Use of Discourse Markers by Chinese EFL Professors: A Corpus-Based Study of Academic Lectures by Natives and Non-natives

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Abstract

This paper reports a study that examines the use of discourse markers (DMs) by non-native professors of English in China and compares their use with their counter parts, native professors of English. In this study, six DMs: ‘so, and, but, ok, well and right’ are specifically analyzed as these DMs appear most frequently among the talk of native and non-native professors. Fifteen lectures of five native and non-native professors were recorded and transcribed to build a small corpus of linguistic lectures. The results show that there is good deal of discrepancy in the functional use of DMs by the Chinese professors. Although, non-natives have acquired the use of some DMs like ‘so’, and ‘and’; their use of these DMs is limited and lacks pragmatic functions. Mostly, other DMs like ‘ok, well and right’ are inappropriately used in the talks of Chinese professors. We have studied the professors with highly advanced language skills but the results confirm the previous research which demonstrates that non-native learners of English have limited proficiency in the use of DMs. Based upon the findings; we provide some implications for second language learning in general, and for foreign language teaching in particular.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics, Discourse Markers, Teachers’ talk, Foreign Language Teaching, Pragmatic Functions.

1. Introduction

Since the 1980’s research on DMs has aroused great interest from scholars in second language acquisition (SLA) and much research has been done in the field of discourse studies (e.g. Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Blakemore, 1987; Norrick, 2001). The scholars in the field have used different terms such as “sentence connectives” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), “pragmatic devices” (Vande Kopple, 1985), “pragmatic formatives” (Fraser, 1987), “pragmatic markers” (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser 1990, 1997), “discourse operators” (Redeker, 1991) and “discourse markers” (Hansen, 1998; Blakemore, 2002; Lewis, 2011) to name only a few. The fact that different researchers have used different terms for this category of language hints at the multifaceted functions performed by DMs in the organization of native speakers’ spoken discourse. DMs play a fundamental role in spoken interaction (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). DMs are defined differently by researchers as they look at DMs from different perspectives. One of the classic definitions is provided by Schiffrin (1987) who explained DMs as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (p. 31); later she elaborates these definitions of DMs as “proposing the contextual coordinates within which an utterance is produced and designed to be interpreted” (p. 315). According to Fraser (1999), DMs belong to the grammatical category of words and signal a relationship between the two segments of speech, having a procedural meaning in the given context. For the purposes of this study, we can define DMs as words having pragmatic functions in speech and without DMs there is no change in the lexical meaning of the sentence.

DMs are ranked among the ten leading word forms in the discourse (Allwood, 1996) while a DM is used after every 1.5 second in any on-going speech of native speakers (Luke, 1987). Therefore, such a frequent category of words requires special attention of the non-native professors (NNS) if they really want to bring a positive change in their personal and their students’ abilities to communicate with the various speakers of English across the globe.

In fact, much has been said about the use of DMs in text and little focus has been given to speech in the foreign language context. Again, although there is some research (Yeung, 2009; Liao, 2009) focusing on the use of DMs by learners’ of English, little attention is paid to the implementation of DMs by EFL teachers in classroom. Therefore, it would be of great help to study the actual data from the classroom to describe the real situation. We believe, this study will yield results and provide implications for foreign language learners and teachers in general and EFL teachers in particular. Lectures of native professors (NS) and NNS have been compared and discussed to find out similarities and differences with respect to the use of DMs in the classroom. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:
In what follows, we review the current research literature where we will point out the importance of DMs in foreign language learning and teaching. Then we describe the data and methods. And finally we report the findings and discuss their implications.

2. **Prior research on DMs and NNS**

Many scholars (Oxford, et al., 1989; Spada, 2007; etc.) in the field of SLA suggest that learning and teaching of second or foreign languages should be communication-orientated. Therefore, for good communication, small categories of words like DMs should, in fact, not be neglected. As Svartvik (1980) notes,

> *if a foreign language learner says five sheeps or he goed, he can be corrected practically by every native speaker; if, on the other hand, he omits a well, the likely reaction will be that he is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to etc, but a native speaker cannot pinpoint an ‘error’* (cf. also HELLERMANN AND VERGUN, 2007).

A great deal of research has been conducted on the use of DMs by NS of English. Recently, however, the focus has started to shift and the research into the use of DMs by NNS is also becoming popular, since researchers and educators have come to realize the importance thereof for communicative competence. For example, Yeung (2009) examined a corpus of Hong Kong Chinese learners’ formal English writing which displayed a high incidence of *besides*. The learners’ use of *besides* is confined in meaning and function, and is often without the rhetorical force of argument which is an important characteristic of the NS corpora. Fung and Carter (2007) compared the DMs from a corpus of spoken British English with those found in a corpus of classroom discourse in Hong Kong. Their results demonstrated that the use of DMs by the NNS is limited and lacks pragmatic functions. Trillo (2002) pointed out that children who are NS or NNS obtain the patterns of DMs in a similar manner but, the NNS adults go through a process of fossilization due to lack of instruction.

The above mentioned studies focus on NNS in contexts where English is a foreign language. However, the results might be different if the NNS have the opportunity to communicate with NS in an English speaking country. Liao focused on the English discourse of six Chinese teaching assistants and found that although NNS have, to some extent, acquired native-like use of DMs, their adoption of these DMs is limited. In addition, they displayed a discrepancy from the NS in the usage of these lexical items as well as their individual functions (2009:1326). The corpus-driven approach of Hellermann and Vergun (2007) showed that more proficient students use more of the typical DMs and that these students are more acculturated to the native English country. Fuller (2003a) has also analyzed the use of DMs by NS and NNS in different social contexts and mentioned that NNSs use DMs in a set pattern.

3. **Theoretical Framework**

There are four major theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of DMs in the field of linguistics. Schiffrin (1987) uses an interactional sociolinguistic approach to the study of DMs (Lee, 2003). Schiffrin proposes that DMs provide contextual coordinates for utterances (Schiffrin, 1987: 326). Blakemore (1987, 1992) provides another theoretical perspective on DMs, which is situated within the framework of relevance theory. The third approach to the study of DMs is related to research in the field of discourse coherence. Knot and Dale (1994) and Sanders, Spooren and Noordman (1992) also provide different accounts of discourse coherence. The final important approach is provided by Fraser (1988, 1990, 1996a, 1997, 1999, 2006, and 2009b). In his work, he focuses on what DMs are and what their grammatical status is in the language. In contrast with Schiffrin, who suggests that paralinguistic features and non-verbal gestures are possible DMs, Fraser considers a DM as a linguistic expression only and presents his grammatical-pragmatic perspective (Fung and Carter, 2007) on DMs. Important characteristics of a DMs as generalized by Fraser are as follows: [See Fraser (1999) a for detailed discussion].

(a) It has a core meaning which can be enriched by the context;
(b) It signals the relationship that the speaker intends between the utterance introduced by the DM and the foregoing utterance;
(c) It relates two discourse segments and does not contribute to the propositional meaning of either segment.

As one of the most impressive and forceful advocates of studying DMs in a grammatical-pragmatic approach; Fraser conducted a systematic study on DMs and developed his own theory in a series of papers. He believes that DMs do have syntactic features but that these words display rich pragmatic functions in discourse. As Fraser points out, “it is difficult to see how a subset of conjunctions, adverbials, and prepositional phrases could be cobbled together to form a syntactic category” (1999:944). His grammatical-pragmatic approach emphasizes the linguistic or syntactic status and properties of DMs. Hence, we have adopted this approach to investigate the phenomenon of DMs in our study.

4. **Data Collection and results**

4.1 Participants
The participants of this study are five professors of English in China. Two of the participants are NS of English while three of them are Chinese EFL professors. Much literature on DMs focuses on young learners of English but little attention is paid to the highly advanced speakers. Therefore, here we have chosen the professors who are considered to be fully developed in their abilities of L2 learning and teaching. Table 1 provides demographical information for the participants of the study.

Table 1: The demographical information of the Participants

<table>
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<th>Participant</th>
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<td>50</td>
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N1 and N2 are the natives while T1 has her masters’ degree from an English speaking country. T2 stayed in native country for research purposes and has contact with the NS. A special case is T3 who has studied for his PhD and afterwards taught English to natives students for many years. All the participants have more than 25 years experience of teaching and NNS are hypothesized to be capable of using language in a highly advanced manner.

As far as the selection of the participants is concerned, the NS are selected because they are the only available source to which the authors have access in China. Their choice is made because much research on DMs (particularly in China) has focused on the written (newspapers) or on data from internet in different contexts and little attention is paid to the first hand classroom oral data. The criteria for the NNS are their stay in English speaking country along with their experience and qualification. Staying in a native country might have helped them to develop their abilities in a native-like manner by learning the use of word categories like DMs. T3 provides a variation which will be helpful for us to understand the importance of contact with NS and culture to all the foreign language learners in general and foreign language teachers in particular.

4.2 Data collection

Fifteen lectures were audio-recorded and transcribed for the purpose of this study. Three lectures of 90 minutes (90*3 = 270 minutes) were delivered by each of the five professors. So, the data contains more than 1450 minutes recordings comprising 136487 words. The researcher remained in the classroom (NNS class) during the lectures to observe the teacher (like intonation, gestures, stress) which became helpful during the transcription process. All the recordings were transcribed by the first author carefully with the help of software Transcripter 1.4.6. These transcriptions were later checked by co-authors to identify any mistakes.

Firstly, a frequency count of the DMs was made and then the most frequently occurring DMs were taken into consideration for further analyses. The total tokens (table 2) of the words were counted and those tokens which were not used as a DM subtracted from the group number. Fuller’s (2003a) two criteria for DMs were adopted to decide whether the selected tokens function as DMs in the discourse where they occur. Firstly, there is no change in the semantic relationship between the parts that are connected by DMs in an utterance. Example 1 below further explains the determination of words as DMs, where the words in bold type-face are not considered DMs:

From 1 (a-g), we can see that the words “...the things like time and space and color and pitch and smell...” are not used in a sense related to DMs. We will find the application of words as DMs in the examples given in the following sections.

4.3 Results

Table 2: DMs use in Native Professors’ talk

<table>
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<th>DMs</th>
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<td>ok</td>
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<td>well</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>so</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but</td>
<td>10</td>
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</tbody>
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The results regarding the six DMs in NS’ talk are summarized in Table 2 above. Table 2 demonstrates the use of DMs by NS in a detailed manner. There is a good deal of regularity in the application of DMs by both the teachers. Although N2 uses more DMs, the difference between the two professors is minor and represents the stylistic features of speech. We will compare and discuss them in detail with the NNS’ use of DMs as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: DMs used in the Non-native Professors’ talk

As far as the NNS are concerned, their use of these lexical expressions is inconsistent in functions and often problematic. We will have a detailed comparison of NS and NNS in Section 5.

5. Discussion

The frequency of DMs in the academic lectures of both the NS and NNS show that DMs are an important part of classroom discourse. The importance of DMs for interaction cannot be overlooked; however, the misuse or overuse of these small words creates serious barriers in the learning of a second or foreign language. Figure 1 is a demonstration of the major differences and similarities in the utilization of DMs by the NS and NNS in the classroom setting.

Figure 1: Similarities and differences of DMs among professors
By and large they remain close to the NS. Graph 1 below will make the point further clear. Although T3 has lived and that every NN professor appears to be more adept in different DM.

**5.1 So**  
The most frequently occurring DM in the lectures of the NS is ‘so’. The two prominent functions performed by so in the NS lectures are as an inferential marker (Fraser, 2009a) and topic developer or topic initiator (Johnson, 2002). The use of so in example 2 defines its role as an inferential marker as the speaker is talking about the construal of a phenomenon and telling that one can explain one and the same thing with the help of different lexical expressions. So here serves as a link to the ongoing talk.

2) N1: The elements that profile entities or things are nouns; the ones that profile relationships are clauses.  
   So, you see a connection with grammar right away.

Another important function of so which is established in the NS talks is topic initiator. We can see this clearly in 3.

3) N2: So, what I want to talk about today are…. basically on this morning, are these three questions:  
   The NNS also apply so for both the above mentioned functions at times but often they use it in a set pattern and pragmatic functions differ from the NS. A close look at data tells us that so is most appropriately used DM among all the studied DMs, however, we can still find overuse and misuse of it in the speech.

4) T1: So it means nothing can occur in vacuum, ok, So, its… things can not extend in isolation. So, text…I think text or, we say, ah, we use the word sign, ok, or semiotic.

T1 shows a great deal of discrepancy in the application of so as compared to the NS. We can find a number of examples which represent the formulaic use of so by T1. The other two EFL professors also have variations but by and large they remain close to the NS. Graph 1 below will make the point further clear. Although T3 has lived in a native community for a longer period of time, still, his talks have significantly low number of so as a DM.

**Graph 1: Frequency of DM so**  
**Graph 2: Frequency of DM And**

**5.2 And**  
And appears most frequently after so in our studied data. Both the NS apply the DM and quite consistently to organize their speech. Two major roles of and can be easily figured out from the lectures of NS. And as a DM helps to continue the ongoing speech or build a relation (Schiffrin, 1987) with the previous text. The other function is as turn-initial coordinator (Biber et al., 1999). This turn-initial position may well be referred as functioning as the topic change or at least a deviation from the original discussion. These functions can be seen in example 5).

5) a) N2: In other words, everybody has ideas about language and these ideas may be based what I’ll call a ‘folk theory’ of language.
   b) N1: And the point is that the meaning of a linguistic expression is going to rely on some set of cognitive domains.

NNS have also employed and in their discourse much the same way as used by the NS. However, at times, their application of and is formulaic and it seems that they are not fully aware of the importance that should be given to the pragmatic functions DMs.

6) a) T1: And then we have purpose, communication purpose. And then both the speaker and hearer can understand the purpose or the goal of human communication...And then...
   b) T3: And we go to Carroll again ...what processes we go through and what we do, ok, for Carroll. And then so far what we’ve been talking about the--- and the nature of language, the psychological mechanisms, and then the language acquisition.

Although the application of and by T1 and T3 is satisfactory (numbers), the use of and in 6a and 6b tells us that at times the NNS seem missing the pragmatic functions. For example, 6b would still have been coherent without and used after Carroll. In spite of the fact that T2 has used DM and quite appropriately, his competency about the pragmatic roles of and is still in question and has limitations. Again the 86 tokens of and used by T2 as DM are less than one fourth of the tokens used by NS which is a significant difference. Graph 2 above makes the picture very much clear.

**5.3 But**  
But is the third DM in our list. It is used most frequently after ‘so’ and ‘and’ in our data. One major function of but in our data of the NS can be termed as signalling the contrast (Foolen, 1991; Fraser, 2006) between the S1
and S2. However, this contrast works at two levels: 1) contrasting actions and 2) contrasting ideas (Schiffrin, 1987).

7) a) N1: So this presupposes previous domains. But this also presupposes like orientation, but also presupposes liquid, the notion of spatial inclusion...
   b) N1: But I said earlier… cognitive linguistics is that language is not an independent module of the mind but, in fact, is based in general cognitive abilities.

In 7b both the functions of but can be viewed clearly. The word but at the start of the 7b works as a contrasting factor between the two actions as the speaker is hinting at the words previously spoken by him. The second but in the middle of the sentence is used to contrast abstract concept of cognitive abilities.

8) a) T1: So that plagiarism is big offense in academic area. But sometimes you plagiarize, ok unconsciously, But. And then it becomes your idea,. So this is quite normal. But, so,
   b) T2: generally speaking it’s a new field of study but it does not really have a long history NNS’ uses of DM but are quite varied. They lack a true understanding of the pragmatic functions of this small word. The but in 8b is noticeably misused by the T2. There is no contrast in sentence 1 and sentence 2 for which but should be used here. As Graph 3 below demonstrates that T1 has used the least number of tokens of but in1000 words. However, the important point to note is that even that less frequent use of DM but by T1 has lot of problems with it. Both in pragmatic functions and frequency only T3 seems to have gained enough competence to use it while the other two professors really find it difficult to draw upon it correctly in most situations.

**Graph 3: Frequency of DM But**

**Graph 4: Frequency of DM Ok**

5.4 Ok

Levin and Gray (1983) explain ok that “with variations in stress, loudness, and prosody, OK communicates many emotional meanings”. The functions of ok vary depending on its position in the discourse. In the NS lectures ok performed the pragmatic functions of acknowledging the preceding utterance (Stenstrom, 1994) and of displaying understanding (Condon and Claude, 2001). Both these functions can be seen in 9a and 9b respectively.

9) a) N2: How you construe them, as the figure-ground organization is an aspect of that. --- Ok. Another important cognitive ability is that many concepts,…
   b) N1: Sometimes there are just real reasons to be totally vague about things, Ok. Obviously, almost always it’s true— that something has happened, Ok.

In contrast to the NS, the NNS represent a higher discrepancy in the application of ok as a DM. Ok performs many functions in the speech of the NS and NNS seem prey to this usage. They have learned using it but there are a number of occasions where we can find the misuse and overuse of ok. T2 and T3 show some good command over ok, only occasionally making misuses of it according to the context. On the other hand, T1 has used the token of ok 4 to 7 times higher than the NS. She does use it appropriately at occasions but extensive overuse makes it look superfluous and formulaic. We can see this clearly in 10 below:

10) T1: Now, what is mosaic, Ok. It is kind of, ah similar to, Ah, Intermingle Ok, Ok, conversation Ok, Mosaic means, but I think you have find the word mosaic. Ok…

From Graph 4 we can witness that T1 used 27 tokens of ok as compared to 4 and 7 tokens of N1 and N2 respectively. T2 and T3 also employed a high number of tokens. This exercise might account for the apparent simple nature of ok which can be deceptive for the NNS.

5.5 Well

In our studied data, both the NS utilize well to make their speech coherent and easily understandable. Two functions of well utilized by the NS in their lectures are as a delay device (Fuller, 2003b) and to mitigate face-threat (Jucker:1993) caused by personal questions.

11) a) N2: No doubt about that. But if you like, well, ok, it sounds rather arrogant to say, well, that he went wrong.
   b) N1: Neither elaborate anything salient within the other but they can still be combined. How? Well,…, their trajectories can be identified.
   c) T3: Well, let’s talk about similarities and differences between psycholinguists and linguists; similarities first of all, well, they are both social sciences, and not really, I mean, well, probably psycholinguists would regard him or herself as a natural scientist.

NNS make use of DM well in a manner which is greatly different from the NS. T2, by and large, remains close to the NS in the application of well in his speech. However, there is not a single token of well in the lectures of T1 used as a DM. On the contrary, T3 has used well into his speech three times more than the NS. The excessive use makes his speech sound monotonous and formulaic. Even if well is not misused in 11c, still, it is frequently used. The frequency count of tokens per 1000 words in Graph 5 will help us understand the usage of well in the studied data.

**Graph 5: Frequency of DM Well**

**Graph 6: Frequency of DM Right**

5.6 Right
In the studied data, one pragmatic function for which NS have made the use of right in their lectures is self-monitoring as discussed by Tang (2010). Schleef (2004, 2008) demonstrated that right is used in everyday speech as a transition marker; but in the classroom its use is different because fewer turns are taken by students and much of the speech is done by the teacher himself/herself. So, at times, teachers want to make sure about the truthfulness of their speech and for this purpose they utilize the words like right to make their speech self-confirmatory. The right in 12a and 12b below helps us to understand this.

12) a) N1: Do you start with a whole line and break it? No, you probably drew it that way to begin with, right.
   b) N2: Ditransitive, a sentence with two objects: a subject-verb-object-object... like buy me a present, right.

Pragmatically, NNS have used right in quite the same way as have been used by NS. They all use it as a self-confirmatory device; however, there is a great deal of variation which can be witnessed from Graph 6 above. T1 employs less than one token of right in 1000 words and this is quite close to NS. T3 exercised 6 tokens of right which is at least double the usage by NS and six times higher than T1. Still, T1 and T3 are fine to some extent. But when we look at the usage of right by T2, we really sense a problem there. His 32 tokens look more like a formulaic application of the right. It appears to be habitual for him and he seems fully unaware of the overuse of it. His use of right is also higher than all the other DMs in our studied data. A set pattern of right is clearly there in 13.

13) T2: In pragmatics, analysis is different from semantic analysis, right, so ah generally, right, I hope, right, you would learn how to make pragmatic analysis, ah, right.

6. Conclusion
We have done an analysis to find out the misuse and overuse of DMs by NNS. Our study supports the previous research that: 1) non-natives use DMs in a set pattern (Fuller, 2003a) as the NNS in studied data depict a pattern in the use of DMs and mostly opt for one and the same DM time and again; 2) non-natives choose different DMs in comparison to natives (Muller, 2005) as there are limited number of tokens of ok, well and right by the NS, however, NNS utilize these most frequently; 3) individual functions of these words differ from natives (Liao, 2009) as we have discussed that the pragmatic functions of DMs are different in two groups. As far as the phenomenon of fossilization is concerned, the results suggest that NNS do become a prey to the process of linguistic fossilization. However, longitudinal research studies are required to further prove the fossilization of this small but important category of words.

We have attempted to delineate the functions and patterns of a group of DMs in lectures of EFL professors in China. Distinctive features have been described and variation in patterns of use between NS and NNS has been singled out for comparison. DMs have always been a problematic issue in second language acquisition, not only to Chinese learners of English, but also to non-native learners of other languages. Our comparison of DMs shows that if we wish to find fewer problems in communication, we need to know about functions of DMs from different perspectives including stylistic, semantic, and pragmatic. Pragmatic point of view should be given due importance in the teaching of foreign languages. Students should be provided with the knowledge of DM functions in both speech and text. For this purpose, special attention should be paid to the training and guidance of foreign language teachers. In short, teachers, policy makers and government officials should realize the importance of FL teacher training courses and due attention should be given to deal with this sophisticated issue.

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References
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Mr. Muhammad Shahbaz Ali is M.Phil scholar and currently serving as a language teacher trainer and areas of interest include ELT, educational linguistics and individual differences.

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Table 1

Table 2

Here, L1, L2, L3= Lectures, TT=Total recorded tokens, As DM=Selected as DMs

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Graphs

**Graph 1: Frequency of DM so**

- X-axis: Tokens per 1000 words
- Y-axis: N1, N2, T1, T2, T3
- Series 1: 13, 15, 16, 12, 10

**Graph 2: Frequency of DM And**

- X-axis: Tokens per 1000 words
- Y-axis: N1, N2, T1, T2, T3
- Series 1: 12, 13, 16, 4, 11

**Graph 3: Frequency of DM But**

- X-axis: Tokens per 1000 words
- Y-axis: N1, N2, T1, T2, T3
- Series 1: 8, 7, 4, 5, 7

**Graph 4: Frequency of DM Ok**

- X-axis: Tokens per 1000 words
- Y-axis: N1, N2, T1, T2, T3
- Series 1: 4, 7, 27, 9, 8

**Graph 5: Frequency of DM Well**

- X-axis: Tokens per 1000 words
- Y-axis: N1, N2, T1, T2, T3
- Series 1: 3, 4, 0, 5, 11

**Graph 6: Frequency of DM Right**

- X-axis: Tokens per 1000 words
- Y-axis: N1, N2, T1, T2, T3
- Series 1: 2, 3, 1, 32, 6
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