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What is This?

Minimal answers to yes/no questions in the service of sequence organization

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Abstract

In conversation analytic and interactional studies, some responses are analyzed as being minimal. This article explores minimality in regard to two types of answers that appear to be used interchangeably as minimal responses to yes/no questions in Estonian. The answers represent typologically different formats, particles and echo answers (verb repeats). It is argued that minimality should be defined in a sequentially sensitive manner and that the two answer formats are used to display speakers' understanding of the status of the social action implemented in the preceding question. The data come from audio recordings of phone calls and face-to-face interaction.

Keywords

confirmation, conversation analysis, echo answers, epistemic strength, Estonian, interactional linguistics, minimal answers, response particles, sequence organization, yes/no questions

Introduction

It has been claimed that there are typologically three groups of languages, when it comes to answering yes/no questions. There are languages that use positive and negative particles (such as *yes* or *no*), the ones that use agreement-disagreement (such as *right, wrong*), and those using echo systems, in which something is repeated from the question, most often a verb (Jones, 1999; König and Siemund, 2007; Sadock and Zwicky, 1985). A number of languages, among them Estonian and Finnish, use both particles and (verb) echoing to answer yes/no questions. At the same time, there have been no systematic studies on the distribution of these answer types across interactional sequences. Only in

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the interactively oriented studies on Finnish has there been continuous interest in the pragmatic difference between the two answer options after yes/no questions as well as assessment (Hakulinen, 2001; Hakulinen et al., 2004; Sorjonen, 1996, 2001b; Sorjonen and Hakulinen, 2009). The aim of this article is to track the orderliness of the different minimal answer formats in the closely related Estonian, and to explore the nature of minimality in sequences of actions.

A functionally minimal answer after a yes/no question is an answer that is not modified or expanded but merely confirms or disconfirms what the question asks. In Estonian and Finnish, this can be done with particles as well as verb repeats. In Finnish studies, particles and verb repeats have both been considered minimal responses (Hakulinen, 2001). Besides, verb repeats have been said to be the prototypical response to some yes/no questions (Hakulinen et al., 2004; Sorjonen, 2001b), while the particle *joo* ('yeah') has been considered predominantly a feature of vernacular style (as mentioned in Hakulinen, 2001; Sorjonen, 2001b).[1] Even a brief glance at Estonian conversational data shows that this cannot be true in Estonian, where about two-thirds of the responses to yes/no questions are particles and they are not a feature of any particular style (Keevallik, 2009a). This suggests that Estonian is typologically somewhat different from Finnish and that the findings about Finnish need not be directly applicable in Estonian. Studies on both languages thus contribute in different ways to the general understanding of how mixed response type languages function.

In order to study the contrast between particles and verb repeat answers, the article focuses on a narrowly defined sequential position in interaction, following positively formulated yes/no questions. A yes/no question makes relevant a confirming or disconfirming response, and in this position the speakers of Estonian can use either a particle (*jah/jaa*, 'yeah', *ei*, 'no') or reuse a verb from the question to provide the confirming or disconfirming answer. However, the choice of a verb repeat is only available in case the pragmatic focus of the question is not on a particular noun (phrase), adjective (phrase) or adverb (phrase). In the latter cases, particle responses are in absolute majority and repeating the focused word is possible but rare. For the comparative purposes of this study, in order to see what the choice of one or another answer format achieves interactionally, only positions where verb repeat is an option have been considered.[2] This involves questions in which the whole proposition is questioned, rather than a noun, adjective or adverb. Consequently, the study differs from the prior Finnish ones that have involved a whole array of questions in conversation. The possible range of answers has furthermore been constrained to the repeat of no more than one word or phrase from the question, as longer repeats have different functions (see e.g. Schegloff, 1996) and should be studied separately. The features of the answers considered in the current study can be summarized as follows:

1) the answer occurs after a positively formulated yes/no question
2) a verb repeat answer is an option
3) the first or only turn construction unit (as first outlined in Sacks et al., 1974) in the answer turn contains only a particle or a verb repeat.

Let us look at two contrasting examples of this basic pattern. The following excerpts come from telemarketing calls, in which the representative of the newspaper (M) contacts people

who have signed up for a cheap short-term subscription and offers them an extension. At the beginning of these calls, the telemarketer always asks whether the client has in fact received the newspaper. The question gets a particle response in (1) and a verb repeat response in (2). Both provide a simple confirmation. For the sake of clarity, the answers have only been given morphemic translations and no idiomatic English glosses. The repeated verb is boldfaced also in the question.

(1)

```
1  M:   =mts kas    leht  käib   teil.
              QUES paper go:3SG you:ADS
              'Do you get the paper?'

2         (0.6)

3  L:   jaa,
              yeah          (LK)
```

(2)

```
1  M:   mts kas     see leht nüüd  käib    teil.
              QUES this paper now go:3SG you:ADS
              'Do you get the paper now?'

2  K:   käib,
              go:3SG        (LK)
```

Both formats provide a non-modified confirming answer to the prior question. What the speakers achieve by choosing one or the other format will be the subject of the following exploration that will necessitate considering matters of action sequencing in human encounters.

Asking a question is a social action which makes relevant an answer by the recipient. In the field of conversation analysis, the question–answer pairs have been considered prototypical cases of adjacency pairs, in which the first pair part makes a second pair part relevant as the next action (Schegloff, 2007). The participants are thus significantly constrained in their actions after a first pair part of an adjacency pair has been produced. When an information question has been asked by one participant, the recipient either has to answer or to provide a reason for not answering, such as insufficient knowledge.

While responding, though, the speakers can attend to various matters of a social nature. For example, by choosing an answer format that does not conform to the constraints embodied in the grammatical form of the yes/no question, the speaker can display that the design of the question was flawed (Raymond, 2003). In English, this means that when the speaker does not respond to a yes/no question with a particle, prototypically 'yes' or 'no', she displays resistance to the design of the question in her answer. The recipient of a question can also show that the question was inapposite by prefacing the answer with an *oh* (Heritage, 1998). By designing a responsive turn with partial repeats

from the prior turn, the speaker in second position can claim primary rights over the claim (Stivers, 2005). These are some examples of matters concerning question design, proper addressing, and interpersonal epistemics that can be dealt with in responsive turns. Besides answering, responsive turns can manage social relations. In the light of these findings, it is plausible that the Estonian choice between the two response formats does not have its explanation within the domain of grammar but rather in interactional or interpersonal matters.

Questions constitute crucial building blocks of sequences in conversation. They sometimes occur as the main focal action, or they may adumbrate that a focal action is under way (e.g. 'can I ask you a question?'). They may ask for a repetition from the previous speaker or be a follow-up of something that has already been talked about. Some questions ask for a longer telling and some elicit a short answer because of their placement in the sequence of actions that it is currently building. All of this may also have a bearing on response design. Just as these sequential matters are reflected in the design of the questions themselves, they may also be reflected in the responses to the questions. Speakers have been shown to display their understanding of where in the sequence the participants are at the moment of responding by choosing, for example, a specific response particle (Sorjonen, 1996). The choice between particles and verb repeat answers will be studied along similar lines, particularly in regard to the status of the prior question in the evolving sequence of action.

The data

The data come from two corpora. The first one consists of 324 everyday as well as institutional phone calls and involves about 150 speakers (henceforth, the LK corpus). The other one is the publicly available Tartu corpus, which is constantly growing (henceforth, the TA corpus). About 900 excerpts with approximately 400 speakers have been checked for this study. The data in the TA corpus come from a large variety of settings, including face-to-face conversations, but is available only as audio. Each example is provided with a code revealing its origin (LK, TA, respectively). Transcription and glossing conventions can be found at the end of the article.

The arguments in this article have been made on the basis of about 500 positively formulated yes/no questions and their 247 positive answers. What counts as a yes/no question was not defined in advance but by considering how the recipients treated the turn. In other words, a turn that was hearable as a question was considered a yes/no question if the recipients answered with a 'yes' or a 'no', or with the corresponding repetition patterns. The formats that were regularly treated as yes/no questions were characterized by the following features:[3]

1) utterance-initial question particle *kas*;
2) turn-final particles *vä/ve* ('or') and *jah* ('yeah') (sometimes combined with *kas*);
3) inversion (sometimes combined with any above particle);
4) some declaratives without particles.

These question formats regularly made relevant a confirmation or a disconfirmation as the next action. *Vä*-final and *kas*-initial questions were most numerous, and inversion

questions were most rare. *Vä* is a markedly informal question particle that can be added to declaratives as well as to inversions. The declaratives and *jah*-final questions are intuitively tilted towards favoring a confirmation, as they encode the highest degree of questioner's certainty, but they can as well be followed by a disconfirmation (Keevallik, 2009b). However, turn-final *jah* is often used to format upshots from prior talk which regularly get particle responses (which will be discussed below). Other than that, for the responses analyzed in this study, the exact linguistic format of the question does not seem to have any straightforward relevance. In contrast to Finnish, verb repeats in Estonian can be used even after declarative questions (see Sorjonen, 2001b). Furthermore, interrogatively marked questions do not even show a significant tendency for receiving more verb repeats as answers, even though they encode a lesser degree of speaker's certainty. All of the above question types can be responded to with particles as well as with verb repeats. With all due concern for the contextual peculiarities of each instance, the overall percentages of particle vs verb repeat answers for the different question types are very similar.[4] This suggests that the exact grammatical format of the question does not play a major role in the choice of response type.

The answers in this study were restricted to single particles and verb repeats, which constituted separate turn construction units. No lexical additions or changes were included, no modals or modifications in the same turn construction unit as the answer. Neither were answers with changed grammatical features, such as tense or aspect, included. The only grammatically necessary change accepted was that of contextual deixis, person endings on verbs. For example, the question in second person usually receives the answer in first person. Although the option of other modifications in relation to the answer format is a promising area of study on its own, the current article aims at understanding the choice between two very basic answer types. Expanded responses where the explication or modification was provided later in a separate clausal turn construction unit were included.

In this collection of positive questions and answers, the choice of grammatical type of response turned out to depend primarily on the nature of the social action carried out by the question. The social action, however, is crucially dependent on where in a sequence the question is asked. We will now proceed to look at the different positions that questions can occupy in sequences of actions and study the two Estonian answer types in them.

Particle as a feature of 'non-primary' action

Particles constitute the most frequent answer format to yes/no questions in Estonian. The prototypical positive response particle in Estonian is *jah/jaa*. There has not yet been any conclusive study on whether and how *jaa* and *jah* differ, so for the time being they are considered functionally the same. The positive particle *jah/jaa* does little more than satisfy the formal sequential requirement for a question to be followed by an answer. In some sequential positions, however, the particle is sufficient for providing an adequate aligning answer to the question. The distribution of particle answers in the data suggests that they are used overwhelmingly in what can be summarized as 'non-primary' actions. This is an ad hoc common term for the initiation of pre-sequences and repairs, checking questions, questions formulated as upshots, and questions that are parasitic on prior questions.

Echo questions

To start with, none of the numerous echo questions in the data received a verb repeat answer, even though it is a theoretical possibility. These are questions that repeat part of the prior turn in order to receive a confirmation. They are technically other-initiations of repair but may function as newsmarks (Jefferson, 1981), showing that the information just heard was relevant and interesting. An example of a question like this with a particle answer is shown below in (3). The verb involved in the echo of the question is rendered in italics in lines 1 and 2. Focused question–answer pairs are shown with arrows throughout the article.

(3)

1 K: kas<u>se</u>ti   *pätsab*   <u>Ma</u>rion talt   kogu aeg   ära.
           tape:GEN steal:3SG NAME she:ABL all   time ÄRA
           'Marion steals her tape all the time.'

2 P: →   <@ *pätsab*   vä. @> hh=
              steal:3SG QUES
              'Does he?'

3 K: →   =**jah, @**
              yeah

4 P: <@ miks @> @@[@@.hh]
           'Why?'   (LK)

The speaker K announces some news and P repeats part of it together with the turn-final question particle *vä*, producing a question. K responds with the particle *jah*. All the echo questions in the data get particle responses, if they indeed get a response at all, and there were literally hundreds of them (only 46 were included in the database of 247 positive answers for this study, because the qualitative sequential pattern is solid). This pattern seems to be precisely the same in Finnish, in which *joo* is regularly used in identical positions in action sequences (Hakulinen et al., 2004; Sorjonen, 2001b). What characterizes questions like this is that the confirmation needs to be only minimal, as the information is already shared between the speakers. In the above example, P does not treat the particle response as problematic at all and instead asks another question. Besides, there is no understanding problem in these cases, which is otherwise common in repair initiations. P has successfully received the news, as witnessed by her correct repeat of the verb in the prior turn, and with her *jah*, K is merely satisfying the formal need for a response after the question. The echo question sequence deals with the news value, the social implications of what has been said. A minimal confirmation is thus what is needed and a particle can indeed provide that.

Upshots

Upshots also rely on what has already been said and thus warrant a minimal confirmation. In fact, conclusions based on some prior turn(s) by another speaker regularly receive particle answers. However, in contrast to echo questions, answers cannot be skipped in this sequential position. Example (4) is a case in point, where the upshot in line 3 receives a particle as an answer. It is a telemarketing call, where the client has just provided her street address in a little village. The upshot concerns the telemarketer's surprise that there are streets in this village.

(4)

```
1  M:       Palderi      kolm üks  ja,
            NAME:GEN three one  yeah
            'Palderi three  one, yeah'

2           (0.8)

3  M: →     .hh ahhaa. (.) et Oves       on ka tänavad.
                okay      ET NAME:INS are too streets
                'Okay, (.) so there are streets in Ove'

4  K: →     jaa,
            yeah

5  M:       khh [ma ise      olen]
                I     myself  am
                'I am myself'

6  K:           [<@ meil     on palju  tänavaid. @>
                    we:ADS are many   streets:PRT
                    'we have many streets.'          (LK)
```

Even though the client continues her turn after the particle response, the fact that the telemarketer overlaps with a new contribution in line 5 shows that he treated the particle as a sufficient answer to the upshot. The upshot is formulated as a declarative B-event, an event that the interlocutor has first hand knowledge of and therefore has to confirm or disconfirm (Labov and Fanshel, 1977). It thus functions as a yes/no question, and is treated as such by the client. It is also explicitly formatted as an upshot via the evidential particle *et* at the beginning of the clause. Turn-initial *et* shows that the upcoming content is attributed to the prior speaker (Keevallik, 2008). Example (5) presents a case where the upshot is not formatted as such but its sequential position renders it an upshot of what J has just said.

(5)

```
1  J:        =a   noh   Priimäge    pole       veel kohal   aga:,
              but NOH NAME:PRT be:NEG  yet  in place but
              'Well, Priimägi has not arrived  yet but'

2  T: →     mkh, (0.2) ootad      vä.
             hm          wait:2SG QUES
             'hm (0.2) Are you waiting (for him)?'

3  J: →     ↑jah,
             yeah                 (TA)
```

In all the above cases, the sequential position of the question and its design work for an answer that provides only minimal confirmation.[5] These questions are not formatted and deployed to elicit stronger confirmations by, for example, expressing suspicion or disbelief. In terms of social action, they express receipt of what was already conveyed, or upshots from it, in which case a minimal confirmation is sufficient to grant the prior speaker correct and the question adequately dealt with. There are no verb repeat answers in this position in the data.

Pre-sequences

So far we have been looking at sequences where the main or primary action was done prior to the question–answer pair in focus, which constituted a follow-up sequence. But particle answers are predominant even in pre-sequences. These are sequences that occur before another action that they project and are thus in the service of accomplishing some larger conversational goal. A pre-sequence projects an action which may then be instantiated as the first pair part of the base sequence (Schegloff, 2007). For example, a question *Are you doing anything?* may be a pre-request, the request (the base first pair part) coming up only in case the response to the question does not block the possibility of cooperation. A generic pre-sequence is a summons that guarantees the appropriate addressee for the base first pair part. At the beginning of a phone call, this may sound as follows.

(6)

```
1  V:        hallo,
             'Yeah'

2            (0.5)

3  E: →     .hhh kas  e Jaan   Veskimäe kuuleb.
                  QUES  NAME NAME     listens
                  'Is this Jaan Veskimäe?'
```

4 V: →   **jaa,**
      yeah

5 E: .hh <u>e</u>lus ä,
        life:INS
        '(You're) alive?'   (LK)

The objective of the yes/no question in line 3 is to guarantee the right addressee for the reason-for-the-call question in line 5, and it receives a particle answer. As the verb *kuuleb* ('listens') was prosodically emphasized in the question, a verb repeat had clearly been an option.

In another type of pre-sequence, pre-requests are also responded to with particles. Example (7) shows a case where the pre-request establishes a fact that is a prerequisite for the information request to be accomplished. M calls a publishing house and in her first question (lines 1–3) makes sure that this publishing house is indeed responsible for the book series she is interested in. The question receives a particle answer after which the base first pair part is produced in lines 6–7.

(7)

1 M: →   <u>te</u>re päevast, ä[ää] teie   <u>kir</u>jastate Loomingu
      hi   day:ELT   you:PL publish:2PL NAME
      'Hello. You publish Loomingu'

2 K: [tere,]
               'Hi'

3 M: →   Raamatukogu raamatu [k-] väljaandeid.
      NAME   book-   publications:PRT
      'Raamatukogu, the book-, publications.'

4 K: →   [**jaa,**]
                yeah

5 K: →   **jaa,**
      yeah

6 M: .h e mind uvitaks   kas <u>on</u>   võimalik
       I:PRT interest:COND QUES be:3SG possible
       'I wonder, is it still possible'

7   kuskilt   veel leida   Daniil <u>Harm</u>si   Maaõlm.
      somewhere:ELT   still find:INF NAME NAME:GEN NAME
      'to find Danil Harms' Maaõlm somewhere?'   (LK)

It is a general feature of pre-sequences that the questions in them do not receive verb repeat answers. Even after pre-announcements, like in (8), the particle *jah/jaa* can be used, which demonstrates the generic character of the particle in Estonian. (A catalogue of all the possible contexts of the particle *jah/jaa* in business negotiations is provided in Kasterpalu, 2005.) The interactional sequence in (8) contains two consecutive pre-sequences: the first is in lines 1–2 and the second in lines 3–4. Only the latter gets a particle response but both project a base first pair part and get a go-ahead answer. The very long base first pair part starts in lines 5–6 and amounts to the announcement that there is an all-day organ concert going on.

(8)

```
1  P:        = kas    sulle:     orelimuusika meeldib.
                QUES you:ALL organ music   like:3SG
                'Do you like organ music?'

2  M:        väga,
             much
             'A lot'

3  P: →      m.hh ee tead        mis   ma kuulsin     präägu just  raadiost.
                     know:2SG what I    heard:1SG now   right radio:ELT
                     '(Do) you know what I just heard on the radio'

4  M: →      jaa?
             yeah

5  P:        mts et   see  Toomkiriku       orel   läheb  nagu
                that this Dome church:GEN organ  goes   like
                'that the organ at Dome church will undergo a seven-'

6            esmaspävast remonti         seitsmeks  kuuks, .h[h] ja
             Monday:ELT renovation:ILL seven:TRA month:TRA and
             'month renovation, starting Monday and'          (LK)
```

In this excerpt, the particle is indeed not literally confirming what the prior question asks, as it would pre-empt the need for the announcement by claiming that M does know what P just heard. Clearly, the participants do not treat the *jaa* in this way. It is implemented as a formal answering device in this sequential position, achieving a go-ahead that enables the advancement of the sequence.

In all of the above cases, the question–answer sequence is not carrying out what can be analyzed as the primary action accomplished in the sequence, and thus the minimal confirming particle *jah/jaa* adequately deals with the social action initiated with the question.

Consequently, the particle *jah/jaa* seems to be a minimal answer to a yes/no question that does not represent the primary action of the sequence. Instead, the questions are initiations of a pre-sequences, news receipts, or upshots heavily built on what came before it. The questions in these positions do not require strong confirmation as they are designed to address supportive matters leading up to the primary action, to address some detail in it, to display understanding and recipiency, or to receive confirmation on some additional details that are derivable from what has already been conveyed. The particle response is a suitable device for doing just that, as it merely responds without addressing any other matters. Crucially, answer formats cannot only be seen as passively reflecting the contextual demands. They are simultaneously active displays of the speaker's own interpretation of the status of the questions, which in the above cases is 'non-primary'.

A deviant case

A deviant case provides further nice evidence of the participants' orientation to the answer formats. By responding with a particle, the speaker displays her understanding of the question having been a part of a longer sequence of actions, in which this particular question did not represent the primary action. Thus, when a particle answer is given to a question that was originally meant to accomplish a primary action, the speaker who asked the question can react to the wrong assumption displayed in the answer. This is what happens in example (9), where E calls G and asks a question (in line 3).

(9)

```
1 E:        siin  räägib     Ene.
            here  speak:3SG NAME
            'Ene speaking.'

2 G:        tšau,
            'Hi'

3 E: →      ee kas    sa  tuled      omme.
               QUES you come:2SG tomorrow
               'Will you come tomorrow?'

4 G: →      jaa,
            yeah

5           (0.9)

6 E:        .hh (no m-) see on nagu k:ontrolliks. (.) [ma ]
               NO I-  this is like  check:TRA    I
               'Well I-, This is just to check. (.)    I'm'
```

7 G: [ahah]
                                               AHAH
                                               'Oh'

8 E: elistan   igaks   <u>ju</u>huks. (.)
          call:1SG every:TRA case:TRA
          'calling just in case.'   (LK)

G answers the question with a particle only. The pause that follows shows that she considers her response adequate and complete while E, however, waits for an expansion. By using the particle only, G has treated the question as initiating a pre-sequence. In lines 6–8, E reacts to this expectation, which has breached her own understanding of the role of the question in this phone call. She explains that the question in line 3 was indeed the main reason for her call, thus also displaying orientation to the particle answer as expecting a main or primary action to be coming up.

   By treating the question as initiating a pre-sequence, G has also conveyed that the question would have been inappropriate as the primary action of a sequence and also as the reason for the call. Therefore, E explains that the question was asked 'just to check' and 'just in case'. The speech perturbation at the beginning of her turn further proves her confusion over the particle answer. The changed understanding of G on the sequential role of the question is displayed in her change-of-state response *ahah* (Keevallik, 1999) in line 7. She apparently treats E's turn as news and thereby shows that her prior understanding was different. A close qualitative analysis of this deviant case demonstrates how the participants indeed orient to the particle as an answer to a pre, a non-primary action in a sequence.

'Primary' actions and verb repeats

In contrast to particle answers, verb repeats (among numerous other longer formats) can be used to answer 'primary' actions, such as base first pair parts. In example (10), L is asking her course mate to lend her a reading for an exam. She starts a pre-sequence with a question about whether M has the reading. The base first pair part in line 7, the request itself, gets a verb repeat as a response.

(10)

1 L: =a<u>hah</u> .h a <u>üt</u>le   mulle ega sul   siukst
          okay   but say:IMP:2SG I:ALL EGA you:ADS such:PRT
          'Okay. But tell me, do you have the'

2   <u>tek</u>sti   ei   ole.   mingit   <u>Ken</u>neni   teksti   mingit.
          text:PRT NEG be   some:PRT NAME:GEN text:PRT some:PRT
          'reading, something like Kennen's text or something?'

3 M: <u>Ken</u>neni   telegrammid.
          NAME:GEN telegrams
          'Kennen's telegrams.'

4		(0.4)

5 M: on,[6]
         be:3SG
         'I do'

6   ((13 lines skipped, about the exact whereabouts
         of the text))

7 L: →   ja   sa   **saad** <@ selle   mulle @ <u>an</u>da   onju.= @>
          and   you can:2SG it:GEN I:ALL   give:INF ONJU
          'And you can give it to me, right?'

8 M: →   =**saan**,
           can:1SG

9 L: sa   oled   nii   <u>mu</u>si.
          you be:2SG such kiss
          'You're so kind!'   (LK)

Coming back to examples (1) and (2) at the beginning of the article, we can assume that the first respondent treated the telemarketer's question as a part of a pre-sequence, while the other one took it to be the primary action.

There is thus a functional difference between particle-only answers and other responses to yes/no questions. Responding with a particle is a means of displaying understanding of the emerging sequence structure. It is remarkable that in this relatively confined position after a question has been asked, the speaker can still deal with and have impact on the overall sequencing of actions. A different understanding of the prior turn than the prior speaker had in mind is bound to change the subsequent course of actions, as we saw in example (9). A conversation is not deterministic at any point, but a result of participants' actions that in every turn-at-talk display individual understandings of every prior turn. The two Estonian answer formats appear to deal with the social issue of sequencing actions.

Verb repeats as sufficient assertions

Repeating what a prior speaker has said can have a number of functions in conversation (Tannen, 2007 [1989]). A repetition is generally a very different action from mere reacting, or from initiating a new sequence. When it comes to short echo answers to yes/no questions, however, they have been characterized as doing (minimal) responding similarly to response particles. This section will pursue the issue of whether repeating the verb from the question is a different kind of action as compared to answering with a particle. It will show that verb repeats too display a specific interactional profile, similarly to particle responses.

In contrast to particle answers, verb repeats are designed as an answer to the specific question in a prior turn. They display the speaker's analysis of what the question was about, for example by not choosing to repeat some other element of the question, which is also an option in Estonian. In this way, verb repeats are more closely format-tied to the

question than the generic particle *jah/jaa*. On the other hand, verb repeats display a higher degree of independence. While the understanding of the sense of the action carried out by a particle heavily relies on the prior turn, a verb repeat stands more independently as a claim in itself. The relative independence of a verb repeat is constituted by the lexical and grammatical information it conveys, as compared to a particle that conveys none of that (I am grateful to Geoffrey Raymond for pointing this out). A verb has a lexical meaning potential and it frequently also displays grammatical-deictic information in Estonian. As a case in point, in example (10) the speaker who is asked for the reading changes the second person suffix in the question into first person singular in her answer. She thus makes an almost independent claim in the response turn, complete with an agent and a predicate. Even though it is still an answer that structurally as well as content-wise relies on the prior question, a verb is lexically and grammatically more independent than a particle. In terms of social action, by uttering a more independent claim, M in example (10) explicitly commits to the lending. In contrast to what a particle would have accomplished, namely compliance with the request, M basically makes her own promise.[7] By being more independent answers that necessitate a careful analysis of the prior question, verb repeats are likely to achieve something more besides simply answering.

Asserting

Even though the sequential position after a yes/no question seems to be very limited in its options, merely allowing for a confirmation or a disconfirmation besides disclaimers of knowledge, previous research has shown that speakers can deal with a number of issues in these answers (Heritage, 1998; Raymond, 2003; Stivers and Hayashi, 2010). The relative independence of verb repeats seems to constitute the ground for their stronger epistemic weight. Questions are generally addressed from unknowing to knowing participants, delivering the epistemic rights to the addressee and thus not taking issue with these rights. Still, every question involves presuppositions, assumptions, and a specific degree of certainty. These matters may have a bearing on how strong the confirmation has to be. As we saw above, particles were used in contexts where a limited amount of confirming was due. In contrast, verb repeats seem to be used in cases where more can or has to be done.

To start with, verb repeats are used for answering questions that are socially sensitive. Asking to borrow something is a sensitive action (example 10), as is asking whether a person has done what he was supposed to do. The latter happens in example (11). By formulating a question about something that her interlocutor was supposed to do, E treats it as questionable, which already sets up a basis for a stronger confirmation than we saw in the examples above. Restating the claim with appropriate person reference changes, rather than merely confirming with a particle, constitutes a more independent answer to the somewhat suspecting question.

(11)

1   K: [võta <u>eaks</u>]
            'You're welcome'

2 E: →   [kule] ee   kas   sa   **ütlesid** ee ka: pühapäeva
             listen:IMP:2SG QUES you said:2SG   too Sunday:GEN
             'Did you say it out loud on Sunday evening that'

3   →   õhtul   <u>väl</u>ja et ee koguduse   liikmetele
             evening:ADS   out   that congregation:GEN   members:ALL
             'for the members of the congregation'

4   →   [see <u>Jõulu</u><u>maa</u> on].
             this NAME   is
             'there will be Jõulumaa?'

5 K: →   [**üt:lesin:,** ja] <u>kol</u>mapäeval   <u>ka</u> niet ee -
             said:1SG   and Wednesday:ADS too so
             'I did and on Wednesday too, so'

6 E: mhmh,=
             'Uhuh'

7 K: =et ee ma usun hh .h   rahvas <u>tu</u>leb,   ja: ja pe-
             that   I   believe:1SG people come:3SG and and
             'I believe, people will come and'

8   <u>see</u> pühapäev saab   veel   öeldud   <u>ka</u> kindlasti.
             this Sunday   get:3SG more   say:IMS:PPT too definitely
             'on Sunday (I) will definitely say (it) once more.'   (LK)

A verb repeat answer performs its action more independently of the question and thereby achieves a more self-sufficient assertion than a particle would have done. It also claims an epistemic right to produce the statement independently of the prior speaker (Stivers, 2005). All this amounts to a stronger confirmation than the particle would have accomplished. After answering the question, K provides additional evidence of his behavior in accordance with his commitment in lines 7–8, which further underlines the stronger confirming value of the verb repeat.

The choice between a particle and a verb repeat seems to be captured in the distinction between confirmation, which is an additional proof that something that was assumed is indeed correct, and affirmation, which is a statement asserting the truth of something (Sorjonen, 2001b). While the particle confirms whatever the question put forward, a verb repeat provides an independent assertion of the matter at hand. This contrast is best illustrated by comparing the following excerpt (12) with the above one (11). Even in (12) the question is about something that the interlocutor had obviously committed to, namely talking to Priit. In contrast to (11), the recipient answers with a confirming *jaa*.

(12)

```
1  E: →   kas    te       rääkisite  Priiduga    läbi     ve.=
          QUES  you:PL talked:2PL NAME:GEN through QUES
          'Did you talk it over with Priit?'
```

```
2  R: →   =jaa:?  Priit    tuleb  omme     pool kaksteist,=
           yeah    NAME comes tomorrow half twelve
          'Yeah, Priit will come at half past eleven tomorrow'
```

```
3  E:     =ahah,
          'Okay'                          (LK)
```

After confirming, the speaker goes on to present the outcome of the talk, which is in clear contrast to example (11) where the speaker continued by providing further arguments for what else he did in compliance with the commitment. While R in (12) treats the question as unproblematically confirmable, K in (11) counters it with an independent assertion and adds further details. Even after E has received his answer, he talks further about his plans to continue fulfilling his obligations (line 8). The whole answer resents the conditions set by the question, particularly its askability (Bolden, 2009). It rejects the presupposition that K may not have acted in accordance with his promises, thus also implying that a negative answer would not have been an option. Further talk is provided to undermine the presuppositions of the question, but verb repeat at the very beginning already establishes the answer as an independent assertion that does not fully accept the terms of the question.

Even though a verb repeat formally provides a positive answer, its nature as a more independent assertion makes it a useful preface for downright counter-arguments. An independent assertion implies independent agency and judgment, which may adumbrate further independent takes on the matter at hand. A case is shown in example (13). Speaker T, who works at a publishing house, complains that the number of copies of a book will be too small. In line 6, his interlocutor suggests a solution to the problem in the form of a yes/no question. T first confirms with a verb repeat, but immediately continues by adding an argument against the proposed solution.

(13)

```
1  T:     .hh ja  nii  edasi. (0.3) aga mul    on nisuke tunne
             and so  ahead        but I:ADS is  such   feeling
          'And so on (0.3) but I have a feeling'
```

```
2         et  sellest  tiraažist              vist     tuleb     puudus.
          that this:ELT number of copies:ELT probably come:3SG short
          'that the number of copies was not enough'
```

```
3  E:     üldse.
          'Altogether'
```

4   T: j[ah],
             'Yeah'

5   E: [ül-]

6   E: →   aga siis kas   juurde   **saab**   teha   s   vä.
             but then QUES in addition can:3SG do:INF then QUES
             'But is it possible to make more?'

7   T: →   noh **saab**.   aga see on jälle: (äre-) riskiga   seotud,
             NOH can:3SG   but this is again   risk:KOM combine:IPS:PPT
             'It is. But this is again combined with a risk.'

8   uus trükk on palju kallim   ku oleks   teind
             new edition is much expensive:COMP than be:COND done
             'A new edition is much more expensive than if (we) had'

9   kohe ro- rohkem.
             at once   more
             'made more at once.'   (LK)

Verb repeats attend to the specifics of the question and at the same time achieve a relative independence from the question. They show that the speaker has an independent take on the issue, which may implicate that she has more to say about it, projecting a continuation. This supports the observations that in Finnish after a verb repeat answer the topic is going to be pursued in one way or another (Hakulinen et al., 2004; Sorjonen, 2001b). In examples (12) and (13), repeating the verb seems, among other things, to achieve extended speakership, although that is not a regular feature of the verb repeat answers. Rather, the answers deal with socially sensitive issues of fulfilling one's promises and rejecting advice.

Mutual ranking and sufficiency

The questions above that receive verb repeat answers initiate new independent actions. In line 1 in example (11), K responds to E's thank you for providing a phone number and the yes/no question is about a different matter. In (13), the question initiates an action of offering a solution to a problem. This is in contrast to the questions that regularly received particle answers, such as upshot questions, repair initiations, and conclusions, which do not initiate new action sequences. In other words, these questions are treated as profiled because the actions that the questions initiate are primary or new, as compared to the questions that were answered with particles. The choice of the answer format in Estonian thus seems to be dependent on perceived action status in a sequence as well as on establishing the relative independence of an answer turn in order to delicately oppose some facet of the question.

Particles and verb repeat answers are furthermore ranked in terms of their social/sequential accomplishment. If a response is re-instantiated, and the first instance is a

particle, the second one is invariably a verb repeat, never the other way round. In example (14) speaker H reconfirms the answer with a verb repeat after the particle answer has been received. The second instance of the answer is an upgrade in confirmatory strength. It provides a more independent statement and is thereby also a more sufficient answer.

(14)

```
1  V: →    sa  oled    tööl        praegu jah.
           you be:2SG work:ADS now     QUES
           'Are you at  work right now?'

2  H: →    jah,
           yeah

3  V:      mhmh,
           'Uhuh'

4          (1.8)

5  H: →    olen,
           be:1SG

6  V:      mhmh,
           'Uhuh'                    (TA)
```

As was argued above, more generic, less specific particle-only answers displayed the speaker's understanding of the question as having dealt with some 'non-primary' matter in the evolving sequence. In contrast, the more specific verb repeat answer can provide an answer to the primary action in the sequence, including questions that initiate altogether new sequences. As an example of that, the redoing of the answer in a different format in example (14) shows the changing understanding of the speaker in regard to where the question was going. The particle answer in line 2 displays the hearing that the question was leading up to something more. When the particle response is received with a minimal reaction without any continuation, the speaker redoes the answer in the form that would have been adequate for a question that raised the main issue, accomplishing a primary action.

   In fact, in terms of social action, verb repeat seems to be a minimal sufficient response to a question that either stands on its own as an initiation of a sequence, or achieves the primary action in a sequence. This is demonstrated in example (15), where L's base first pair part request gets a verb repeat answer that she receives as sufficient in line 9.

(15, repeated from 10)

```
7  L: →    ja  sa  saad <@ selle   mulle @ anda    onju.= @>
           and you can:2SG it:GEN I:ALL   give:INF ONJU
           'And you can give it to me, right?'
```

8 M: →   =**saan,**
              can:1SG

9 L: sa   oled   nii   <u>mu</u>si.
              you be:2SG such kiss
              'You're so kind!'   (LK)

By providing an assessment of the complying answer, which, in terms of its social action, is a sequence-closing *third* after an adjacency pair (Schegloff, 2007), L closes the whole sequence. A third does not project any continuation beyond itself and the talk after the above excerpt continues unproblematically on other issues. Another action that implies closure of a sequence is thanking. A particle answer to a yes/no question is never followed by a 'thank you' in the available data while it happens after a verb repeat answer (see example (16)). Note that even in this case, the asserting answer is an upgrade from a particle.

(16)

1 M: →   .hh <u>ka:s</u>   nüüd **akkas**   kahekümne   viiendast
              QUES now started:3SG twenty:GEN fifth:ELT
              'Did you now start receiving our'

2   →   teil   meie Linnaleht käima.
              you:PL:ADS our   NAME   go:SUP
              'Linnaleht from the twenty fifth?'

3 K**: →   jaa,**
              yeah

4 M: .hh

5 K: →   **<u>ak</u>kas**   tänan   väga,
              started:3SG thank:1SG much
              'It started, thanks a lot.'   (LK)

Examples like this show that verb repeats can be minimal sufficient answers to yes/no questions that instantiate primary actions. They also achieve closure-relevance of the question–answer sequence, which means that the sequence is not expected to be expanded (Schegloff, 2007). As sufficiently strong confirmations in the particular sequential positions after yes/ no questions, verb repeats in Estonian imply the possibility of sequence termination.

    This is in clear contrast with particle-only answers that in preliminary actions implicate expansion relevance. They display an expectation that the sequence is going to continue beyond them. Examples (17) and (18) illustrate participant orientation to these different relevancies. Both examples come from the beginning of phone calls in which the caller asks to speak with another person. In both cases, the caller's turn is formatted as a yes/no question about the availability of the person. In (17) the call-taker treats the

question as initiating a pre-sequence and answers with a particle. This is an exchange between adult sisters. In (18), the call-taker responds with a verb repeat. The caller is a friend of the call-taker's adult son.

(17)

```
1  P: →    =kule   empsu    on vä.
            listen   mum:PRT is  QUES
            'Listen,  is mum (there)?'

2  L: →    jah,
            yeah

3  P:       anna      sis. ((L leaves the phone))
            give:IMP then
            'Give (it to her) then!'          (LK)
```

(18)

```
1  H: →    tere kas    Vello   on kodus.
            hi   QUES NAME is  home:INS
            'Hi, is Vello home?'

2  S: →    on.
            is

3  H:       .hh väga ea, ((S leaves the phone))
              'Very good'                  (LK)
```

These two answers receive different treatment. In the case of the particle answer, the caller continues by providing the request itself, the base first pair part that was adumbrated in the pre-sequence. In contrast, when the question gets a verb repeat answer, the caller provides a third, an assessment of the information, which treats the sequence as terminated. By virtue of its confirmatory strength, the verb repeat answer implies that the matter has been sufficiently dealt with, as is displayed in the next turn of the caller. Also, there is no more talk in this segment of the call in (18), as S leaves the phone. Being possibly a 'too strong' confirmation in this position, the verb repeat preempts the need for providing the base first pair part.[8] Once again, the verb repeat accomplishes something more besides merely answering the question. It effectively terminates the sequence, even though it was projected to be longer.

Minimality as a sequential matter

However, a mere verb repeat can be a sufficient answer only after certain types of questions that do not make relevant a strong confirmation or an extended informing. Examples (10, 14,

16–18) all involve questions that are either strongly tilted towards a confirming answer by virtue of their format and display epistemic certainty (10, 14) or because of the shared prior knowledge (16). The questions in (17) and (18) are straightforward information requests, hearable as doing just that in the specific activity of a phone call opening. Suspecting, insinuating, negative and other kinds of more problematical and delicate questions occasion differently formulated answers, among other things combinations of the particle *jah/jaa* and the verb (Keevallik, 2009a). In these positions, verb repeats on their own are not enough to provide a sufficiently confirming answer. Verb repeats are still relatively weak and only slightly less minimal than the generic response particle *jah/jaa*. But the repeats stand as more independent claims than the particle and thereby accomplish a stronger confirmation, as opposed to merely answering. They are minimal sufficient answers to some primary actions.

Being a minimal answer is thus not an absolute value in a language but can be judged only in a specific sequential position. Indeed, an answer can also be 'too minimal' in its sequential position to be doing the relevant social action and may therefore be pursued, as happens in example (19). Here, the particle answer in line 4 is not treated as confirmatory enough, as the recipient of the answer pursues a statement of certainty after it.

(19)

1 H: sa lähed trenni vä.
          you go:2SG training QUES
          'Will you go to the training pass today?'

2 V: jaa?
          'Yeah'

3 H: →   täna on ikka onju.
          today is IKKA ONJU
          'There is one today, right?'

4 V: →   **jaa?**
          yeah

5 H: kindel.
          sure
          '(Are you) sure?'

6   (0.5)

7 V: ei   ole. @@
          NEG be
          'No'   (TA)

There are no similar examples with verb repeat answers in the current corpora. Verb repeats are instead received with sequence closing thirds much more regularly than particle

answers. This also depends on the sequential position of the question and the type of action carried out in it. The fact that thirds follow verb repeats shows that the repeats are treated as contributing new information by the participants. This strengthens the argument that they are not mere confirmations of what was asked but independent assertions that contribute something new. Example (20) is a case in point, where the first question is answered with a verb, which gets a news receipt *ahah* as a third. In contrast, the upshot question in line 3 is answered with a particle, which is not received as news.

(20)

1 L: →   /---/ ema   **teab**, et sa   siin oled   võe.
                mother knows that you   here be:2SG QUES
                'Does your mother know that you are here?'

2   (0.8)

3 K: →   **tea:b?**
              know:3SG

4 L: →   ahah (.)   ütlesid   talle   kohe   jah?
              AHAH   told:1SG she:ADS at once QUES
              'Uhuh/Oh. (.) You told her right away?'

5 K: →   **jaa?**=
              yeah

6 A: =kas   aaa (0.5) teised läksid   ära   või=
              QUES um   others   went:3PL away QUES
              'Did um: (0.5) did the others leave?'   (TA)

Part of the reason for these differences in choice of the answer format is that it reveals the speaker's understanding of the epistemic certainty of the question, as has been shown for identical formats of Finnish answers to verb-interrogatives (Sorjonen, 2001b). When the question reveals strong epistemic certainty, the aligning response can simply confirm what was said. This is done minimally with a particle. While the question is seeking information and reveals a less definitively grounded knowledge, the minimal aligning response is a verb repeat (Sorjonen, 2001b). However, the epistemic strength of a question often depends on where in an action sequence it occurs. In particular, whether the question is a follow-up or an upshot from prior talk bears on how much confirmatory strength or independent assertion is adequate in the answer. Also, pre-sequences are designed for easy confirmation, thus quite likely with a strong epistemic certainty. Epistemic matters are intertwined with sequential structure, as different epistemic strength is generally characteristic of actions in different positions in a sequence.

    Interestingly, Estonian and Finnish do not behave in an identical manner when it comes to the choice of answer format. It seems that Finnish speakers rely more on

the perceived epistemic factors when choosing between answer formats in, for example, pre-sequences, where they can use verb repeats. In contrast, in Estonian, the action import of the question as 'non-primary' is more relevant because the speakers treat the questions in pre-sequences as making relevant only weaker confirmations. Cross-linguistic pragmatic differences of this kind provide a promising topic for further investigation.

In summary, verb repeats in Estonian are systematically deployed in different sequential positions and treated as different from the particles in terms of their confirmatory strength, sequential implications, and action import. Although they are both non-modified confirmatory answers to yes/no questions, particles and verb repeats accomplish different social actions and display a different understanding of where the sequence is going.

Conclusion

Yes/no questions in different functions and sequential positions make relevant answers with different confirmatory strength. This means that being a minimal answer is a relative value that should be defined in a specific sequential and action context. The above analysis argued that in Estonian the typologically different minimal confirmations are in fact minimal in different sequential positions in conversation. In order to provide a minimally confirming answer to a question that is part of a pre-sequence or an upshot from prior talk, the particle *jah/jaa* is sufficient. In contrast, a particle as an answer to what was produced as a primary action in a sequence leads to a clarification sequence in regard to the status of the question. Verb repeat is a minimal answer to questions that are not formatted to imply too much problematicity or social sensitiveness.

Social action should accordingly be studied as integral to the meaning and organization of linguistic form (Sorjonen, 1996), and even grammar per se. This article argued that typologically different answer types are used to manage sequential and social matters in everyday Estonian. Answering a yes/no question with a particle or a verb repeat shows the speaker's understanding of the nature of the question in terms of its role in sequences of actions. It is a means of displaying sequential understanding in the relatively restricted second position, and a means of defining the future course of actions. In addition, the choice of the answer displays how strong the need for confirmation was perceived to be by the recipient of the question, which in turn is often tied to the position of the question in a sequence. Whether this precise way of displaying sequential and social sensitivity is an idiosyncratic development in Estonian, is too early to answer. Apparently, the closely related Finnish does not display identical action-based distinctions in the choice of respective answer formats, but relies more on epistemics. Similar qualitative microanalysis is needed from other echo answer and mixed answer languages in order to make any wider claims in regard to how the answer formats are used universally. It is clear, however, that answers can and do display social and interactional understandings of the speakers cross-linguistically.

Another social matter that is dealt with in the answers, is how committed the speaker is to the answer. This is most often taken care of lexically, by adding a modal word to the turn or by directly explaining the nature of reservations or the grounds of certainty. In

order to compare the two basic formats, the particle and the verb repeat, the responses involving modals and other modifications were left out of the discussion. Clearly, an answer that already contains a verb has different opportunities for expansion than a particle does, as a verb answer may be expanded within the same clause. One area of implementation of verb repeats may indeed turn out to be various modifications of the answers with other elements in the clause. Nevertheless, a mere verb repeat as a claim on its own also implies more commitment on behalf of the speaker, especially when it comes to requests. How commitment is managed in answers is an area for further study.

The possible relevance of prosodic contours in terms of action will also have to wait for another project. In the above examples, the answers displayed very different terminal pitch movements, ranging from rises to falls. Understanding their function most probably necessitates a comparison with a wider array of sequential contexts. Besides, the items themselves afford a different amount of prosodic manipulation depending on how many syllables there are and how long they are. It may also be the case that a choice between a *jah* and a *jaa* is influenced by the prosodic needs of the action at hand, as intonation can easily be manipulated in a long vowel.

In order to understand some of the basic choices in our everyday language, we have to look beyond the narrowly defined language itself. When conversing, speakers do not only exchange information but also deal with social and interactional issues, with who has a right to say what, when, and with how much epistemic strength. They constantly display their understanding of the role and importance of the ongoing exchanges, indicating the status of the talk produced right now in relation to what happened before and what will happen in the future. If the issue in an answer to a yes/no question would only be to provide valid information, Estonians could always just say *jah*.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Furthermore, Finnish has another confirmatory particle *niin* with separate functions from *joo* (Sorjonen, 2001a, 2001b), but *niin* can only marginally be used as an answer to the question types discussed in this article.
2. This intuitive judgment is not always easy to make. I ended up with 78 cases with particle response, where a verb repeat would clearly have been an option, and 35 questionable ones. There were altogether 30 verb repeat answers in the corpora (see also Keevallik, 2009a).
3. Final particles *onju*, *eksju, eksole*, all approximately 'right?', sometimes trigger a response but most of the time they function as elicitors of alignment rather than as virtual yes/no questions. The response patterns to these formats were different, involving primarily responses of the type 'uhuh'. Only instances that received a yes/no type answer have been included this study (see example (10)).
4. In a pilot comparison, the biggest percentage difference occurred in answers to declaratively formulated questions that involved 29 percent of all the particle answers but only 19 percent of all the verb repeats.

5. In Finnish, *niin* could be used in examples such as 4 and 5 (Sorjonen, 2001a).

6. A positive answer to the negative *ega*-question in line 1 can only be a verb repeat (Keevallik, 2009b).

7. It has been shown that mere particles are generally insufficient answers when it comes to committing to a promise of future action in Swedish (Lindström, 1999).

8. There are some counterexamples to this pattern in one telemarketer's calls, especially with the politeness word *paluks*, meaning 'I would like him/her to come to the phone', occurring in the next turn after a verb repeat response.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

un<u>der</u><u>li</u>ning	emphasis
-	truncation
[ ]	overlaps
=	latching of turns
(0.5)	pause length in tenths of a second
(.)	micropause
:	lengthening of a sound
@	a laughter syllable
<@ smile @>	smiling quality
.hh	breathing in,
hh	breathing out, the estimated relative length corresponds to the number of hs
((snort))	transcriber's comments
/–-/	something has been left out from the same turn in the example
boldface	the focused item in the excerpt
.	pitch fall at the end of an intonation unit
?	pitch rise at the end of an intonation unit
,	level pitch at the end of an intonation unit
-	unfinished intonation unit
↑	abrupt rise in pitch
(not in Estonian)	the part is not expressed in the Estonian version
/	alternative translations

Appendix: Abbreviations

1, 2, 3:	person
ABL:	ablative
ADS:	adessive
ALL:	allative
COMP:	comparative
COND:	conditional
ELT:	elative
GEN:	genitive
ILL:	illative
IMP:	imperative
IMS:	impersonal
INF:	infinitive
INS:	inessive
IPS:	impersonal
KI:	clitic *-ki* (a phonological variant of the clitic *-ki/-gi*)
KOM:	komitative
NAME:	name
NEG:	negation (particles *ei, ära*)
PL:	plural
PPT:	past participle
PRT:	partitive
QUES:	question particle
SG:	singular
SUP:	supinum
TRA:	translative

Other capital letters: an untranslatable particle

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