Internalism as Methodology

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This paper scrutinizes the recent proposal made by Lassiter (2008) that the dichotomy between Chomskyan internalism and Dummett-type externalism is misguided and should be overcome by an approach that incorporates sociolinguistic concepts such as speakers' dispositions to defer. We argue that Lassiter's arguments are flawed and based on a serious misunderstanding of the internalist approach to the study of natural language, failing to appreciate its methodological nature and conclude that Lassiter's sociolinguistic approach is just another instance of externalist attempts with little hope of scientific achievement.

Keywords: externalism; internalism; sociolinguistics

1.   Introduction

In a recent paper, Lassiter (2008) argues that both the Chomskyan internalist approach to human language and the Dummett-type externalism fail to provide an account of some semantic and social facts that he claims are crucial to any linguistic theory. Furthermore, Lassiter claims that we can overcome such difficulties in these two approaches by incorporating some sociolinguistic notions into linguistic theory. We will argue that Lassiter's claim is misguided, and that he misunderstands crucial aspects of the Chomskyan internalist project.

We will first provide an overview of Lassiter's claims, and then examine his critique of the internalist project, and discuss why the alternative he presents is highly problematic. We take the failure of his externalist theory to be rather suggestive of the general feasibility of any scientific investigation of language that rests mainly on an externalist foundation.

2.   Lassiter's Claims

This section is devoted to an overview of the argument presented in Lassiter

(2008). Before we proceed, we have to clarify some of the terminology Lassiter misleadingly adopts. Throughout his paper, Lassiter repeatedly attributes to Noam Chomsky and generative linguistics led by him (which he often calls 'descriptive linguistics') a claim that "a language just is a mental grammar" (p. 619) and calls such a claim 'individualism'. Individualism, as he construes, is a claim that semantic properties, such as reference, of an individual's speech behavior rest exclusively on, and can be explained solely by, the facts and knowledge internal to the individual. This is in itself a serious misrepresentation of the Chomskyan internalism (Chomsky 1995, 2000), as we will argue in the next section, but since his discussion rests heavily on this misrepresentation, we will adopt it and review his arguments with regard to this straw man hypothesis. In order to avoid unnecessary vagueness in terminology, let us tentatively call the 'individualism' under his particular conception sketched here *L-individualism*.

In a nutshell, Lassiter's claim is that (i) there are some sociological facts of human linguistic behavior that can be accounted for only by a linguistic theory that incorporates individuals' intentional contributions to the meaning/reference of linguistic expressions, and (ii) neither L-individualism nor the philosophically dominant tradition of semantic externalism (led by people like Hilary Putnam, Tyler Burge, Michael Dummett, and David Lewis) can satisfy this need. We will articulate these points in what follows.

Basing his argument primarily on observations made by externalists such as those just mentioned, Lassiter claims that there are certain 'crucial' socio-linguistic facts of human speech behavior that highlight the relevance of social contexts in a speech community and also of speakers' intentions. A primary example of this kind is, according to him, individuals' intuitions about the '(in)correctness' of their language use against the standards of the speech community they belong to. Lassiter notes, "sometimes an individual's use of language is just *wrong*, and individuals often acknowledge making mistakes upon reflection or correction" (p. 608). As an illustration, he takes a familiar example from Burge (1979), where we are asked to imagine an English-speaking individual, say Jim, who has rheumatism in his thigh but suspects he has arthritis as a result of having an ailment in his thigh. This individual, not being a doctor, does not know that arthritis is a condition of the joints only, and so when he utters "I have arthritis in my thigh," he is expressing a false belief. In such a circumstance, however, Jim should be able to become aware of his mistake, for example, by being explicitly corrected by a doctor. Given this much, Lassiter argues that "a descriptive theory emphasizing *knowledge* of language" would predict (wrongly, as he argues) that his utterance above is not false but rather is just "true-in-his-idiolect" (p. 609), which he regards as a serious flaw of such a theory. That is, he argues with Burge that the reference of 'arthritis' in such a case is rather fixed by the word's use in the speech community Jim belongs to.

Furthermore, Lassiter claims that L-individualism is seriously flawed in that it does not provide any room for language-external concepts such as speech communities and community standards for normative meaning, in its account of sociologically and contextually varying semantic properties of human speech behaviors, as in Jim's cases above. In this regard, Lassiter more or less endorses Dummett's (1986) claim that an individual's knowledge of his language is merely

"a second-order theory: a partial, and partly incorrect, theory about what the meanings of the expressions are in the common language, that may be represented as a partial theory of what the correct theory of meaning for the language is" (Dummett 1986: 469).

However, Lassiter also claims that we should not take at face value the strong form of externalism that Dummett and other externalists like Putnam and Lewis envisage. His target is what he calls *communitarianism*, a position implicitly or explicitly shared by these externalists' approaches which holds that a language is primarily a social object belonging to a speech community, and that such speech communities exist prior to individual speakers and are capable of determining a unique community language (a *communalect*, in his terms) with or without the individual speakers' cooperation (p. 610). Lassiter argues that we should reject communitarianism, because it makes a clearly unsustainable prediction that 'speech communities' that communalects correspond to should be determinate and isolable real objects that we can find in the world. The problem of this prediction lies in the difficulties in isolating the relevant speech communities in a well-articulated fashion. For example, we cannot define a community corresponding to a communalect language neither by political or institutional boundaries, nor by communicative notions like mutual intelligibility. It is by now an established fact that languages vary both synchronically over geographical and sociopolitical space and diachronically over generations, and moreover that such variation is rather continuous and gradual in most cases, without any sharp divisions in terms of geographic space, sociopolitical boundaries, generation gaps, or mutual intelligibility. Consequently, as Lassiter argues, we should give up any hope to find any objective or absolute criteria for isolating speech communities, which in effect militates against the backbone of communitarianist approaches.

He then goes on to suggest that his sociolinguistic approach to semantics can overcome both the difficulties in L-individualism and those in communitariarism. His alternative theory posits that "the meaning of a word in the mouth of a speaker S is determined by S's dispositions to defer to other speakers with regard to the meaning and use of this word" (p. 623). For example, as for the rheumatism patient Jim in Burge's example, he notes, "if we wish to know what 'arthritis' means in Jim's mouth, we must ask who Jim would defer to with regard to the meaning of this word" (p. 622), say, his doctor, in which case his utterance. "I have arthritis in my thigh" can be still said to be expressing a wrong belief, since "he would be willing to change his use if he *were* to go [to see the doctor—L&N]" (p. 623). This way, we can make room for the effect of the speaker's intuitions of correctness by relocating the effect of normativity to the speaker's dispositions to defer, without making recourse to the dubious communitarianist notion of speech community.

3.   The Externalism vs. Internalism Debate

To begin with, let us first state clearly that we have no problem in accepting Lassiter's counterarguments to L-individualism and communitariarism as such,

since they both seem dubious, although we don't regard his argumentation as particularly strong. What we regard as particularly misguided and problematic is his continuous misrepresentation of Chomsky's internalism (Chomsky 1995, 2000) as L-individualism. In our opinion, L-individualism is a straw man hypothesis that says that the meaning of an individual's speech is to be determined solely by facts internal to the individual. From this, Lassiter subsequently concludes that the dichotomy between Chomsky's position (again, misrepresented as L-individualism) and externalism is misguided and to be remedied by "unify[ing] the two approaches" under the realm of sociolinguistics (p. 607).

Lassiter's "broad outlines of the debate" say, on the one hand, that internalists "believe that the proper object of the scientific study of language is the language of an individual, his idiolect or, in Chomskyan terms, his mental grammar, knowledge of language, or I-language. […] This does not necessarily mean that social aspects of language are unimportant or that they do not admit of a scientific description, though some [internalists] have made this further claim: cf. Chomsky (1975). However, most [internalists] do believe that only individualistic aspects of language can be formalized and used to make predictions (e.g., about entailment and grammaticality)" (p. 608). Elsewhere, he also (correctly) attributes to Chomsky the claim that "only the 'internalist' aspects of language can admit of a truly scientific description" (p. 631). On the other hand, semantic externalists "hold that a language belongs to a community of language users, and that common languages or communalects exist above and beyond individuals. According to this conception, a language has an ontology (e.g., words and grammatical rules, or social practices and/or conventions) and norms (standards of correctness) that are in some sense independent of the linguistic competence of individual speakers" (p. 608). These two "broad outlines" seem to be a sufficiently accurate approximation. Crucially, note that internalism thus understood is primarily a *conjecture about a proper object of the scientific study of language* (which internalists claim to be *I-language*), whereas externalism is rather a philosophical *belief* about the *ontology* of some mind/brain-external aspects of human linguistic behaviors (which would be *E-language* of some sort).

Typically, then, both positions would not, and Lassiter also does not, take issue with the fact that there exist aspects of language purely internal to the human mind/brain (i.e. *I-language*): Thus Lassiter's remark, "I think mental grammars are fully real" (p. 619). Indeed, to the extent that the externalist proposals are even coherent, they presuppose some notion of I-language, as Chomsky repeatedly has stressed (e.g., in Chomsky 2000). An I-language can in many ways be identified as a generative system — an I-language enables a speaker to generate linguistic expressions. It's a (trivial) fact that speakers are able to generate an unlimited amount of hierarchically structured expressions. An I-language makes it possible to make sense of the linguistic creativity we all possess as human beings, a creativity that is unbounded, innovative and uncaused (Chomsky 2009 [1966]; see also McGilvray 2009 on this). This linguistic creativity is in obvious ways individual: It is something that each person uses and how it is used is independent of how other people are using their linguistic creativity. The utterances that are generated are part of what is commonly called E-language.

However, E-language cannot exist without the utterances being generated

in some way or other. Certainly language cannot just appear out of nowhere. Hence individuals have to create it using their linguistic creativity. This creativity, of which I-language is a crucial part, is by definition internal. One can debate what the exact content of I-language is, as people following Chomsky have done since the 1950s, but it is very hard to see that it is possible to debate the reality of I-language. If one wants to study E-language, one has to suppose the existence of some sort of I-language since E-language would not exist without I-language. One can choose not to focus on its existence, but it should be clear that it *has* to exist. More advanced examples can be adduced in support of this, involving central well-known empirical facts about human language that doesn't create themselves (hierarchy, as mentioned above, but also structural relations like c-command and others that are crucial properties of I-languages). Thus, we take it for granted that it should be clear why an E-language approach is presupposing the existence of an I-language.

Surrounding the dichotomy between internalism and externalism are, then, (at least) two separate issues:

(i)   Whether we have reasons to believe in some ontology of 'language' outside of individuals' mind/brain, and

(ii)   Whether we can ever construct a serious scientific theory of such 'language'.[1]

Internalists like Chomsky would typically answer a skeptical "No" to (i) and (ii), as Lassiter correctly acknowledges. Externalists strongly answer "Yes" to (i), rooted in their philosophical belief in the existence of such an 'object'. But they seem less concerned about arguing for an articulated "Yes" to (ii), as far as we can see. This is an important difference. For internalists, (i) is not really an important research question, whereas (ii) is really the question they/we are concerned with. Again, this is an important methodological difference that bears emphasis, as Collins (2009) also underlines.

4.   Evaluating Lassiter's Contributions

Despite the sufficient accuracy of the "broad outlines of the debate" above, which is presented on the second page of his paper, Lassiter continuously misinterprets

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[1]   McGilvray (2002: 73) provides a nice exposition of what we have in mind for the term *serious science*:

> A serious science is a theory for which there is not only empirical support in the form of the descriptive and explanatory adequacy of a set of formal, explicit principles (adequate to their domain by standards that are universal, although adjusted to a specific domain) and evidence of progress (a history of revision of theories with good reason to think that there have been improvements in adequacy, simplicity, and explicit statement), but some reason to think that the theory's principles can be accommodated to the principles of other, relevant sciences. In the science of mind, the relevant science would, presumably, be some branch of biology — perhaps a much-revised form of neurophysiology.

what internalism is all about elsewhere in his paper, and repeatedly mis-represents it as L-individualism. For example, he makes the following odd claim: "In contrast to the assumptions of thinkers from Chomsky to Putnam, I do not think that externalism and mentalism are incompatible: I think mental grammars are fully real, though I do deny the claim that language just is a mental grammar" (p. 619). Here, Lassiter is attributing to Chomskyan internalism the "claim that language just is a mental grammar." In the same vein, elsewhere he also says, "Individualists hold that an individual's language just is her idiolect" (p. 610).[2] This is a serious misrepresentation of the internalist claim. As noted above, the core claim of internalists who, like Chomsky, seek a naturalistic theory of language is that the proper object of a serious linguistic science should be organism-internal aspects of human language (namely I-language). Internalists never deny that there are phenomena broadly related to language (in particular to language use) that are beyond the narrow confines of the architecture of the human mental grammar (I-language). Such phenomena would surely include prescriptive pressures from the linguistic community, speakers' intentionality for communicative success, and all sorts of other E-language phenomena that Lassiter and others argue for. What internalists doubt is rather the feasibility and/or legitimacy of providing a serious science of any mind-external phenomena such as these. Thus, Chomsky (1995) writes: "[G]eneral issues of intentionality, including those of language use, cannot reasonably be assumed to fall within naturalistic inquiry" (p. 27); see also Chomsky (2000) for much relevant discussion.

Cast in this real internalism vs. externalism debate, we cannot find any compelling reason to believe that Lassiter constructed even a relevant argument for his conclusion that "the choice between individualism [referring to the Chomskyan internalism] and externalism is a false one" (p. 630). He is mostly attacking the 'claim that language just is a mental grammar', i.e. the incorrect L-individualism, a claim never defended by Chomsky, but Lassiter never addresses all the serious issues raised by the Chomskyan internalism that an externalist theory would have to face. Rather, his alleged 'theory' is just another instantiation of externalism, expressing but not quite arguing for his intuitive "Yes" to (i) and (ii).

Let us now turn to the more specific aspects of Lassiter's proposals, where we in particular will focus on important problems surrounding an E-language approach and why Chomsky and others have focused on studying I-language. As we have seen, Lassiter's claims are as follows:

(A)   There are facts that cannot be addressed purely internalistically (such as individuals' intuitions on (in)correctness of language use, e.g., the imprecision of a rheumatism patient's usage of the word 'arthritis', as seen above).

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2   An additional note on Lassiter's terminology may be in order here. Throughout his paper, he uses the notion 'idiolect' as more or less synonymous with grammar or I-language. This is a misunderstanding. Never has Chomsky squared idiolect and I-language; on the contrary, he has been very explicit in numerous writings that idiolect and I-language are very different (e.g., Chomsky 1986, 2000). A notion like 'idiolect' is very much like 'dialect' and 'language'; vague and ambiguous notions that are notoriously hard to define. This fact, together with the numerous other often remarkably vague notions used by Lassiter, makes it quite hard to assess his theory.

(B)   Any linguistic theory must account for these facts.

(C)   We can actually construct (or at least imagine) an explanatory theory of such facts which incorporates externalist (I-language-external) concepts like speakers' dispositions to defer to normativity or authority in their speech community.

As for the claim in (A), we looked at an example borrowed from Burge where the meaning of a rheumatism patient's word 'arthritis' is determined by who the speaker would defer to, and in what fashion. That is, if we want to know what the speaker meant to refer to by the word 'arthritis', we are told by Lassiter to ask who the speaker would defer to with regard to the meaning of this specific word. Internalists would have no problem accepting Lassiter's mundane (and trivially true) claim that such notions as individuals' dispositions to defer, and the E-linguistic system (communalect) that the totality of a person's dispositions to defer in a particular communicative situation map out, obviously go beyond a purely internalistic account. Thus (A) should not be at issue here.

However, internalists may very well be inclined to deny (B) and (C). As for (B), we fail to see any serious justification of this claim in Lassiter's paper, apart from his personal belief that these facts regarding (A), like most phenomena investigated by sociolinguists, are of general interest. It is not clear that an internalist theory needs to take into account the facts of Lassiter's interest, given that the past fifty years of generative investigation have provided more than ample evidence that the I-linguistic mental system can be fruitfully studied purely internalistically, under the abstraction from the external fluctuations from sociological circumstances or intentions of speakers or the like. Thus, nobody would claim that dispositions to defer or other sorts of an individual's social intentions have any influence on the computational properties of the I-linguistic mechanism that generates the mental compositions of hierarchical structures of words and sentences. As long as they can construct and investigate the science of I-language, internalists are fine to admit that they have to leave whatever remains beyond the reach of their I-linguistic science for the time being, such as the facts that Lassiter and other externalists' interest think are very important (see Chomsky 1995, 2000, McGilvray 2009, and Hinzen 2006a, 2006b, among others). In this regard, it is not clear what Lassiter thinks would go wrong if an internalist approach to human language set the facts of his interest aside, and left it to other disciplines such as sociolinguistics to investigate I-language-external facts. Lassiter never articulates his claim on this point, so we do not see any reason to abandon the internalist theory of I-language. In this regard, we completely agree with the following remark by Chomsky (1995: 50): "As for sociolinguistics, it is a perfectly legitimate inquiry, externalist by definition. It borrows from internalist inquiry into humans, but suggests no alternative to it." By contrast, Lassiter somehow believes that not just *some* but *any* linguistic discipline must account for the relevant facts, but he never articulates why that should be.

More to the point, most internalists suspect that we need to understand the I-language much better than we currently do before we can even start to attempt

at pursuing some serious understanding of how I-language is embedded in sociolinguistic contexts, and specifically how the utterances generated with recourse to I-language are used in a given context to refer to things outside the head. Admittedly, internalists have scarcely started to understand how an I-language that an individual possesses contributes to the semantico-pragmatic performance of that individual in a sufficiently comprehensive way, and thus it would be an inextricable leap at this point to broaden the object of study to individuals' varying deference and any other E-linguistic notions; hopelessly complicating the task. We need a more complete understanding of the internal properties of I-language before we can even attempt to try to understand how individuals utilize them to deal with all sorts of E-language phenomena. This is a very different methodology than that of externalists, and a difference that Lassiter seems to have failed to notice. In total, we see that there are both theoretical and metholodogical reasons to be skeptical regarding (B) (cf. Collins 2009).

Furthermore, it is hard to see how one could even imagine a successfully explanatory theory within the framework that Lassiter pursues given that he does not acknowledge the importance of I-language. In this regard, we side with Chomsky (1995, 2000) and McGilvray (1998, 2002, 2009), and many others, in being very skeptical about the feasibility of (C). The claim that we can construct or should be able to construct an explanatory theory of (E-)language by incorporating various sociolinguistic notions is central to Lassiter (2008). Unfortunately, Lassiter never defines crucial notions that are part of his theory, for example, 'deferential dispositions', 'communicative success', 'social identification' or, elsewhere in the paper, important notions such as 'norms', 'correctness' and 'reference', in a sufficiently meticulous way that enables us to derive predictions from his theory. Rather, to address these notions, he seems to borrow heavily from common sense understandings of these terms. However, we have no reason to expect that any commonsense understanding of words like these can merit scientific investigations. Compare Chomsky's (1999: 113) remark: "[T]here is no reason to suppose that common usage of such terms as 'language' or 'learning' (or 'belief' or numerous others like them), or others belonging to similar semantic fields in other linguistic systems, will find any place in attempts to understand the aspects of the world to which they pertain, just as no one expects the common sense terms 'energy' or 'liquid' or 'life' to play a role in the sciences, beyond a rudimentary level" (see also Chomsky 1980). The point is much the same for Lassiter's 'deference', 'social identification', 'norms', etc. Thus, it is hard to assess to what extent we are actually dealing with a theory here.

Related to this point is the fact that crucial aspects of Lassiter's theory fail to provide obvious criteria for falsifiability. Whenever he encounters problematic examples, he stipulates some superficial elaboration of his terms in order to dismiss them. Consider the following illustrative case: "Recall that, in the case of Jim and his community's deviant use of 'arthritis', we came to the conclusion that the deviant usage could be incorrect in certain circumstances (e.g., talking to the doctor), but it could just as well involve dialect-switching in which both usages are correct in different social contexts. In the latter case, some sort of translation manual would be in order" (p. 625). And as above, he never specifies what role

the newly invented terms like 'dialect-switching' and 'translation manual' are supposed to play in his theory. What seems to be going on here is that Lassiter allows there to be multiple 'explanations' for the same phenomenon. Moreover, there seem to be no principles behind these possible explanations. That is, no guidelines can be found that tell us where/when we should use explanation x and where/when we should use explanation y. Without such guidelines or principles, the theory easily becomes vacuous. Though again, it might be eventually possible to develop such principles, but at least they are not stated in his paper.

Furthermore, Lassiter himself admits (correctly) that the crucial external factors he is utilizing would be subject to much fluctuation, in what appears to be unpredictable ways. Thus he even suggests a possibility that "what a term means must be resolved on a case-by-case basis" in reference to speakers' dispositions to defer (p. 622). Thus, even if it were possible to formalize the externalist factors Lassiter is relying on, no systematic account of these changes seems to be on the horizon as his notions are not precisely formulated, let alone explained, which again undermines the scientific significance of the notions employed by Lassiter.

These are all insurmountable problems facing the 'theory' Lassiter proposes. He fails to provide convincing arguments for the feasibility or legitimacy of constructing an externalist linguistic theory of the sort he envisages. For these reasons, we find it particularly puzzling to see Lassiter's remark in his conclusion: "Chomsky […] insists that only the 'internalist' aspects of language can admit of a truly scientific description. I have attempted to provide several counter-examples to this claim in the form of explanations of problems that cannot be addressed or even formulated without externalist concepts" (p. 631). His "counter-examples" (the facts relevant to (A)) are orthogonal to Chomskyan internalism, which just amounts to "the *methodological decision* […] to study *less*, prior to studying *more*: To study the *organism*, prior to the infinitely more complex task of studying how it embeds in a social, physical, and cultural surrounding", to borrow Hinzen's (2006a: 161) words (cf. Collins 2009). Lassiter also fails to demonstrate why internalists have to worry about his "counter-examples", nor does he convince us of how the sociolinguistic theory that he envisages can be explanatory, going beyond case-by-case descriptions.

We take Lassiter's contribution to be somewhat important, since, *contra* Lassiter's own intention, its failure is actually quite suggestive of a much more general conclusion: namely the absence of explanations or even descriptions that go beyond common sense in externalist approaches such as Lassiter's. We suspect that any account that ever tries to address such I-language-external complex phenomena as community standards or speakers' intentions would be relevantly like Lassiter's, and would fail in the same ways as Lassiter's does. This point is plainly another corroboration of the conclusion by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*: There is no theory of the domain of language use, apart from just more or less helpful description (McGilvray 1998: 228; cf. Chomsky 1995: 27).

However, as noted, Lassiter's failure has no bearing on the internalist research enterprise. His attempt to articulate a sociolinguistic theory of the sort he envisages is orthogonal to the goal of internalist investigations of the Chomskyan sort, which is to provide a naturalistic scientific theory of I-language.

We should, though, make it clear that this assessment is an assessment of Lassiter's particular sociolinguistic theory, and in particular his unwarranted and misguided intention of replacing the internalist project. It is perfectly possible that a different kind of sociolinguistics might emerge that makes explicit its dependence on, or its supplementary nature to, internalist inquiry. Moreover, it might also turn out to be the case that some of the work that is done by people working on language use will turn out to be grounded in phenomena that can be investigated within an internalist approach to language. In any case, sociolinguistics suggests no alternative to the internalist science of language.

5.   Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was primarily to emphasize the methodological aspect of internalism. To repeat, internalists never deny that there are complicated social aspects in the domain of language use; they just decide not to let these unexplainable aspects of language use enter into their naturalistic theory at the present stage of inquiry: "Naturalistic inquiry is a particular human enterprise that seeks a special kind of understanding, attainable for humans in some few domains when problems can be simplified enough" (Chomsky 1995: 10). Thus, focusing on I-language (i.e. taking an internalist approach) is primarily a methodological decision, as we have argued above. And within this domain of study, any I-language-external phenomena such as speakers' intentionality and prescriptive pressures by the linguistic community are of rather little interest. Thus internalists decide to abstract away from these complicating factors when they study their object of inquiry, just as physicists abstract away from various factors such as colors and smells when they study motion and movement of physical objects; an abstraction that is not a scientific necessity. We have argued that Lassiter's criticism of internalism is off the point, based on the serious misrepresentation of Chomsky's position as L-individualism. Rather, the significance of Lassiter's 'contribution', if any, lies in his demonstration that the I-language-external conceptions of linguistic meaning might well be beyond the reach of naturalistic inquiry.

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