

“Might be something”: Information protection in central Australia

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*“This road goes might be somewhere
And I’ll take it might be someday
And I’ll see might be someone
Then we’ll do might be something...”¹*

1 Introduction²

This paper addresses culture-dependent information transmission norms and the challenges that they pose to fieldworkers collecting linguistic data. I explore these topics through a case study of my own experience doing linguistic fieldwork in a Warlpiri speaker community in central Australia.

I propose that in central Australian Aboriginal speaker communities, utterances including an epistemic possibility modal like English *maybe* or Warlpiri *marda* ‘maybe’ are used to uphold strict cultural norms regulating information transmission. These include utterances like the following Warlpiri example:

- (1) Context: Speaker B knows that Jungarrayi is at the shop but is uncomfortable communicating Jungarrayi’s location to Speaker A.
- a. A: Jungarrayi ya-nu japu-kurra=mayi?
A: Jungarrayi go-PST shop-ALL=INTERR
A: ‘Did Jungarrayi go to the shop?’³
- b. B: Ya-nu marda.
B: go-PST maybe
B: ‘Maybe he went.’

These expressions of epistemic possibility often sound evasive or marked to Western listeners. However, in Australian Aboriginal speaker communities, the use of these expressions is quite natural. These expressions allow speakers to maintain

¹Song lyrics composed by Valentine Sawenko, manager of the Angarapa cattle company in Utopia, NT, circa 1979. Thank you to Jenny Green for the reference.

²The Warlpiri data in this paper comes from my fieldwork in Yuendumu, NT. I would like to thank my Warlpiri consultants for teaching me about their language and culture. I would also like to thank audiences at CLS 51 and the UCLA American Indian Seminar for their helpful comments, David Nash, Jenny Green, and my adviser Yael Sharvit. This research was supported by an NSF GRFP grant. All mistakes are my own.

³Abbreviations used in this paper include 1 ‘first person,’ 2 ‘second person,’ 3 ‘third person,’ ALL ‘allative,’ AUX ‘auxiliary,’ ERG ‘ergative,’ INTERR ‘interrogative,’ LOC ‘locative,’ NPST ‘nonpast,’ NSUBJ ‘nonsubject,’ PL ‘plural,’ PST ‘past,’ SG ‘singular,’ and SUBJ ‘subject.’

a degree of conversational cooperativeness without violating lower-level cultural norms regarding transmission of protected information. I compare these constructions with (Western) English uses of the epistemic possibility modal *maybe*, and explore possible ways of analyzing them: Do these constructions require abandoning Grice's maxim of quantity, modifying the Gricean conversational maxims, or creating new maxim(s) (Grice 1975)?

The data presented in this paper comes from my own fieldwork in a Warlpiri speaker community. However, information protection norms as I describe them in this paper are not unique to Australian cultures. Similar speech norms have also been described for Malagasy (Keenan & Ochs 1978) and speakers of some Papuan languages (Rumsey 2013). Furthermore, Western English speakers are also subject to them, as discussed in section 4.1.2. The intent of this paper is therefore not to propose that the existence of such information protection norms is unique to Australia. Instead, I argue that these norms can be highly culture-dependent, and that consultants' attempts at obeying them may result in linguistic data that is challenging for the fieldworker to interpret.

Similar information protection conventions have also been described in other Australian cultures, including Yir-Yoront (Alpher 1991), Pitjantjatjara (Bain 2006), Yankunytjatjara (Goddard 1985), and Emiyenggal (Povinelli 1993), among others. Though it remains to be seen if the specifics of my pragmatic proposal can apply to these speaker communities, the account should be conceptually extendable to these groups as well. When I use the term "Warlpiri" in this paper, it can therefore be read as "Warlpiri, and other Australian groups with similar information protection norms."

2 Factors influencing information protection

Strict cultural norms regulate the ownership and transmission of information in many Australian cultures (Michaels 1986). The concept of "free speech" is anathema to the enforcement of these norms, which treat knowledge as a form of property, and which is protected and exchanged as such. Michaels (1986: 2) notes that this highly restricted flow of information "may be the case generally in oral societies." In his anthropological work on Yolngu religious activities, Keen (1994: 20) notes also that "modalities of obliqueness and deceit, what might be called 'opacity' in communication, [are] pervasive features of Yolngu social interaction and characteristic of some other Aboriginal peoples."

In this section, I briefly outline some of the factors that may give rise to restricted environments. The following sections by no means attempt to provide an exhaustive list of social contexts in which information transmission is restricted. These contexts are simply the most salient to me as a non-Aboriginal researcher in the community.

2.1 Gender and initiation status

Genders are strictly segregated in both daily and ritual Warlpiri life; unmarried Warlpiri men and women typically live in separate camps (Musharbash 2008). Gender-specific domains of knowledge are referred to as "men's business" and

“women’s business.” This term can refer to such diverse topics as knowledge on hunting certain animals or plants, songs, dance steps, traditional medicinal knowledge, and so on.

The men’s initiation ceremony is a very important locus of information transmission on men’s business (Dussart 2000). Portions of the the initiation ceremony are highly secret, and cannot be shared with either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal women, nor with uninitiated men. Participating in the initiation ceremony grants Warlpiri men the right to the knowledge contained within it. This information is then strictly protected.

More generally, Warlpiri social norms prohibit men (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) from knowing information relating to women’s business, and vice versa. Instances in which non-Aboriginal residents in the community ask Warlpiri people for details about opposite-gender “business” are almost uniformly met with evasive answers.

2.2 Ownership of *Jukurrpa* ‘Dreaming’

The *Jukurrpa*, often translated as ‘Dreaming’ or ‘Law,’ refers to an ancestral past that continues today. *Jukurrpa* are typically associated with certain totemic animals (e.g. *yankirri Jukurrpa* ‘emu Dreaming’) or locations (e.g. *Pirlinyarnu Jukurrpa* ‘Mount Farewell Dreaming’). Owners of particular portions of the *Jukurrpa* lay claim to the stories, songs, and dances that are associated with that portion (Stanner 1959, Michaels 1987).

Jukurrpa ownership is determined by age, gender, kinship category, and “country,” or ancestral home. These factors determine who has access to which aspects of the *Jukurrpa* knowledge. This knowledge includes stories, parts of songs, iconographic designs, dance steps, or simply knowledge of the location of particular *Jukurrpa* sites (Michaels 1987: 106). No one individual has total access to an entire *Jukurrpa*. Individuals are culturally permitted to share only the public portion of their own *Jukurrpa*. Questions about another person’s *Jukurrpa*, or questions about a secret portion of a person’s *Jukurrpa*, will result in evasive answers due to the observation of information protection norms.

3 Warlpiri data

All of the data in this paper was collected through naturalistic observation rather than through elicitation. This provided me with detailed contexts for the utterances; however, the lack of elicitation means that I do not have data on subtle semantic or pragmatic judgements.

Unlike the epigraph to this paper, evasive *might be P* and *might be something* statements are almost always given in response to questions, rather than volunteered outright. Many tokens come from questions asked by non-Aboriginal people who were ignorant of the information protection norms. In the following sections, I provide data on the two types of observed epistemic statements. I will refer to the first type as *might be P* statements, where an epistemic possibility modal (English *might be* or *maybe*, Warlpiri *marda* ‘maybe,’ and so on) combines with a syntactic element expressing a proposition. I will refer to the second type as *might be some-*

thing statements, although the choice of epistemic possibility modal and indefinite pronoun (*someone, sometime*, and so on) varies.

Note that these uses of epistemic possibility modals occur both when Warlpiri speakers are speaking Warlpiri, and when they are speaking English. The marked use of epistemic possibility modals is not restricted to when Australian Aboriginal speakers are speaking the local language. Their use is dictated by low-level cultural prescriptions rather than by the use of a particular code.

3.1 *Might be P* statements

Might be P statements typically occur in response to polar questions. The following example shows an instance of $\Diamond P$ being used despite the fact that the speaker could have truthfully uttered *P*:

- (2) Context: Speaker B knows that Jungarrayi is at the shop but is uncomfortable communicating Jungarrayi's location to Speaker A.
- a. A: Jungarrayi ya-nu japu-kurra=mayi?
 A: Jungarrayi go-PST shop-ALL=INTERR
 A: 'Did Jungarrayi go to the shop?'
- b. B: Ya-nu marda.
 B: go-PST maybe
 B: 'Maybe he went.'

In English, the unembedded use of *maybe* typically triggers a scalar implicature:

- (3) 'Maybe he went.'
 $\Diamond P \rightsquigarrow \neg \Box P$

This scalar implicature arises because we assume that the speaker is obeying Grice's maxim of quantity and is making the strongest claim possible. However, given a context and utterance like (2), no such scalar implicature arises for (2b):

- (4) B: Ya-nu marda.
 B: go-PST maybe
 B: 'Maybe he went.'
 $\Diamond P \not\rightsquigarrow \neg \Box P$ (no implicature in a restricted context)

To explain why this implicature is not generated, I propose that Speaker A, having an understanding of information transmission norms within the Warlpiri speaker community, knows that this is a restricted context. Warlpiri communities in Australia are small (all under 800 people), extremely remote, and the qualities addressed in section 2 are highly salient in daily life (initiation status, *Jukurrpa* 'Dreaming' ownership, and so on). In a context like (2), Speaker A likely knows that Speaker B is not culturally permitted to disclose Jungarrayi's location to them. Therefore, I propose that when Speaker A hears Speaker B's response, they do not expect Speaker B to make a stronger claim (that is, $\Box P$). Since $\Box P$ is not an available stronger alternative, no strengthening takes place.

This leads us to ask why Speaker A would pose the question to Speaker B at all, if they do not expect a response any stronger than $\Diamond P$. There may be cultural norms

regarding question-asking at play, e.g. one should ask questions about a person’s relatives to be polite, without expecting an informative answer in response.⁴

I will additionally note that the majority of the instances in which I observed exchanges like (2) taking place involved a non-Aboriginal person asking questions of an Aboriginal person. For most of the examples, this would explain why the questions were asked: that is, because the non-Aboriginal person genuinely expected an informative response. Although the non-Aboriginal person would typically react as if the scalar utterance in the response were strengthened, Aboriginal bystanders generally would not (e.g. by suggesting that they ask someone else for the information).

3.2 *Might be something* statements

Might be something statements typically occur in response to Wh-questions. These statements convey even less information than *might be P* statements. They effectively provide no information with respect to the question under discussion:

- (5) Context: Speaker B is uncomfortable answering Speaker A’s question regarding an alarm going off in her neighbor’s house.
- a. A: ‘What set off the alarm?’ (*question asked in English*)
 - b. B: Nganayi, marda.
B: whatchamacallit maybe
B: ‘Maybe something.’
- (6) Context: Speaker B knows that Nungarrayi is at the shop, but is uncomfortable answering Speaker A’s question.
- a. A: Nyarrpara Nungarrayi?
A: where Nungarrayi
A: ‘Where is Nungarrayi?’
 - b. B: Nyarrpara marda.
B: somewhere maybe
B: ‘Maybe somewhere.’

Possible informative responses that Speaker B could give to Speaker’s A question in (6) include the following: {pool, shop, clinic}. However, if Speaker B were to provide a response like *Puurlu-rla marda* ‘Maybe at the pool’ in a restricted context, Speaker A would know that this is the strongest possible claim that Speaker B could make. This would then effectively be as good as explicitly communicating Nungarrayi’s location.

To avoid this issue, Speaker B uses an indefinite like *nyarrpara* ‘somewhere’ instead. The response *Nyarrpara marda* ‘maybe somewhere’ acknowledges the presupposition of (6a) (that is, that Nungarrayi is somewhere) without suggesting her location.

⁴I thank Hannah Sarvasy for bringing an example of a norm like this to my attention.

3.3 A summary

We can visually represent Warlpiri speakers' use of epistemic possibility modals through the following Venn diagrams:

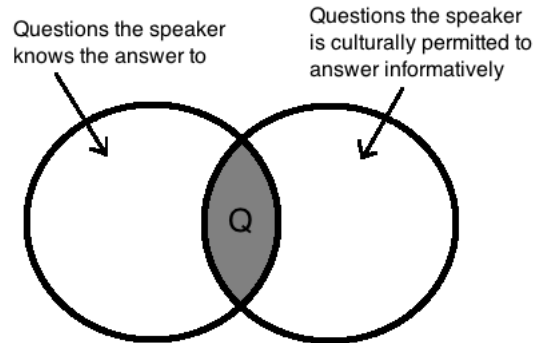


Figure 1: A question *Q* belongs to the set of questions the speaker knows the answer to, and to the set of questions that they are culturally permitted to answer.

Figure 1 shows question *Q* in the intersection of the set of questions the speaker knows (or thinks that they know) the answer to and the set of questions the speaker is culturally permitted to give an informative answer to. If *Q* is in this intersection, and *P* is a possible answer to *Q* and the speaker considers *P* to be true, then the speaker may utter *P*.⁵

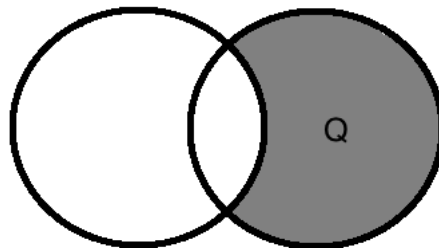


Figure 2: *Q* belongs to the set of questions the speaker is culturally permitted to answer, but does not belong to the set of questions they know the answer to.

Figure 2 shows a question *Q* that belongs only to the set of questions the speaker is culturally permitted to informatively answer but not to the set of questions they know (or think they know) the answer to. If *P* is a possible answer to *Q*, and the speaker considers *P* to be possibly true, then the speaker may only express $\diamond P$. The implicature $\neg \square P$ may arise.

⁵For simplicity, I assume that *Q* has at most one true answer; that is, that it is a polar question or a singular Wh-question.

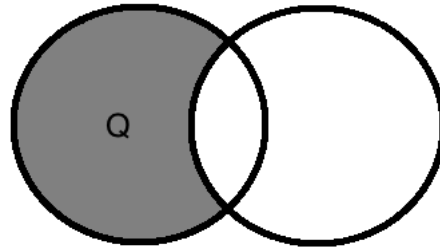


Figure 3: Q belongs to the set of questions the speaker knows the answer to, but does not belong to the set of questions they are culturally permitted to answer.

Figure 3 shows a question Q that belongs only to the set of questions the speaker knows (or thinks they know) the answer to but not to the set of questions they are culturally permitted to informatively answer. If P is a possible answer to Q, then the speaker may only express $\Diamond P$. The implicature $\neg \Box P$ does not arise. An example of this is given in (4).

The following table compares the possible responses to the polar question in (7) in Warlpiri and in English:

(7) ‘Did John go to the store?’

Answer	Warlpiri (restricted, knowledgeable)	Warlpiri (unrestricted, ignorant)	English (ignorant speaker)
‘Yes.’	# (culturally prohibited)	#	#
‘No.’	# (culturally prohibited)	#	#
‘I don’t know.’	✓	✓	✓
‘Maybe.’	✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Possible responses to a polar question in Warlpiri and English.

In both Warlpiri and English, ignorant speakers cannot answer *yes* or *no* to a polar question. Under a Gricean story, this is because their answer would violate the maxim of quality (“Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”) (Grice 1975: 46). In restricted contexts, Warlpiri speakers cannot answer *yes* or *no* to a polar question because doing so would violate cultural restrictions on information transmission.

The following table compares the possible responses to the Wh-question in (8):

(8) ‘Where is John?’

Answer	Warlpiri (restricted, knowledgeable)	Warlpiri (unrestricted, ignorant)	English (ignorant speaker)
'I don't know.'	✓	✓	✓
'Somewhere.'	✓	✓?	# (evasive)
'He might be somewhere.'	✓	✓?	# (marginally grammatical)

Table 2: Possible responses to a Wh-question in Warlpiri and English.

Ignorant English speakers cannot answer a Wh-question with an indefinite like *somewhere*, because it is seen as being evasive.⁶ Unlike the answer *I don't know*, the answer *somewhere* provides no information at all. It does not provide any information with respect to the answer to the question *Where is John?*, and also does not provide any information with respect to the speaker's knowledge. Furthermore, English speakers report that the utterance *might be somewhere* is only marginally grammatical.

At present, I lack the data on whether *somewhere* or *might be somewhere* is infelicitous when used by ignorant Warlpiri speakers in unrestricted contexts. The crucial Warlpiri data, however, is that these responses are available to knowledgeable speakers in restricted contexts.

I am also currently unsure if there is a communicative difference in Warlpiri between the responses *I don't know*, *somewhere*, and *might be somewhere*. It is unclear if one of the responses is associated with restricted information contexts (could it be *might be somewhere*, since it provides the least speaker commitment?). It is also unclear if one of the responses is associated with conveying the standard scalar implicature in unrestricted contexts (could it be *I don't know*, since the speaker is providing explicit commentary on their epistemic state?).

Overall, note that the responses available to knowledgeable Warlpiri speakers in restricted contexts are effectively the same as the responses available to ignorant Warlpiri speakers in unrestricted contexts.

4 A pragmatic account

Our treatment of this data must account for the lack of scalar implicature in (2), and the availability of the *might be something* response in (5) and (6).

4.1 Gricean conversational maxims

I examine a series of Gricean accounts for the Warlpiri data. For all accounts, I propose that Warlpiri speakers are upholding the basic Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975). Part of being a cooperative speaker involves taking a conversational turn at

⁶Some English speakers note that this is better than other infelicitous answers in Table 1, which I acknowledge. However, I'll also note that in instances of *somewhere* being used felicitously, it is frequently accompanied by a location (e.g. *somewhere around here*), which provides more information than the indefinite on its own.

to convey information covertly by flouting a maxim.⁸ For these reasons, a treatment of the data in sections 3.1 and 3.2 cannot involve either discarding or flouting the maxim of quantity.

4.1.2 Adding additional maxims

Another approach to account for the data in sections 3.1 and 3.2 could involve positing an additional conversational maxim. This maxim could take the following form:

- (10) **MAXIM OF DISCRETION:** Disclose only as much information as is permitted, given the context.

“Context” here could be defined as social norms, as in the case of Warlpiri speakers. Alternately, it could be defined as codified rules regarding information transmission, as in the case of the protection of top secret political information. Indeed, one motivation for an approach of this sort involves very similar examples from Western English speakers. There are some contexts in which it is felicitous for a Western English speaker to use *maybe P* in a context in which they can truthfully say *P*, as in the following example:

- (11) **Context:** A syntax student asks their TA about the topics their upcoming exam will cover. However, per university regulations, the TA is not allowed to disclose the topics to them.
 Student: ‘Will raising and control be on the exam?’
 TA: ‘Maybe.’⁹

In examples like (11), *maybe P* is used to obey norms dictated by an external authority (namely, the university system) that determines the relative standing of TAs and students at the university, and what the information flow between the two groups looks like. Since the student knows the university regulations about exams, they do not expect their TA to share all of the information that they know about the exam topics. This is similar to the situation I proposed in section 3.1 with respect to Warlpiri speakers and their knowledge of protected information; like the Warlpiri speakers in restricted contexts, students know that TAs are not able to make the strongest claims possible when discussing certain topics with them.

On one hand, this contrasts with the Warlpiri use of *might be P*; no external authority dictates the norms restricting information flow between two Warlpiri speakers. On the other, however, examples like (11) show the existence of information

⁸While these utterances don’t convey information per se, it is possible that they might convey some sort of meta-information about the presence of a restricted context. That is, the use of the answer *might be something* in response to a question could signal to the listener that the speaker cannot answer informatively due to information protection norms. However, I do not have the data at present to argue whether or not this is the case.

⁹Grice (1975: 49) gives responses like *I can neither confirm nor deny P* as examples of a speaker opting out of a maxim/the Cooperative Principle. However, since *maybe P* is also used by speakers to express genuine epistemic uncertainty, it seems unreasonable to propose that *maybe P* expressions are used by speakers to signal their choice to opt out.

protection norms across cultures. An additional maxim of discretion could therefore be cross-culturally applicable. The application of this maxim would vary on a cultural basis depending on the sorts of information that are protected.

Grice himself proposes that there are “all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character)” which may generate “nonconventional implicatures” (Grice 1975: 47). This proposal therefore could clearly do some work towards explaining the Warlpiri data. However, it requires further complicating the Gricean maxims. In the next section, I discuss an option that does not have this drawback.

4.1.3 Treatment under Grice’s current maxims

A treatment under Grice’s current maxims could refer to the maxim of relation, defined as follows:

- (12) MAXIM OF RELATION (Grice 1975: 46-47): Be relevant. (...) I expect a partner’s contribution to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction.

With respect to the Warlpiri data, the key component of this principle is the direction to speak appropriately for the conversation. The open-ended nature of this statement could include contingencies such as a TA speaking to a student, or an uninitiated Warlpiri teenager speaking to an initiated Warlpiri elder. In each instance the principle dictates what sort of contribution is considered appropriate. That is, the maxim of relation can do some conceptual work towards an answer to the question of why Warlpiri speakers are able to use *might be P* and *might be something* statements.

I propose that the Gricean maxim of relation contributes to a treatment of the Warlpiri data, in combination with speaker knowledge of the contexts that invoke information protection norms as described in sections 3.1 and 3.2. Observation of the basic Cooperative Principle and Gricean conversational maxims in Warlpiri speaker communities involves sensitivity to and knowledge of information protection norms. Speakers’ knowledge of these protected contexts may lead to utterances of epistemic possibility that seem marked or are misinterpreted by Western English speakers.

5 Lessons for fieldwork methodology

Students in linguistic fieldwork courses are typically instructed to understand hedged grammaticality judgements as indicating ungrammaticality or infelicity. That is, if a consultant reports that a particular utterance “might be” acceptable, or is a “little bit” acceptable, it is usually the case that the utterance is marked in some way and that they are attempting to be polite towards the fieldworker.

However, I have encountered several instances in which the use of *might be* in this context did not indicate ungrammaticality, but instead that my Warlpiri consultant was uncomfortable with the topic being discussed. This included an instance in which I unwittingly asked a male consultant for a sentence including a word that is typically associated with women’s business. This resulted in the following exchange:

- (13) Context: I ask a consultant whether he can say a particular phrase in Warlpiri.
- a. A: Wangka-mi=mayi=npa=∅ kuja-piya?
 A: speak-NPST=INTERR=2SG.SUBJ=3SG.NSUBJ this-like
 A: ‘Do you say it like this?’
- b. B: Yuwa, wangka-mi ka=rna=∅ marda.
 B: yes speak-NPST AUX=1SG.SUBJ=3SG.NSUBJ maybe
 B: ‘Yes, I might say it.’

When I later elicited the same sentence with a female consultant, she reported that it was grammatical, and explained my error.

Given examples like (13), I propose that information given by consultants to fieldworkers in Australian Aboriginal communities has already passed through several cultural “filters” regarding what the consultant is able to speak about, and what the researcher is able to know. Responses to questions may therefore reflect these cultural prescriptions more than the question the fieldworker has asked.

Attempts by different speakers to conform to this prescription can result in apparently conflicting information, as in the case of my male and female Warlpiri consultants. This raises another challenge of determining whether discrepancies in speakers’ responses are due to misinformation, or to attempts at avoiding disclosing protected information. Handling this challenge therefore requires keen sensitivity to the information protection norms in the speaker community in which one is working.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I presented data on the utterances *might be P* and *might be something* in Warlpiri. I reviewed a number of options for accounting for the use of these utterances in restricted contexts. I ultimately proposed that we can understand the use of these utterances in Warlpiri speaker communities under the Gricean maxim of relation.

This account crucially relies on the importance and centrality of information transmission norms in everyday Warlpiri life. That is, in Warlpiri speaker communities, adherence to low-level social prescriptions regarding information exchange and protection of information is more important than providing fully informative responses. This in turn influences listeners’ pragmatic interpretations of *might be P* and *might be something* utterances. I noted that culture-dependent norms like these are not unique to Warlpiri. As shown in section 4.1.2, such restricted contexts also exist for Western English speakers as well.

The implications of this paper are relevant to the linguistic or anthropological fieldworker, or to any researcher whose methodology requires question-and-answer interviews. This work is especially relevant for fieldworkers in Australian Aboriginal communities, or for fieldworkers in other communities with similar information protection norms (e.g. American Indian and First Nations communities). I propose that consultants’ observance of culturally-dependent information protection norms may result in linguistic data that is challenging for the fieldworker to interpret. Awareness of these norms can help fieldworkers understand the data that they

collect.

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