Moving into interaction—Social practices for initiating encounters at a help desk

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Abstract

Opening an interaction is a crucial step in establishing and maintaining social relationships. In this paper we describe how participants in an institutional setting, a help desk counter for exchange students at an international university, literally move into interaction. This is accomplished through a range of publicly available and sequentially organised movements in space. These steps are highly systematic and are open to participants’ ongoing negotiation of the situation at hand. Secondly, the paper describes how participants in and through their bodily movements, the use of space and the manipulation of material objects ‘embody the institution’. The paper adds to the growing field of multimodal conversation analytic work on space, mobility and objects in interaction as resources for participants’ ongoing sense-making practices.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we describe the everyday recurrent and mundane situation of initiating a social encounter in an institutional setting. More specifically, we look at how participants at the help desk for (current and future) international exchange students at an international university co-ordinate their spatial trajectories and, quite literally, move into interaction. Moving into interaction is managed through a range of publicly available and co-ordinated embodied trajectories, during which participants constantly monitor the actions of the (incipient) co-participant and organise their next-actions accordingly. Following Goffman (1963), we argue that the transition from unfocused to focused interaction forms the very beginning of a ‘face engagement’ (Goffman, 1963:89), as a constitutive feature of a social encounter rather than as a preliminary to it (cf. Schegloff, 1979). It is in and through the move from unfocused to focused interaction, from co-present individuals to co-participants, that participants establish and maintain social relationships, negotiate whether they ‘just’ happen to share some public space or whether space is used as a resource for entering into social interaction, (institutional) identities and participation roles are projected and negotiated, and participants ‘get ready’ for the incipient interaction, e.g., by disengaging from the ongoing-so-far activities.

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Our methodological approach is ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EM/CA). Although CA has predominantly investigated the role of verbal and vocal conduct in interaction, the acknowledgement of bodily conduct such as gesture, gaze and body posture as relevant and oriented-to resources in and for interaction is not new (e.g., Goodwin, 1986; Heath, 1986; Sacks and Schegloff, 2002[1975]). More recently, research endeavours which explore topics of situated, co-present interaction, have come to constitute a now-integrated field of interaction studies, drawing primarily on EM/CA, context analysis (Birdwhistell, 1970; Kendon, 1990a, 1990[1970]; Scheflin, 1972) and gesture studies (e.g., McNeill, 1992; Kendon, 2004). Together, they argue for approaching social interaction in all its complexity by describing how human action is constructed in and through various types of semiotic resources (Enfield, 2005; Goodwin, 2000), most noticeably talk, gesture, gaze and body posture. In line with this, a range of studies have also documented how features in the setting such as material objects, graphic structures and textures of the environment provide resources through which participants construct their actions (e.g., Goodwin, 2000; Hazel and Mortensen, in press; Streeck, 2011, 2013; Streeck and Kallmeyer, 2001). In this sense, “the environment, through the interpretive uses the participants make of it in their situated activities, becomes a component of the process of communication” (Streeck, 2011:67, italics in original). Human action, then, is constructed by members acting in a social and material world (see e.g., Streeck et al., 2011).

Our paper adds to a long list of interaction studies documenting how institutions are ‘talked-into-being’ (Heritage, 1984b) rather than existing as a mere context for participants’ actions (e.g., Arminen, 2005; Drew and Heritage, 1993; Heritage, 1997; Heritage and Clayman, 2010). According to these studies, participants in institutional interaction employ different sets of parameters for the organisation of turn-taking in institutionally oriented interaction – for instance, who asks/answers questions; who selects a next-speaker – than those found in informal, ordinary conversational settings (Sacks et al., 1974:701). More recently, studies have argued that the resources participants employ are not only vocal and verbal, but include the full spectrum of participants’ bodies in a physical, material surround (e.g., Streeck, 1996; Goodwin, 2003; Heath and Luff, 2011); indeed, that institutions are ‘embodied into being’ (Hazel and Mortensen, in press). Here we argue that participants’ orientation to the institutionality of the encounter is negotiated and made visible already prior to the first turn-at-talk, i.e. during participants’ initial moves that constitute the opening of the social encounter.

1.1. ‘Openings’

A focus on ‘openings’ is far from new in EM/CA studies. Indeed, it constitutes one of the classic topics in CA – in particular openings of telephone conversations (Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 1986), and institutional variations hereof, such as openings of radio talk shows (Hutchby, 1999) and emergency calls (Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987). These studies focus on the action sequences that form the telephone opening, i.e. summons–answer, greeting–greeting, and how in calls in institutional settings the adjacency pairs that constitute the beginning of the call are modified, e.g., with an absence of a greeting sequence in emergency calls. Recently, these have been supplemented by ‘telephone calls’ involving new technologies such as mobile phones (Arminen, 2005; Licoppe, 2009), video conferences (Mondada, 2010), and Skypecasts (Jenks, 2009).

Additionally, a range of studies focus on the interactional accomplishment of moving into focused interaction, i.e. the very set-up of the participation framework (Goffman, 1981) out of which ‘talk’ may emerge. These studies build on earlier research, primarily conducted through recollection and/or field notes, of how verbal and embodied conduct are integral features of interactional openings (e.g., Greenbaum and Rosenfeld, 1980; Schiffrin, 1977; see also Goffman, 1963). For instance, Heath (1986) describes how doctor and patient coordinate their movements when entering the consultation room (see Limberg, 2010, chapter 4 on academic office hours). Kendon and Ferber (1973) refer to the opening phase of an encounter as a ‘greeting’, which they define as “when people come into one another’s presence, which includes a distinctive exchange of gestures or utterances in which each person appears to signal to the other, directly and explicitly, that he has been seen” (p. 153, emphasis added). Duranti (1992), in describing ceremonial greetings in Samoan, notes that “the actual exchange of verbal expressions called here ‘ceremonial greetings’ is contingent upon a number of other activities, including socially guided perception (e.g., seeing or being seen) and the utilisation of the human body as a socially effective communicative resource” (p. 659). From a speech-based perspective, these movements may well be seen as preliminary to the interaction. However, in adopting a strict *emic* perspective we argue that they are indeed an intrinsic part of the orderly accomplishment of social interaction – as highly systematic practices of social conduct. In line

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2 At the time of writing, terms such as ‘multimodal interaction analysis’ and ‘studies of embodied interaction’ are used to demarcate this field of interaction research from the perhaps more established discourse analytic traditions such as Conversation Analysis. We would contend, however, that as interaction is always in some way or other multimodal and embodied, the use of such terms is problematic (see Hazel et al., in press for discussion).
with this, Mondada (2009) provides a detailed analysis of how participants in public space align their trajectories, gaze and bodies as a pre-condition for, and pre-beginning to the ‘reason for the interaction’ – here asking for directions. She shows how the ‘questioner’ categorises and identifies passers-by as relevant potential future interactional partners, and how the (emergent) participants co-ordinate their movements of stopping and mutually aligning the postural orientation towards each other prior to and as part of a summons sequence initiated by ‘excusez-moi?' Such an approach extends Kendon’s (1990b) work on the F-formation in which participants, in and through the positioning of their bodies, engage in an interactional space (which he refers to as ‘transactional segment’) through which their actions can emerge.

1.2. Bodies in motion

A dominant part of social life occurs while participants are moving in an environment. Whereas the majority of studies in CA either deal with settings in which participants remain ‘immobile’ or do not relate the construction of social action to movements in space and place, a small body of work has explicitly described the practices employed when moving together – as an intrinsic social activity (see e.g., Haddington et al., 2013; McIlvenny et al., 2009; Ryave and Schenkein, 1975). Walking, running and riding the bike are thus seen as finely coordinated activities in which participants constantly monitor the physical progression of the other(s) in order to act accordingly. For instance, in an autoethnographic study, Allen-Collinson (2006) describes how she and her running partner, through extensive experience of running together, skillfully recognise heavy breathing by their co-runner as an indication to slow down the pace. Most of these studies deal with participants who are moving in unison from the outset as a joint activity.

The current article builds on these lines of research, in particular on Mondada’s (2009) study. But it differs from her study in one important aspect – the setting. Our examples are taken from an institutional setting in which it is one of the participants’ institutional job to be of assistance to students, who approach the help desk. As our analysis will show, the institutional character is made visible in and through the interaction and the various sequential moves it embodies (cf. Kidwell, 2000). For instance, although being engaged in other work at the counter the staff members monitor people who enter the larger office space in order to project upcoming ‘advice seekers’ so as to bring the ongoing business to a momentary hold. The staff members’ institutional work thus relies on a high degree of ‘multitasking’ and a continuing engagement, disengagement and re-engagement of various activities (see also Haddington et al., forthcoming).

1.3. Data and setting

This paper focuses on the opening phase of interactions at a help desk at an international university. The help desk services both international and local students seeking information about, amongst others, administrative procedures relating to their stay, or study abroad exchange programmes (such as the ERASMUS-programme). Languages used are primarily Danish and English, and language choice is, as we will show later on, a matter of negotiation during the incipient stages of the verbal part of the interaction. The interactions typically include a staff member and one or two students who are seeking some kind of information or administrative service. The data material was collected as part of the Research Centre for Cultural and Linguistic Practices in the International University, and includes a total of 7 h of video recordings produced with small wall-mounted digital cameras. Consent for the use of the recordings was obtained by one of the authors.

The help desk counter faces the entrance of the larger area that hosts a range of offices as visualised in Fig. 1. Due to the various offices located in the space, it is not projectable whether people entering the larger area will effectively approach the help desk counter or move to another space; the participants have to monitor each other’s emergent behaviour in order to detect a potential incipient focused encounter. Our corpus includes openings through various methods for approaching and opening an interaction at the help desk, most noticeably cases in which (i) student(s) approach the member of staff behind the counter, (ii) student(s) must first queue at the counter and wait for their turn, and (iii) student(s) arrive at a vacant counter and await the arrival of a staff member. These different physical and spatial arrangements lead to fundamentally different opening and greeting sequences, each providing participants with different

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3 As the extensive list of more recent studies of interaction has shown, this is indeed a bit of a paradox as participants, even when their feet maintain a position in one place, are in constant motion through gesticulations, body torques, etc.

4 Additionally, research on interaction in cars has demonstrated how driver and co-passenger(s) negotiate and incorporate structures in the environment as an intrinsic part of ‘driving’ (see e.g., Haddington and Keisanen, 2009).

5 To protect participant anonymity, the video-clips relating to the sequences are not openly available. The audio files, however, are being made available through the CALPIU Research Centre online database; see calpiu.dk for information regarding the CALPIU data sets, access, and informed consent obtained from the participants.
structural resources to be drawn on and different interactional work to be accomplished. For instance, whereas a next-client in a queue has to monitor the departure of the prior client in order to find a relevant moment to approach the clerk (e.g., Livingston, 1987; Dausendschön-Gay and Krafft, 2009), this is not the case when a client approaches a counter where there are no students waiting. In this case, the client can rely on the physical position of the clerk as a landmark towards which his/her trajectory can be relevantly projected. This again is different from situations where the client approaches an empty counter and needs to rely on artefacts and physical structures such as computer screens and the location of the counter itself to find a relevant point to await the staff member. In the remainder of this paper, we will describe the first type, i.e. situations in which one or more students approach the help desk counter where a member of staff is already present. In these cases, as we will see, staff members are typically engaged in other work, such as filing papers or typing on the keyboard/looking at the computer screen as the students approach the counter. The move into the incipient encounter therefore includes a momentary disengagement from the current business.

2. The sequential organisation of moving into interaction

Moving into interaction is a mutually coordinated activity in which participants rely on a range of (primarily bodily visual) actions in order to analyse current and projected actions of the co-participant(s), and construct their next-actions accordingly (cf. Deppermann et al., 2010). As we will show, this involves highly systematic and recognisable social practices that are sequentially organised and whose absence are noticeable and accountable. Before we go further into the analysis, Extract 1 will serve to illuminate the interactional steps involved in opening an interaction at the help desk.6

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6 Transcription of verbal conduct follows Jefferson (2004). Transcription of embodied conduct is based on Mondada (e.g., 2009) in which “***” refers to the (primary) student (STU), “*” to the staff member (STA), and “$" to the (secondary) student. The transcript is complemented with frame grabs, which are tagged in the transcription with “#”.}
When entering the larger office area the student gazes towards the staff member while walking towards her (Extract 1 fig. 1). The staff member at this point is writing on a piece of paper behind the counter. However, as the student approaches she redirects her gaze towards the student and they establish mutual gaze (Extract 1 fig. 2). Immediately following the establishment of mutual gaze a brief greeting sequence follows (lines 2 and 3). Note that the greetings occur in overlap. Whereas in conversation a first-greeting normally provides a framework in which the second-greeting can emerge (see Schegloff, 2007; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), here both participants orient to this sequential position as relevant for producing a greeting. They have, in other words, 'simultaneously' understood the immediate prior action as providing a framework in which a greeting sequence is relevant and expectable. The student continues her trajectory towards the counter, and the staff member puts the top on the pen as if to prepare for the incipient interaction by disengaging from the ongoing activity (Extract 1 fig. 4). At this point, the student produces a hesitation marker as she nears the counter. Only now, with both participants facing each other at each side of the counter, is the interaction verbally continued with the student's self-identification (line 5) and reason for coming to the help desk (line 7). As such, both the greeting sequence and the student's self-identification are embedded in complex interactional work in which participants align their bodies to that of the co-participant in time and space, as an emergent move into the interaction. In the remainder of this article, we will describe this opening as a range of sequentially organised steps that participants accomplish in a co-ordinated and orderly fashion in which one step not only builds on but also is dependent on the realisation of the prior step.

3. From entering the help desk counter area on to the greeting sequence

In this first analytic section, we look at the initial appearance of the student in the larger office area, and how participants move into a state of mutual gaze, which is subsequently used as a framework for the verbal greeting sequence.
3.1. Establishing mutual gaze

As noted previously, the help desk counter is not the only ‘office’ that can be reached through the larger entrance area. This means that the staff member behind the counter faces a practical problem, namely to monitor and distinguish between future co-interactants and others who pass by the counter to access other offices. In a quite practical sense, this is a matter of an online categorical analysis: for the student through an identification of the person behind the counter as an institutionally relevant participant for the inquiry at hand (rather than, say, a technician repairing the computer); for the staff member through identifying the approaching person (at this point regardless of other types of categorisation such as ‘local student’ vs. ‘visiting student’) as seeking information relevant to the institutional business of the help desk counter, i.e. have inquiries about, or relevant to, the range of procedural issues the attendant staff can advise on (cf. Schegloff, 1972:88ff.). As we will show, this includes not only determining the student’s projected physical trajectory, but also monitoring his/her gaze. Paraphrasing Kidwell (2005) the staff member makes a crucial analytic distinction between ‘a mere look’ and a look that is projecting a move into an emerging focused encounter.

A general observation is that mutual gaze between student and staff member can be established in two different ways: either the staff member is gazing towards the student ‘from early on’, i.e. as soon as the student appears in the larger office area. Or the staff member turns the gaze towards the approaching student when the student is ‘relatively close’ to the help desk, i.e. the staff member’s gaze shift is a reaction to the student’s appearance in his/her immediate surroundings. The ways in which mutual gaze is established has consequences for how the interaction continues, in particular with regard to who produces the first-greeting – student or staff member (see Section 3.2).

In the first situation, the staff member gazes towards the student ‘from early on’. This displays the staff member’s availability to enter a focused encounter.

(Extract 2)

Here, the staff member is working at the computer. As soon as the students enter the larger office area, she turns the gaze towards them and starts smiling. This displays her availability to enter a social encounter, and the students orient to this by returning the smile.

In the second situation, the staff member only turns the gaze towards the student when (s)he is ‘relatively close’ to the help desk. At this point, the student is already gazing towards the staff member. This means that by gazing towards the approaching student(s) (s)he finds a gazing participant (cf. Goodwin, 1981).

(Extract 3)

The student’s move into the larger area and into the staff member’s perceptual field of vision may be seen as a summons, which is being acknowledged and oriented to in and through the staff member’s turn of gaze. This is markedly different from Mondada’s (2009) data, in which the summons is done through a verbal hesitation, ‘euh’, which requests the co-participant’s
gaze and results in the establishment of mutual gaze. Here, the staff member’s gaze shift can be seen as constituting a response to the student’s projected trajectory towards the counter. The establishment of mutual gaze when the student is ‘relatively close’ to the counter seems to be related to the staff member’s ongoing work behind the counter. Here, the staff member’s continued engagement with the ongoing business displays a limited availability towards the approaching student (see also Section 4).

Students’ gaze towards the staff member when entering the larger office space is very frequent in our data, and constitutes a relevant resource for projecting the student’s request for assistance. It is, however, not the only resource that the staff member draws on. Other factors, such as proximity and walking pace are relevant interactional resources. In most cases in our corpus the walking pace of the student is quite ‘determined’, as (s)he moves relatively fast and directly towards the counter, and this serves as a (relatively) stable factor for being able to categorise the student as a prospective interlocutor. This complements Duranti’s (1992) observation that “[b]eing seen by others while approaching a particular place, being publicly recognised […] are all highly interactional activities through which social identities are negotiated and the forthcoming or ongoing social event […] framed in terms of spatial access while or before linguistic categorizations and social epithets are used” (pp. 659--660). Additionally, smiling – as in Extract 2 – appears to be an important and relevant feature is this endeavour, and most students smile before or during the establishment of mutual gaze with the staff member – similar to other types of vocal and bodily actions in pre-beginnings (e.g., Schegloff, 1996; Streeck and Hartge, 1992). In and through the mutual gaze, the participants enter an engagement framework – as a crucial point in a new social relation.

Kidwell (2000) has noted how institutional relevancies provide a resource for understanding social actions. Here, participants’ embodied action such as the staff member’s repeated orientation towards passers-by as potential incipient interlocutors and the approaching student’s early turn of gaze towards the staff members index the institutionality of the setting. The establishment of mutual gaze is in this sense not ‘just’ between two individuals, but between individuals who are oriented to as class/category-specific (Sacks, 1972), such as ‘staff member’ and ‘information seeker’, and the range of category bound activities that are associated to them. These categories are made publicly available in and through participants’ embodied conduct, and, more importantly for our purpose here, are used as interactional resources in moving from unfocused to a focused encounter.

3.2. The verbal greeting

The verbal greeting occurs as a relevant next-action following the establishment of mutual gaze. It is the first verbal display that ratifies the beginning of the social encounter. However, as we have seen in the above, it follows finely coordinated interactional work in which the participants negotiate the move from unfocused to focused interaction. The verbal greeting occurs, in other words, in a position in which the participants have already established an engagement framework – with the greeting sequences as a relevant next-action to it-, and the verbal greeting emerges out of this engagement framework.7

The ways in which mutual gaze was established, i.e. whether the staff member displayed her availability ‘from early on’ or when the student is ‘relatively close’ to the help desk, have consequences for who produces the first-greeting. In cases in which the staff member displays her availability by gazing towards the student as (s)he enters the larger office area, it is the staff member who does this:

(Extract 4)

7 Compare, in this regard, Duranti’s (1992) observation that mutual gaze is avoided during the greeting sequence in Samoan ‘ceremonial greetings’.
The first-greeting by the staff member ratifies her publicly displayed availability to enter a social encounter. On the other hand, when mutual gaze is established as a response to a student who is 'relatively close' to the counter, the student produces the first-greeting:

(Extract 5)

01  *(4.5) #+(0.4) # ((4.9))
    *turns gaze towards STA
    +turns gaze towards STU

fig #1 #2 #3
STA: hej
STU: hej

In this situation, the student's first-greeting orients to the staff member's gaze redirection, and the first-greeting is ratifying the student's projected trajectory towards the counter as a move into an information request. Interestingly, and opposed to Mondada's (2009) observation, our corpus includes only a few examples where the (student's) first-greeting is used as a summons (Schegloff, 1968) to request the gaze of the non-gazing staff member, as the following example.

(Extract 6)

01  +(1.4) *(0.3) #*(0.5) ((2.2))
    +gazes at computer screen
    *gazes at STA
        *changes projected trajectory

fig #1

02  STU: #hi:
    fig #2

03  (0.4) + (0.3) ((0.7))
    +turns gaze towards STU

04  STA: #hi
    fig #3

05  (0.2)

06  STU: ehh sorry information

Here the student markedly changes the projected trajectory as he enters the larger office area, turns towards the staff member behind the counter and turns the gaze towards her (Extract 6 fig. 1). Although in her peripheral vision, she does not display having noticed him, but continues her work behind the computer screen. Following his greeting in line 2, however, she turns the gaze and torso towards him and produces a second-greeting (line 4, Extract 6 fig. 2). Here, then, the student's greeting works as a summons to attract the co-participant's gaze. Interestingly, the student's next turn is initiated with an apology (line 6) followed by an account for the visit. In this way, he orients to the 'disturbance' of his visit and his (possible) interruption of her prior work-related activity.

Proximity seems to be central to the (sequential as well as physical) position of the verbal greeting: the greeting is done while the student is still moving towards the counter. There appears to be a preference for producing the greeting sequence while the student is still 'at a distance' from the counter (see also Mondada, 2009:1983). As we will describe
more closely later, the time between the greeting sequence and the student’s arrival at the counter is crucial for both participants to coordinate their actions and move into a configuration of postural alignment out of which the next verbal turn-at-talk emerges. The greeting sequence, however, is contingent on a prior establishment of mutual gaze, which may result in a ‘delayed’ greeting. In Extract 7, the staff member starts coughing immediately prior to turning the gaze towards the approaching student. She is therefore physically unable to produce (or respond to) a greeting following the establishment of an engagement framework.

(Extract 7)
01 (1.4) + (0.6) # + (0.5) (2.5))
+ moves hand to mouth
+ turns gaze towards STU
02 STA: kh* h
* slows down
03 (0.5)
04 STA: # hi
fig # 2
05 STU: # hi
fig # 3
06 *(0.4)
* removes gaze from STA and gazes towards the counter
07 STU: #.hh eh*rm:: (0.7) .tsk I came hgre *last + week
* stops walking
* gazes at STA

The student orients to this momentary unavailability: she slows down during the coughing and waits for the staff member to produce the first-greeting. As a consequence, the student has almost reached the counter when the greeting sequence occurs.

Although the greeting sequence is a crucial moment in this emerging social relationship it is nonetheless negotiable whether the greeting will effectively lead to a sustained interaction. We observe that participants are continuously monitoring each other’s embodied actions in order to establish a mutual understanding of whether the greeting sequence is a step into a (focused) interaction, or whether it is a greeting between passers-by. Here, participants rely on several bodily visual resources such as smiling, the ‘determined’ gait of the student’s walk, and sustained mutual gaze. Consider Extract 8, in which participants re-negotiate the ‘character’ of the greeting sequence:

(Extract 8)
01 (1.1) *(0.2) *(0.7) (2.0))
* gazes at STA
* gazes at STU
02 STA: "hej"
03 STU: # *hej
In this extract, the participants negotiate whether the greeting sequence is a first (verbal) step into an interaction or a greeting between passers-by (Goffman, 1963). As the student approaches the counter, he gazes towards the staff member who turns her gaze towards him, whereupon they establish mutual gaze (Extract 8 fig. 1). As we have seen, this is a relevant sequential position for the first-greeting to be produced. Here, the staff member produces a first greeting in line 2, and as the student returns the greeting, he simultaneously withdraws his gaze (Extract 8 fig. 2) and looks towards the papers that the staff member is holding in her hands. The staff member orients to his gaze removal as indicating that this is not a move into an interaction, and she too moves her gaze towards the papers, which constitute a relevant object to her ongoing activity (Extract 8 fig. 3). The student continues his walk pass the counter at a rather slow pace. Again the staff member turns the gaze towards him (Extract 8 fig. 4) and finds a non-gazing participant. The student, who has by this point almost passed by her physical position, now slows down his pace even further, and, once again, the staff member gazes towards him (Extract 8 fig. 5). Again she finds a non-gazing participant. This time, she maintains her gaze towards him, and in line 5 he produces a reason for the visit as he turns the body to establish postural alignment with her. The reason for the visit is here formulated as a general information seeking request – wishing to ‘inquire about exchange programs’ (line 5). The request is designed as neither pressing nor specifically related to his (personal) study abroad situation. Rather, it can be heard as a general information-seeking request prior to the specific planning. With this in mind, we can see his move towards the counter and the sequential interactional steps moving into the focused interaction as displaying the non-specific, general character of the incipient encounter – not unlike that of ‘browsing in a shop’. What we see, then, is that the student’s sequentially positioned embodied actions are formatted in such a way so as not to immediately engage the staff member in focused interaction, but rather delay it. Here we see a systematic pattern of moves into an encounter, in which subtle deviances, as for instance the withdrawal of a gaze, have interactional consequences for the progression of the incipient interaction. Additionally, the way in which a greeting sequence is embodied into being is a crucial resource for how the greeting is intersubjectively understood. A greeting sequence, as a first verbal step into an interaction is thus packaged through a range of verbal and bodily resources where slight deviances change the social action that is being performed, the nature of the greeting, and the course of action that it projects.

3.3. The verbal greeting as a multilingual resource

Throughout our corpus, the greeting is almost exclusively an informal ‘hej’. The pronunciation of the Danish ‘hej’ is almost indistinguishable from an English ‘hi’; in particular when the vowel is prolonged as is often the case when the staff member is
producing the first-greeting. Through the pronunciation of the first-greeting, which can be heard as being either in Danish or in English, the participant does not decide on one language, but rather leaves this an open matter for the co-participant. The second-greeting, which is normatively produced almost identical to the first-greeting in terms of lexicality and pronunciation (although not necessarily in terms of prosody) also bypasses language choice and thereby postpones this decision until after the greeting sequence. As we will show below, the next-turn is produced by the approaching student. Structurally, then, the sequential organisation and participants’ orientation to the institutional setting allows for the client to determine the medium for interaction, without needing to explicitly negotiate a choice of language (Auer, 1984; Gafaranga, 1999; Hazel, 2012; Hazel and Mortensen, 2013; Mondada et al., 2004) (although see Extract 16 below). In this way, participants make use of the linguistic indeterminacy of the greeting during the very opening of the interaction.

4. Disengaging from the prior activity

The initial interactional steps reveal the staff member's simultaneous engagement in various activities and the institutional character of the setting. In almost every case the staff member is engaged in other activities when the student approaches the counter. This has several practical consequences. Firstly, the staff member continuously switches the gaze between objects that are central to the ongoing activity, e.g., computer screen or documents on the counter, and people who enter his/her peripheral vision and who may or may not lead to a focused interaction at the counter. Secondly, the staff member disengages from the ongoing activity to engage in interaction with a student, and that this can be done quite abruptly.

(Extract 9)

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01 *(2.5) +(0.2) (2.7))
+enters the office area and gazes towards STA
+turns gaze towards STU
02 STU: ’hej"
03 STA: #hej
04 fig #1
05 STU: ##ehm*:::
+withdraws gaze
06 fig #2
07 STU: >je vil bare #+li’e høfre<
I just wanted to ask
+stacks papers in vertical position
08 fig #3
09 STU: ##+(0.4)
+puts the stacked papers down in the table
09 fig #4
09 STU: *.huh hvis je ta’r en kombination (0.2)
huh if I do a combination (0.2)
+stops walking
10 STU: på min overbygning der hede:::r (0.4) >virk+somhedsstudier og kommunikation<
in my masters which is called (0.4) business studies and communications
+gazes at STA
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This constitutes a methodological problem for the transcriber who runs the risk of transcriptional stereotyping (Jefferson, 1996) with the ”hej/hi” decision only being made retrospectively. This, however, is not available to the participants in situ and primarily refers to the graphic representation of the transcription. In this article, we are aware of this and consistently use what is retrospectively defined as the resulting medium of interaction.
In Extract 9, the staff member is filing papers behind the counter as the student enters the office space. The move into mutual gaze is followed by a greeting sequence. After a short pause in which the student continues her trajectory towards the counter she produces a hesitation token as a pre-beginning to the incipient turn-at-talk (see Section 5.1). Simultaneously, the staff member starts putting the papers aside firstly by grabbing the papers with both hands (Extract 9 fig. 2), aligning them by tapping the papers against the counter surface (Extract 9 fig. 3), and putting them aside on top of another stack of papers to her left (Extract 9 figs. 4 and 5). The displayed disengagement of her prior activity is closely coordinated with the student’s verbal and embodied actions: the staff member grabs the papers with both hands and projects a physical movement away from the (projected) shared interactional space (Mondada, 2009) of the emerging interaction with the manual activity being coordinated with the student’s pre-beginning in line 5. The alignment (Extract 9 figs. 3 and 4) is done during the student’s preliminary question, and in the pause following it the staff member puts the papers down on the table (Extract 9 fig. 5), thereby having cleared a small empty space immediately between the participants that can now be used for the emerging interaction. In this way, the participants display their understanding of the ongoing activity through vocal and embodied resources as well as the manipulation of objects in the surround; they align their actions according to the immediate prior action(s) by the co-participant by disengaging from prior activities and preparing a shared space around which the incipient interaction can continue.

The physical distance between the entry point into the larger office area and the counter means that the time between the establishment of mutual gaze between the participants – as a first step into a focused encounter – and the student’s arrival at the counter is only a matter of seconds. In this brief moment, the staff member not only has to disengage from the ongoing (‘private’) work-related activity, but also prepare for the emerging encounter. The disengagement is thus another move that ratifies the incipient encounter. When the staff member is working on the computer, the disengagement from the current activity often includes a last few taps on the keyboard or removing the hand from the mouse as in (Extract 10).

(Extract 10)

Following Greatbatch (1992), a (last) keystroke may serve as a resource for a co-participant to time the onset of a next action, such as initiating a turn-at-talk (see also Komter, 2006; Moore et al., 2010). Additionally, the manipulation of objects
is very frequent. This includes physically (re)moving objects as well as ‘grooming objects’ (Mortensen and Lundsgaard, 2011), such as (re-)stacking papers or putting the cap on the pen, as observed in Extract 11.

(Extract 11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>(1.5) * (0.3) + (0.6) (2.4) *gazes at STA +gazes at STU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02 STA:</td>
<td>#[hi:] fig #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03 STU:</td>
<td>*[hi:] #[(0.2) + (0.2) * (0.6) + (0.2) (1.2)] +gazes at pen and puts a tap on the pen *turns torso and gaze towards STU, and walks to R side of counter *gazes towards R side of counter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>fig #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05 STU:</td>
<td>eurm#: I’m:: international student? *stops walking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not only does this publicly display a disengagement from the previous activity and thus project a transition into a new participation framework, it also prepares a physical space on the counter as a site for the incipient interaction. The public availability of the manipulation of material objects in the environment in ways that are not normatively associated with their primary function, becomes here an interactional resource for participants to negotiate transitions between bounded activities (Deppermann et al., 2010; Hazel, 2012; Hazel and Mortensen, in press; Robinson and Stivers, 2001; Streeck, 1996).

5. From greeting sequence to the launch of the next turn-at-talk

Simultaneous with the staff member’s disengagement from the ongoing business, the student continues with the approach towards the counter. This includes a projection of the next turn-at-talk (where the reason for the visit will be presented), and results in the student’s arrival at the counter, where participants’ move into an F-formation. In the following sections, we will describe these stages separately.

5.1. Projecting the next turn

Following the greeting sequence, further talk is withheld until participants have entered an F-formation (Kendon, 1990b) in which participants’ bodies are mutually aligned around the counter. It is noticeable that the absence of further talk is oriented to as an accountable action: the move into an F-formation, i.e. where the student arrives and stops at the counter and the staff member reorients his/her postural orientation towards the incipient co-participant, is accompanied by what is often referred to as pre-speech tokens (e.g., Schegloff, 1996), most typically hesitations (see also Mondada, 2009). Firstly, this reveals participants’ orientation to a new turn-at-talk as ‘upcoming’. Secondly, it projects the student as the relevant next-speaker. Thirdly, the student’s hesitation token is coordinated with the moving into position at the counter, including the placing of the hands against the counter surface. Although a next-turn has been projected, the pre-speech token displays that the bodily spatial configuration has not yet reached a position out of which the turn can emerge (cf. Goodwin, 1979, 1981).

The gaze removal following the greeting sequence is used as a resource to perform relevant action prior to continuing the interaction: for the student to make the last steps towards the counter, and for the staff member to disengage from the prior activity. The staff members in our corpus do not always withdraw the gaze from the student(s) in this position, but may maintain the gaze towards a non-gazing co-participant. In that case, the staff member displays being ready as a recipient to the student’s upcoming turn-at-talk. The students, however, all turn the gaze away from the staff member following the greeting and only return the gaze to the staff member after the next turn-at-talk has been initiated. This reveals an orientation to the student as the relevant next-speaker, but that (s)he is not yet in a spatially adequate position to produce
the turn-at-talk. Or, more accurately, that participants have not yet moved into an F-formation out of which the next turn-at-talk can emerge. The temporal and spatial position of the greeting provides participants both time and space to make the final necessary preparations before the interaction moves on.

The interactional steps described so far are sequentially organised with each sequential position representing a choice of possible next-actions. Each of these is consequential to the unfolding trajectory of the encounter. The social practices on which participants rely are systematic, and even small ‘deviations’ change the course of the projected activity. We will end this section with a deviant case in which each sequential move we have described so far is (re-)negotiated by the participants due to an instance of misalignment in one of the steps.

(Extract 12)

In Extract 12, the student’s gaze is directed away from the counter/staff member as he approaches the counter. As a result, the staff member initially finds somebody whose gaze is directed elsewhere as she orients to his presence (Extract 12 fig. 1). He subsequently turns his gaze towards her, and the staff members starts smiling (Extract 12 fig. 2). The staff member then withdraws her gaze by turning towards the papers in her hands. The established engagement framework, which as we have described above serves as a framework through which a greeting-sequence is a relevant next-action, is thus abandoned and her gaze towards the papers is subsequently maintained throughout the greeting sequence. She thereby does not only orient to the papers as central objects to her ongoing (and continued) course of action, she also treats the student as a passer-by to whom a greeting sequence may constitute both a first and final adjacency pair of the encounter. His greeting, produced in a low volume, is complemented with a removal of gaze (Extract 12 fig. 3) and a continued trajectory past the staff member, before he takes up a waiting position (which can only be viewed from an additional camera – see Extract 12 fig. 4) diagonally to the staff member. Following her subsequent gaze shift in his direction (Extract 12 fig. 4), he produces a request for her availability (line 5). We note, then, how the engagement framework is abandoned before a first-greeting is produced, and how this transforms participants’ understanding of the situation as not a stepwise transition into a stable F-formation, but rather as acknowledging each other’s presence as sharing some public space.
5.2. Coming to a halt and moving into an F-formation

The design of the counter, with two arranged high surfaces in an L shape, provides participants with two possible interactional spaces for the incipient interaction: either on the right side or on the left side in alignment with the computer screen. In most cases, students orient to the physical position of the staff member as an endpoint of their trajectory or more precisely, to the staff member’s postural alignment. At times, however, when the staff member is engaged in paperwork on one side of the counter, students move to the other side of the counter, thereby orienting to the physical unavailability of the projected interactional space, and project that a shared interactional space is imminent to the upcoming request, e.g., putting papers on the counter surface.9

In the following extract, the student reaches the counter and comes to a halt with the lower body facing the counter. The move from ‘walking’ to ‘stopping’ is co-ordinated with the hesitation token, with the ‘stop’ occurring at the end of the hesitation.

(Extract 13)

Here, the student slows down as she produces the final steps to the counter with the stop being accomplished towards the end of the hesitation token (line 7, Extract 13 fig. 4). As part of coming to a halt, the student raises her bag in front of her torso (Extract 13 figs. 2 and 3), and places it on the counter in front of the staff member (Extract 13 figs. 4 and 5). What we see, then, is that the stop is co-ordinated with bringing the bag into the staff member’s visual field, and furthermore, by placing it on the counter in the shared space between them, she makes the bag a relevant object to the business at hand.

9 In a few cases, the approaching student takes up a position at the corner of the counter. Interestingly, however, in these cases the reason for the visit is formulated as a request that is not related to the general institutional purpose of the help desk. Here the student orients to the staff member as a receptionist whose job it is to guide the student to the right office (‘who should I talk to if I want to hear about X?’; ‘Can I borrow that computer?’). Such requests are generally short, consisting minimally of a greeting, request and farewell sequence, and the brevity is visible in the student taking up a position at the counter, which is normatively not associated with service requests. By taking up this position, the student orients to the incipient encounter as not being related to the normative institutional business of the staff member.
It appears that in cases in which the student has not reached the counter towards the end of the hesitation marker, the student produces a pre-request (Schegloff, 1980) to allow for the final steps to be made, and the walk comes to a halt at the end of the pre-request. In other words, the pre-request seems to be produced so that the student comes to a halt before the next-turn is produced and the ‘stop’ is then co-ordinated with the end of the pre-request as in Extract 14.

(Extract 14)

01 *(2.5) +(0.2) (2.7)  
  *enters the office area and gazes towards STA  
  +turns gaze towards STU

02 STU: *hej*  
03 STA: hej

04 #+(0.2) *(0.4) (0.6)  
  +withdraws gaze  
  *withdraws gaze

fig #1

05 STU: #+ehrm+::  
  +grabs papers with both hands  
  +gazes towards STU  
  *turns torso towards counter

fig #2

06 #(0.3)

fig #3

07 STU: >je vil bare +il'e høre<  
  I just wanted to ask  
  +stacks papers in vertical position

08 #*+(0.4)  
  +puts the stacked papers down in the table  
  *places her cap on the counter

fig #4

09 STU: #*hhh hvis je ta'r en kombination (0.2)  
  hhh if I do a combination (0.2)  
  *stops walking

fig #5

10 STU: på min overbygning der hedde:ør (0.4) >virk+somhedsstudier og kommunikation<  
  in my masters which is called (0.4) business studies and communications  
  *gazes at STA

fig #6

Here, the student turns the torso towards the counter at the end of the hesitation token (Extract 14 fig. 3). At this point, she is still completing the final steps (note the position of her legs in Extract 14 fig. 3). She produces a pre-request and takes another step towards the counter (Extract 14 fig. 4). Additionally, she puts her hat on the counter and only then does she proceed with her reason for the visit. The physical connection with the counter seems to be a general feature of the move into an F-formation, and students consistently touch or place various objects such as bags, papers or bottles on the counter surface. The physical engagement with the counter regularly occurs in the hesitation marker that follows the greeting sequence or during the reason for the visit.
Coming to a halt is accompanied with the student’s torso being turned so the student ends up with the full body ‘facing’ the counter. This seems to be the end position of the student’s projected trajectory: from entering the office area and seeing the physical position of the staff member, the student walks in a straight line directly towards the counter, rather than, for instance, walking towards the counter and only then turning the torso towards the staff member. In cases in which two students walk and approach the counter together this requires mutual coordination of the projected interactional space.

(Extract 15)

01 STA: hej
02 StR: hej
03 STL: =hej
05 #1.8) #+(0.5) ((2.3))
+turns gaze towards STL

06 StR: #$.h$#h$ #$H$HHHhhh[hhh
$StR stops walking
$StL stops walking, torques body towards STA, gazes at papers in her hand
$starts walking towards STL

07 STL:
[je ha:*r #eh]:
I have eh
*moves closer to the counter

08 STA:
[suk
sight

09 StL:
*ud[(yltd]
*reaches and stops at the counter

10 StR: [uh [huh #sluh
$torques body towards STA

11 STA: [huh [huh

12 StL:
[spersgaet
the question

13 StR: huh huh
In Extract 15, the two students, StL to the left with papers in her hand and StR to the right, approach the counter directly in front of the staff member at the corner of the counter (Extract 15 fig. 1). StL breaks off and continues towards the counter-surface to the left side of the staff member (Extract 15 fig. 2). StR, however, continues the projected trajectory and comes to a stop at the corner of the counter (Extract 15 fig. 3), clearly in a position in which she projects a continuation of the interaction by producing a protracted in-breath (line 6). At this point, StL has continued her walk along the counter and comes to a brief halt -still at a distance from the counter- while gazing at the papers in her hand (Extract 15 fig. 4). The staff member turns the gaze towards her and orients to her as the primary incipient interlocutor, and the papers as relevant to their business at hand. StR, too, turns the gaze towards her partner and starts walking towards her (Extract 15 fig. 5). StL orients to the onset of StR’s approach by initiating a turn-at-talk (line 7) and moving closer to the counter (Extract 15 fig. 6). In doing so, she retrospectively defines her prior hold as ‘doing waiting’ for StR to join her (cf. Schmitt, 2012). Here, her verbal and embodied actions are closely co-ordinated to those of StR: her hesitation token (line 7) is used to complete embodied movements in space by both participants as they take their final steps towards the counter. As her turn continues (line 9), both StL and StR reach the counter. Simultaneously with her stressed “udfyldt” (filled out), she rotates her body, thereby ending up in an F-formation with the staff member. Additionally, both students engage in physical contact with the counter: StL by putting her hand on the counter surface, and StR by putting her bottle on the counter. And finally, during the laughter tokens (line 10, Extract 15 fig. 8) produced as a response to the staff member’s online indexical description of StR’s protracted in-breath, StR rotates her body, thereby ending up side-by-side with StL, with both of their bodily positions facing the staff member. Here, building on the work of Ryave and Schenkein (1975), we see how the activity is embodied and oriented to as a shared activity between both students; how they co-ordinate their projected trajectories; and how they display their online analysis of co-participants’ actions through subtle embodied conduct in space.

5.3. Producing the next turn-at-talk

In the next turn the student either accounts for the visit (Extract 13 above) or provides a self-identification (Extract 11 above). The turn is contingent on the final move into interaction in which participants align their postural orientation vis-à-vis each other, thereby engaging in an F-formation. The F-formation is not just a framework for producing the next turn, but an integrated part of it. Previously we noted the multilingual nature of the setting where both ‘Danish’ and ‘international’ students approach the counter, which is also the professional working space of both ‘Danish’ and ‘international’ employees. Furthermore, we note that this makes language choice (predominantly Danish or English) a negotiable matter for participants – with the initial verbal greeting ‘hej’ and the language ambiguity due to its pronunciation acting as a resource for participants. In Extract 16, we see the participants establish an F-formation out of which the student’s account for the visit emerges.

(Extract 16)

01 STU: "hej? *gaze at STA
02 *(1.1)
03 STA: *hej *gazes down at the counter
04 *(0.3)
05 STU: *eh jeg kun godt +tænk mig at +eh: ;
   eh I’ve been thinking about eh
   *places both hands on the counter
   +gaze at STU +gaze at and grabs pen
   +gazes at STU
06 STU: tage til *Iceland
   going to Iceland
   +gazes at STA
07 *(0.3)
08 STU: #femte semester=
   the fifth semester
   #1
09 STA: ++eh #sorry I huhuh I [don’t] speak much
   +gazes down, flicks the pen
   #2

fig #1

fig #2
The turn concerning the reason for the visit, which follows the greeting sequence, is produced in Danish. As the student produces a pre-beginning hesitation token, he places both hands on the counter surface while the participants move into postural alignment on each side of the counter. The student reaches a possible completion of the turn constructional unit (TCU) and adds an increment in line 8. At this point, they move into mutual gaze (Extract 16 fig. 1), both of them in physical contact with the counter surface – the staff member through resting his hand on the counter with a pen in his right hand. Following the increment, the staff member initiates medium repair (Gafaranga, 2000), producing an apology in English, “sorry” (line 9), and announcing the language choice as the trouble source; the rather late repair seems to be related to his account of not being able to speak “much Danish” (lines 9–12), but probably enough to have understood the student’s first turn. As the staff member prefaces the apology with a hesitation (line 9), he turns the gaze away from the student, flicks the pen, and moves his body slightly towards the left (Extract 16 fig. 2). He thus disengages from the established F-formation as part of producing the apology. The student, able to draw on the language of the apology, responds with a change of state token (Heritage, 1984a) and an apologetic gesture by raising both hands from the counter to a position in front of his torso with palms facing the staff member (Extract 16 fig. 3). Both participants then rotate their bodies away from each other and take a step backwards (Extract 16 fig. 4). They subsequently move back into their original positions at the counter during the student’s restarting of his account, i.e. a ‘translation’ of his prior turn into English. This is accomplished by first rotating their bodies back towards the counter and thereby ending with their torsos facing each other (Extract 16 fig. 5), and, in overlap with “Iceland”, establishing mutual gaze (Extract 16 fig. 6). What we see here is that not only does the repair initiation occasion a language alternation, but moving out of one language, i.e. Danish, means literally disengaging from the established F-formation and re-engaging into it once again as part of switching to another language. The language alternation is in other words ‘embodied into being’ with a re-enactment of the bodily engagement as an intrinsic part of restarting the turn.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to explicate the practices through which participants in a prospective institutional activity together achieve conditions of mutual alignment from which a service encounter can emerge. We have done so by subjecting to close analysis the opening stages of incipient interactions, where participants engender the earliest displays
of a moving into an interaction. These approaches, which involve participants both negotiating convergent spatial trajectories, in conjunction with an aligning of mutual orientation towards a common participation framework, are deeply embodied processes. They involve in the first place the awareness of particular bodies’ placement or trajectories within symbolically sedimented spatial structures in the physical surround, e.g., offices, corridors and public space, and the territorial demarcations associated with them. They involve the coordination of displays of noticing and gaze orientation, gait, the accountable manipulation of artefacts in the surround, facial gestures, postural configurations and greeting sequences. They also involve categorisation of participants within a larger institutional framework as potentially relevant co-participants to a service-oriented interaction. The resulting configuration, or ‘shared interactional space’ (Mondada, 2009) from which the jointly managed institutional activity subsequently develops, is contingent on participants observing the progressive arrangement of body visual resources as the trajectories become mutually aligned.

This work parallels Mondada (2009), who describes the same stages of emergent focused interactions but in the ‘non-institutional’ setting of a public street. In Mondada’s data, the encounters involved members of a research team approaching unacquainted pedestrians to request directions to locally situated landmarks in a town. She found that “even before beginning to speak, participants achieve the mutual orientation of their bodies and of their gaze: the pre-conditions for social interaction are visibly and publicly assembled in time, within the progressive establishment of a mutual focus of attention and a common interactional space” (2009:1977). This incipient phase is finely coordinated between prospective co-participants, as potentially suitable candidates for providing directions are initially identified by the itinerary requester. The preliminary and preparatory activity of selecting a competent member for the task at hand is also a member’s concern in the setting described in the current paper. However, the institutional nature of the encounters described here affords prospective clients a number of other resources. They may locate relevant service providers at designated contact points, here, for example, at a help desk counter located within an International Office at a university. The sought after information provider may further display a greater state of preparedness to attend to an approaching potential service requester, in contrast with the passers-by in Mondada’s French street, who may need to be actively brought into mutual orientation by an itinerary requester through other means – a vocal summons, for example – prior to the convergent mutual orientations to be able to be negotiated. And while passers-by are in the position to reject entering into a focused interaction with an unacquainted member of the public, these rights are somewhat restricted in institutional settings. Whereas a member of staff may seek to temporarily suspend a convergent move into an interaction with a client, or refer the client to another member of staff, it would appear inappropriate to withdraw from the emergent encounter once it has been initiated. In this way, a client’s embodied summons may not be ignored or rejected.

Connected with this, the participants in our data are found in this space for the reason of engaging in the exchanges we observe, in contrast to pedestrians and passers-by, who are not present in the street for the purpose of engaging in an itinerary request. As such, it could be suggested that where the act of seeking out an itinerary provider may be instigated at the moment the missing information becomes relevant, and that this may be instantaneous, this is different for the participants in our data. Here, clients have sought out the place in order to engage in the required service encounter, engaging in the kinds of activities described as pre-beginnings by Whalen and Zimmerman (1987; see also Mondada, 2008); and the service providers are on hand for the very reason of providing clients with administrative support. This would appear consequential to the way the different trajectories unfold at these opening stages.

Nonetheless, we find, in line with Mondada (2009) that the entry into these focused encounters is brought about methodically by participants deploying a range of sequentially organised resources. These include gaze, body posture, walking trajectories as well as manipulation of material objects that are relevant to the institutional business. It is the interrelation of these different resources that constructs a Gestalt through which social action is accomplished.

References


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