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Directives in ELF Peer Feedback

Introduction

Feedback is a central element in many areas of education: Teachers may, for instance, give feedback to their students to improve their language or writing skills, students may give each other peer feedback on their course work, and teacher trainers may provide feedback to future teachers for them to improve their own teaching skills. Feedback has been studied from a variety of perspectives, including ethnographic (didactic) and speech act (language) perspectives. Ethnographic perspectives aim to provide insights into the social and didactic dimensions of peer feedback by highlighting the power structure and institutional roles of the participants as well as other contextual or social factors that can influence the feedback process (cf. e.g. Dippold, 2009; Farr, 2011; Khezrlou, 2023; Swinglehurst et al., 2008). On the other hand, a speech act perspective takes the language as a focal point and focuses on the individual speech acts used within the speech event, such as criticism, praise, suggestions (Batlle & Seedhouse, 2022; Decapua & Findlay Dunham, 2007; Del Bono & Nuzzo, 2021; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Nguyen, 2008a, 2008b, 2013).

The present study adopts a speech act perspective in the study of feedback and focuses on directive speech acts produced in written peer feedback. While directives are only one of many different components in complex feedback events (among, e.g. positive and negative assessments), they occupy a central role in such events. Whereas previous research has partially shed light on directives in feedback, there is no comprehensive study on such directives to date that is informed by speech act theoretical insights and systematically applies previous

findings on directive speech acts to the study of feedback directives. With this paper, we aim at filling this research gap by developing a coding scheme for feedback directives that synthesizes both theoretical insights and empirical findings on a range of directive speech acts. For the development of our coding scheme, we use data from an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context to test it in an exploratory analysis. Thus, our research questions are:

1. How can feedback directives be analysed transparently and systematically?
2. Which strategies are used by ELF speakers in their feedback directives and how do their directives compare with native speaker feed-back directives?
3. How do the ELF learners' feedback directives compare with other directive speech acts?

In this paper, we first conceptualise feedback as a complex speech event, then discuss directives in the light of speech-act based theoretical and empirical traditions, before offering a literature review on empirical studies investigating feedback (or components thereof). In our methodology section, we briefly introduce our participant groups, the data collection procedure and our coding scheme before introducing and discussing our initial results.

Theory

Feedback as a Speech Event

Feedback is a complex linguistic phenomenon that may include a number of different individual speech acts, such as providing criticism, praise, or giving the recipient ideas of what could and should be changed (i.e. directive speech acts). The intrinsically complex structure of feedback can also be traced to its institutional situatedness with its related norms and expectations, which in turn are influenced by the purpose, expectations and rules prevalent in a particular situational context

(Copland, 2011, 2012; Vásquez, 2004; Farr & O’Keeffe, 2002). Finally, feedback is produced between interlocutors with pre-defined roles (feedback provider and feedback recipient) and hence is characterised by an asymmetrical power relation. With these characteristics, feedback can be conceptualised as what Levinson (1979: 368, original emphasis) refers to as an “activity type”: Activity types are “goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with *constraints* on participants, settings, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions”.

Given its multi-faceted nature and situatedness within a specific context, feedback can furthermore be conceptualised as a speech event (cf. Vásquez, 2004). According to Hymes (1972: 56), speech events are “restricted to activities, or aspects of activities, that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech. An event may consist of a single speech act, but will often comprise several”. A speech event differs from a speech act in that it can comprise one or more speech acts and takes place in a specific speech situation. In the present study, our *speech situation* is a classroom, *the speech event* is feedback, and this feedback event may be composed of various *speech acts* (e.g. criticism, praise, directives).

While the concept of a “speech event” highlights the multi-faceted character of feedback events as potentially consisting of a number of different individual illocutions (praise, criticism, advise), the concept “activity type” highlights the situatedness in social or institutional settings with all the constraints that come with such situatedness. These constraints may lead to a number of challenges for ELF or EFL (English as a Foreign Language) speakers, such as a potential lack of awareness of the social/institutional expectations (sociopragmatic perspective) and a potential lack of knowledge of which linguistic structures are suitable or expected in which situation (sociopragmatic/pragmalinguistic perspective).

The concept of a speech event offers a theoretical framework which can capture the complexity of feedback. On an empirical level, a number of individual acts and moves have been identified for feedback and related speech events such as email directives (as in Freytag, 2019). The following list aims at collecting and synthesizing these individual components and offers an overview of the acts and moves that have been identified for feedback. While in our analysis we focus on directive

speech acts (strategy 8), it is important to keep in mind that directives do not occur in isolation in feedback events but are embedded in the context of other strategies (in addition to being socially situated).

1. Greeting (Freytag, 2019)
2. Self-introduction (Freytag, 2019)
3. Orientation move (Freytag, 2019)
4. Inquiry about the other's well-being (Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990)
5. Positive prefatory statement (Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990)
6. Negative evaluation/criticism (Nguyen, 2008a)
7. Positive evaluation/praise (Nguyen 2008a, 2008b)
8. Directive (Donaghue 2020; Nguyen 2008a, 2008b; Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990)
9. Positive ending statement (Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990)
10. Farewell move (Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990)

In conclusion, as the present study focuses on the multi-faceted nature of feedback and adopts a speech act perspective, feedback is conceptualised as a *speech event* that can include a number of different individual speech acts and an *activity type* that is situated in a specific institutional setting (classroom context). In our analysis, we focus on the linguistic realisation of one particular speech act, viz. directives.

Directive Speech Acts in EIL Feedback

Most studies investigating feedback acknowledge that one component of the complex speech event consists of a speaker providing the addressee with ideas of what to change in their work (Del Bono & Nuzzo, 2021; Nguyen, 2008a, 2008b, 2013; Nguyen & Basturkmen, 2010; Strong & Baron, 2004; Vásquez, 2004). In other words, feedback frequently includes directive speech acts, i.e. linguistic actions in which a speaker directs an addressee to carry out a future action A (Searle, 1969; cf. 8 in the list above). Applied to the case of peer feedback, the feedback giver directs the feedback recipient to change something in their work (and frequently also indicates how to change it). The category of directive speech acts includes a wide range of individual illocutions, ranging from commands, orders, requests to suggestions and advice. Whereas

the definition of the overall speech act category of directives is rather straightforward and has not been questioned in the theoretical literature on speech acts and its empirical applications, the delineation of individual directive illocutions is far from being clear-cut (cf. e.g. Flöck, 2016). Different criteria have been employed to distinguish between individual directive illocutions. Speech-act theoretical approaches (such as Fraser, 1974; Hindelang, 1978; Searle, 1969; Wunderlich, 1976) have used the criterion of benefit to delineate requests from suggestions and advice (with requests being in the speaker's and suggestions/advice being in the addressee's interest). While directive speech acts in feedback events can be said to be in the addressee's long-term interest (as the purpose of the feedback is to improve the quality of their work), they may still clash with a recipient's short-term preferences. The criterion of benefit is thus difficult to use and apply in practice in distinguishing between different directive illocutions in feedback.

This difficulty to distinguish between different directive illocutions can also be observed in empirical research on feedback directives: While authors like Nguyen and Basturkmen (2010), Song (2023), Strong and Baron (2004) and Vásquez (2004) identify suggesting and advising as possible directive points in feedback, Nguyen (2008a) also conceptualises directive speech acts in feedback as requests, demands, advice and suggestions. None of these studies have offered systematic structural or contextual criteria for delineating the different illocutions and hence their criteria for coding these acts into different categories remain opaque. More generally, it is questionable whether a systematic delineation is even possible let alone whether it can be implemented validly and reliably in natural data. The question of which specific directive illocutions can be found in feedback events and how they can be distinguished has thus never been and may not be possible to be answered systematically. Thus, instead of relying on *a priori* categories of different directive illocutions, the present study includes all directive speech acts produced in feedback events. In our analysis, we use structural linguistic criteria to differentiate between the different directness levels and realisation strategies employed in these directives.

While a speech act perspective on directives in feedback events sheds light on some of the properties of directives, it cannot account for the social characteristics of this particular speech action. In most

investigations of directive speech acts, directive acts are conceptualised as intrinsic face-threatening acts (FTA) in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms. More specifically, Brown and Levinson (1987: 62) argue that directives primarily threaten the hearer's negative face wants (i.e. their desire to be free in action) but it is conceivable that directives in feedback may also threaten the addressee's positive face wants (i.e. their desire for themselves and their actions to be liked and respected by others) in that directives may be understood as a negative assessment of the feedback recipient's work, and hence function in a similar manner as the act of criticising. The connection between the actions of directing and criticising has been highlighted by a number of authors in the feedback literature (Nguyen & Mushin, 2022; Nguyen, 2008a, 2008b; Nguyen & Basturkmen, 2010; Song, 2023; Strong & Baron, 2004; Tracy et al. 1987; Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990; Vásquez, 2004). Nguyen (2008a, 2008b) even codes the use of directive speech acts as an indirect strategy of criticising. In that sense, it may be helpful to distinguish between the primary and secondary meaning of speech acts. While the primary function of directives is to direct the hearer towards carrying out a future action, a potential secondary function of directives may be to provide a negative assessment (viz. criticism) of the addressee's work. Whereas speech act-based approaches have traditionally focussed on the primary meaning of speech acts, discursive approaches to speech acts have highlighted that speech acts may be used in a number of different functions. Robinson (2004), for instance, finds that explicit apologies are often used as mitigating prefaces for other illocutions (e.g. asking for information) or are used as structural markers of dispreference in dispreferred second pair parts (such as complaints). A similar case can be made for directives in feedback events: While the primary function is to direct the addressee to change aspects of their work, they may at the same time be understood as negative assessments. However, whether addressees perceive them as such can ultimately not be determined based on production data. There are, for instance, some indications that directives in feedback sequences may not automatically be understood as negative assessments due to their specific social and institutional situatedness of the feedback event. In her investigation of how participants negotiate face in feedback events, Copland (2011) finds that participants expect some types of FTAs to happen in feedback and thus do not

evaluate them as overly imposing (e.g. providing criticism). However, Copland (2011) does not specifically investigate directives and hence her findings may not be entirely applicable to these speech acts.

Based on the discussions in the current section, the present study focuses on acts with a primary directive function and defines primary directives in feedback speech events as the following:

- speech acts in which the feedback giver directs the feedback recipient to carry out a future action by explicitly outlining this specific course of action,
- speech actions that may include a number of individual illocutions (suggestions, advice, requests, etc.), which all express directive point,
- speech acts which are produced between interlocutors with pre-defined roles of feedback provider and feedback recipient and hence display an asymmetrical power relation (given the institutional situatedness of the feedback event, cf. Chapter 2.1),
- speech acts which potentially threaten the hearer's negative and positive face wants.

To finish our theoretical background section, we give a short overview of the findings of studies which have investigated directives and other related speech acts, such as criticism, in the same speech event: peer feedback. While the studies to be reviewed may differ from our study in their definition and conceptualisation of directives (some use different speech act labels and some attempt such *a priori* categorisations of directive illocutions as critically discussed above), they still provide valuable insights as to how ELF and EFL language users have been found to provide feedback in English.

Directives in (Peer) Feedback: A Literature Review

As outlined in the previous section, the present study focuses on directives in peer feedback events. As previous research focussed on other aspects of the feedback event, feedback directives have frequently been conceptualised as realisation strategies of other speech acts, most notably criticism. Consequently, in such studies, similar but not identical

functions (such as criticizing and directing) have been conflated, leading to a diverse and heterogeneous conceptualisation of feedback directives. Hence, findings of studies including feedback directives may not always be comparable in themselves, nor with the present analysis. With this in mind, we focus on only those findings for which at least some comparability is possible. To give the reader a good overview of the research field, we first outline how feedback directives have been conceptualised in previous research before outlining how native speakers and English learners have been found to realise feedback directives.

Feedback Directives as Realisation Strategies for Criticism

Feedback directives have often been conceptualised as realisation strategies for criticism in previous research (Nguyen, 2008a; Nguyen & Basturkmen, 2010; Song, 2023; Tracy et al., 1987; Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990). In a study widely discussed in the feedback literature, Nguyen (2008a) investigates EFL learners' strategies of realising criticism in feedback events. The author conceptualises criticising as an umbrella term for different linguistic actions ranging from negative assessments, disagreements, and warnings, to a number of different directives, such as demanding, requesting, advising, and suggesting. These directives are categorised as indirect realisations of criticism given, as the author argues, that criticism is performed with the intention of guiding the addressee towards improved future behaviour or to express the speaker's discontent or disapproval of the addressee's actions and choices. Within her indirect criticism strategy, Nguyen (2008a) differentiates demands for change, requests for change, advice for change and suggestions for change. Nguyen's (2008a) categorisation of directives differs markedly from established research on requests in that the study conflates distinct directive strategies into seemingly homogenous categories and groups strategies as distinct that are typically treated as instantiations of the same category. This can, for instance, be seen in Nguyen's request for change category where both imperatives and preparatory strategies like *Can you...?* are treated as instantiations of the same category. Furthermore, Nguyen's (2008a) four directive categories are not mutually exclusive as they are not theoretically or structurally defined. While the examples in the demand for change category seem to suggest that

the expression of obligation was the criterion for classification, the categorisation of *should* in the advice category contradicts this pattern. Given the lack of structural criteria in Nguyen's (2008a) categorisation of directives, a systematic delineation of directive strategies based on this framework is not possible.

Despite the issues discussed above, Nguyen's (2008a) conceptualisation of directives has been influential in the research field in that a number of authors have adopted a similar approach. Nguyen and Basturkmen (2010), for instance, treat advice about change as a realisation strategy for constructive critical feedback. In a similar vein, Song (2023) codes suggestions and advice for change as strategies of constructive feedback. Nguyen's (2008a) connection (or even conflation) of criticism and directives in feedback events is also visible in Del Bono and Nuzzo's (2021) investigation of criticism and suggestion strategies in intermediate and advanced Italian EFL learners and American English native speakers collaborating in a telecollaborative exchange format.

Furthermore, the conflation of directives with realisation strategies of criticism has led to a lack of focus in the analysis of feedback directives. Song (2023: 79), for instance, analyses head act and modification strategies of critical feedback but does not always systematically distinguish between the two levels of analysis. Hedges (traditionally analysed as modifiers) serve as head act strategies in Song's (2023: 79) framework (alongside direct and indirect strategies). Furthermore, adverbs such as *very* (which are customarily analysed as upgrading modifiers in all frameworks following Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) are treated as direct head act strategies ("strong modal verbs or adverbs"). Similar inconsistencies in speech act categorisation and coding can be found in Del Bono and Nuzzo's (2021: 199) investigation of criticism and suggestion strategies as some of the examples do not correspond to the strategy definitions (e.g. "you could fix that" is coded as an impersonal strategy and not as a possibility strategy). At the same time, Del Bono and Nuzzo (2021) use a modified version of Nguyen's (2008a) coding categories, supplemented with categories from Martínez-Flor's (2005) taxonomy of suggestions, to conceptually differentiate between criticism and suggestions. However, what Del Bono and Nuzzo (2021)

term “suggestions” spans a wide range of directives including requests, advice and potentially even orders.

To conclude, the functional overlap between the illocutions of criticising and directing in feedback events (cf. Section 2.2) has led to the conceptualisation of feedback directives as realisation strategies for criticism in previous research. This, in turn, has resulted in directives not being analysed in a systematic and in-depth manner. With the present study, we aim at closing this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of feedback directives that is informed by speech act theory and the findings of empirical studies on directive speech acts.

Feedback Directives in English Native Speaker Groups

There are only a few studies that have investigated the perception and production of feedback strategies (including directives) of native English speakers. Two of the early studies are Tracy et al.'s (1987) and Tracy and Eisenberg's (1990) investigations of the perception of criticism in the feedback produced by American English native speakers. In their study on markers of good and bad feedback, Tracy et al. (1987) find that the level of specificity of the direction provided had an impact on respondents' evaluation of appropriateness. Their index of specificity of suggested change ranges from no direction provided to providing the exact words or phrases to be changed. While high levels of specificity in the direction correlated with respondents' positive evaluation of the feedback instance, redundancy in the directions given and perceived over-specificity of direction led to lower judgement in clarity, and hence more negative evaluations of feedback. Given their focus on criticism, the authors' investigations only provide partial insights about directives in feedback events. Nonetheless, we can conclude from them that feedback recipients expect feedback givers to provide them with specific directions as to what and how to change in their work.

Moving to production, the use of feedback directives among English native speakers has been investigated by Vásquez (2004) and Strong and Baron (2004). While Vásquez (2004) analyses the modification strategies in American English (AmE) feedback advice and suggestions produced in post-observation feedback sessions in a teacher

supervision context, Strong and Baron (2004) focus on the realisation of suggestions and their responses in an AmE native speaker group of teacher trainers providing feedback and support for beginning teachers. Strong and Baron (2004: 50) find that suggestion strategies in feedback include the use of performatives (*I suggest...*), expressions of willingness (*You want to...*), “testimonials” (*Many teachers like to...*), interrogative structures (*What do you think about...?*), and indirect strategies like comments (*X would be good.*). The authors find that their participants relied primarily on indirect suggestions with strategies expressing possibility and positive assessment being the most frequent (of the form *I wonder if you could...* and *It would be helpful...*). The second most frequent strategy in their dataset is the use of questions to realise a suggestion (*Will you do X?*) followed by pointing out general rules. While these results are interesting as they provide insights as to which linguistic realisation strategies are used for directives in native speaker feedback, the lack of transparent structural criteria in their coding makes it difficult to compare Strong and Baron’s (2004) results to other researchers’ findings.

Focussing only on the use of hedging devices in post-observation teacher training interactions at an Irish university, Farr and O’Keeffe (2002) find that the hedge *would* is routinely employed by advisors, especially in first person singular constructions. The authors find that trainers frequently substituted obligation references with *should* with the hedged form *would* in order to make their directives more indirect.

Feedback Directives in EFL Learner Groups

Most of the studies investigating the use of directives in EFL learner populations have conceptualised directives as realisation strategies of criticism. Hence, the lack of systematic focus on directives as discussed earlier (cf. p. 202–204) applies to many studies. Despite these theoretical and methodological issues, they still yield some interesting initial results about EFL learners’ use of directives in feedback events. The overall findings of these studies indicate that learners differ from native speakers in their feedback strategies in that they use fewer directives (and hence produce feedback that is not specific enough) and choose different linguistic means to realise their directives.

Nguyen's (2008a) investigation of criticism produced by Vietnamese EFL learners shows learner criticism strategies to be significantly more indirect than those of native speakers. While the learners produced fewer statements of the problem, they used more demands than Nguyen's (2008a) native speaker group. In other words, Nguyen's learners relied more on directives than on criticism strategies. In addition to differing in the choice of speech act produced, Nguyen's learners also differed from the native speakers in their wording of these acts. Nguyen (2008a: 54–55) reports that her learners used fewer modal past and conditional forms in their suggestions and advice than the native speakers. The author also finds that learners expressed their requests mostly through bare imperatives and want statements. Nguyen also observes that her learners' feedback strategies were generally less complex than native speaker ones.

Similarly, Del Bono and Nuzzo's (2021) results suggest that learners differ from native speakers in their criticism and suggestion patterns. However, the authors report patterns which diverge from Nguyen's (2008a) findings in that their learners produced more negative assessments than directives in feedback events. While their AmE native speakers relied primarily on producing directives that refer to ability (*you could do X*) in giving feedback, the learners predominantly produced negative assessments without a directive. Over time and with exposure to English, this usage pattern shifted slightly and learners started to use more and also different directives: When learners produced directives at the beginning of the observational period, they mainly used need statements (*you need to do X*). At the end of the observational period, Del Bono and Nuzzo's (2021: 199) intermediate and advanced Italian EFL learner group started to produce more impersonal constructions (*"I think it's better to use. . ."*). Another study that reports differences between learners and native speakers is Song's (2023) investigation of feedback directives in a group of advanced Chinese EFL learners and AmE native speakers. The author finds that their AmE native speaker group relied primarily on what the author calls hedges (a functionally diverse category that also includes ability references). This finding is in line with Del Bono and Nuzzo's (2021) observation that their AmE native speakers used references to ability most frequently. While Song's (2023) Chinese EFL group also displayed a preference for hedges, they

used direct strategies markedly less frequently than the English native speakers. In that, the Chinese EFL learners' usage is more similar to their L1 Chinese native patterns, indicating negative pragmatic transfer.

To conclude this literature review, previous studies mostly focussed on the overall speech event of feedback and have often treated directives as a realisation strategy of criticism. This has led to feedback directives not receiving the systematic and in-depth attention that they require, resulting in an unsystematic and, perhaps, idiosyncratic categorization and analysis of directives in feedback events. Irrespective of the limitations in comparability in the coding categories and general theoretical and methodological setup, all studies report that the feedback behaviour in their learner populations differed from that of native speakers. In addition, overall, two dimensions of learner characteristics or divergence from native speakers can be identified from investigations of EFL learners' use of directives in feedback events: (1) the choice of speech act produced (criticism vs. directive), and (2) the linguistic strategies they choose when directing. However, due to the limitations outlined, previous research has not been able to validly and comparably identify the specifics of how learners use directives in feedback strategies. Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate the directives used by language learners in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) peer feedback context to develop a coding scheme that can help analyse directives in feedback events systematically.

Methodology

Participants

The participants included 28 university students with various native languages (see Table 7.1 below for an overview). The students were enrolled at three different universities (Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany; University of Trabzon, Türkiye; and IEP de Fontainebleau, UPEC, France) and took part in a telecollaborative exchange format in which English was used as a lingua franca. Their English proficiency levels, determined by self-assessment reports, ranged from B1–B2 to

C1–C2. There was a slight discrepancy in the proficiency levels between the three groups with the French group being less proficient than the other two groups. Our participants were, on average, 20.9 years old and are comparable with respect to their educational background.

Table 7.1. Informants and dataset.

Group	Native languages	Mean age	C1–C2	B1–B2
Leuphana (Germany)	German, Bulgarian, Finnish, French, Czech	20.3	4	2
Trabzon (Türkiye)	Turkish	21.5	8	1
Fontainebleau (France)	French	21	3	10
Total		20.9	15	13

Data Collection

Peer feedback data collection took place within the curriculum of a Sustainability and Culture course (cf. Birdman et al., forthcoming). Students were required to provide written feedback on an essay produced by an imaginary classmate as part of that student’s writing class course assessment. Students were instructed to comment on at least six writing issues. In advance of and in preparation for the task, students together with their instructor had identified several writing issues related to ideas, argumentation, organisation and language use. This preparatory step was taken to avoid potential differences in feedback analytical skills. This task was assigned as homework to be submitted within one week.

The process of data collection for directives involved conducting manual bottom-up searches utilizing a combination of what Jucker (2009) calls a “conversation analytic approach” and “laboratory” methods. While the data collection involved elicitation (making them laboratory in nature), the coding was done in the manner of a conversation analytic approach. This approach entailed systematically examining the written data manually to identify instances of directive speech acts. In

addition, to ensure the accuracy and consistency of coding, inter-rater reliability checks were implemented. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus of three raters. This rigorous process not only enhanced the reliability of the coding but also informed the development of a synthesized coding scheme. Ultimately, by integrating different insights and ensuring consistency across analyses, the synthesized coding scheme aimed to provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting and categorizing directive utterances within the dataset.

Feedback Directives: Coding Scheme and Data Analysis

In this paper, we aim to develop a systematic coding scheme for the analysis of directives in feedback events. As a starting point, directive strategies identified in previous research were examined for suitability (cf. Table 7.2 below for an overview). These were synthesized and added to ensure content validity, transparency in coding and a systematic analysis based on structural criteria.

Our coding scheme for directives in feedback events is broadly based on Blum-Kulka and House's (1989) distinction of requests into three levels of head act directness: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect strategies (hints). While in direct requests the speaker's intention is signalled through the linguistic form (e.g. by using imperatives or performatives verbs), there is ambiguity in both types of indirect requests. Blum-Kulka (1989) argues that there are two different types of ambiguity at work, however. Whereas the linguistic resources for conventionally indirect directives are conventionalised, non-conventionally indirect strategies must be inferred by the addressee via contextual cues. Hence, non-conventionally indirect strategies include realisations whose primary function is not a directive. Within feedback, there is thus considerable overlap between non-conventionally indirect strategies and criticism, with negative assessments potentially being classifiable as non-conventionally indirect strategies for directives as they have a secondary directive function (as Nguyen, 2008a, for instance, argues). However, including negative assessments in our hints category would have led to a large and

functionally heterogeneous group of strategies in the non-conventional indirectness (hint) category. We opted against this to avoid functional overlap and an indeterminate category of hints. As our database did not include any other strategies in this category, we limit our analysis to direct and conventionally indirect head acts. In sum, what we define and analyse as directives in the present study includes only those acts which clearly delineate a specific course of action (making them primary directives), excluding primary expressions of disagreement, disapproval, or negative assessment in Nguyen’s (2008a) terms. That is, of course, not to say that these primary directives cannot at the same time be understood as negative assessments, or criticism in Nguyen’s (2008a) terms.

The following excerpt (example 1) from one of our feedback letters illustrates our procedure: The writer produces a negative assessment in lines 2–3 that does not outline any specific course of action. Hence, this negative assessment (“criticism”) was not counted as a directive in our study. Only in the last sentence does the writer produce a directive that outlines a specific course of action. Hence, only the last sentence (marked in bold) would be coded as a directive in our database.

- (1) You have many extensive examples of the topic—(. . .). However, having many examples can make your essay more superficial in the process of conveying your thoughts. **I would kindly propose concentrating on a small number of convincing arguments that you feel competent in elaborating upon (. . .).**

Table 7.2. Coding categories applied in the present study (and their sources).

	Strategy	Definition	Source
Direct	(A) Mood derivable	S uses an imperative, negative imperative, or elliptical form	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Martínez-Flor (2005)
	(B) Performative	S uses a performative verb or nominalised expression	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Martínez-Flor (2005), Strong and Baron (2004), Del Bono and Nuzzo (2021)
	(C) Obligation statement	S uses an expression of obligation	Blum-Kulka and House (1989), Martínez-Flor (2005)

Table 7.2. *Continued*

	Strategy	Definition	Source
Conventionally indirect	(D) Want statement	S expresses their desire for H to carry out an action	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Breuer and Geluykens (2007), Trosborg (1995)
	(E) Suggestory formulae	S uses a formulaic utterance (in interrogative form) typically associated with the speech act of suggestion	Martínez-Flor (2005)
	(F) Preparatory	S addresses or questions H's ability or the general possibility/probability/willingness for an action	Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Breuer and Geluykens (2007), Martínez-Flor (2005), Strong and Baron (2004), Trosborg (1995)
	(G) Positive assessment of future action	S positively evaluates the action they want H to carry out (adjective or verb with positive semantic load)	Martínez-Flor (2005), Strong and Baron (2004)
	(H) Assessment of past action	S assesses H's past decision either positively or negatively and H needs to infer that this has an impact on future actions	not identified in previous research
Convent. indirect	(I) Reflective question	S asks a rhetorical question to instigate reflexion in the addressee	Donaghue (2020), Locher (2013), Nguyen (2008a), Strong and Baron (2004)
	(J) Personal perspective/account	S outlines that or what they would change if they were in H's position	Del Bono and Nuzzo (2021), Martínez-Flor (2005), Strong and Baron (2004)

In the direct strategies (strategies A-C in Table 7.2), the speaker's intention can be derived directly from the form of the utterance. In mood derivables (A) this information is signalled through the grammatical mood of the utterance, prototypically by using imperative or elliptical structures (example 2). In contrast, the speaker's intention is signalled through the use of a performative verb or nominalised forms in performatives (B). Hence, the speaker explicitly names their intention (example 3). In obligation statements (C), the illocutionary purpose of

the utterance is encoded in an expression of obligation. This is typically done with a modal verb (e.g. *have to*, *must*, *should*, *need to*, *ought to*, etc., as in (4)).

- (2) To strengthen your argument, **provide** specific examples or evidence to support this claim and make it more persuasive.⁴
- (3) To improve the essay's general arrangement, I kindly **advise** improving the transition between paragraphs two and three.
- (4) You **need to** change the subject because roles cannot focus.

In contrast to direct strategies, the directive intention is indirectly conveyed by a different function on the literal level in conventionally indirect requests. For instance, in want statements (D), the speaker expresses their desire for the hearer to make changes to their work, without explicitly indicating that the addressee should carry out the action. Here, the speaker merely communicates their desire or preference ("I'd like to. . .", Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 279), leaving the hearer to infer a future action from this statement. In a similar vein, suggestory formulae (E) are realised by a conventional formulaic interrogative utterance typically featuring the forms *Why don't you . . .?* or *How about. . .?* In preparatory strategies (F), the speaker addresses or questions the hearer's ability to carry out the directive. In that, preparatory strategies refer back to the preparatory condition of requests that the hearer has to be able to carry out an action for an utterance to be understood as a request (Searle, 1969). Request studies such as Blum-Kulka (1989), Trosborg (1995), and Breuer and Geluykens (2007), have added other conditions than the addressee's ability in the preparatory category, including their willingness, general availability or permission, and the non-obviousness of compliance with the request. The typical structure involves a modal verb (*can/could/will/would*) + a verb denoting a course of action to be undertaken (examples 5 and 6).

- (5) You **can** also start with an interesting sentence, with a hook at the beginning of your essay.
- (6) Perhaps, you **could** change the structure of your text by starting each paragraph with an introductory sentence.

In positive assessments of a future action (G), the speaker assesses the action they want the addressee to carry out positively by using

4 All examples are taken from our database unless we specify otherwise.

an adjective or a verb with a positive semantic load (e.g. *better*, *nice*, *improve*, *benefit*, cf. example 7).

- (7) Additionally, the essay would **benefit from** a more structured approach, with clear and well-defined transitions between ideas and paragraphs.

The delineation of preparatory strategies (F) and positive evaluations (G) is not always straightforward as both strategies show similar realisation patterns using modal verbs such as *can*, *could*, or *want to*. However, the semantic meaning conveyed differs slightly in that while the former is concerned with either the speaker's capability to carry out a specific action (A) or the overall likelihood/feasibility of that action, the latter highlights the positive implication that A will bring about when performed. In other words, if the verb or adjective in the directive denotes a positive assessment of the action, the strategy is coded as positive assessment of a future action. If the verb only denotes a future action (without any positive assessment), the strategy is coded as a preparatory. To illustrate this distinction, in (8) and (9) below, the positive semantic load of the verb or adjective is the determining factor in categorizing these examples as 'Positive assessment of future action' whereas in (10) no such positive semantic load is present, instead, we find a verb outlining a future act.

- | | | |
|------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (8) | This could/would be better . | → Pos. assessm. of future A |
| (9) | You could benefit from X. | → Pos. assessm. of future A |
| (10) | You could change/modify X. | → Preparatory |

In assessments of past action (H), the speaker assesses a past decision either positively or negatively and the hearer needs to infer that this has an impact on their future actions (11). The speaker can also express a missed opportunity, which may be interpreted as a negative assessment (12). In contrast to primary negative assessments (such as *I didn't like your introduction*), the strategies included in this category in our analysis all refer to a specific course of action (e.g. to give examples or evidence, as in example 11).

- (11) It **would have been more relevant and accurate** to give examples or evidence, even from your own experience.

- (12) For example, **you could have used** the fact that these intelligent machines are automating processes in many areas.

Reflective questions (I) are rhetorical questions intended to instigate reflection in the addressee, and are not meant as a genuine request for information (13). The strategy can be found under the labels “asking/presupposing” (Nguyen, 2008a), “display questions” (Donaghue, 2020), or “interrogatives inviting introspection” (Locher, 2013).

- (13) **Wouldn’t it be more appropriate** to use other terms such as perfected or reactive?

Finally, in personal perspective/account (J), the speaker outlines what they would do if they were in the addressee’s position (14) or offer a personal account or learning outcome of their own (15). This strategy often involves the use of *would* as a modal verb rather than as a hedging device. This strategy has been used under different labels by different authors: While Martínez-Flor (2005) refers to this strategy as ‘conditional,’ Del Bono and Nuzzo (2021: 199) label this strategy as ‘preference’. Irrespective of the label, such strategies highlight the speaker offering a personal perspective or account from their own experience.

- (14) **I would use** “affect” or “have an effect on” instead of using “effect” in that sentence.
- (15) **A solution for writing paragraphs that a teacher gave me**, to make my writing more explicit, is called the “AEI” method;

In conclusion, this study employs a coding scheme that synthesizes and adds to the realisation strategies identified in empirical studies on a range of directive illocutions and systematizes them based on structural criteria. We hope to make a contribution to the field by doing so.

Results and Discussion

In the following, we present the results of our analysis of feedback directives in 28 letters of peer feedback produced by 28 ELF speakers in a telecollaborative setting. Our ELF participants had not received any kind of pragmatic instruction before writing their peer feedback

letters. As outlined earlier in 3.3, our analysis only encompasses those speech acts which have a primary directive function. In turn, all speech acts with a secondary directive function (e.g. negative assessments that are uttered without reference to a future course of action) are not part of our database. While this limits comparability with previous research, a systematic analysis of feedback directives is important to draw attention to the complexities and specifics of this particular speech act.

Overall, the manual bottom-up searches of feedback letters yielded 280 directives for analysis. On average, participants produced 10.0 directives in their feedback letters. Of these, the majority (59.3 %) were realised as conventionally indirect head acts with direct head acts accounting for 40.7 % (cf. Table 7.3 below provides an overview of the frequency distribution of our head act strategies and directness levels). This preference for conventional indirectness has also been reported in studies on requests in non-feedback contexts, where conventionally indirect strategies account for proportions as high as 96.3 % in English as spoken in England (Barron, 2008). The numbers of conventionally indirect directives in the present study are markedly lower than that. This may be due to the register investigated as the social and contextual situatedness of our data in a specific speech event may well have its own conventions of language use. Furthermore, while the requests in Barron's (2008) study (and most other studies on requests) are elicited through production questionnaires, the elicitation element in our data refers to the production of the overall speech event (feedback) rather than the individual speech acts produced. Thus, the type of data used in the present study may have led to higher levels of directness than in questionnaire-based studies. Another reason for diverging patterns may be found in the fact that in contrast to many request studies, our feedback directives were produced by learners (and not native speakers) of English.

Turning to the individual head act strategies employed, our participants showed a preference for three strategies: preparatories, positive assessment of future action, and obligation statements. While performatives and mood derivables were also used with some frequency, other strategies, such as want statements, suggestory formulae, reflective questions, and personal perspective/account were not used at all or were used very infrequently (cf. Table 7.3).

Table 7.3. Frequency distribution of head act strategies in feedback directives.

Directn.	n	%	Head act strategy	n	%
Direct	114	40.7 %	(A) Mood derivable	24	8.6 %
			(B) Performative	26	9.3 %
			(C) Obligation statement	64	22.9 %
Convent. indirect	166	59.3 %	(D) Want statement	0	0.0 %
			(E) Suggestory formulae	0	0.0 %
			(F) Preparatory	78	27.9 %
			(G) Positive assessment of future action	63	22.5 %
			(H) Assessment of past action	16	5.7 %
			(I) Reflective question	2	0.7 %
			(J) Personal perspective/account	7	2.5 %
	280	100.0 %		280	100.0 %

In the rest of this results and discussion section, we focus on the three most frequent strategies and discuss them in more detail. One of the most frequently used strategies in our sample is the preparatory strategy, which accounts for 27.9 % ($n = 78$) of all our directive head acts. The high numbers of preparatories are not surprising as most request research finds this strategy to be highly frequent in English requests (cf. Barron, 2008; Blum-Kulka, 1989; Breuer & Geluykens, 2007; Flöck, 2016). However, our numbers for preparatories are lower than in most request studies. Again, this might indicate that while there are some similarities between conversational requests and feedback directives, the norms for feedback directives within our particular speech event may be different.

When looking at the individual strategies used within the preparatory category, our analysis indicates that ability references constitute the most frequent subtype. In our dataset, they account for 96.3 % ($n = 75$) of all preparatory strategies (cf. Table 7.4 below for an overview), while references to possibility, permission or willingness were rare. The prevalence of ability references in our feedback directives is highly comparable to the patterns found for preparatories in request

studies, where ability references also constitute the most frequent subtype of English preparatories (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Flöck, 2016). Again, however, our numbers diverge from those reported in request studies in that the proportion of ability references is much higher in our database compared with request studies. Blum-Kulka (1989: 50), for instance, reports that her Australian English participants used ability references in 66.5 % of all preparatories. While Flöck (2016: 179) finds higher levels in her American and British English requests (70.6 % and 87.7 % respectively) than Blum-Kulka (1989), her relative numbers are still lower than in our database.

Table 7.4. Frequency distribution of preparatory subtypes in feedback directives.

Preparatory	n	%	Strategy	n	%
Ability	75	96.2 %	<i>You/we could DO X.</i>	37	47.4 %
			<i>You/we can DO X.</i>	34	43.6 %
			Impersonal	4	5.1 %
Possibility	1	1.3 %	<i>An idea might be X.</i>	1	1.3 %
Permission	1	1.3 %	<i>You may DO X.</i>	1	1.3 %
Willingness	1	1.3 %	<i>What you want to DO is X.</i>	1	1.3 %
	78	100.0 %		78	100.0 %

The overall number of preparatory strategies in our dataset is also comparable to studies focussed on the same speech event. Also focusing on feedback events, Del Bono and Nuzzo (2021) and Strong and Baron (2004: 51–52) find that preparatories (or the strategies that correlate to our preparatories) were among the most frequent strategies employed by their American English native speakers. Del Bono and Nuzzo find possibility references (roughly equivalent to our preparatory strategies) to be used most frequently by American English native speakers (21 % (n=27) of all “suggestions”, as they call directives).

What is also striking in our data is the virtual absence of willingness references (n = 1 out of 78), which are routinely used in conversational requests (accounting for 29.4 % in Flöck’s, 2016, and 17.7 % in Blum-Kulka’s, 1989 database). As willingness references do not seem

to occur frequently in other investigations of learner peer feedback (neither Del Bono and Nuzzo, 2021 nor Nguyen, 2008a discuss them), it may be the influence of the feedback event that is responsible for the low numbers of this strategy.

The second strategy frequently employed in our sample is the use of positive assessment of a future action, which accounts for 22.5 % (n = 63) of all directives. Instead of referring to the feedback recipient's ability to carry out a future action, the feedback writer explicitly assesses a future action as positive, indicating the need for change conventionally indirectly. The positive assessment in this strategy can refer to a number of things: it may consist of a general positive assessment (e.g. *It would be good/better to DO X*), or take more specific forms (such as indexing increased quality, understandability, credibility or persuasiveness of the work). In our sample, the most frequent positive assessment strategies included general positive assessments (33.3 %, n=21), references to general beneficialness (12.7 %, n=8), and references to improving the quality of the work (11.1 %, n=7).

Similar to the case of preparatories, Strong and Baron (2004: 51/52) also find positive assessments to be used frequently in their investigation of teacher feedback meetings by their American English native speaker teacher trainers. In contrast, positive assessment of future action is a strategy that is virtually absent in all request studies. This strategy, in conclusion, seems to be a strategy that is specific to directives in the register of feedback. Hence, by also frequently relying on these two strategies in their feedback letters, our learners display knowledge and awareness of the particular norms of this speech event.

Turning to the form of these positive assessments, two patterns can be identified: (1) feedback writers preferred to make specific reference to the feedback recipient by producing personal constructions over impersonal constructions, and (2) they consistently preferred to use hedged over unhedged positive assessments of future action (cf. Table 7.5 below). Hedging in the present study was defined as the presence of a modal particle (*would, could, or may/might*). While personal second person singular constructions account for 69.8 % (n = 44), impersonal constructions made up 30.2 % (n = 19) of all positive assessment strategies. A similar frequency distribution can be found for

hedged vs. unhedged positive assessment strategies (68.3 %, n = 43 vs. 31.7 %, n = 20).

Table 7.5: Head act perspective in positive assessment of future action strategies.

Perspective	n	%	Example	Hedged	n	%
2nd person sg. reference (you/your)	44	69.8 %	<i>I think it would be better if you reduce them to one</i>	Yes	30	47.6 %
			<i>Maybe you'll benefit from rephrasing the sentence.</i>	No	14	22.2 %
Impersonal	19	30.2 %	<i>It would be helpful to provide examples for clarity.</i>	Yes	13	20.6 %
			<i>It is important to focus on a few important aspects of that topic in depth</i>	No	6	9.5 %
					63	100.0 %
					63	100.0 %

Similar to the findings in Farr and O’Keeffe (2002), our participants used *would* as a hedging device most frequently but also employed similar strategies such as hedging with the modal past form *could* and modal verbs expressing epistemic modality (*may*, *might*). The preference of hedged over unhedged assessment strategies in our database is also similar to what Farr and O’Keeffe (2002) describe for their corpus-based post-observation teacher training interaction data from an Irish English native speaker context. While the authors report that especially first-person singular structures co-occur with the hedge *would*, we see a more general trend towards the use of hedged forms in second person singular and impersonal constructions in our database. In Farr and O’Keeffe’s (2002: 42) data, hedged strategies were so frequent that the authors conclude that hedging “to downtone advice/direction seems to be a typical politeness strategy in this [post-observation feedback] register. It lends a theoretical and global significance to the advice.”. The authors even find that hedged strategies with *would* replace all

strategies where obligation (*should*) could have been used instead. This pattern was not visible in our ELF learner feedback data as obligation statements account for the third strategy used with high frequency (in fact with the same frequency as the frequently hedged positive assessment of future action strategy).

Obligation statements account for 22.9 % ($n = 64$) of all directives in our database. With that number, they are employed relatively frequently in our ELF learner population. The substantial number of obligation statements is not surprising given that previous research also finds this strategy to be highly frequent in English learner population. In Nguyen's (2008a) investigation of feedback strategies in a Vietnamese EFL learner population, the learners used more directives expressing obligation than the Australian English native speaker control group, who did not use this strategy at all. Similarly, Del Bono and Nuzzo's (2021) Italian EFL learners used more strategies expressing obligation than their American English native speaker controls. While the English native speakers only used obligation statements (called "need" in Del Bono & Nuzzo, 2021) in 8.5 % ($n = 11$) of all directives, the learners used them in 26.8 % ($n = 57$) of all directives at the beginning of the observational period. With that number, their learners' use of obligation statement is comparable to ours. As the use of obligation statements decreased to 13.7 % ($n = 13$) during their observational period, Del Bono and Nuzzo (2021) conclude that learners approached native speaker norms due to exposure to English. Due to differences in coding and Del Bono and Nuzzo's (2021) small sample size of only four learners and four native speakers, the comparability between our and their study may not always be given. Nevertheless, overall, the comparison of our results with other studies on feedback directives suggests that our learners, like other learner groups, seem to have a stronger preference for obligation statements relative to native speakers.

Compared to studies of requests in English native speaker populations, obligation statements are more frequent in our learner database. Obligation statements are very rare in questionnaire-based request research. Whereas the strategy is more common in naturally occurring requests (accounting for 11.9 %, $n = 31$ in Flöck's, 2016, American

English and 16.5 %, n = 43 British English request sample), the numbers are still proportionally lower than in our feedback directives. Based on the comparisons with both other feedback directives and with request studies, the high usage of obligation statements thus seems to be a learner feature in this particular register, as the high numbers of our and other studies' learners diverge from both native speaker feedback directives and native speaker conversational requests.

When it comes to the form of obligation statements, our learners opted to use personalised (*You* + modal verb. . . , e.g. *You should/must/need to DO X*) forms more frequently than impersonal forms (such as *X needs a change/must be changed*.). While personalised forms account for 75.0 % (n = 48) of all obligation statements, impersonal structures can only be found in the remaining 25.0 % (n = 16) of cases. Table 7.6 below provides an overview of the linguistic strategies found and their frequency distribution. Furthermore, the most frequently used linguistic device expressing obligation was *should* (56.3 %, n = 36). While *need to* was also used occasionally, *must* and *have to* were used rarely.

Table 7.6. Frequency distribution of obligation subtypes in feedback directives.

Type	n	%	Linguistic strategy	n	%
Personalised	48	75.0 %	<i>You should DO X.</i>	31	48.4 %
			<i>You need to DO X.</i>	9	14.1 %
			<i>You have to DO X.</i>	7	10.9 %
			<i>You must DO X.</i>	1	1.6 %
			<i>X should be DO_{ed} /Y_{adjective/ specific change}</i>	5	7.8 %
Impersonal	16	25.0 %	<i>X needs a change/needs to be DO_{ed}.</i>	4	6.3 %
			<i>It is/would (not) be necessary to DO X.</i>	3	4.7 %
			<i>X requires DO_{ing} /DO_{ing} is required.</i>	2	3.1 %
			<i>X must be Y_{adjective}</i>	1	1.6 %
			<i>X has to be DO_{ed}.</i>	1	1.6 %
Total	64	100.0 %		64	100.0 %

Conclusion

The present study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How can feedback directives be analysed transparently and systematically?
2. Which strategies are used by ELF speakers in their feedback directives and how do their directives compare with native speaker feed-back directives?
3. How do the ELF learners' feedback directives compare with other directive speech acts?

On the methodological level (addressing the first two research questions), we have proposed a framework for analysing feedback directives that draws on insights from speech act theory and empirical investigations of a range of directive illocutions. We have argued that feedback directives may include a number of diverse individual pragmatic functions, such as suggesting, advising, warning, etc. As these illocutions cannot be delineated validly both in theory and in practice, we have refrained from an *a priori* categorisation of these actions and have proposed the more inclusive approach of labelling them as 'directives' instead. We have also developed a coding scheme for feedback directives that is informed by, synthesizes, and further develops the relevant coding categories from numerous studies on directives. To ensure concept validity and replicability of results, the coding categories have been defined structurally and the structural criteria underlying our categories have been made transparent.

When it comes to the form of feedback directives (and our second research question), our ELF learners used preparatory strategies most frequently, followed by obligation statements and positive evaluations of future actions. In all three strategies, the learners preferred personalised forms over impersonal constructions and positive assessments of future actions occurred in hedged forms most frequently. With these patterns of usage, our ELF learners mostly converge with native speaker realisation pattern in feedback directives. The only difference between our ELF population and English native speakers in feedback directives can be seen in our learners' overuse of obligation statements. Compared

with native speaker feedback directives in previous research, our learners use obligation statements more frequently than native speakers do. As the same pattern has also been described in previous research (cf. Del Bono & Nuzzo, 2021; Nguyen, 2008a; Strong & Baron, 2004), the overuse of obligation statements in feedback directives seems to be a learner feature.

When it comes to our third research question, our results indicate that feedback directives produced by ELF learners show complex patterns of convergence with and divergence from other directives produced by native speakers. Our learner feedback directives are similar to the patterns reported for requests (cf. Barron, 2008; Blum-Kulka, 1989; Breuer & Geluykens, 2007; Flöck, 2016) in that preparatory strategies occur highly frequently in both directive subtypes. Our learner data further mirror conversational requests in that ability references are the most frequent preparatory substrategy. At the same time, we have observed that there are some differences between our learner feedback directives and the conversational requests investigated in previous research. Whereas our study and feedback studies with English native speakers show high frequencies of positive assessments of future action, this strategy is not found in general request studies. Hence, this strategy likely shows a register-specific pattern in that it is acceptable and expected in feedback directives but not in directives in other registers. Another form of divergence from general request patterns can be found in the use of obligation statements in our learner data. Obligation statements occur with higher frequencies in our learner feedback directives than they do in general request studies. However, this difference does not seem to be correlated with genre (feedback directives vs. requests) but with learner status as obligation statements have been shown to be less frequent in native speaker feedback directives (cf. Del Bono & Nuzzo, 2021; Nguyen, 2008a; Strong & Baron, 2004).

On a final note, the present study delivers a systematic coding scheme based on structural criteria that we hope does justice to the complexities of the individual illocutions. However, going forward, the investigation of the complex speech event of feedback should not be limited to the analysis of feedback directives as feedback directives are only one part of the overall feedback event. Rather, the investigation of feedback directives needs to be supplemented with systematic analyses of other feedback

actions and moves (such as negative and positive assessments). In addition, the findings and patterns of the present study need to be explored in greater detail in future scholarship. More specifically, feedback directives might be analysed in a more in-depth manner using our structurally-based coding scheme in contrastive designs to investigate patterns of learner variability (e.g. the influence of proficiency, L1, learning context, such as in English as for foreign, second, international language or lingua franca), the difference between learners and native speakers, and the influence of different instructional designs (e.g. interventional designs or incidental learning). We look forward to manifold studies on such questions.

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