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Abstract

In this article I investigate the properties of counter-expectational surprise yes-no questions in Italian, introduced by the adversative particle *ma*. These structures minimally contrast with surprise exclamations. I provide an analysis of the left periphery able to explain the observations concerning the distribution of *ma*, for instance that it must precede all other items in the clause and cannot be embedded. I propose that *ma* is a discourse head, projecting a syntactic structure analogous to that of normal syntactic heads. Discourse heads, however, connect separate sentences, which can also be uttered by different speakers, provided that they belong to the same context. I also add some brief remarks on the so-called *expletive* negation appearing in these cases.

Keywords

Surprise questions, counter-expectational, discourse, left periphery, expletive negation.

Ma non era rosso? (But wasn't it red?): On counter-expectational questions in Italian

1 Introduction

Surprise questions – or using a more appropriate terminology, introduced by Vicente (2009) *counter-expectational* questions – are especially interesting because they constitute a challenge for the very notion of sentence grammar. Their form and syntax are in fact determined to a large extent on the basis of extra-sentential properties. The aim of this work is to show how the extra-sentential issues can be handled in a Minimalist framework and combined successfully with a Cartographic model of sentence grammar, capturing the interactions between discourse and sentence in a principled way. The structure I propose for these constructions is a multi-sentential one, i.e. I'll argue that counter-expectational questions are *discourses*.

In this work, I consider the same set of data analyzed in Giorgi (2016b). In that paper I focused mostly on their temporal interpretation; here, I extend the analysis to the other syntactic properties, in particular word order phenomena and information structure. I compare this kind of questions with exclamatives, because they minimally contrast for the relevant properties.

2 The data

Counter-expectational questions in Italian are introduced by the adversative particle *ma* (but). Note that for some speakers, the presence of *ma* is optional, as will be better discussed below in section 5. Consider the following examples:

Scenario I: Mary calls me on the phone and tells me that she has a new red dress to wear at tonight's party. When I meet her at the party, I see that she has a blue dress. I'm surprised and say (from Giorgi, 2016b, ex. 1):

(1) *Ma non era rosso?*

But not was-**IMPF** red

‘But wasn’t it red?’

Scenario II: Mary informs me that she is going to buy her wedding dress. Later she shows me her purchase and I see that it is a red gown, an unusual color for this kind of dress. I may react by saying (from Giorgi 2016b, ex.2):

(2) Ma è rosso!

But is-**IND** red!

‘But it’s red!’”

The main properties that can be associated with (1) are the following:

- (3) . There is a characteristic falling-raising intonation.
- . The sentence is accompanied by gestures of the hands and of the head, plus brow raising.
 - . Presence of the imperfect form of the indicative mood.
 - . Presence of the particle *ma*.
 - . Presence of negation.

Intonation and gestures are usually considered properties pertaining to modules of grammar other than syntax (phonology, pragmatics). Moreover, surprise questions and exclamations have been analyzed so far as mono-sentential constructions.¹

In this paper I challenge this view with respect to both issues. In previous work (Giorgi 2010), I already argued that the syntactic representation must be enriched by means of the representation in the C-layer of the speaker’s temporal and spatial coordinates. I also argued (Giorgi, 2014, 2016a) that certain properties concerning the prosodic contour of a sentence must be read off the syntax. In particular, I analyzed certain types of parentheticals, such as those introducing Free Indirect Discourse and Quotations, and proposed that their syntactic representation includes prosody-oriented heads, responsible for the characteristic *comma intonation* – cf. Selkirk (2005) – assigned to these structures. Giorgi (2015) also argues in favor of a similar theory for Italian Clitic Left

¹ See among the others, Vicente, 2009; Munaro and Obenauer, 2002; Zanuttini & Portner, 2003; Obenauer, 2004; Delfitto & Fiorin, 2014, 2015.

Dislocation – henceforth CLLD – contrasting it with Hanging Topics – henceforth, HT. In that paper, I proposed an analysis of HT as *discourses*, i.e. I proposed that what apparently looks like a single sentence, is actually composed of two different sentential units – one constituted by the hanging topic phrase, and the other by the main sentence – connected by means of a silent discourse head.²

Here I capitalize on this view and argue that the syntactic representation of counter-expectational yes-no questions must be enriched with information traditionally considered as belonging to other modules of grammar and, furthermore, that they must be represented as *bi-sentential structures*, i.e. *discourses*.

As far as the intonation is concerned, Lepschy (1978) already identified 5 tunes for Standard Italian: a falling tune characterizing statements, a rising tune for yes/no questions, a level tune for uncertainty, a rising-falling tune as a contradiction contour and a falling-rising tune expressing doubt or surprise, the last one being the relevant one in these cases.³

With respect to gestures, consider that their presence is obligatory, even if they can slightly vary across speakers. Namely, these sentences become strongly odd if pronounced with a neutral facial expression and with non-moving hands – as for instance with one's hands in the pockets. Adopting Schlenker's terminology, these gestures are co-speech ones, in that they accompany the whole sentence.⁴

² See section 4.2 below for a discussion of these cases.

³ A discussion of the intonation of these constructions is outside the scope of this work. I just want to point out the relationship between the presence of a certain intonation and a peculiar syntax, strongly tied to the each other.

⁴ Schlenker (2015, abstract), “ [...] We argue that some co-speech gestures should be analyzed within a presuppositional framework, but with a twist: an expression p co-occurring with a co-

3 The imperfect

In this section I briefly summarize the discussion of Giorgi (2016) concerning the presence of the imperfect in counter-expectational questions, as opposed to exclamations, which exhibit a non-imperfect form of the indicative.

As a first observation, note that the imperfect is a well-behaved indicative form, in that in complement clauses it resists complementizer deletion, which is on the contrary a property of the subjunctive mood:⁵

(4) Gianni ha detto *(che) ieri alle tre mangiava un panino

Gianni said that yesterday at three (he) eat-IMPF a sandwich

In order to illustrate the contribution of the imperfect to the constructions at issue, I will show what happens if the distribution of the imperfect vs. the non-imperfect indicative in (1) and (2) is reversed. Consider the following case (from Giorgi 2016, ex 38):

(5) Ma non è rosso?

But isn't-IND it red?

In Scenario I a sentence with a present indicative like (5) is infelicitous. It is appropriate in Scenario III: Mary, pointing to a dress exposed in a window, tells Paul: “How beautiful that blue dress!” and Paul might answer: “But isn't it red?”, because he is seeing it as red and not as blue. In this case, the speaker assumes that the dress is red and asks for an explanation.

Conversely, in Scenario II an exclamative sentence with an imperfect like (6) is infelicitous (from Giorgi, 2016, ex. 39):

speech gesture G with content g comes with the requirement that the local context of p should guarantee that p entails g; we call such assertion-dependent presuppositions 'cosuppositions' [...]

⁵ With some exceptions, which I do not discuss here, because they are not relevant for the purposes of this work. For a full discussion, see Giorgi (2010).

(6) Ma era rosso!

But it was-**IMPF** red!

It is appropriate in Scenario IV: The speaker knows that I will wear a certain dress, which he remembers as red. When he sees me, he recognizes the dress as the one he remembers, but the dress is presently of a different color. The presence of the imperfect here expresses a temporal value, in that the speaker says that the dress was red at a previous time, and then changed, for instance by dying.

Note also that there is an important semantic difference between the question with the imperfect and the one with the indicative. The sentence with the imperfect, repeated here, is a *special* question, according to the terminology by Obenauer (2004):

(7) Ma non era rosso? (=1)

But not was-**IMPF** red

‘But wasn’t it red?’

(8) # Sì, era rosso

Yes. It was red

(9) # No, no era rosso

No, it wasn’t red

A yes-no answer would not make any sense at all: the speaker wants an explanation with respect to the dress color, because it does not meet her expectations. On the contrary, the question with the indicative, should indeed be answered in the ‘normal’ way:

(10) Ma non è rosso? (=5)

But isn’t-**IND** it red?

(11) Sì, è rosso (mi sono sbagliata)

Yes. It’s red (I was wrong)

(12) No, non è rosso (è la luce)

No, it isn’t red (it is the light)

In what follows I provide an explanation for these observations.⁶

Recall first that the imperfect is an anaphoric verbal form, i.e. there is no direct anchoring to the utterance time. Consider the following examples:⁷

(13) #Luca faceva i compiti.

Luca do-IMPF homework.

(14) Ieri alle tre Luca faceva i compiti.

Yesterday at three Luca do-IMPF homework

‘Yesterday at three Luca was doing homework’

(15) Cosa faceva Luca alle tre?

What was Mario doing at three?

(16) Luca faceva i compiti

Luca do-IMPF homework

‘Luca was doing homework’

In these examples, the relationship of the imperfect with the utterance time must be mediated by the presence of a temporal reference, either present in the same sentence, or in the preceding discourse/context. Giorgi and Pianesi (2001) argued that exactly this property determines the distribution of this verbal form in *fictional* and *dream* contexts, where it is obligatory. In what follows, I’ll give a brief overview of various phenomena.

Consider first the so-called *imperfâit preludique*, typically used by children while planning a new

⁶ The literature on the imperfect is very rich and I’ll provide here only a brief discussion limited to purposes of this work, in the framework of Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) and (2001). See also, for different perspectives on the issue, Delfitto & Bertinetto (1995), Delfitto (2004) and Ippolito (2000).

⁷ Note that in these cases the imperfect has a past temporal value. However, I will illustrate in the text other usages in which the imperfect does not have a temporal value at all.

game (cf. Vet 1983):

(17) Facciamo che io ero il re e tu la regina

Let's pretend that I am-IMPF the king and you the queen

Analogously, consider stage instructions:

(18) A questo punto il ladro usciva e tu lo inseguivi.

At this point the thief leave-IMPF and you follow-IMPF him

In both cases the imperfect is not referring to a past event and is obligatory. Consider for instance sentences (17) and (18) with a present perfect, instead of an imperfect:⁸

(19) #Facciamo che io sono stato/ fui il re e tu la regina.

Let's pretend that I was-PRES PERF the king and you the queen.

(20) #A questo punto il ladro è uscito e tu lo hai seguito.

At this point the thief left-PRES PERF and you followed-PRES PERF him.

These sentences cannot be taken to be stage instructions, but descriptions of past events.

The imperfect is also the form used in narrative contexts, story-telling and fiction:

(21) Il ladro passeggiava nervosamente. Qualcosa era andato storto...

(from Giorgi & Pianesi, 2001 ex. 53)

The thief walked-IMPF nervously. Something had-IMPF gone wrong...

Again, there is no way in which these events can be interpreted as past with respect to the utterance time. Moreover, the imperfect is the verbal form embedded under the verb *sognare* (dream):

(22) Luca ha sognato che Paolo vinceva la gara.

Luca dreamed that Paolo won-IMPF the race.

The winning of the race is *the content of the dream* and it is not located in the past present or future

⁸ In Central and Northern Italy the present perfect is the form normally used to express past-ness. In Southern Italy a simple past would be used. In the examples in the text, I adopt my own variety (Central Italy).

with respect to the dream itself. I.e., it is not the case that Luca dreamed of an event located in his past, contrasting with the following example:

(23) Luca ha detto che Paolo ha vinto la gara.

Luca said that Paolo won-PRES PERF the race

In example (23), the winning of the race is temporally located in the past with respect to the utterance time.⁹

⁹ The imperfect does not exhibit the Double Access Reading (DAR). For reasons of space, it is impossible to provide a discussion of this issue here, and refer the reader to the previous literature. However, it might be worth mentioning, because it is an interesting argument in favor of the analysis provided in the text. The basic example for the DAR includes a present tense embedded under a past verbal form:

i. Gianni ha detto che Maria è incinta

Gianni said that Maria is pregnant

For this sentence to be felicitous, the state of pregnancy must hold both at the time of the saying and at utterance time, so that the following sentence is infelicitous:

ii. #Due anni fa, Gianni ha detto che Maria è incinta

Two years ago, Gianni said that Maria is pregnant

However, there is no DAR with an embedded imperfect:

iii. Gianni ha detto che Maria era incinta

Gianni said that Maria was(IMPF) pregnant

In this case the state of pregnancy is simultaneous with the saying and does not have to hold at time of the utterance, to the extent that the following sentence contrasts with (ii) above:

iv. Due anni fa, Gianni ha detto che Maria era incinta

Two years ago, Gianni said that Maria was(IMPF) pregnant

This contrast has been explained by Giorgi and Pianesi (1997) and Giorgi (2010) on the basis of the

In all the cases illustrated above, the imperfect event is not anchored to the utterance time. It contrasts with the other forms of the indicative, for instance the present perfect, which on contrary must express a temporal value of past-ness with respect to the utterance time.

These observations account for the obligatory presence of the imperfect in counter-expectational questions, in that in these cases the embedded verbal form cannot be anchored to the indexical context: the redness of the dress is not a fact, but only the speaker's expectation and for this reason, the predicate is not anchored to the context where the speaker is located.

Conversely, a non-imperfect indicative requires anchoring to the utterance time. Therefore, in this case, for the sentence to be felicitous, the dress must indeed be red. In the case of exclamative sentences the opposite holds. The speaker's surprise is due to the fact that, according to her, the dress is red. Therefore, an indexical verbal form is required, as for instance a present perfect.

4. The distribution and properties of the particle *ma* in counter-expectational contexts

4.1 Generalities

Ma cannot appear in embedded contexts, independently of its position with respect to the complementizer *che*:

(24) *Gianni ha detto *che* ma non era rosso

Gianni said that but it wasn't-IMPF red

(25) *Gianni ha detto *che* ma è rosso

Gianni said that but it is-IND red

Ma is not itself a complementizer, as shown by the ungrammaticality of the following examples:

(26) *Gianni ha detto ma non era rosso

Gianni said but it wasn't-IMPF red

idea that the imperfect is not an indexical verbal form, which is the point I'm stressing in the text.

(27) *Gianni ha detto ma è rosso

Gianni said but it is-IN red

In non- counter-expectational contexts, *ma* appears in a conjunction:

(28) Maria ha trenta anni, *ma* ne dimostra venti

Maria is thirty, but she looks twenty

(29) Maria è stanca, *ma* felice

Maria is tired, but happy

Note that (28) and (29) can also be realized as discourses, i.e. the two parts could be uttered by different speakers:

(30) A: Maria ha trenta anni

Maria is thirty

(31) B: (Sì), ma ne dimostra venti

(Yes), but she looks twenty

(32) A: Maria è stanca

Maria is tired

(33) B: (Sì), ma (è) felice

(Yes), but (she is) happy

In these cases, the presence of the first conjunct, either in the same sentence, or in a discourse is obligatory. A non counter-expectational constructions, without the first conjunction is infelicitous:

(34) #Ma ne dimostra venti

But she looks twenty

(35) #Ma è felice

But she is happy

4.2 The co-occurrence of *ma* with Clitic Left Dislocation, Focus and Hanging Topic

In this section I consider the distribution of *ma* with respect to the other items of the left periphery.

Roughly speaking, we can say that in Italian the left periphery is the syntactic portion of the clause on the left of the subject. The particle *ma* indeed occurs in this area, hence, in principle it should qualify as component of the left periphery.

According to Rizzi (1997), the left periphery of the clause is structured as follows:¹⁰

(36) C-FORCE TOP* FOCUS TOP* FIN

In Italian the complementizer *che* (that), introducing finite clauses, appears in C-FORCE, whereas the complementizer introducing non-finite clauses appears in FIN. TOP is usually taken to be a (clitic) left dislocated phrase and FOCUS is a contrastive focus. The asterisk on the right of TOP means that it is possible to recur on the topic position. Therefore, according to this hypothesis, a clitic left dislocated phrase can occur anywhere in the left periphery, both on the left and on the right of Focus, provided that it occurs on the left of the complementizer. Focus, on the contrary is a unique position. Concluding, in principle, if *ma* is a head of the left periphery, even if of a type not yet identified, we should be able to ascertain its position by looking at its distribution with respect to Focus and Topic.

A clitic left dislocated phrase cannot appear on the left of *ma*, both in the case of questions and in the case of exclamatives:¹¹

(37) ??A Luca, ma non gli avevi dato un libro?

To Luca, but not (you) to him(CL) had(IMPF) given a book?

(38) *A Luca ma gli hai dato un libro!

¹⁰ Many scholars addressed these issues in the framework of the so-called *cartographic approach*. See among the others Belletti (2004) and Rizzi (2004). I refer the reader to the relevant literature.

¹¹ For some speakers example (43) is strongly ungrammatical, for other ones, less so. According to my intuition, it is quite bad: ‘?*’. The reasons for these differences among speakers are not clear yet to me.

To Luca but (you) to him have given a book!

When on the right of *ma*, a CLLD item is grammatical, as shown by the following examples:

(39) Ma a Luca, non gli avevi dato un libro?

But to Luca, not to him(CL) (you) had(IMPF) given a book?

(40) Ma a Luca, gli hai dato un libro!

But to Luca (you) to him have given ice-cream!

Let's compare now CLLD with contrastive focus (in capital letters). The focused phrase cannot precede the particle *ma*. Consider the following examples:

(41) *UN LIBRO (non un vestito) ma non avevi comprato a Maria?

A book (not a dress) but (you) not had bought to Maria?

(42) *UN LIBRO ma hai comprato! (non un vestito)

A book but you bought! (not a dress)

Finally, a focused phrase on the right of *ma* is ungrammatical with the interrogative structure:

(43) *Ma UN LIBRO (non un vestito) non avevi comprato a Maria?

But a book (not a dress) (you) not had bought to Maria?

On the contrary, in exclamatives a contrastive focus following *ma* is grammatical:

(44) Ma UN LIBRO hai comprato! (non un vestito)

But the A BOOK you bought! (not a dress)

'But you bought a book! (not a dress)'

Hence, neither CLLD nor Focus can precede *ma*. With the exception of example (43), they can follow it. With respect to (43), consider that this judgment is expected, given that in Italian it is in general impossible to have questions with a co-occurring contrastive focus in the left periphery:

(45) *IL LIBRO (non i biscotti) hai dato a Maria?

The book-foc (not the cookies) (you) have given to Maria?

Note that in the literature on these issues, it has been long argued that contrastive focus is a moved

phrase, giving rise to an operator-variable structure, whereas CLLD is base generated.¹²

Therefore, we can conclude that the position on the left of *ma* is available neither to moved phrases, nor to base generated ones, whereas the one on its right is in general accessible.

Consider now a Hanging Topic phrase. Hanging Topic is grammatical on the left of *ma* in both constructions:¹³

(46) Mario, *ma non gli avevi comprato un libro?*

Mario, but (you) non to him-cl had-IMPF bought a book?

(47) Mario, *ma gli hai comprato un libro!*

Mario, but (you) to him-cl bought an a book!

In the next section I provide an explanation for these observations.

5 Sentence and discourse

Giorgi (2015) points out that there are many differences between CLLD and HT, which cannot be accounted for by simply hypothesizing that they are ‘variants’ of the same constructions. Capitalizing on an observation by Cinque (2008), Giorgi (2015) proposes that HT and the sentence following it, though apparently constituting a single sentence, are actually a discourse, whereas this is not the case for CLLD. Consider the following HT example:¹⁴

(48) Paolo, *il professore gli ha dato un bellissimo voto*

¹² See, among the others, Rizzi (1997), Cinque (1990), Frascarelli (2000).

¹³ In this case HT can be distinguished from CLLD because the phrase appearing on the left though corresponding to a dative argument – cf. the dative clitic *gli* (to him) appearing in the clause – is not accompanied by the dative preposition *a* (to), as in *a Paolo* (to Paolo). This is the most evident difference between HT and CLLD. Again a full discussion of this issue is not possible in this work.

¹⁴ For reasons of space, I cannot reproduce here the relevant discussion in Giorgi (2015), where it is shown that HT, in spite of its name, does not behave at all as an ordinary topic.

Paolo, the professor to him-cl has given a very good mark

Giorgi (2015) proposes that there is a silent discourse head DIS, connecting the two parts of the discourse. HT appears in the specifier position, whereas the sentence in the complement one.

Therefore, the structure is the following:

(49) [DISCOURSE Paolo [DIS [il professore gli ha dato un bellissimo voto]]

Paolo the professor gave him-cl a very good mark

In this work, I extend this analysis to *ma* constructions and show that it can capture the data discussed above. In particular, I claim that *ma* is the head of a discourse taking the interrogative clause as its complement, whereas the specifier position is empty:

(50) [DISCOURSE ... [DIS *ma* [non era rosso?]]

but wasn't it red?

(51) [DISCOURSE ... [DIS *ma* [è rosso!]]

but is red!

The dots under the specifier stand for the silent portion of the construction, namely, the expectation for the dress to be, or to be not, red.¹⁵

Note that in this way it is possible to account for the observations in (28)-(35). Consider for instance example (28), or (29), according to this proposal, the structure is the following:

(52) [DISCOURSE Maria ha trenta anni [DIS *ma* [ne dimostra venti]]

Maria is thirty but she looks twenty

¹⁵ A reviewer raises the very important question concerning the notion of *sentence* adopted in this work. Certainly, it cannot be a simple notion of “syntactic sentence” in the traditional sense – notion already challenged in the last twenty years in the studies on parentheticals – but must distinguish among several notion: an intonational one, a pragmatic one and a syntactic one, depending on the object of the analysis. Unfortunately, for reasons of space, this issue cannot be addressed here.

Where specifier and complement can also be uttered by different speakers.¹⁶ The presence of the appropriate intonation and gestures is required when the specifier is missing, i.e. in counter-expectational constructions. As mentioned above in section 1, for some speakers in these cases the discourse head *ma* can be silent, provided that the counter-expectational value can be retrieved by means of a very strong intonation and emphatic gestures. Consider also that, as noted in examples (30) - (33), when the two conjuncts are uttered by different speakers, the affirmative particle *sì* (yes) can appear. According to this proposal, *sì* (yes) occupies the specifier position of the DIS projection:

(53) [DISCOURSE *Sì* [DIS *ma* [ne dimostra venti]]

Yes but she looks twenty

Sì (yes) in this case refers anaphorically to the first conjunct uttered by the other speaker.

Let's go back now to the distribution of CLLD and Focus. The unavailability of both moved and unmoved phrases on the left of *ma*, is explained by means of the consideration that this area does not belong to the sentence. *Ma* is a discourse head and defines the boundary between sentences, hence all the phrases belonging to that sentence must appear on its right.

Hanging Topic, on the contrary, as illustrated above, gives rise to a discourse as well. Hence, for sentence (46) and (47) the structure is the following:

(54) [DISCOURSE Mario [DIS \emptyset [DISCOURSE ... [DIS *ma* [non gli avevi comprato un libro?]]]]

Mario but didn't you buy a book to him?

(55) [DISCOURSE Mario [DIS \emptyset [DISCOURSE ... [DIS *ma* [gli hai comprato un libro!]]]]

Mario but you bought a book to him!

¹⁶ There is no principled requirement in fact for the specifier and complement of a discourse head to share the same speaker. All is required in these cases is that they share the same *context*, i.e. simplifying, the occasion in which a speech act takes place, which permits the identification of the participants in the conversation.

Here we have a complex discourse with a high empty discourse head. The HT appears in its specifier position and the *ma* construction is its complement. On its turn, *ma* projects a discourse phrase, with an empty specifier position, as discussed above.

I conclude this section with a few words on the presence of negation. Delfitto and Fiorin (2014b), point out that negation in surprise exclamatives is expletive, i.e. it does not contribute its canonical meaning as a propositional operator, and only prompts a positive reply. *Prima facie* the same analysis could be proposed for the counter-expectational constructions, even if the authors do not consider exactly this type. My proposal is that at least in these cases however, negation is not expletive, but a real ‘normal’ sentential negation.

In section 1, I listed the properties of these constructions, let me summarize here what has been observed so far: Intonation and gestures, together with *ma*, express the counter-expectational nature of the structure and request for more information; the imperfect stresses the fact that the predicate holds with respect to the speaker’s expectations, and not in the real world. Hence, these components roughly speaking express the following meaning: “X contradicts my expectations, I require further information”. Once these components – intonation, gestures, interrogative form, *ma*, and imperfect – are stripped off the sentence, what we are left with is *dress not red*, which is indeed true. From this perspective, the negation is not expletive at all.¹⁷

6. Conclusions

In this article, I proposed an enlarged view of grammar, able to include certain discourse phenomena as well. I proposed that *ma* is a discourse head, which projects a syntactic structure analogous to that of normal syntactic heads appearing in the sentence. Discourse heads connect separate sentences, which can also be uttered by different speakers, provided that they belong to the same context. Further study is indeed required in order to consider possible developments of this

¹⁷ The possibility of generalizing this conclusion to other cases is a topic for further research.

view to other discourse heads and other constructions.

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