Teaching Discourse Stress to Asian Students

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ABSTRACT

English utterances contain a main sentence stress or discourse stress which marks new information or contrast in sentences. ESL/EFL students may have difficulties if they fail to perceive or express the main point of utterances by means of stress – obstacles that are especially strong for Asian students – due to the prosodic differences between English and Asian languages. This discourse stress exists to reflect the flow of information, and mark the most salient information of an utterance, namely, new information and sometimes contrast emphasis. Simple linguistic principles account for how stress is placed in the most salient word in an utterance. These principles can be readily taught to ESL/EFL students. The stress system, how it can be taught, and ideas for some communicatively oriented lessons will be described for teaching the various aspects of English discourse stress.

INTRODUCTION

Utterances in spoken English contain what is known as sentence stress or discourse stress which is stronger than other stresses in the sentence. It is used for indicating the speaker's main point, and marking important new information, contrast, and emphasis. For learners of English, managing stress is helpful if not necessary for clear communication. The stress expresses the speaker's attitudes, intentions, what s/he feels is important, and other nuances. Improper stress interferes with the speaker's intended main points, possibly leading to awkwardness or miscommunication for learners and their listeners (Clennell, 1997), while stressless utterances can sound unnatural and thereby impede communication. ESL/EFL learners are often not taught stress and rhythm or their importance. Few ESL/EFL materials, even pronunciation materials, address this adequately or at all, and teachers may not understand how it works or how to teach it. Learning stress can be especially difficult for East Asian students whose L1 backgrounds have very different prosodic systems than English.

Discourse or sentence stress is generally understood in the linguistics literature to mark to the most salient or relevant information, namely, new information in an utterance, as well as contrast and emphasis (Chafe, 1994, van Deemter, 1999, Bardovi-Harlig, 1986, Cruttenden, 1986, Gussenhoven, 1983). The various aspects of stress in marking such information and how to teach stress are discussed below. The following discussion is based on a linguistic analysis and pedagogical applications worked out in Lee (2001), which deals with more details and com-

plexities not addressed here. Because it depends on discourse flow and structure, 'discourse stress' would technically be more accurate; however, for learners, 'sentence stress' is easier and more transparent. Both terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

PRAGMATIC AND PHONOLOGICAL BASIS OF STRESS

The ends of sentences are generally characterized by a final lengthening and pitch drop (see, e.g., Inkelas & Leben, 1990). An item at or near the end of the sentence is stretched out (longer syllable duration), followed by a brief pitch drop, as in this famous phrase from an American politician.

1. I am not a c-r-o-o-k¯.

In verb-final languages like Korean and Japanese, the lengthened section tends to serve to highlight verb stems or other important sentence final items, while the final drop serves as a useful place for less important verb endings or sentence endings. In English, the final lengthening is combined with an increased pitch change and used for other expressive purposes. This creates a very prominent stress which stands out over other stress in the sentence – a discourse stress (indicated by boldface below). Speakers use it to highlight the most important information and to convey the main point of utterances. The most basic, default usage of stress is at or near the end of the sentence. Since new information generally occurs at or near the end of the sentence, the sentence stress typically marks the most salient new information in this position (2a). But it can be exploited for the special purposes of indicating contrast and emphasis, by stressing other information and putting the rest of the sentence under the final pitch drop (2b).

2a. I am not a **crook**. (statement of new information)

2b. **I** ¯am not a crook. (meaning: but *he* is one.)

Because of the drop in intonation and prominence, the very end of the sentence, intonation after the discourse stress, is suitable for less important information, such as old object pronouns (3a) and information that may be new but is less important (3b).

3a. I didn't **do** ¯it.

3b. I am not a **crook**, ¯said Richard.

Final items following the discourse stress like *said Richard* in 3b are unstressed, marked by a pitch drop, and are also shortened, i.e., pronounced more quickly. Such final unstressed items are known as parenthetical expressions (Nespor & Vogel, 1986), and are typically pronounced in such fashion. Parentheticals may convey new information, but of a less important kind than the items that are stress marked. These and other unstressed final items convey background or contextual information – minor information to clarify the linguistic or physical context, such

as who is speaking (reporting expressions, as in 3b), who is being spoken to (vocatives or address forms), and the flow of thought (discourse markers like *you know, anyway, though*).

Stress and stress pedagogy

After addressing some initial pedagogical issues, the essence of the English stress system and how to teach it are laid out in the following sections. The system consists of a few simple principles that can help students understand where to place stress in utterances. These principles basically consist of (1) marking new information with stress, specifically, final content words, compounds, or similar items; (2) identifying what is not stressed – old and background information; and (3) contrast and emphasis. The means and order of presentation of the concepts to students are outlined, and sample activities are suggested.

Pedagogical issues

Gilbert (1987, 1994) points out that pronunciation teaching crucially depends on teaching the prosodic and rhythmic ("musical") features of the language. Besides stress for new information and emphasis, it is also necessary to teach pitch change, the length of stressed vowels and syllables, vowel reduction in unstressed syllables, intonation, and stress. These prosodic aspects require more specific and focused attention in teaching East Asian students. Many East Asian languages do not have stress as a regular linguistic feature, and in fact have very different prosodic systems. Intonation is put to use as a regular phonemic feature of most syllables in tone languages like Chinese, rather than marking information flow. Some languages, like Japanese, have a pitch accent system, which is another lexical intonational system of a more limited scope. In many languages like Korean, which has no stress or tone system, intonation is used for sentence final intonation and for purely pragmatic purposes.

Thus, for many Asian students, the initial difficulty lies in simply pronouncing stress, so a useful starting point may be word stress. After practicing the stress pronounced by means of lengthening and pitch rise or fall in word stresses, and different levels of stresses in words, students would be more prepared for learning stress at the broader level of discourse stress. Since the sentence-final lengthening and downstep are language universals, these can be used as a starting point in stress production. More controlled tasks like repetition exercises with sample dialogues can be used to teach students to exaggerate this lengthening and downstep by adding pitch rises and falls to produce clear stresses. After learning to perceive and produce stress in controlled situations, they can move on later to more communicative exercises, as discussed below.

For beginning perception tasks to teach students to hear the difference between stressed and unstressed items, the teacher can exaggerate pronunciation of the stresses (Jull, 1992), especially for students from non-stress languages. Standard controlled tasks like imitation and recitation from prepared dialogues and texts

can be useful as beginning production tasks, as well as simple interview tasks, simple information gap activities (e.g., describing pictures of familiar objects), and limericks. Freer communicative activities may include more complex interview tasks, role plays, group presentations and discussions. These and other various pronunciation activities are described in McNerney and Mendelsohn (1992), Celce-Murcia et al.(1996), Naiman (1992), Gilbert (1994), Gilbert (1984), Wright et al.(1979), Jull (1992), and Morley (1994).

Stress for new information

Each meaningful utterance contains a discourse stress; a 'meaningful utterance' can be a whole sentence or clause, an incomplete sentence, or even a single phrase spoken in a speaking turn (consisting of at least a content word or syntactic phrase). Each utterance is separated from other utterances by pauses and intonation changes, forming an informational unit (Lee 2001) or a "thought group" (Gilbert 1,987, 1994). Most often, discourse stress falls on a noun or other content word at or near the end of the sentence, because the content word is a new item in the conversation. Grammatically, it is placed there because it is most relevant to the interpretation of the utterance, and discourse stress makes it easier for listeners to perceive it and to understand what the speaker conveys as significant information in a sentence or short utterance.

In learning stress, students can readily grasp the concept of new information, since various languages throughout the world distinguish between old and new information to some degree or another in their word order. New information tends to occur at or toward the end of sentences as much as the syntax allows it in various languages. Some languages also mark the distinctions with morphological endings (such as Korean *-n/-neun* versus *-i/-ga*, and Japanese *-wa*). For students, this most basic and general principle of stress location can be summarized as follows:

4. NEW: discourse stress occurs on the final new item.

Another factor for stress is the grammatical word class, namely, whether it is a content or function word. Content words include nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, which carry the main meaning of the sentence and the more important semantic information. Since they are more important to listeners in processing and interpreting utterances, they are better candidates for discourse stress. Function words include prepositions, pronouns, pro-forms (e.g., *here, there*), conjunctions, articles, determiners, quantifiers, discourse markers, linking verbs, modals, and auxiliary verbs. Function words carry less information, and so are less salient and are not stressed as new if a new content word is present. New content words usually occur at or near the end of the utterance, as in 5, where they receive stress, while the function word does not.

5. Do you have anything **similar** there?

Some short sentences may contain only function words as new information, so then the function words carry the new information. In 6, for example, the last new function word *is* receives the stress because it is the last new item.

6. Who **is** it?

In shortened sentences with subjects or verbs omitted, or in short phrases, some or all of the old information may appear as pronouns or may be omitted (7b). In another type of elliptical sentence, a final auxiliary verb can refer to a previous verb phrase or predicate, in which case the preceding auxiliary or modal is stressed as new (8b).

7a. Who ate the rhubarb?

7b. **Me**.

8a. Have you ever seen 'Little Shop of Horrors'?

8b. No, but I **should** have.

We can formulate two linguistic principles as below, one for stressing content words (CW), and another for stressing function words (FW). Because content words are more important linguistically, the CW principle is more important and takes precedence over FW. In the presence of new content words, CW overrides FW, ensuring that content words are stressed; in the absence of new content words, FW allows a function word to be stressed.

9a. CW: discourse stress occurs on content words.

9b. FW: discourse stress occurs on function words.

Discourse stress coincides with the main lexical stress of a stressed word. Similarly, if the final new item is a compound, phrasal verb, or other phrasal item, the discourse stress coincides with the main stress of the phrasal item, as summarized by the phrase principle below. English phrasal and compound stress is very complicated, and is not addressed in detail here; for students, it will suffice to present and practice some basic common patterns.

10a. I can't figure him **out**. (phrasal verb: figure $\overline{\text{out}}$)

10b. We're seeking greater investor **participátion**. (compound noun)

10c. Don't just do it willy-**nilly**. (compound adjective)

11. PHRASE: discourse stress on compound or phrasal stress

Unstressed items

Two kinds of information are not stressed: old items, and items that are new but of minor linguistic importance. Old and thus unstressed information consists of items that have been previously mentioned and are thus known to the listeners,

including subjects, object pronouns and other pro-forms. Items that refer to or are synonymous with previously mentioned items are also old, as in 12, in which *Hitchcock movie* has been previously mentioned in the preceding context, and in which *flick* refers back to the movie (vertical bars indicate separate utterance units).

12. The **Rise** is a good Hitchcock movie |
You'd love to **watch** it |
It's a **cool** flick. (adapted from corpus in Lee 2001)

Some kinds of new but less salient items can occur at the very end of the utterance, when speakers mention items that are not old but are understood within the context by the listeners; they merely contribute to the linguistic context or background of the discourse. These background items, including general time expressions (13a), various final parentheticals such as reporting expressions (13b), discourse markers (13c), and short descriptive infinitivals, contribute minor background material, as in 13d,where *read* is commonly associated with books and thus not highly informative. These can be called light infinitivals, because of their low informational value. In the following examples from a corpus sample in Lee (2001), backgrounded items are marked with grayed text and underlining.

13a. I saw in the **paper** last night | that they're filming Star Wars episode **two** now.

13b. I am not a **crook**, said Richard.

13c. I am not a **crook**, you know.

13d. I have a ton of **books** to read.

Contrast

Speakers may choose to emphasize any item they wish, or to contrasttwo different items, for various purposes (correction, returning to a previous topic, emphasizing a word that was not properly understood), regardless of its informational status as old or new, or sentence position. In this case, stress placement is not a matter of new information, but another kind of saliency, namely, contrast. Speakers may wish to stress an old item, a function word, a word at the beginning of a sentence, two contrasting items in a single clause or between two clauses, or even a normally unstressed syllable, in order to make a special point.

14a. Why don't you get in the **car**.	[default new information stress]
14b. I told **you** to get in the car.	[function word, emphasis]
14c. I told you to get **in** the car, not **on** the car.	[function word, pairwise contrast]
14d. I **told** you to get in the car.	[non-final item, emphasis]
14e. It's either **this** or **that**.	[double stress, pairwise contrasted items in same clause]
14f. I said "**in**crease," not "**de**crease."	[contrastive stress on normally unstressed syllables]

Indicating contrast is a more specialized function of discourse stress than its primary function of marking new information, and this specialized function takes precedence over new information stress. Thus, the Contrast Principle below overrides the above principles that govern new information stress.

15. CONTRAST: discourse stress on contrasted or emphasized items.

While direct contrast involves comparison between two items explicitly mentioned within an utterance phrase, such as *this or that*, the emphasis is not very different, for it involves an implied comparison between two items or ideas. For example, *I told yóu* in 14b implies, "*I'm not talking to myself or someone else, I'm talking to you"*, and *told* in 14d contrasts with the listener's misunderstanding of or refusal to heed what the speaker said. So contrast and emphasis can be both treated together under the category of contrastive stress. Contrast or emphasis can also be indicated by words that carry contrastive or emphatic meanings, known as focus markers (König, 1991), such as *too, even, also*, and words like *myself* when occurring sentence finally for emphasis (and not used as pronoun objects). The stress usually occurs on the word modified or marked by the focus marker, or sometimes on the focus marker itself (16a-b). Some common focus markers are listed in 17, plus special contrastive grammatical structures such as clefts and topic transition markers that can be taught to more advanced students.

16a. John is also **intelligent**.

16b. John is **also** intelligent.

16c. I can do it **myself**.

17. *focus markers:*
also, as for, as well, each, either, else, even, too, myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves; own, do, just, exactly, precisely, each, respectively

18. *grammatical markers*:

a. cleft sentences	It's the **yak** that I need to milk.
b. preposing	Milk the **yak**, that's what I'll do.
c. topic shift markers	Speaking of **yaks**, did you know that yak meat tastes just like water buffalo?
	Speaking of yaks, did you know that yak meat tastes just like water buffalo?

The stress principles described above are linguistic statements about how linguistic features are to appear in language, such as those here that define what preferences the language has for placement of stress according to word classes and types of information. The strongest principle is Contrast, which overrides New. In the absence of contrastive items, New determines stress location, and it is still one of the stronger principles. It alone is not decisive, and other principles

must also be considered for stress location – whether the final new item is a phrasal item, a content word, or a function word. The relevant principles Phrase, CW, and FW are considered in their order of importance to determine the stress placement. The relative importance of these principles is summarized below.

19. CONTRAST > NEW > PHRASE > CW > FW

Corpus sample

Having laid out the basic system, we can readily demonstrate its application to an actual speech sample. The system is shown below for a 1.5 minute excerpt from a natural speech corpus in Lee (2001). The right column shows the relevant applicable principle(s) for each utterance in the left column. The model can account for all the stress patterns, including utterances that contain no stresses (line 17) because they do not contain an informational phrase or message unit. The relevant principles are considered in their order of importance, until the stress is located. For line 1, for example, the Contrast principles is not applicable, since no contrast exists. New is considered, followed by Phrase; these two principles suffice to locate the stress, so the other principles need not be considered. For sample dialogues for teaching and practicing stress, naturally recorded speech samples like the following can provide a rich source of examples that can be adapted for classroom use.

20. *Corpus sample*[1]

grayed `courier type`	= background information
grayed SMALL CAPS	= refers to old information understood from the context
underline	= phrasal item
bold	= stress
italics	= contrasted item

1	K.	Do we need to return those **Schnuck's** videos?	New, Phrase
2	M.	Oh yeah, they need to go **back**.	New, Phrase
3		Hey, you wanna watch one of those, uh, **Hitchcock** movies `tonight`?	New, Phrase
4	G.	***I*** don't know.	Contrast (emphasis)
5		You know, I'm not a real **Hitchcock** fan.	New, Phrase
6	M.	***I*** think Hitchcock movies are ***great***.	Contrast (pairwise contrasts)
7		We should watch The Third **Man**	New, Phrase
8		and see if we recognize any of Vienna after the **war**.	New, CW
9		I'm sure we'd recognize St. **Stephan's**.	New, Phrase
10	M.	Since we saw it in its burned **out** STAGE.	New, Phrase
11	K.	*The **Rise*** is a good Hitchcock movie	Contrast (topic shift), Phrase
12		It's got Paul **Newman** in it.	New, Phrase
13		You'd love to **watch** it.	New, CW
14	M.	What **is** it?	Contrast (repair)
15	K.	It's *The **Rise***...	Contrast (emphasis), Phrase
16	K.	It won a Nobel **Prize**.	New, Phrase
17	M.	yeah.	(discourse marker, no stress)

Sample syllabus

Discourse stress can be presented from the most basic and simple patterns, to the more complex and specialized usages. So stressed final new content words are presented first, followed by deviations from this pattern – final old items, final background items, and stressed function words. Then the more complex cases of compounds and other phrasal items are presented, and the specialized contrastive usages of stress. Finally, some holistic and more communicative practice is recommended, in which the various patterns of stress can occur together more freely and naturally.

Stressed final content words

The instructor reads a short sample dialogue or plays a simple example from a recording. Students are asked to discern whether one word stands out more prominently than the others in each utterance, and to identify the words with stronger stresses. Students are then to guess at a general principle for placement of stress, and will likely identify the last important word or new item as the stressed item. The distinctions between old and new information and between content words and function words are discussed. Then students can practice with sample dialogues. One short sample dialogue is given below; in addition to such dialogues, limericks can also be used to illustrate final new stress.

21. A. So why isn't Johnny eating his **squid**?
    B. He thinks it looks **disgusting**,
    and it's hard to **chew**.
    A. Can you get him to eat **octopus**?
    B. No, he doesn't eat seafood besides **shrimp**.
    How about **Fritz**?
    A. He only eats octopus or squid with **peppers**.
    He's so very **picky**.

22. There once was a lady from **Bright**,
    Who could travel faster than **light**.
    She went out one **day**,
    And in a relative **way**,
    Came back the previous **night**.

Chunking

Most students will need extra practice with chunking sentences into smooth utterances and informational units with a sentence stress on each utterance. Rhymalogues (Gilbert, 1984, 1994) and sample dialogues or monologues can be used for controlled practice; for more advanced practice, texts like the "Dear John" letter below (an anonymous piece of humor disseminated by email) may be used to emphasize the importance of proper phrasing via humor.

23a. They like pie and apples.

23b. They like pineapples. (Gilbert, 1984:113)

24a. He sold his house, boat, and trailer.

24b. He sold his houseboat and trailer. (Gilbert, 1994:46)

25a. "Alfred", said the boss, "is stupid".

25b. Alfred said, "The boss is stupic". (Gilbert, 1984:48-9)

26a.

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we're apart. I can be forever happy – will you let me be yours?

Gloria

26b.

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we're apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours,

Gloria

Stressed non-final items

Another dialogue is presented with final old items, including function words. Students are asked to identify stressed words, and whether it conforms with the previously guessed principle for stress placement. The principles 'New' and 'CW', and the new vs. old information distinction, can be clarified here. Practice can be done with dialogue samples, jazz chants, and simple songs.

A third sample dialogue is presented with final background information items. Students are to identify them as "new but not really important or informative". The concept of background information is discussed, and the new information principle is revised to exclude background items. Further practice can be done with dialogues and stress production. Students should learn to pronounce backgrounded phrases with reduced intonation, no stress, and quickly as a rush-through. Possibilities for practice material may include embellishing a plain dialogue by adding such background phrases, or using material adapted from the Paul Simon song, "Fifty Ways to Leave your Lover" (e.g., *just hop on the bus, Gus*) for vocatives. These common types of background information can be addressed:

- General time adverbials: unstressed when only contextualizing the general time frame of the conversation – *...now, today, tonight.*
- Reporting expressions (quotatives): *...s/he said, reported, explained,* etc.
- Address forms (vocatives): *I **will**, sir / Dad / Homer / Mr. Simpson.*
- Discourse markers: *...though, you know, like*
- Expletives: *...darn it.*
- Light infinitivals: *a book to read.*

Stressed new function words

The next dialogue may contain shorter, more conversational style utterances, with final function words, both new and old. Students are to identify the stresses and how to explain them (the instructor may need to point out that the final words are function words). Students learn the function word (FW) principle that applies in the absence of new content words, such that stress can fall on the last new function word. Practice dialogues with short sentences can be used, or activities that elicit short responses like ***should** have* (e.g., *no, but I should have*). For new information stress on both content and function words together, classic information gap activities (info-gap) may also be used (e.g., Naiman, 1992), such as describing pictures of familiar items, or drawing pictures composed of odd geometrical shapes, as well as asking students to provide brief explanations of concepts from their other classes or from their own fields of study or work.

Compounds

Students can practice with slightly more academic level English, with phrasal verbs and compound nouns receiving sentence stress. Basic patterns of compound noun and phrasal verb stress are presented. For practice, students can do the following:

- Sample dialogues
- Info-gap definitions: One student has a picture of an item with a compound noun name, and another has a description of the item with no picture;students try to match items with descriptions; e.g., basset hound, hole puncher, baseball, laptop computer, South America.
- Definitions: Students explain more complex or technical terms from their fields consisting of compound nouns or verbs, or common phrasal verb expressions.

Contrast

Dialogues with examples of miscommunication, repair, disagreement, or other cases that easily lead to contrastive stress can be presented. Students should notice numerous violations of the principles learned thus far, and learn that contrastive stress can override the new information stress principles (New, CW, FW, Phrase). For more advanced learners, special syntactic patterns for contrastive stress may be discussed. For communicative practice, activities like these can be used:

- Describing differences between two pictures that are similar except for slight differences (e.g., with pictures from children's magazines like Highlights at www.highlights.com).
- Scolding: pretending to be a parent, teacher, or boss scolding another student.
- Police interrogation: Two students pretend to be police interrogators who interrogate a crime suspect, played by another student.
- Mock debates: The class is split into two opposing groups of students. Students debate real issues, or non-threatening issues trivial issues, such as which of these is the better option:

  Macs vs. PC/Windows vs. Linux
  American food vs. Chinese food
  smoking cigarettes vs. inhaling car exhaust
  one-humped vs. two-humped camels
- Service encounter: One student plays a clerk, the other a customer, one of whom has difficulty hearing; they use contrastive stress to clarify and correct what they say.

To practice all stress patterns together, some holistic communicative activities can be used:

- Practice sample dialogues from actual natural conversations.
- Narration or description activities.
- Describing ambiguous pictures: Ambiguous pictures (like those found in information gap exercises) or abstract art can bepresented to students; students are to describe the picture, what they think it looks like, or what it is supposed to be.
- Map task: Student A asks Student B for directions to locations on a map. B has to give directions, and A must clarify B's directions. A simple campus map may be used for lower level students, and a more complete campus map or a map of a familiar city can be used for more advanced students (especially a larger city like Chicago).
- Persuasive presentation: Students deliver short persuasive presentations about "why you should major in X" or "why you should work for company X" or "why you should choose career X", and why the student's choice is better than other alternatives (especially appropriate for teaching pronunciation within a listening/speaking, oral communication course, or content-based curriculum).

CONCLUSION

Students can be given a few simple principles of stress to be grasped, followed by controlled and communicative types of exercises. The system presented here is linguistically sound, since it is derived from a comprehensive linguistic model that accounts for formal linguistic, pragmatic, and psycholinguistic aspects of discourse stress. The pedagogical model benefits from these newinsights in that it is simple, powerful, and straightforward enough to be readily taught. Natural cor-

pora can also be useful resources for teachers and materials writers in developing more authentic and natural-like teaching materials, as has been done in some examples in this paper. Hopefully, this system and these materials can prove useful to ESL/EFL teachers, especially since good materials in this area are relatively rare.

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Notes

1. Several lines deserve special comment.

   Lines 1-2: *return* and *go back*, though synonymous, are informationally different, because different types of transitive and intransitive verbs convey different kinds of meaning (see Goldberg, 1995, Lee, 2001); *Schnuck's* is the name of a supermarket.

   Line 4: Special emphasis on *I* entails an implied contrasting counterpart, and in such cases, the implied counterpart can be rather abstract. Here the implicated contrast might be between G.'s own personal "uncertainty" versus M.'s enthusiasm for the films.

   Line 5:'**Hitchcock** fan' as one entity is distinct from 'Hitchcock **fan**' and is new here.

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