THREE WAYS OF REFERRING TO DISCOURSE PARTICIPANTS IN VIETNAMESE

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Abstract
This note discusses the fact that in Vietnamese, speakers and hearers can refer to themselves by pronouns, proper names, or relational nouns. This makes Vietnamese different from English and many other languages which require discourse participants to refer to themselves by pronouns only. We sketch an account for this difference which involves a syntactically represented speech act level, a parameterization of Rule I with respect to its candidate set, and a well-formedness principle concerning the structure of bound nominals.

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1 Preliminaries

Let us briefly lay some groundwork. I assume the familiar set-up of truth-conditional semantics which is presented in well-known expositions (cf. Montague 1973, Heim & Kratzer 1998, Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet 2000). Linguistic expressions belong to different types depending on their semantic values. The basic types are t and e, and the derived types are $\langle a,b \rangle$ where a and b are types. Let D_a be the set of semantic values of expressions of type a. Then D_t is the set of truth values, D_e is the set of individuals, and $D_{\langle a,b \rangle}$ is the set of functions from D_a to D_b.[1] The set of truth-values, D_t, has two members, T (true) and F (false), while the set of individuals, D_e, is countably infinite. Interpretation is relativized to an assignment g: $[[\alpha]]^g$ is the semantic value of α with respect to g. We can think of g as representing aspects of the context which determine the semantic value of certain expressions, specifically those that refer to individuals such as *he* or *John*. Such expressions are of type e, and are syntactically of the form X_n where n is a natural number. We call n the "index" of X_n. The assignment g is a function from indices to individuals: it maps X_n to the individual g(n), provided g(n) satisfies the condition specified by X.

(1)   a. $[[he_2]]^g = g(2)$, provided g(2) is male
        b. $[[John_4]]^g = g(4)$, provided g(4) = John

If the condition after "provided" is not satisfied, g(n) is undefined. Thus, X represents the "presuppositional" and n represents the "denotational" content of the expression X_n. Apparently, all languages are similar to English in that the presuppositional content of type e expressions is phonologically realized but their denotational content is not. This universal may have a functional explanation. Suppose English did realize the index phonologically. Then, instead of hearing *he* and guessing what its silent index refers to, we would hear both *he* and the index and then guess what the index refers to. Obviously, neither procedure is practically better than the other. If the index is present

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[1] For example, the sentence *John smokes* is an expression of type t: its semantic value is either T, if John smokes, or F, if John does not smoke. The proper name *John* is an expression of type e, since John, its semantic value, is an individual. The verb phrase *smokes* is an expression of type $\langle e,t \rangle$, having as semantic value the function $[\lambda x: x \in D_e. \ x \text{ smokes}]$ which maps each individual x to T if x smokes and to F if x does not smoke. I will use the "lambda notation" to represent functions in the manner of Heim & Kratzer (1998). Specifically, $[\lambda \alpha: \beta. \ \varphi]$ represents the function from each α such that β to T if φ and to F if it is not the case that φ. The condition on the domain of the function will be made explicit only when necessary.

by default and we have to guess which individual it is mapped to in the context anyway, then there is no reason for pronouncing it.[1]

For this discussion, we will assume that every expression of type e is either a pronoun or a name.[2] Let us now discuss the following distinction between pronouns and names.

(2)   Binding Condition
       Pronouns can be bound or free while names must be free

We consider the Binding Condition to be definitional: among expressions of type e, some must be free. We call these "names" and call the rest "pronouns". For α_n to be "bound" by X is for the sister of X to be of the form $[\beta_n \ Y]$ where Y contains α_n and no other instance of β_n which c-commands α_n. If α_n is not bound then it is "free". The binding operator β_n, which is phonologically covert and can be freely inserted between the subject and the VP, is interpreted by the rule in (3), where $g^{x/n}$ is the function which maps index n to x and which is identical to g with respect to every other index, i.e., $g^{x/n}(n) = x$ and $g^{x/n}(m) = g(m)$ for every $m \neq n$ (cf. Büring 2005).[3]

(3)   Interpretation of β_n
       $[[\beta_n \ VP]]^g = [\lambda x. \ [[VP]]^{g^{x/n}}(x) = 1]$

We can now distinguish between binding and coreference, or more specifically, between anaphoric relations established by β_n and anaphoric relations established by co-indexing (cf. Reinhart 1983a). Consider sentence (4), which can be parsed as (4a) or (4b).[4]

(4)   *Only John thinks he is intelligent*
       a.   *Only John$_2$ [$_A$ thinks he$_2$ is intelligent]*
       b.   *Only John$_2$ [$_B$ β_7 thinks he$_7$ is intelligent]*

In both sentences, *John* carries index 2, which means both sentences presuppose g(2) = John. In (4a), the anaphoric relation between *John* and *he* is established by co-indexing. We say that the two expressions are coreferent. The semantic value of A, the VP of (4a), is the function [$\lambda x.$ x thinks g(2) is intelligent], which maps each individual who thinks of John as intelligent to T and every other individual to F. In (4b), the anaphoric relation between *John* and *he* is established by β_n: the sister of *John* is [β_7 Y] where Y contains *he$_7$* and no other instance of β_7 which c-commands *he$_7$*. This means, given what we said above, that the pronoun is "bound" by the name. Applying (3), the semantic value of B, the VP of (4b), will be the function [$\lambda x.$ x thinks x is intelligent] which maps each individual who thinks of himself as intelligent to T and every other individual to F. Thus, what (4a) asserts is that no one other than John thinks of John as intelligent, and what (4b) asserts is that no one other than John thinks of

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[1]   Of course, overt indices would help in anaphoric contexts such as *John met Bill, and he promised to help him* (Heim 1982, 1990). The functionalist would have to supplement her explanation for the silence of indices with the claim that such contexts are not of primary concern for the "superengineer" when she designed language, or with some other auxiliary hypothesis.

[2]   Two classes of expressions which have been considered to be of type e by several analyses are definite descriptions such as *the man* or traces created by movement (cf. Fox 2000, 2003, Sauerland 2004). We leave these out of consideration in this paper. Note, also, that anaphors such as *himself* or reflexives such as *each other* will be ignored as well. These are essentially pronouns that must be bound (cf. Chomsky 1981).

[3]   For the purpose of this discussion, we consider only binding from the subject position.

[4]   Note that *John* carries index 2 while β and its bindee *he* carry index 7. Obviously, the meaning would be the same if all three expressions carry the same index, but in that case, the co-indexation would be accidental. We take the principle of avoiding accidental co-indexing to be operative in language (cf. Büring 2005).

himself as intelligent.[1] These are, of course, two different propositions: in a situation where everyone, including John, considers John, and only John, to be intelligent, (4a) will be false while (4b) true. Reflection upon (4) shows that it has both of these readings. We will adopt standard terminology and call the reading involving coreference and represented by (4a) the "strict reading" and the reading involving binding and represented by (4b) the "sloppy reading". The ambiguity of (4) between the strict and the sloppy reading is evidence that (4) has (4a) and (4b) as possible parses, i.e., that the anaphoric relation between a pronoun and a name can be established by either coreference or binding. This is predicted by the Binding Condition, which says that pronouns can be bound or free.

We have used *he*, a third person pronoun, as example. Let us now discuss the first and the second pronoun, which are *I* and *you*, respectively.[2]

(5) a. $[[I_n]]^g = g(n)$, provided $g(n)$ is the speaker
     b. $[[you_n]]^g = g(n)$, provided $g(n)$ is the hearer

The question we raise is whether the two options of binding and coreference are available to the first and the second pronoun just as they are to the third person pronoun. Consider the sentences in (6).

(6) a. *Only I have the courage to do what I think is right*
     b. *Only you have the courage to do what you think is right*

These sentences turn out to be ambiguous between the strict and the sloppy reading in the same way as (4) is (cf. Partee 1989, Kratzer 1998, Heim 2008, Kratzer 2009). Specifically, (6a) can be read as asserting that no person x other than the speaker has the courage to do what the speaker thinks is right, or as asserting that no person x other than the speaker has the courage to do what x thinks is right. Similarly, (6b) can be read as asserting that no person x other than the hearer has the courage to do what the hearer thinks is right, or as asserting that no person x other than the hearer has the courage to do what x thinks is right. This is evidence that (6a) has (7a) and (7b), while (6b) has (8a) and (8b), as possible parses. This means that both the first person pronoun *I* and the second person pronoun *you* can be bound or free.[3]

(7) a. *Only I₃ [VP have the courage to do what I₃ think is right]*   strict
     b. *Only I₃ [VP β₇ have the courage to do what I₇ think is right]*   sloppy

(8) a. *Only you₄ [VP have the courage to do what you₄ think is right]*   strict
     b. *Only you₄ [VP β₇ have the courage to do what you₇ think is right]*   sloppy

What about the second part of (2), which says that names cannot be bound? Consider (9).

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[1] In other words, (4a) says that John thinks John is intelligent but Bill does not think John is intelligent and Sue does not think John is intelligent, etc., while (4b) says that John thinks John is intelligent but Bill does not think Bill is intelligent and Sue does not think Sue is intelligent, etc. I thank a reviewer for suggesting this way of describing these two different meanings.

[2] We will not discuss plural expressions of type e such as *they* or *we* or *John and Mary*.

[3] I assume a standard semantics for *only*, according to which $[[only\ p]]^g$ presupposes that *p* is true and asserts that alternatives of *p* which are not entailed by *p* are false (cf. Horn 1969, Rooth 1985, 1992, Krifka 1993). Following Sauerland (2013), Bassi & Longenbaugh (2018, Bassi 2019), I assume that presuppositions of bound nominals do not project onto the focus alternatives. In (7b), for example, the VP of the prejacent denotes the function [λx: x is the speaker. x has the courage to do what x thinks is right], but the VP of the alternatives would denote the function [λx. x has the courage to do what x thinks is right].

(9)   *Only John₅ has the courage to do what John₅ thinks is right*
    a.   *Only John₅ [ₐₚ has the courage to do what John₅ thinks is right]*   strict
    b.   *Only John₅ [ₐₚ β₇ has the courage to do what John₇ thinks is right]*   *sloppy

This sentence can only be read as asserting that no person x other than John has the courage to do what John thinks is right. It cannot be read as asserting that no person x other than John has the courage to do what x thinks is right. This indicates that (9) only has the parse in (9a) but does not have the parse in (9b), as (9b) would express the latter, unavailable, reading. This observation is evidence that the name *John* cannot be bound and, consequently, that the anaphoric relation between the two instances of *John* in (9) can only be established by coreference.[1]

2 Refering to discourse participants using proper names

Vietnamese has three basic pronouns: *tao*, *mày* and *nó* for first, second, and third person, respectively.[2] With respect to binding and coreference, these behave similarly to their English counterparts: they can be either free or bound, as evidenced by the ambiguity between the strict and the sloppy reading of the following sentences.

(10) | *Mỗi* | *tao* | *dám* | *làm* | *cái* | *tao* | *cho* | | *là* | *đúng* |
       | only | I | dare | do | what | I | think | | is | right |
    a.   No x other than the speaker has the courage to do what the speaker thinks is right
    b.   No x other than the speaker has the courage to do what x thinks is right

(11) | *Mỗi* | *mày* | *dám* | *làm* | *cái* | *mày* | *cho* | | *là* | *đúng* |
       | only | you | dare | do | what | you | think | | is | right |
    a.   No x other than the hearer has the courage to do what the hearer thinks is right
    b.   No x other than the hearer has the courage to do what x thinks is right

(12) | *Mỗi* | *John* | *dám* | *làm* | *cái* | *nó* | *cho* | | *là* | *đúng* |
       | only | John | dare | do | what | he | thinks | is | | right |
    a.   No x other than John has the courage to do what John thinks is right
    b.   No x other than John has the courage to do what x thinks is right

Also, names cannot be bound in Vietnamese, as evidenced by the lack of the sloppy reading for (13). Thus, Vietnamese obeys the Binding Condition just as English does.

(13) | Mỗi | John | dám | làm | cái | John | cho | | là | đúng |
       | only | John | dare | do | what | John | thinks | is | | right |
    a.   No x other than John has the courage to do what John thinks is right
    b.   #No x other than John has the courage to do what x thinks is right

There is, however, a striking difference between Vietnamese and English with respect to the first and the second pronouns: whereas the use of these pronouns are obligatory in English, it is optional in Vietnamese (Reinhart 1983b, Trinh & Truckenbrodt 2018).

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[1]   The argument is of course based on the premise that the parse (9b) would yield the sloppy reading. This premise, in turn, requires the assumption that presuppositions of bound nominals do not project onto the alternatives (see previous note).

[2]   The plural forms are derived by adding the morpheme *chúng*. Thus, *chúng tao*, *chúng mày* and *chúng nó* are the first, second and third person plural pronouns. As mentioned above, we will not discuss plural pronouns. Note, also, that *tao*, *mày* and *nó* are used only among close friends of equal social ranks. Thus, their pragmatics is different, specifically more limited, than that of their English counterparts. We will abstract from the pragmatics of pronouns in this paper.

(14)   Generalization
        In English, discourse participants must be referred to by pronouns, while in Vietnamese, they can
        be referred to either by pronouns or by names

An individual is a "discourse participant" if she is either the speaker or the hearer. What (14) says of English is a fact so familiar to speakers of this language that they may not even be aware of it, namely that *I* and *you* must be used when they can be. Suppose John wants to tell Mary that he will help her, what he would have to say is (15a), not (15b), even though the two sentences are semantically equivalent.

(15)   Context: John is telling Mary that he will help her
        a.   *I will help you*
        b.   *#John will help Mary*

This curious restriction, which is pervasive among European languages, does not hold for Vietnamese. In this language, people in conversations can refer to themselves by name. If John is telling Mary the same thing in Vietnamese, he can say either (16a) or (16b).

(16)   a.   *Tao*   *sẽ*   *giúp*   *mày*
              I   will   help   you
        b.   *John sẽ*   *giúp*   *Mary*
              John will   help   Mary

Let us now try to make sense of the generalization in (14). The first ingredient to our analysis is the following hypothesis (Trinh & Truckenbrodt 2018). I use strikethrough to represent syntactic materials without phonological content.

(17)   Performative Hypothesis
        Every sentence φ spoken by α to β is parsed as [α [~~want~~ [β [~~believe~~ [φ]]]]]

What (17) amounts to is the claim that certain aspects of meaning which have often been classified as "pragmatic", i.e., as resulting from principles of language use, are actually logical, i.e., part of the literal meaning. When α tells β that φ, what becomes true in the world after the utterance is neither φ nor that β believes that φ, but that α wants β to believe that φ.[1] The Performative Hypothesis says that this truth obtains by virtue of a sentence, or more precisely a grammatical representation, becoming true.[2]

The second ingredient of our analysis is a condition called Rule I, proposed by Grodzinsky & Reinhart (1993). I hypothesize that Rule I is parameterized in the sense that its precise interpretation for English and Vietnamese differs slightly (Trinh 2019).

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[1]   Note that this account can, and should, be extended to other speech acts as well, since the generalization in (14) is meant to hold for sentences beyond declaratives. A straightforward way to implement such an extension would involve replacing *want* and *believe* in (17) with other predicates (cf. Austin 1962, Searle 1969). In fact, even for declaratives, whose paradigmatic use is to make assertions, the choice of *want* and *believe* is not crucial. I make this choice largely to simplify the exposition, and similar views have been expressed in the literature (cf. e.g., Bach & Harnish 1979, Zaefferer 2001, Truckenbrodt 2006). However, the reader is free to substitute these verbs with other relations as stated by her favorite theory of assertions (cf. McFarlane 2011, Krifka 2021).

[2]   The idea that certain aspects of speech acts are grammatically represented has a long history, cf. Frege (1879), Stenius (1967), Ross (1970), Lakoff (1970), Sadock (1974), Gazdar (1979), Cinque (1999), Krifka (2001), Gärtner (2002), Gunlogson (2003), Speas and Tenny (2003), Hacquard (2006), Trinh & Crnic (2011), Haegeman & Hill (2013), Krifka (2015), Sauerland & Yatsushiro (2017), among others.

(18) Rule I
      Choose binding over coreference!
      a. Interpretation for Vietnamese
          If a free pronoun can be replaced by a bound pronoun without changing the truth-conditional meaning of the sentence, it must be
      b. Interpretation for English
          If a free pronoun or a name can be replaced by a bound pronoun without changing the truth-conditional meaning of the sentence, it must be

Recall the examples we discussed to illustrate the difference between binding and coreference. They are cases where choosing between these syntactic options has semantic consequence. However, this is not always true. Consider the three structures (19a), (19b) and (19c), which all express one and the same proposition, namely that g(2) thinks g(2) is intelligent, where g(2) = John.

(19) a. *John$_2$* [$_{VP}$ *thinks John$_2$ is intelligent*]
      b. *John$_2$* [$_{VP}$ *thinks he$_2$ is intelligent*]
      c. *John$_2$* [$_{VP}$ β$_7$ *thinks he$_7$ is intelligent*]

What Rule I tells us is that in this case, English must choose (19c), while Vietnamese must choose either (19a) or (19c). Both languages would rule out (19b). In other words, English considers a bound pronoun to be better than a corefering name and a corefering pronoun, while Vietnamese only considers a bound pronoun to be better than a free pronoun: Vietnamese does not compare pronouns and names.

Let us now put the two ingredients together to derive the facts. Let g(2) = John and g(3) = Mary, and suppose g(2) is telling g(3) that g(2) will help g(3). The Binding Condition and the Performative Hypothesis alone would predict all three structures in (20) to be viable options. I present how the sentence sounds in parentheses next to its syntactic analysis.[1]

(20) a. [~~John~~$_2$ [~~want~~ [~~Mary~~$_3$ [~~believe~~ [*John$_2$ will help Mary$_3$*]]]]] ("John will help Mary")
      b. [~~John~~$_2$ [~~want~~ [~~Mary~~$_3$ [~~believe~~ [*I$_2$ will help you$_3$*]]]]] ("I will help you")
      c. [~~John~~$_2$ [β$_7$ ~~want~~ [~~Mary~~$_3$ [β$_8$ ~~believe~~ [*I$_2$ will help you$_3$*]]]]] ("I will help you")

Rule I for English would exclude both (20a) and (20b), as the first contains a corefering name and the second a corefering pronoun, both of which can be replaced by a bound pronoun without changing the truth-conditional meaning of the sentence. One the other hand, Rule I for Vietnamese would exclude only (20b), as Vietnamese only compares, and prefers, bound pronouns to corefering pronouns. It does not compare bound pronouns and corefering names. We thus derive the fact that discourse participants can be referred to by either pronouns or names in Vietnamese, but must be referred to by pronouns in English.

3 Referring to discourse participants using relational nouns
It is also possible in Vietnamese to refer to discourse participants by relational nouns. Suppose John is Mary's father, and he is telling her that he will help her. What he can say, and in fact would most likely say, is (21).

(21) Bố   sẽ   giúp   con
      father will   help   child

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[1] Note that the pronouns anaphorically related to *John* and *Mary* in (20b) and (20c) must be *I* and *you*, respectively. This is because John is the speaker and Mary is the hearer, and pronouns anaphorically related to the speaker and the hearer must be in the first and the second person. I believe this requirement can be derived from Maximize Presupposition (Heim 1991), but will leave the task of working out the details of this derivation for another occasion.

Sentence (21) would be translated as "I will help you" in English. Note, importantly, that John will be referred to as *bố* and Mary as *con* throughout the conversation, independently of who is the speaker and who is the hearer. Thus, if Mary tells John she will help him too, she would say (22), which is translated as "I will help you too" in English.

(22) | *Con* | *cũng* | *sẽ* | *giúp* | *bố* |
      |---------|--------|-------|--------|---------|
      | child | also | will | help | father |

Evidence that these relational nouns have been co-opted for use as pronouns is the fact that they can be bound. Thus, both sentences in (23) are ambiguous between the strict and the sloppy reading.

(23) Context: John and Mary are talking and John is Mary's father
   a. | *Mỗi* | *bố* | *dám* | *làm* | *cái* | *bố* | *cho* | *là* | *đúng* |
       |--------|---------|-------|-------|-------|---------|--------|------|--------|
       | only | father | dare | do | what | father | think | is | right |
       i.   No x other than John has the courage to do what John thinks is right
       ii. No x other than John has the courage to do what x thinks is right
   b. | *Mỗi* | *con* | *dám* | *làm* | *cái* | *con* | *cho* | *là* | *đúng* |
       |--------|---------|-------|-------|-------|---------|--------|------|--------|
       | only | child | dare | do | what | child | think | is | right |
       i.   No x other than Mary has the courage to do what John thinks is right
       ii. No x other than Mary has the courage to do what x thinks is right

Why does Vietnamese allow reference to discourse participants by relational nouns but English does not? I will now propose a tentative answer to this question.

First, let us say that a relational noun N, for example "bố" (father) or "con" (child), when used as a pronoun, has the syntactic structure $[N(\alpha)]_n$, where α is a phonological null expression of type e and n an index. Thus, these derived pronouns are interpreted by g just like proper names and basic pronouns. Obviously, the presupposition introduced by "N(α)" should be related to the semantics of N as a noun. Let us take "bố" and "con" as examples.

(23) a. $[[[bố(\alpha)]_n]]^g = g(n)$, provided $g(n)$ is the father of $[[\alpha]]^g$
      b. $[[[con(\alpha)]_n]]^g = g(n)$, provided $g(n)$ is a child of $[[\alpha]]^g$

Now suppose, again, that John, who is Mary's father, is telling Mary he will help her, using the derived pronouns *bố* and *con* to refer to himself and Mary, respectively. Consider the two structural options in (24a) and (24b).[1] I will use English instead of Vietnamese words to facilitate reading.

(24) Context: John is Mary's father and he is telling her he will help her
   a. ~~John~~$_7$ β$_1$ ~~want Mary~~$_8$ β$_2$ ~~believe~~ [*father*(~~Mary~~$_8$)]$_1$ *will help* [*child*(~~John~~$_7$)]$_2$
   b. ~~John~~$_7$ β$_1$ ~~want Mary~~$_8$ β$_2$ ~~believe~~ [*father*(~~you~~$_2$)]$_1$ *will help* [*child*(~~me~~$_1$)]$_2$

What we want is for Vietnamese to admit at least one of these options and for English to exclude them both. Suppose we say that UG contains the following principle, which I will call the "b-within-b" condition.[2]

(25) b-within-b
      *$[_A$ ... B ...] if A and B are bound

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[1] We consider only structures in which the derived pronouns are bound, as one where they are free is excluded by Rule I for both English and Vietnamese.

[2] Where "b" is mnemonic for "bound". My choice of name and formulation for this condition is obviously due to its similarity to Chomsky's (1981) "i-within-i" condition: *$[_A$ ... B ...] if A and B bear the same index.

The condition rules out structures in which a bound nominal is contained within another bound nominal. This means (24b) is ruled out for both Vietnamese and English. What about (24a)? This structure should be admitted in Vietnamese. It does not violate the b-within-b condition, and as it contains only names and bound pronouns, it does not violate the Vietnamese version of Rule I either. As for English, it turns out that (24a) is not available: the interpretation of Rule I for English requires the second occurence of $Mary_8$ and $John_7$ be replaced with you_2 and me_1, respectively. But such a replacement would yield (24b), which violates the b-within-b condition.

The question is, of course, whether there is any independent evidence for (25)? Unfortunately, the answer, at this point, is no. I hope to pursue the issue in future research.

4 Conclusion

We discussed three ways of referring to discourse participants in Vietnamese: by pronouns, by proper names, and by relational nouns. We propose an account which derives the availability of the latter two options in Vietnamese versus their absence in English from one parametric difference between these two languages which concerns how Rule I is precisely interpreted. Specifically, English prefers the use of bound pronouns to both the use of corefering pronouns and the use of corefering names, while Vietnamese only prefers the use of bound pronouns to the use of corefering pronouns, leaving the option of corefering names out of the competition. Our account, as it relates to the observation about relational nouns, also requires the postulation of a new principle of grammar which disallows bound nominals containing other bound nominals.

Acknowledgement

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