

QUESTIONING GRAMMAR TEACHING NORMS: THE CASE OF THE ENGLISH TENSES

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Abstract

After briefly considering the debates centred on the teaching of L2 grammar, the paper considers the difficulties related to the teaching and learning of the English tenses while pleading for an alternative teaching approach based on the logic inherent in the grammatical system and categories.

Keywords: *grammar; grammatical competence; verbal tenses; aspect; modals*

1. Introduction

One of the most fundamental claims in modern linguistic theory is that all languages have a grammar. Interestingly enough, the word *grammar*, which entered English in the 13th century from Greek *grammata* ('letters') via Old French, is etymologically related to *glamour*. *Grammar*, the original term, came to mean 'learning' but also 'magic', while in 18th century Scottish English a form appeared spelled with an *l* – *glamour*, which besides the magical sense took on another, the current one of 'enchantment' and 'alluring charm' (see Crystal 1995, 136). Despite the common etymology, nowadays the two words have nothing in common, given that grammar has a long history as a matter of anguish and strife. Debates around the notion also have a long history and in recent times they are known to have been particularly animated, and even violent, hence the phrase "the grammar wars" (see Locke 2010). *Grammar* is in fact assigned different meanings, e.g. **a/** grammar as synonymous with morphology and syntax, as an object of descriptive study; **b/** (related to a/) systemic-functional, dependency, Montague a.s.o. grammar, as ordered interpretations imposed upon languages by the corresponding linguists; **c/** prescriptive grammar (in 1st language contexts) and normative grammar (in 2nd language contexts); **d/** teaching or pedagogic grammar, typically used in the context of language teaching and learning, covering morphology and syntax; **e/** Chomskyan

universal grammar, as developed and internally represented by children for their 1st language, i.e. grammar as a representation of the speaker's linguistic competence, or a cognitive part of the brain; f/ grammar books, e.g. *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*, etc.

More recently, ELT's Diane Larsen-Freeman (2003; material presented at the University of Iași in 2000) has coined the term *grammaring*, which she views as the fifth skill, and basically meaning that grammar rules need to be put in the broader perspective provided by language use and by understanding the reasons behind the rules. "Grammaring is a skill, and as a skill, requires practice. Meaningful practice of a particular type not only helps learners consolidate their understanding or their memory traces or achieve fluency, it also helps them to advance in their grammatical development" (2003, 99). The idea of grammar as "a dynamic process" has also been proposed by ELT writer Scott Thornbury: "grammaring is a process of 'adding grammar' to propositions that are expressed lexically (2001, 12), while "grammar is a kind of organic process that, in the right conditions, grows of its own accord and in its own mysterious way. The key to success – and the indispensable role of the teacher – is providing those conditions" (2001, vi). Michael Swan, another ELT writer, on the other hand, is far less optimistic: "despite decades of research and theorizing, we still know little about the acquisition of second-language grammar [...]; language learning and teaching are difficult, only a relatively small part of a language can be learnt in the time generally available, and limited success is all that can be hoped for" (2011, 567-568).

If one looks at curricula, the goal of *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) is to provide learners with communicative competence as well as with the cultural skills necessary for tolerance of Others and with learning to learn languages. The concept of *communicative competence*, which lies at the basis of the approach with the same name, was originally described by Dell Hymes (1972, 277) as the knowledge "when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner". As *communicative competence* has become a trendy term in ELT, it has been variously defined. Littlewood (1981) breaks it down into four domains: 1. *language (grammatical) competence*, implying fluency and accuracy; 2. *understanding functional meanings*, with three sub-skills – the ability to recognise and understand linguistic structures and vocabulary; secondly, the awareness of their possible communicative functions, and "the ability to relate the linguistic forms to appropriate non-linguistic knowledge, in order to interpret the specific functional meaning intended by the speaker" (1981, 3); 3. *productive skills aimed at conveying messages effectively*; and 4. *understanding and expressing social meanings*. Similar views are expressed

by the authors of *Grammar and the Language Teacher* (1994). Thus the acquisition of *communicative competence* appears to be a rather daunting enterprise, as it is now widely acknowledged that learners will not master a foreign language during school years; rather, learning a foreign language is a life-long endeavour, “time-consuming, expensive and difficult” (Swan 2011, 564).

In the midst of ongoing ELT controversy concerning its role, and despite occasional arresting claims such as that “language learning is exemplar based [...] the knowledge underlying fluent use of language is not grammar in the sense of abstract rules or structure but a huge collection of memories of previously experienced utterances” (Ellis 2002, 166), the fact that learning grammar, rather than an end in itself, is one of the means of acquiring mastery of a language, appears to be now established. Research findings now show that attention to form is a necessary condition for language learning (see Kachru 2006, 249; Thornbury 1999, 116), while meaning-focused communicative tasks, with no method of creating awareness of the grammatical system, are inadequate and do not lead to accuracy in language use (Skehan 1998 quoted in Kachru 2006). Cowan (2008, 30-31) too quotes an abundance of research that shows that “classroom instruction in grammar actually results in substantial gains in L2 proficiency”, while explicit teaching produces better and longer-lasting learning than implicit teaching (Norris and Ortega 2000 quoted in Cowan 2008; see also Chen 1995). A question that remains is to what extent the learner must be made consciously aware of language patterns or grammar rules.

2. Discussion

My own challenge refers to teaching what might be called ‘remedial English grammar’ to large multilevel classes of first-year students majoring in Geography or Translation Studies in the general context of failing educational attainment. In this case further challenges are limited teaching time, as well as the fact that many first-year students appear to be disoriented and unmotivated. Upon engaging in the more or less systematic study of English grammar, it is customary to begin with the verb. In fact, the first unit in practically all English language (EL) course books and grammars I have used or know of deals with the ‘tense forms and uses’, or ‘tenses in context’ or ‘tense consolidation’, the rationale being, one might suppose, that the verb is the most predictable and obligatory of all clause elements, which determines clause structure.

2.1. Tense

The first distinction that applies with tenses is that between *grammatical tense* and *conventional time*. In the *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (1998, 395), *tense* refers to “the form taken by a verb to indicate the time at which the action or state is viewed as occurring”, but immediately below this definition comes T. F. Mitchell’s (1975) remark that “there is no coherent relation between tense and time”, as past and present tenses, for example, can be used to refer to future time.

English is said to have a binary (two-way) tense system, with the *present (non-past) tense* defined as unmarked and “timeless in the sense that it can embrace any time that does not exclude the speaker’s time [...] and any time that the speaker does not want to distance himself from”, and the *past tense* defined as “marked for separation from the speaker’s ‘now’, or to indicate the hypothetical nature of the statement, or to convey social distancing” (Chalker and Weiner 1998, 395). English verbs are also marked for *aspect*, another ‘dimension’, as Thornbury (1997, 79) explains, or another layer of meaning, one which speakers of other languages may find difficult. In English aspect takes two forms: *continuous/ progressive* and *perfect*. Huddleston and Pullum (2005, 51) write that “a grammatical form or construction qualifies as an aspect if its main use is to indicate how the speaker views the situation described in the clause with respect not to its location in time but to its temporal structure or properties” (see also Cowan 2008, 351). Tense and aspect intersect in English grammar, so that more than one aspect can combine with tense, a fact amply reflected in teaching grammars, which describe from 8 to 12 and even more ‘tenses’. The sheer number of ‘tenses’ is thus likely to baffle EL learners from the start. Cowan (2008, 379) reports that recent research indicates that several factors shape ESL/EFL students’ attempts to master tense and aspect in English: “the lexical aspect of verbs plays a role along with the influence of the students’ L1 and the input that students receive in class”; the third factor refers to the frequency with which, in instruction, certain types of verbs are associated with particular tense forms.

2.2. Aspect

For Romanian learners of English, the grammatical category of aspect is bound to present difficulties, as noted for instance by Duțescu–Coliban (2000, 169), mainly because in Romanian aspect is lexicalized by means of adverbials, verbs – *a începe să*, *a se apuca de*, *a termina de* a.s.o., and morphemes, e.g. *a amuți/ adormi* etc, subordinated to the category of tense, “the only instance when a specialized syntactic form reflects an aspectual opposition being the ‘imperfect’ tense versus the ‘perfectul simplu’”. Chițoran (1976, 17) writes that “the English tense system is difficult for the

Romanian learner because, although both languages can easily be described as having only two major tenses (Present and Past), the number of *tense forms* is widely different in the two languages”. Duțescu–Coliban (2000, 151-153) mentions sixteen finite verb forms in English and seven in Romanian. Another major difficulty is related to the fact that the opposition [\pm duration], which is “systematically marked in English (*be-ing*) is not overtly marked in Romanian (with the exception of the *Perfect Simplu*, an always [-duration] tense. Almost all the other Romanian forms are potentially ambiguous between a [\pm durative] interpretation” (1976, 18).

As Dave Willis writes, “it takes a very long time for learners to develop a consistently accurate model of the verb phrase. [...] This is certainly in part due to the complexity and subtlety of the meaning and concepts involved. But it may also be due to the fact that traditional pedagogic models are unsystematic and uneconomical” (2009, 99). True to this, as I have found, besides L1/L2 differences, additional learning problems are generated by the manner in which the grammar of the verb is presented in most ELT materials, implying long lists of tenses, verb forms and their uses, often with insufficient and/or confusing or even contradictory explanations, e.g. “When referring to the **present** or **future**, these expressions (*I wish/ If only*) are followed by a **past tense**” (O’Connell, *Focus on First Certificate*, 1996, 210). There is no logic in such explanations; there is nonetheless a logical system to English tense usage. As is well-known, only what has been understood can be truly learnt, and so I would argue that, especially under limited available time conditions, it helps learners if the teacher can conceptualize and systematize the complexities of tense-aspect connections. Such conceptualization works at the appropriate levels – (upper) intermediate and beyond, when the structures of the various tense forms have been learnt, paving the way to language awareness. This view of grammar favours meanings over rules to be learnt by rote.

Thus, for teaching/learning purposes, the complexity of English verb tenses can be subsumed to three elements of meaning:

- **factuality** (*fact* vs. *non-fact*: what is real or considered possible vs. what is only imagined, hypothesized or wished for);
- **time** (with reference to the time of the event);
- **aspect**
 - ▶ **grammatical** (how the speaker sees the verb action)
 - *perfect* = ‘finished’/‘completed’
 - *progressive/continuous* = ‘durative’
 - ▶ **lexical** (verb meanings: verbs carry different periods of duration).

For the same purposes, the meanings of the main terms used to refer to the tenses can be summarized as follows:

Present means [+fact] [+close to the speaker's situation]
Past means either [+ fact] →[+ remote in time]
 or [- fact] →[+ remote in time/ reality/ social distance]
Perfect means [+before] [+ connected to a point in time – present or past]
Simple means [+complete]
Continuous/ Progressive means [+duration].

When the Continuous Aspect is used, *duration* is signalled as being important; also, the Continuous Aspect has three possible implications: the event may be

- in progress
- temporary
- possibly incomplete.

The lexical aspect, which is found in Romanian as well, is yet another source of difficulties for learners, mainly because, as Chițoran (1976, 21) remarks, both languages have similar verb subcategories, „but the correspondence is never perfect. [...] semantically equivalent items correspond to different subcategories; this is an extremely frequent situation and a powerful source of errors”. Cowan (2008, 354), on the other hand, notes that “ESL/EFL courses and materials often ignore the lexical aspect and its effects”. Two main forms of lexical aspect in English are *action/dynamic* and *state/stative* (*states* are cognitive, emotional, relational, perceptive verbs; verbs of needs and preference; measurement). A simple hint to distinguish between the two is this: actions have clear beginnings and endings, while with states, which are continuous and last a long time, imagining a beginning and an ending is more difficult, e.g. *live, have, know* etc. States mean the idea of permanency and completeness, which conflicts with that of (limited) duration, inherent in the Continuous; this is the reason why state verbs are not used in the Continuous aspect, except when they function as action verbs.

A second key conceptual distinction related to lexical aspect is that between *punctual* vs. *durative* (*short* vs. *long time*). Verbs carry different durations; basically, a clear distinction can be drawn between short and long-time verbs. It is important to note that Continuous works differently with the two groups of verbs: it makes long-time verbs suggest less time, e.g. *He lives in London but is living in Tangiers this year*, while it makes shorter-time verbs suggest longer time, e.g. *Now I put/ am putting the mixture into the oven*. Punctual verbs, which refer to momentary activities that do not have duration, repeat (in technical parlance, express iterative meaning) when used in the Continuous. If a verb won't 'stretch' (cannot be imagined as having

duration), Continuous makes it repeat, e.g. *Lightning is flashing* (see Maule 1991 for interesting examples and practice; also Yule 1998).

2.3. The Perfect Tenses

The Perfect Tenses can be accounted for in the same manner. In describing the uses of the Present Perfect, it is useful to draw learners' attention to the word 'present', which marks this tense as having present time reference; in fact it links past and present time. This is also the reason why it cannot be used with past time adverbials, but it combines frequently with expressions of duration which link past and present time. Following Comrie (1998 [1976]), it has become customary to distinguish between four main uses of the Present Perfect Simple: the Perfect of result, where a present state is seen as the result of a past situation, e.g. *I've sprained a muscle in my leg; that's why I'm limping*; the Perfect of experience, e.g. *We've already been to one crafts fair too many, don't you think?*; the Perfect of persistent situation (perhaps better called 'unfinished past'), e.g. *I've learnt English for eight years now*, and the Perfect of recent past (also termed 'hot news' – a useful term to draw learners' attention to its use in breaking news or introducing a new conversation topic, before moving on to the Past Tenses as details are given accompanied by definite past time expressions), e.g. *I've just discovered that he has a twin brother*.

Thornbury (2006, 159) remarks that the Present Perfect "is baffling for many learners. This is because notions such as relevance, connectedness and unfinishedness are subjective and difficult to pin down." It is nevertheless also true that difficulties also arise simply because the learners' L1 does not have a corresponding verb form, as languages 'divide up' the world in different ways. For Romanian learners, a source of errors as identified by Chițoran (1976, 18) is related to the fact that in Romanian the 'Prezent' and 'Imperfect' occur freely with open-time adverbials. In English, the general distinction between simple and continuous uses of the perfect tenses is that the simple focuses more on the result, the continuous more on the activity itself.

The distinction between *fact* and *non-fact* is very clearly marked in English grammar: thus what is not real or indeed possible (verifiable in reality) but only imagined or hypothesized about is marked in the grammar by shifting the tenses once backwards, for example from present to past tense to mark unreality/ [- fact] at present time. (see Soars 1991, 139). This 'mechanism' of the grammar is of use in making sense of Conditionals. The so-called Type 1 conditionals are based on fact in real time as they express a possible condition and its probable result, e.g. *If it rains, we'll have to stay in*; Types 2 and 3 are [- fact], and this explains the backshifting, first from present to past and from *will* to *would*, *If it rained, we'd have to stay in*; then

from past to past perfect (before past) and from *would* to *would have*, *If it had rained, we'd have had to stay in*. Thus the difference between the Type 1 and Type 2 is not related to time, as both can refer to present or future time. Here are two more examples from Soars (1991, 140): “*If there is a nuclear war, we will...* (I am a pessimist. Nuclear war is a real possibility); *If there was a nuclear war, we would...* (I am an optimist and I think nuclear war is very unlikely to happen)”. In spoken English in particular, *if* does not only introduce conditions, but a range of additional functions such as explanations, suggestions, e.g. *if you look at this one...*, *if you'll/d wait here...* (‘willingness’), giving reasons.

2.4. Counterfactual Constructions

Hypothetical/counterfactual constructions work in the same way, e.g. wishes to change present-time states, habits or regular events: *I wish I was better looking* (present time but past tense to indicate non-fact); *If only we weren't doing the exam tomorrow!* (*if only* is more emphatic than *wish*); *If only I'd known then what I know now* (past time reference – *then-* and one shift backwards to past perfect to show non-fact). The meaning of *would* in hypothetical constructions is the literal meaning of *will* i.e. ‘willingness’, with a shift backwards to show non-fact, e.g. *If only you'd think before you speak!* Logically, since speakers can control what they do, hypothesizing in the 1st person requires *could*, e.g. *I wish I could speak French*. In their *Exploring Grammar in Context* (2002, 76), Carter et al. suggest that “although the three main types of conditional which are taught are useful, they are only the starting point for understanding and forming other patterns”. Alas, as every teacher knows, the high degree of idiomaticity of English is a constant problem: expressions like *if I were you*, *you'd better not*, *it's not as if*, *come what may*, *by and large* have little or no generalizable grammar. Another example of the fact vs. non-fact contrast accounts for the use of verb forms in time clauses, e.g. “*When I leave school, I'm going to concentrate on my musical career* (NOT *When I will leave school...*)”. Paraphrase: ‘when leaving school is fact’, instead of “when it is clear from the main clause that the sentence is about the future, you don't use a future form in a subordinate clause”, the rather inept explanation provided by *Inside Out Upper Intermediate Student's Book* 2005, 114).

2.5. Futurity

Future verb forms – since linguists agree that English has no future tense, as there are no future tense inflections on verbs – are likely to present difficulties for learners, firstly because of their sheer number (by comparison, Romanian has ‘viitor’ with its three informal variants, all equivalent in meaning, plus ‘viitor anterior’). Secondly, in English, as

Thornbury notes, the choice of future form is mainly a manifestation of aspect (1997, 219), since it is determined “less by factors such as nearness or certainty, than by the speaker’s perception of how the future event is to come about” (1997, 91). This is an important point for learners to understand, as other European languages, Romanian included, have one standard future form morphologically marked as tense. Future time can easily be seen as linked to present time, given the dominant (not only English) metaphor of the future moving towards us from in front of us. This is also the reason why when future events are clearly tied to present time, Present Tense forms are selected; the Present Continuous for social/personal arrangements exclusively with human subjects and future time adverbials (thus **It’s raining tomorrow* is unacceptable, unlike *What are you doing for lunch tomorrow?*), and the Present Simple for timetabled events seen as [+ fact], which are generally true for past, present and future, e.g. *The academic year starts in October (next year)*.

Futurity is an area of meaning where, besides tense and aspect, modality intervenes. In this respect, it is important to understand that *will* is not *the* English future tense, as many EL learners misguidedly imagine. With reference to future time, *will* is used to make *predictions*, based on *what the speaker knows to be true*, e.g. *He’ll be late home tonight; Next week I’ll be 21*. Modal *will* is associated with a variety of meanings, which are all subsumable to the idea of ‘likelihood’: these are ‘intention’, ‘prediction’ and ‘willingness’ (see Yule 1998, 100-103). The other kind of future-projected type of prediction in English grammar is that based not on mental, but *on visual or aural present evidence*, using the periphrastic modal *going to* e.g. *There’s going to be trouble; The way they’re playing, they’re going to win. Going to* is also used to refer to planned intentions for the future, e.g. *I’m going to fly to Paris next week*. The workings of the fact/non-fact distinction can be seen in this case, too e.g. *I was going to fly to Paris next week, but I can’t make it*. Another future form which is taught at upper intermediate level and beyond is the Future Continuous, which refers to inevitable events and arrangements, e.g. *They won’t be playing on account of the weather; Will you be using the car tonight?* (the second example has *will* meaning ‘willingness’ and involves social distancing, functioning as a polite question about someone’s future plans).

2.6. Modality

In addition to tense and aspect, verbs are also marked for **modality**, which is expressed grammatically through modal verbs. Next to tense and aspect, modality is identified by Chițoran (1976, 18) as the grammatical category which presents “serious difficulties for Romanian learners”, mainly because there is no one-to-one correspondence between realizations of modality in

the two languages. “Where in a certain speech situation English uses a modal verb or phrase, Romanian may use a certain mood, a modal adjective or adverb etc. [...] Also, when modal verbs are used in both languages, one Romanian modal may correspond to several English ones; for example, the meaning range of ‘*a putea*’ covers most of the meanings of ‘*may*’, ‘*might*’, ‘*can*’, ‘*could*’; similarly, the meaning scale of ‘*a trebui*’ may correspond to the modal values expressed by ‘*must*’, ‘*need*’, ‘*should*’, ‘*ought to*’ and even by phrases such as ‘*have to*’, ‘*have got to*’, ‘*be to*’, etc.” (Bîră 1976, 133). Modality represents an area of great grammatical and semantic complexity, associated with subtle shades of meaning; to this contribute not only the modal operators, but also lexical modality. The complexity results not only from the fact that modals in English function in syntactically peculiar ways, but also from each of them having at least two meanings, referred to in the literature as *extrinsic/epistemic*, expressing the speaker’s judgement about the ‘likelihood’ of events and related to *potential facts*, and *intrinsic/root modality*, which is socially determined, e.g. obligation, permission, ability, related to *potential acts*. Modals too can be marked for tense, e.g. *He may/might come*, but such marking is indicative of degrees of likelihood. Two ways of generalizing modal grammar are presented below:

Box 1. Strength of modality

Strong	necessity	<i>must, need, have to</i>
Medium		<i>should, ought to</i>
Weak	possibility	<i>may, can</i>

Box 2. Epistemic meanings of modals

	Present	Past
Fact		
certainty	<i>It will happen</i>	<i>It will have happened</i>
↕	<i>It must happen</i>	<i>It must have happened</i>
↕	<i>It is going to happen</i>	<i>It was going to happen</i>
probability	<i>It should happen</i>	<i>It should have happened</i>
↕	<i>It may happen</i>	<i>It may have happened</i>
↕	<i>It might happen</i>	<i>It might have happened</i>
↕	<i>It could happen</i>	<i>It could have happened</i>
not likely	<i>It can't happen</i>	<i>It can't have happened</i>
Non-fact	<i>It won't happen</i>	<i>It won't have happened</i>

Last but not least, the concept of ‘distance’ is very important in English grammar, which has markings for **a/** distance in time, e.g. *wrote/ had written*; **b/** distance in reality, e.g. *I wish you were here; if I could drive*; **c/** formal/ social distance, also marked by tense backshifting, e.g. *I thought I’d ask you if...; I was wondering if...; Did you wish to see me?*, all with present time reference. Modals too are often associated with the expression of social distance or politeness which, in varied linguistic shapes, is of particular importance in English as noted by Biber et al (2005, 151) among others, being clearly related to the model of ‘good speech’ in English – rational, factually based, precise and accurate (for interesting insights, see Wierzbicka 2006). Jenny Thomas (1983, 99) points out that when learning a second language, pragmatic strategies such as the appropriate forms of politeness are usually overlooked and fail to be acquired, a situation which she describes as “pragmatic failure”. It can be noted, however, that often pragmatic and grammatical failure go together.

3. Conclusions

Despite the fact that from the viewpoint of theoretical linguistics, most course books and teaching grammars misguidedly use the notion of ‘tense’ by positing the existence of a large number of ‘tenses’ which are better termed ‘verb forms’, for learners of English their acquisition is of major importance in view of a proper command of the language. The form of the verb determines sentence structure, while meanings determine language use in the first place. With Romanian learners the difficulties in acquiring the English tenses can be subsumed to the fact that Romanian is a synthetic language, while present-day English is highly analytic: consequently, as already pointed out, verbs in English and Romanian function in markedly different ways; for example, a characteristic feature of English is that many verbs function in both transitive and intransitive structures; also, the two complement systems are different, in that English has many non-finite forms without correspondents in Romanian grammar, while Romanian uses finite complements far more extensively than English does.

However, instead of learning rules and lists of uses, which many learners never seem to master, with the teachers’ help, sense can be made of the main verb forms or tenses, beginning with the simple observation that tense in English is not simply based on time. In my own experience I have noticed that several areas of grammar – tenses included – are amenable to conceptualization and to teaching and learning in terms of meaning. This implies a shift from a purely structural, to a more functional, description. Tenses in English make up a system which learners should be able to make sense of. Conceptualization works better than time lines drawn on the black/white board which, depending on the graphic abilities of the teacher,

can take various composite forms involving straight and wavy lines, triangles and dots, yielding further graphic abstraction (see, for example, Penston 2005, 20-26).

Conceptualization should be followed by review in a more personalizing style, for instance by eliciting and feeding the same structures with relevant topics, preferably with the books closed, to provide reinforcement and communicative practice. In my experience, for many students, beginning to grasp the logic of grammar clearly gives them confidence and marks the beginning of their growing motivation. It seems that comprehension of rules provide learners with a feeling of security. Certainly not all areas of grammar can be conceptualized – collocations are only one example; nevertheless reasoned understanding of how language works is often an incentive for learners, who are thus encouraged to think about language. This can pave the way to ‘grammatical competence’, as the foundation of ‘communicative competence’.

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