \text{BRING}(\mathbf{sp}, \text{BEER}))$

This analysis of performatives with *hereby* corresponds to Searle's direct account. However, unlike Searle, Eckhard does not assume a tacit *hereby* for performatives occurring without it, but an existential closure, which leads to an indirect derivation of performativity, much like Bach (1975) proposed.

- (2) $\llbracket I \text{ promise to bring beer.} \rrbracket^{w,c} = \exists e. \text{PROMISE}(\mathbf{sp}, e, \text{BRING}(\mathbf{sp}, \text{BEER}))$

The self-referentiality of this existential statement comes about in context, along with its verification through instantiation of the existentially bound variable.

- (3) $\llbracket \exists e. \text{PROMISE}(\mathbf{sp}, e, \text{BRING}(\mathbf{sp}, \text{BEER})) \rrbracket^{M,g} = 1$ because
 $\llbracket \exists e. \text{PROMISE}(\mathbf{sp}, e, \text{BRING}(\mathbf{sp}, \text{BEER})) \rrbracket^{M,g(e/\varepsilon)} = 1$

Eckhard shows that self-referentiality accounts for whether an utterance is interpreted as a performative or not in many cases, which were formerly considered problematic. Within this account, performative meaning is established through reference of the event-argument of the performative verb to the utterance event and diverse processes saturating verbal arguments give rise to different derivations of eventive self-referentiality. It follows that the performative event (or speech act) *is* the utterance event. However, there are performative utterances which are not strictly self-referring:

- (4) a. $\llbracket \text{King Karl hereby promises you a cow. (to farmer Burns)} \rrbracket = \text{PROMISE}(\text{KING}, \varepsilon, \lambda w'. \text{GIVE}(\text{KING}, \text{COW}, \text{BURNS}))$

(4) can be interpreted performatively, when uttered by an official messenger or representative of the king. Taking into account Parsons's (1990) argument for the uniqueness of roles as a principle of event individuation, the interpretation of *hereby* in (4a) as referring to the utterance leads to a felicitous utterance only if the speaker is King Karl. Eckhard therefore generalises the reference of *hereby* to a more abstract communicative event¹. Minimal communicative events take place at the level of utterances, and can be part of complex communicative events: A person A communicating on behalf of another person B towards a person C involves a larger communication between B and C . For performative utterances of sentences like (4), Eckhardt characterises the context-sensitive constant ε as referring to that complex communicative event. This analysis sheds light on many unsolved questions regarding the meaning of performativity. Deriving performativity through this special type of context anchoring explains how the same sentence can be used as a performative in some contexts and as a statement in others. As Eckhardt points out, a habitual interpretation of performative sentences leads to a reportative utterance.

- (5) (*Whenever you invite me, I promise to bring beer.*)

A specific communicative event is not habitual. Therefore Eckhardt's theory predicts that (5), which is habitual, could not be a performative. This raises the more general question about what communicative events are (and are not) – a question which I attempt to elucidate in the forthcoming sections. Performative utterances are a special type of communicative event, which are explicitly realised in language as the main verb's event argument. Because the event denoted by the performative main verb and the communica-

¹Eckhardt denominates these events as *ongoing acts of information transfer*. As has been pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, this notion is not compatible with a dialogue view of communication. I am going to use the more neutral term *communicative event*, which can not only be more conveniently used to talk about its participants and properties, but also forgoes inherent assumptions about the nature of communication.

tion are the same event, they should share their thematic roles and some other eventive properties. Investigating the linguistic realisations of these arguments and properties may offer some insight into their internal structure.

2.2 Self-reference and self-verification

Another widely discussed characteristic of performative utterances is being self-verificational. Incoherent discourses like in (6) have often been used as a test for performativity.

- (6) a. *I invite you to come to my party tonight.* – # *No, that's not true.*
b. *I invite you to come to my party tonight.* – # *Yes, correct.*

However, Eckhardt shows that self-verification and self-referentiality are not equivalent and both not sufficient for performativity. Many verbs can take *hereby* as an argument and thereby establish a self-referential reading. Not all of them are self-verificational or performative, as (7) shows.

- (7) *I hereby utter a sentence with seven words.*

An utterance of (7) would be self-referential, but not self-verificational (it would be that of a wrong statement). The self-referentiality is explicitly realised through the use of *hereby* and the sentence is a statement about its utterance. Necessary truth, which is established through context-anchoring, on the other hand does not require self-reference either, nor does it necessarily lead to a performative interpretation.

- (8) *I am here now.*

The self-verification of (8) comes about through the proximal deixis of its subparts, anchoring them in the speech situation. Although this sentence could not be used to make a self-referential utterance, its context-anchoring is similar to eventive self-reference of utterances as described by Eckhardt. Therefore the mechanism of self-verification in (8) seems to

be similar to performative self-verificationalism. Given that self-verification is a necessary condition for performatives and that there are different ways in which a sentence could be self-verificational, a step towards a more precise characterisation of performativity could be asking the question how exactly performative self-verification comes about. If self-referentiality and self-verificationalism are both necessary for performativity, we should ask how the two interrelate in the construal of performative meaning.

2.3 A sufficient characterisation?

The existence of non-performative self-referential utterances as in (7) and the fact that performative sentences uttered jokingly do not establish their potential force lead Eckhardt to further make assumptions about pragmatic mechanisms as sufficient conditions for performative utterances:

She assumes that the speaker has to actively express their sincere intention to perform the described speech act. She proposes that performative utterances involve the speaker's definition as a performative. Eckhardt believes that the speaker as the creator of an utterance has the power to define the category of their creation. She implies that this is a general principle for acts of creation and suggests that the pragmatic principles at work are analogous to a painter's definition of their paintings' meaning. The example she gives is a depiction of a frog. Frogs have no visible features distinguishing between both sexes and therefore a picture of a frog would not specify its sexual category. According to Eckhardt, the painter can define their painting as showing, say, a female frog, which would then be a specification of the frog's category and so change the interpretation of the picture. The painting is still interpretable without this definition but would not necessarily show a female frog. Unlike in the art case, where the definition is an explicit specification, for performatives Eckhardt proposes that without evidence to the contrary, the hearer assumes that the speaker is making the definition.

The analogy to graphic semiotics is based

on the assumption that a painter creates a sign with a certain meaning but that their definition is conveyed via another medium, which in this case is language. If there is such an act of meta-communication for performatives, it is not (overt) in language. Eckhardt assumes that it is carried out implicitly, meaning that whenever an utterance is interpretable as performative, without evidence to the contrary, the speaker's definition is implied. This seems to be in line with Searle's assumption that the manifestation of the speaker's intention to perform a speech act is needed in order to do so. However, Searle assumes that the speaker's intention is manifested in the lexical semantics of performative verbs in combination with the self-referentiality of performative sentences. Considering self-referentiality a property of utterances instead of sentences is the only restriction under which I agree to this point of view, while rejecting an additional definition by the speaker.

In language, the category of an expression is usually related to its form or content. In order for a theory of performativity to fit into greater theories of language, Eckhardt's assumption of an extra-compositional definition by the speaker would constitute a rare and unsystematic exception. This would neither be theoretically elegant nor reasonable. Moreover, it is not necessary: Searle's account of intention manifestation can explain why (7) is not performative although it is self-referential: it has no performative verb which could express the intention to perform a speech act. Eckhardt supports her supposition of speaker's definition with the example (9), in which a non-sincere utterance of a performative sentence is interpreted as non-sincere.

- (9) *B: (gasps) Stop it! You are killing me!*
A: (laughing): Ok. I hereby promise to never be funny again.

Eckhardt argues that the context of the utterance, the mimic and gesture of the speaker in (9) constitute evidence enough for the hearer to assume the absence of A's definition of their utterance as performative. The interpretation of A's re-

sponse as 'insincere' is however not due to the violation of linguistic requirements for performativity, but is based on the interpretation as a joke. Forms of figurative speech like irony, sarcasm or jokes flout a conversational maxim in Gricean terms and operate on the illocutionary force of an utterance. An assertive response to B's utterance would not be taken seriously in a similar way:

- (10) *B: (gasps) Stop it! You are killing me!*
A: (laughing): Ok. I know I am a bad person.

The arguments and the analogy supporting a *define*-step seem invalid, which leads me to disregard Eckhardt's pragmatic story. However, I am adopting her context-dependent account of self-referential utterances, and extend it in order to explain, what kinds of subjects and objects can be used in order to enable a performative interpretation.

3 The performative formula

3.1 Extending Eckhardt

Eckhardt's formal account of self-referential utterances has a lot to offer for a theory of performativity and speech acts, but given the non-sufficiency of self-referentiality, how is performative self-verification derived? I suggest that an answer can be approached by investigating some implications of Eckhardt's logic of self-referential utterances:

We get from Searle that performative verbs lexicalise speech acts and performatives are a special case of speech acts in that they are realised explicitly. This means that the event referred to by a performative verb is a speech act. Eckhardt's analysis of self-referential performatives involves reference of the performative main verb to the communicative event, which implies the identity of a speech act and its utterance. This is crucial, because if they are the same event, they should have unique roles, arguments and aspectual and spatio-temporal properties. Austin's classic distinction between locutionary content and illocutionary force may hold for implicit speech acts, but collapses under this interpreta-

tion of performativity. Here, the locutionary content (i.e. the expressed proposition) describes the illocutionary force, while it conveys it. The locutionary and the illocutionary event not only coincide in performative utterances, they are the same event. Taking further this event-based account of self-referential utterances may provide us with a better understanding of performativity. A way to do this is to analyse the event structure of performatives in terms of arguments, thematic roles or aspectual type.

3.2 Performative event participants

Eckhard mentions the uniqueness of roles as a principle of event individuation in order to make her point that the self-referentiality of utterances can be established as being part of an abstract, more complex communicative event. If the speaker is the agent of the communication, they should be the agent of the performative event. The same point can be made for the hearer as communicative undergoer or recipient. The identity of the performative event with the communicative event entails that they have the same properties and roles, that the performative event is anchored in the same context as the communication (or utterance). It seems to be a viable assumption that speech acts have this restriction in general: that the participants of the locutionary event (communicative event) have to be the participants of the illocutionary event (speech act) as well and pass on their thematic roles. Concerning explicit speech acts, this should have an observable effect on the arguments of performative verbs, which can be formulated as a restriction on their reference. (11) illustrates that arguments of performative verbs require to be anchored in context in order for a self-referential interpretation of the utterance to be possible.

- (11) a. *I (hereby) thank you.*
 b. *Thank you.*
 c. *The author of this paper hereby thanks her readers.*
 d. *Lisa (hereby) thanks Daniel.*
 e. *My employer (hereby) thanks you for your patience.*

If I uttered one of the sentences in (11a – 11c) to you, that would constitute an act of thanking. In Eckhardt's terms, this involves a simple communicative event between two parties (me and you) and therefore produces directly self-referential utterances. Not all of these sentences involve a first person subject, but something closely related: coreference of the performative agent with the speaker.

A performative interpretation of (11d) is possible only if uttered by Lisa to Daniel. There are no such contextual restrictions for (11c). Its verbal arguments are realised as definite descriptions, which again involve some deixis and therefore context-anchoring. In a written context, they have the same extension as the verbal arguments in (11a). This illustrates how third-person arguments can be part of the construal of performative meaning under certain contextual conditions.² The deictic verbal arguments in (11a + 11c) make explicit their contextual anchoring, whereas the descriptive arguments in (11d) presuppose coreference with speech participants under a performative interpretation. The sentence (11e) would need some additional context: at least it needs an authorisation for me to speak on behalf of my employer. Only in virtue of this circumstance, (11e) can be uttered performatively. This is no exception to the requirement that the performative agent has to be the agent of

²An anonymous reviewer pointed out that (11c + 11d) are not as straightforwardly acceptable as performatives, with deictic arguments. This is also noted by Eckhardt (2012), who assumes that third-person-subject performatives require explicit context-anchoring through *hereby*. They however occur, especially in written language. Third-person realisations of performative participants have different functions in relation to their context-anchoring: I assume that deictic third-person arguments as in (11c) are chosen as manifestation of a rather formal register. A weak definite variant (*the author(s)*) is however more commonly used than constructions with possessor specification. Non-deictic third person subjects may be used in order to specify the identity of the communicative/performative agent, which might not be salient in written communication at all times. A non-deictic third person object like in (11d) can be a means of domain restriction, which operates on the set of communicative recipients and singles out the intended performative recipient(s). This is especially common in spoken or written communication which is distributed to multiple recipients. Just think of people saying things like *'I hereby greet my mother.'* on television.

the communicative event referred to by the performative verb. The event of thanking in (11e) is a larger communicative event between my employer and you, which is relayed via my utterance. Because my utterance is an integral part of this larger communication, it establishes an indirect, mereological self-reference.

Under a self-referential interpretation, the participants of the thanking-event in (11) have to be anchored in context: in order for the performative verb *thank* to refer to the communicative event, its agent is linked to the speaker and its recipient is linked to the communicative undergoer. This is predicted by Parson's argument that event participants and their roles are constitutive for events and Eckhardt's event-based analysis of self-referentiality: if the performative event is the utterance, also its constituent parts have to be parts of the utterance situation. The context-anchoring requirement of performative events and their subparts contributes to a description of how communicative events and interlocutors are conceptualised and realised in language. This is derived from and parallel to Eckhardt's self-reference restriction for event arguments of performative verbs and the different ways in which it comes about.

The old performative formula explained

The use of proximal deictic expressions is an explicit realisation of context-anchoring of verbal arguments. It is therefore not surprising that a first person agent, second person undergoer and present tense are so common among performatives. The semantic composition of performatives with explicitly context-anchored arguments is modeled parallel to Eckhardt's analysis of performatives with the deictic adverb *hereby*:

- (12) a. $\llbracket I \rrbracket^{w,c} = \mathbf{sp}$ (speaker in *c*)
 b. $\llbracket you \rrbracket^{w,c} = \mathbf{h}$ (hearer in *c*)
 c. $\llbracket hereby \rrbracket^{w,c} =$
 ε (communicative event in *c*)
 d. $\llbracket thank \rrbracket^{w,c} =$
 $\lambda y \lambda e \lambda x. \text{THANK}(x, e, y)$
 e. $\llbracket I hereby thank you. \rrbracket^{w,c} =$
 $\text{THANK}(\mathbf{sp}, \varepsilon, \mathbf{h})$

f. $\llbracket I thank you. \rrbracket^{w,c} =$
 $\exists e. \text{THANK}(\mathbf{sp}, e, \mathbf{h})$

The argument slots of the THANK-predicate in (12e) are saturated with deictic expressions, explicitly realising their context-anchoring. Note that context-anchoring of the participant-arguments is compatible with explicit self-reference of the event-argument and the arguments have to be compatible for a successful interpretation. This is for a relationship between the event and its participants, which suggests that the event and its participants have no equal status as arguments. The reference of the event argument and the reference of the participant arguments depend on each other.

Existential binding and circumstantial coreference

Realising arguments as specific existential statements is not exclusive for event-arguments. Eckhardt brings up a specific existential binding of the subject of '*Someone needs a bath here.*', which you could perfectly imagine if uttered by a mother to her son. Also, conventionalised omissions like in (13) are not unusual:

(13) $\llbracket Thank you. \rrbracket^{w,c} =$
 $\exists x \exists e. \text{THANK}(x, e, \mathbf{h})$

A performative utterance of (13) necessarily involves self-referentiality and therefore context-anchoring of all verbal arguments. That the communicative undergoer is explicitly realised as the performative undergoer is compatible with that interpretation. Of course, a large dose of social convention plays a role for determining the preferred interpretation of such existential statements. (13) is one of the most frequently used performatives, which is probably a factor, which made the conventionalisation of this omission possible in the first place and thus ensured that contextually anchored reference is the associated interpretation.

The way in which participant-arguments depend on the event-argument explains why (intended) performative sentences with third person subjects are often infelicitous. Third person NPs

can refer to persons other than speech participants. But also, although it is unusual, they can refer to interlocutors, which presents one of the advantages of an event based account of performatives: The felicitousness of third-person agent performatives is no longer puzzling.

- (14) a. $\llbracket \text{John hereby thanks Mary.} \rrbracket^{w,c} =$
 $\text{THANK}(J, e, M)$
 b. $\llbracket \text{THANK}(J, \varepsilon, M) \rrbracket^{M, g(J/\text{sp}, M/h)} = 1$

Although there are no existential statements in (14), performative context anchoring is established similarly here: If the subject refers to the speaker and the direct object refers to the hearer, a performative interpretation is possible. Because the reference of the event-argument is explicitly specified through *hereby*, this is the only possible felicitous interpretation. Third person arguments do not hinder a performative interpretation in general, but only when they refer to a person who is not a speech participant (which is mostly the case). In English, the third person is not deictic, like the first and second person are. While the first and second person specify the role of an NP in the communicative event, the third person has no such specification.³

Mereologically self-referential utterances

Certain social conventions (e.g. employment, legal representation) allow persons to communicate on behalf of others. A sender *A* communicating with a recipient *B* via a messenger *C* gives rise to a complex communicative event with smaller communicative events as proper subparts. Eckhardt motivated her generalisation of performative self-reference as reference to an abstract communicative event with (4a), an example of a sentence, which could be uttered as

³This is different in languages with obviative marking, like for example some Algonquian languages. They specify the role of a third person with respect to the utterance context as proximate or obviative. This analysis predicts that obviative realisations of participant-arguments should not be allowed coreference with speech participants. If that is the case, they should not allow for an interpretation as strictly self-referential performatives. They might, however be allowed in performatives which are conveyed on behalf of others, as they are less restricted.

the temporally ultimate subpart of the complex communicative event: the communication between *C* and *B*.

- (4a) *King Karl hereby promises you a cow.*

A felicitous utterance of (4a) constitutes an exception to the principle that performative arguments refer to immediate interlocutors. As Eckhardt points out, this and similar cases involve an indirect kind of eventive self-reference, which is why they allow for an indirect context anchoring of participant-arguments. The indirect self-referentiality of a performative utterance *u* by *C* towards *B* on behalf of *A* comes about through reference of the event argument to the larger communicative event *c* between *A* and *C*. This is no strict self-reference of *u*, but because $u \subset c$, it is an indirect kind of self-reference, which can be described as mereological. The relationship between the event-argument and the participant-arguments stays the same: the participant-arguments of the verb have to be the participants of the event. Therefore, the performative agent as expressed in the utterance has to be the communicative agent *A*. A felicitous utterance of (4a) also presupposes some ‘*authorised-to-speak-on-behalf-of*’-relation between the speaker *C* and the performative agent *A*. Only in virtue of this relation, it can be a felicitous performative. The context-anchoring of performative arguments is met as a (less strict) relational association of performative participant-arguments with interlocutors. This relational association can also be made explicit through the use of relational nouns, possessive constructions or weak definites⁴. The possessive constructions with first-person possessors in (15) are therefore an explicit realisation of associative context anchoring

⁴Cf. Löbner (2011) for an account of nominal relationality and different ways in which it comes about. It is based on theories which assume an associative structure and a subcategorical concept type as part of the lexical semantics. The semantic features \pm uniqueness and \pm relationality are assumed inherent to lexical nouns and their cross-classification gives rise to a four-way distinction of nominal concept types.

- (15) a. *My employer (hereby) thanks you for your patience.*
b. *I request payment from your client.*

Although a variant of (15a) with a non-relational subject (e.g. *The Café du Congo*) can be uttered performatively (e.g. if the Café du Congo is my employer), a relational subject is probably a frequent choice for such relayed performatives, because it explicitly expresses the relation between the messenger and the communicative agent.

4 Conclusion

What does it mean for an utterance to be self-referential? In Eckhardt's terms it means that the event argument of the main verb refers to the ongoing act of information transfer. Self-reference can be explicitly realised or implicitly achieved (with and without *hereby*). It can also be direct (when the information transfer is established on utterance-level) or mereological (involving a superordinated complex information transfer). In a Davidsonian account, the event denoted by a verb is formalised as argument, while other verbal arguments realise the participants in the denoted event. If the event is anchored in context, its participants will have to be context-anchored as well. This, in turn, can also be explicitly realised or implicitly achieved (with and without deictic expressions/relationality). The interdependence between event and participants comes about, because the participant-arguments have a role in the event. This raises the question if the different kinds of verbal arguments have a different status, which should be subject to further research. For now, it explains why verbal arguments which are not anchored in context lead to:

1. Unavailability of a self-referential interpretation for *hereby*-less sentences.
2. Infelicitousness of sentences with *hereby* due to incompatible participant-event-combinations.

The self-referentiality of an utterance is necessary for it to be performative, but not equiva-

lent to self-verification, another necessary condition. So how is performative self-verification derived? Searle assumes that it comes about through composition with a performative main verb in combination with self-referentiality. Performative verbs can be used in descriptive sentences and their potential to manifest an intention to perform a speech act is only realised in combination with self-reference. I showed that self-referentiality can not only be understood as contextual anchoring of the event-argument, but also entails context-anchoring of its subparts. This, combined with verbal meaning can be understood as a link between self-reference and self-verification. The non-self-referential '*I am here now.*' is self-verifying because of its composition, the meaning of its main verb and the contextual anchoring of its subparts. Performative self-verification seems to be achieved in the same way.

An event-based account of self-referential utterances is substantially connected to the semantics and pragmatics of dialogue:

Performative meaning can only be interpreted in the context of the communication or dialogue it occurs in. This is a consequence of accounting for context-anchoring of performative event-participants as coreference with speech participants or relation to speech participants, respectively. It is also a consequence of the identity of the performative event with the communicative event. The other side of the coin is that communicative events can be directly referred to by performative verbs, therefore studying performatives enables us to directly observe how language treats them. One thing, that Eckhardt's account tells us, is that communication is not always carried by a single utterance event, but can be conveyed via people communicating on behalf of others. In that case, several communicative events with different participants contingently form an overarching communicative event.

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