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Grading Cultural Imperialism in English Language Theory and Practice

- Abstract I: This essay explores the ways in which Edward W. Said's critical theories have been employed by contemporary applied linguists to explain the relation between the English language and its long colonial history an approach to language theory and practice that is still less than marginal in Italian universities. The essay also presents a challenging exercise by blending an excerpt from Edgar Schneider's popular textbook English Around the World (2011) with key-images of Conrad's Heart of Darkness in an attempt to provide exemplification of a critical-linguistic exercise.
- Abstract II: L'articolo analizza l'impiego del pensiero critico di Edward W. Said da parte di linguisti contemporanei al fine di spiegare il rapporto tra la lingua inglese e la sua lunga storia coloniale – un approccio alla teoria e alla pratica della lingua che rimane ad oggi più che marginale nelle università italiane. Il saggio, inoltre, elabora una possibile applicazione delle teorie saidiane allo studio della lingua ideando un esercizio che unisce un passo del noto manuale di Edgar Schneider English Around the World (2011) a immagini chiave da Cuore di tenebra di Joseph Conrad al fine di produrre un'ipotesi di esercizio linguistico-critico.

Introduction

This essay originates as a reflection on the discrepant situation I have found myself in for the last twelve years as a university instructor of English language and a scholar in postcolonial cultures and literatures, divided between what I do as a teacher using pre-packed course books and handbooks of applied linguistics and what I know and research as an engaged humanist. Facing, for instance, a listening comprehension exercise in which a British businessman based in Hong Kong appears like a mirage – literally "as an angel" (Soars & Soars 2008: 105) – to a Chinese woman desperately looking for a British native speaker, with specific pedigree, to practice her knowledge of Trollope's novels, is a unique hilarious way to begin practicing the language. Or, better, it would be so, were it the case that students were supposed to engage with the obvious propaganda hidden in the text, and that, in an English language class it was not utterly out of place to even think of speaking about cultural contents or to raise any *critical* issue at all. As a matter of fact, what usually happens is that implied cultural references simply pass through onto the students' memory, there to become one with their 'linguistic' knowledge of English (Cimarosti 2012).

In this respect, this essay is a two-fold challenge because it figures out an English language class where both students and instructor are trained enough in postcolonial theory and in general in criticism so as to be able to open the archive of English language studies – possibly the only major archive of Western knowledge mostly religiously sealed - and assess the degree of colonial discourse therein contained. In such a class, students can do exercises in 'contrapuntal reading' as part of the language learning curriculum and 'grading cultural imperialism' may be part of ordinary homework. Such exercise involves a 'grading' activity in the three different meanings of this word: students are asked 1) to mark and assess any trace of colonial discourse present in the text; 2) to flatten or smooth out the varying ideological inclination by considering their raison d'être; 3) to find a hybridised position no matter if for or against it, as long as the student can negotiate a standpoint rather than being unwarily positioned by the text. And if the idea of doing such a complex exercise raise a few eyebrows among the experts, this is because in Italy Anglophone studies have long been religiously halved into too neat a literaturelanguage divide which impedes the use of critique and of any other humanistic expertise in the English language classroom, de facto keeping language curricula stuck to a modernist age that has never reached beyond structuralism, hence devoid of the crucial contributions of postmodern and postcolonial insights whose introduction of forms of resistant pedagogy and critical applied linguistics, as well as their view of language based on practice rather than system, would provide adequate preparation to tackle the challenges of this globalised era and its several new forms of Anglophilia (Canagarajah 2013; Pennycook 2010). 'Grading' exercises such as the one I propose would form language students able to interact within the complex dynamics that constitute English in today's world, a global language shaped by interweaving currents of neo-colonial and postcolonial discourses which one should be familiar with, no matter if one is learning the present simple or attending a course about the 'global spread of English'. Both types of language courses of and about English are in fact offered through textbooks typically made up of a mix of popular culture that define the nature of English and of pedagogical procedures whose supposed objective methodology stems from a European monolingual, and monolithic, orientation to language and to language learning (Canagarajah 2013: 19-34; Phillipson 1992: 181-211). This is certainly the case of the Global English textbook that I will linger on in some detail by way of conclusion.

However, before reaching there, I will take two main steps which should explain the full import of the grading exercise. I will first address some basic connections between Said's criticism and English language theories and practices as drawn by two critical applied linguists, Suresh Canagarajah and Alastair Pennycook; then I will briefly present the variational linguistics sub-field called 'Global English', to indicate some mechanisms ruling its discourse as used in Edgar Schneider's English Around the World (Schneider 2011), one of the most popular and accredited textbooks of this sub-genre to date.

Culture and Imperialism in English Language Theories and Practices

In the first chapter of Culture and Imperialism, Said talks about the need to see and understand the relations between the facts of empire and its culture, a relation determining what he notoriously defines as the 'worldliness' of all fields of knowledge, their tight connection with politics and social actions, a basic notion whose validity he confirms in his later work (Said 2004: 48-49, 61). At the same time, he insists on the need to explore the very way by which relations are made, including those among fields of study, because "the way we make connections informs our vision of the present" (Said 1993: 18). It is this latter selfreflexive understanding that allows us to really see against the grains not only the complex network composing the map of cultures, hence the ideas and values which they identify with, but the arbitrary ways by which such meaningful configurations are drawn, their constructedness, the sight of which only grants us the chance of possibly negotiate with it. In this respect, he points out that two types of unfruitful relations have strongly contributed in order to draw the postcolonial map of today's world culture in continuation with old colonial logics: relations of blame of empire and of hostility towards the ex-colonised. In order to move forward, he adds, we need to transform such dated yet on-going legacies by seeing and retrieving the still unacknowledged complexity that lies behind their binary simplifications and to do so by using a critical approach which he famously defines as 'contrapuntal reading'. This would enable us to disclose the manifold network of relations that makes cultures intrinsically plural and diversified – rather than homogenous – their coterminous and overlapping territories, histories, cultures as well as their languages and literatures – rather than their neat separation or even opposition to one another – hence, to be positioned well beyond the bounds of national and nationalistic views and rhetoric (Said 1993: 35-49). Well into the globalised 2013-world, however, in the field of English language studies, almost nothing resembling such open perspective has become real practice, at least not to the extent of

reconfiguring our approach to language from consequential domains such as the planning of academic curricula and the ideation of new didactic activities. For instance, the adjective 'extraterritorial', used by language historians to define the ideological bias towards the new forms of English that developed in the ex-colonies in the era of British standard English prescriptivism (Mazzon 2000), turns up in contemporary conferences to define the acculturated varieties of English from postcolonial countries, no matter if these have developed their own standards and an outstanding literary tradition in English.

There is one major type of contextual and ideological relations that has been particularly functional in creating enduring colonial perspectives that have been embedded in the usage of colonial languages thence perpetuating their biases, which Said has called "structures of attitudes and references" (Said 1993: 61-62). Such cultural configurations of meanings have solidified and perpetuated themselves through specific genres and textual forms, in which simple words and language uses have acquired the power of reproducing stereotypical ideas and frames of mind, features charactering authoritative works, whose discourses, therefore, have remained mostly unchallenged, free to convey prejudiced ideas and consequential attitudes. From this perspective, Said has analysed in depth the main genre of the British nineteenth-century novel whose local stories, interspersed with vague hints at the colonised territories, acquire and expand a claim to power which allows homely, even provincial, values to become worldwide 'consolidated visions' with universal resonance, and so by mere recourse to casual references, gestures, poses and twists of the mother tongue. As a matter of fact, such rarefied allusions at social facts of empire policy and such apparently negligible parts in the novel's plot, establish a most consequential and strong relation with the colonial system in the backdrop bringing about and activating its ethnic and cultural hierarchies. In metaphorical prosaic terms, we may perhaps think of such references as of post-it notes stuck in an invisible empire context, without which messages would

lose their main meanings and functions – minimal notations binding spaces and temporalities and making them strangely and forcibly one, the empire being kept in motion also through little practical reminders scattered in the daily routine. Empire culture, therefore, works most effectively when it remains almost unsaid, anonymous, commingled with common sense, a hovering frame of reference determining abstract meanings against which one can hardly dispute but rather tends to agree with.

There is no better book than Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, that renders this most sophisticated use of English, perhaps due to the fact that Conrad – incredible as it may seem, judging from his mastery of the language – learnt English as a grown-up man and as a second foreign language, after French, which must have provided him with a special sensitivity towards the nuances of English and their crucial role when it comes to tackling its ideological power. Let's have a glimpse of the way his extraordinary novella records the way English implicitly conveys colonial 'values', by reading an exchange between the English manager and Marlow, who is leading the expedition upriver to meet Kurtz.

He was just the kind of man who would wish to save appearances. That was his restraint. [...] You couldn't imagine a more deadly place for a shipwreck. [...] I authorize you to take all the risks," he said, after a short silence. "I refuse to take any," I said shortly; which was just the answer he expected, though its tone might have surprised him. "Well, I must defer to your judgement. You are captain," he said, with marked civility. I turned my shoulder to him in sign of my appreciation, and looked into the fog. [...] Will they attack, do you think?" Asked the manager, a confidential tone (Conrad 2000: 72).

It is a minuet between Marlow and the manager, in which Marlow seduces his interlocutor AND finally persuades him of his fidelity to the empire's values so

dear to him, and merely manages to do so through his knowledge of the most subtle use of the language: the tone, the pauses, and the following gesture bestowing the few previous words with a sense of nobility and wide significance. All of which sounds so well to the manager's trained ears that their fellowship is sealed against the imminent enemy.

Said has also clearly explained how English has come to be amazingly frank about its relation with the discourses of the empire, which were made to identify with it and, therefore, to shape its very texture. English became the vehicle by which a discriminatory world knowledge was articulated by ordering – in both senses – human beings into races, and cultures and languages into fixed categories as well as by dictating specialised ways to be accounted for, as exemplified by Carlyle's discourses:

Carlyle speaks a language of total generality, anchored in unshakeable certainties about the essence of races, peoples, cultures, all of which need little elucidation because they are familiar to his audience. He speaks a *lingua franca* for metropolitan Britain: global, comprehensive, and with so vast a social authority as to be accessible to anyone speaking to and about the nation. This lingua franca locates England at the focal point of a world also presided over by its power, illuminated by its ideas and culture, kept productive by the attitudes of its moral teachers, artists, legislators (Said 1993: 123).

If the English language was being shaped through the colonial discourses which it came to obsessively articulate, this same overlapping came also to shape the idea of an Anglo-Saxon ethnicity scattered over the large colonised world. This was made of a range of discourses about the extended and mixed British identity whose destiny was, from its historical multi-ethnic beginnings, that of ruling over other races, and whose powerful bond of affiliation was its rich composite language, with its deep-seated cultural discourses that showed

through when needed, constantly creating the sense of belonging to a universal British ethnicity whose home was now orderly scattered all around the world (Young 2008).

Besides being characterised by this fusion with colonial discourse, the English language came to tightly adhere also, and more fatally, to self-praising discourses about its structure and usage so that made-up ideas about its history and culture became the language. English was made to interiorise an artificial, historical, sense of Self through a stereophonic rhetoric about its superiority and suitability to rule over other languages, which became particularly intense in the second half of the 19th century and which sadly has continued to these days making colonial legacy a further, if still little considered, influence in its historical formation (Pennycook 1998; Phillipson 2008). Paradoxically enough, this is a part of the language history that is largely uncovered by historical linguists and which most audibly claims its existence as we can observe in the masked triumphalism of some contemporary linguists who advocate purely 'linguistic' reasons why it is English that has become 'the' world language (Crystal 2003; Svartvik & Leech 2006). Again, it is worth stopping here for a second, to introduce one more passage from Heart of Darkness, where this idea is presented through Marlow's description of Kurtz's magniloquent prose; Kurtz who - it is worth our notice was, partly like Conrad, half-English and half-French, the quintessence, the novel says, of European intelligence:

[...] it was a beautiful piece of writing. The opening paragraph, however, in the light of later information, strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings [...] by the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," [...] from that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity

ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence – of words – of burning noble words (Conrad 2000: 83).

Today, just like yesterday, and incredible as it may seem, such discourses are articulated through a particular use of different language levels. On the lexicon and grammar level, a set of recurring vocabulary asserts implicit arguments – English is linear, logical, rational, as well as flexible and generously hospital, its grammatical simplicity makes it efficient, hence suitable for business, progress and scientific knowledge (Pennycook 1998) - all of which qualify English in indirect positive comparison to other less adequate languages which, in a linguistic natural selection of the fittest, have in some cases, we are made to notice, even become extinct (Svartvik & Leech 2006). Functional linguists have defined such dense intermingling of the lexico-grammar and the semanticsdiscourse levels as 'grammatical metaphor', i.e. a mechanism whereby figurative meanings disguise themselves under simple linear references (Martin & Rose 2008: 17-20, 38-44). As a matter of fact, language users are made to stand on a shifting seismic ground, where a contingent context of situation is also, mostly unknowingly, a far more connoted and complex context of culture whose meanings resonate as a powerful yet invisible discourse that assigns roles and positions, no matter if the circumscribed situation would not require it.

If such figurative tension across the language levels becomes a way by which English conveys further messages than it seems to be doing ordinarily, and is made to invisibly render hierarchical worldviews, this mechanism also works on a far larger and more sophisticated scale, to maintain the status quo in the way culture, knowledge and education are made to relate to the organization of society and the management of natural, economic and human resources. In a larger inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural scenario, a global language like English works across contexts of cultures through the use of ad hoc micro-languages and specialised registers that regulate the way reality is translated into

knowledge and, further, into the ways by which such knowledge needs to be appropriately addressed through specialised jargon, genres and subgenres. Language articulates meanings at several removes from sensual reality, and it is access to such codification – dependent on social positions granting access to the various ranks of expertise in the education system – that will in turn regulate the impact upon nature, culture and the society.

This is how the colonised world, for one, was translated into distinct yet interwoven academic fields and genres of discourse. Filtered through specialised jargons and text-types, real people, cultures and languages were turned into scientific subjects, defined, described, processed, with no chance of effective replication, unless, as it would happen, users took control of the established access codes. The colonised world became the place where to do fieldwork, gather data, categorize human beings by race and religion, and draw scientific conclusions that justified territorial management and interventions for the benefit of the European economies, a complex mechanism at work in the single observer and expert, a power stored in the inconsequential linguist or biologist travelling around the colonies. Early in the 20th century, Said reminds us, the world was divided between those who ordered knowledge through academic research and those who were but numbers and raw material to be decoded and showcased (Said 1993: 198-203).

'After' such a globalised scenario, a liberating language competence cannot but be based on the learning of how to use this overintrinsic transcultural dialectics and its translational complexity, a hybridised notion and use of English that has been recently called 'globalectics', whose cultural background and whose centre is the postcolonial world at large conceived of as plurilingual and pluricentric (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2012).

Into Global English Darkness

A good blend of English and colonial discourse is observable in current

textbooks of Global English or Varieties of English, manuals that typically range from history to geography, to cultural and language studies, with the aim of explaining the world-scale diffusion of the language in linguistic objective terms. It is a sub-field of variational or contact linguistics not to be confused with the antagonist approach of the Kachruvian World-English studies, which, however, in spite of crucial contribution to validate the acculturated Englishes developed in the ex-colonies, has seen its innovative principles be re-appropriated by mainstream linguistics, in consequence of both its very limiting descriptive analyses stopping short at syntax level (Mahboob & Szene 2010), and of its restricted involvement with literature and critique.

The 'grading exercise' that I am about to introduce is based on an introductory section of Schneider's textbook *English Around the World*, entitled "English, Both Globalising and Nativising" (Schneider 2011: 2-5), directed to an audience of future students of linguistics and generally of English. 'Objectivity' is claimed through recourse to technical linguistics terms and the use of specialised procedural genres typical of the sciences, which make the drawn relations appear factual and indisputable. While the mentor, the expert linguist, uses *reports and explanations* of authentic material (by which linguists usually mean 'not literature'), he also invites students to learn how to work likewise by using *procedures* and *procedural recounts* for gathering their information to be then scientifically delivered (Martin & Rose 2008: 142-229). Clearly, the Global English manual will provide technical knowledge while also furthering it by forming general adepts and future experts to function in respective ranks of the society.

Schneider's text, however, I have integrated with scattered images from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in order to provide a useful interlocutor for its hidden colonial discourse. In doing so, I'm also referring to Said's view of the novel's 'double vision' (Said 1993: 24-35) which represents, Said explains, both the indisputable facts of colonialism in Africa and its unsettling and ambiguous foundations as conveyed by the novel's structure in which British colonial Africa is set and framed within Marlow's narration, with all its references to the role that language has played in keeping colonialism going, hence laying bare that such harm and exploitation are *related* to and occur through the uses of English.

To start with we have a text whose linguist-narrator, with his wide and moral vision, is that of a *Buddha* providing the status of English in the world and neatly positioning his audience in it: one the one hand, the guru and his students, all *in the same boat*, sharing the one form of normal English; on the other, unspecified people living somewhere in the rest of the world who speak 'odd', 'strange', 'different' Englishes whose distortions – should one venture to stay among them for a long time – may become contaminating.

Have you been abroad? Do you travel a lot? Then you know what I'm



talking about. *Wherever* you go on this globe, mostly there's something **odd** about the way English is used: **strange** words, familiar words pronounced **differently**, sentences built in **odd** ways. Well, if you stay **there**, **wherever** that is,

you may pick up some of these features and sound like a **native**. What this teaches us is that English is no longer just "one language"; **it comes in different shapes**



and sizes, as it were, so that linguists talk of **different "Englishes**" (Schneider 2011: 2, all emphasis added).

These weird Englishes are yet soon revealed to be those used in ex-colonial countries, where they are divided into three main categories, all of which are essentially different from the one Standard used or learnt in the West: *there*, English may be used as a neutral *lingua franca* for mere practical use; or, more rarely, it may get *nativized* in case people have made it 'their own' by either using it alongside local languages or by having replaced their languages altogether. Of note here is the ambiguous phrase 'made it

their own', by which 'language appropriation' as a positive key-term in postcolonial studies is re-adumbrated with the literal sense of 'illegitimate action'. Schneider's categorization of types of Englishes is all along accompanied by cunning expressions of surprise, of great wonder, whose aim is to estrange the European student from the idea that such translingual practices are the norm and not the exception in today's globalised world and that it is not English which is either 'globalising' or 'nativizing' the world but the other way round: it is the hybrid nature of societies where several languages are used alongside English that are pluralising and grading, mixing, English, determining the new established standard forms it has taken in over at least half a century.

No doubt English is truly the leading language today. It is used in SURPRISINGLY many countries, almost always as the mediator language (a lingua franca) by people who have different mother tongues, as in many



developing countries people perceive it as the primary gateway to better jobs and incomes. At the same time, HOWEVER, *English* has become localized and indigenized, as people enjoy using it in 'their own' way, a dialect to express regional pride.

FURTHERMORE, in Asia and Africa, where English was introduced just one or two centuries ago, there are children who grow up speaking English as their first language. Some are not even able to speak the indigenous language of their parents anymore. ISN'T THIS AN AMAZING PHENOMENON? (Schneider 2011: 2, all emphasis added).

As striking in Schneider's narration is the dismissal of colonial history altogether, with the consequence that no connection can be made between postcolonial countries and Europe; hence no 'interwoven map of cultural interactions, no intertwined and overlapping histories and territories' out of which only the reality of English could emerge as a hybrid language in a global contact zone.

ONE REALLY INTERESTING ASPECT about all this is that this indigenization and nativization process of English in former colonies in the British Empire, is a product of a very recent past and not of colonial heritage. Again, THIS SHOULD COME AS A SURPRISE TO AN OUTSIDE OBSERVER. English was the language of the colonial power, the settlers and rulers sometimes perceived as the oppressors. But, once they were gone, INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, English was embraced, made "our own" (Schneider 2011: 3).

Like a new Marlow finding the illuminating presence of the English seafaring book in the very heart of the African darkness, Schneider points out his own manual of global English whose rational quality and practical function are emphasized.

This book describes this process of the global spread of English. My



strategy is that of "zooming in" from the general to the specific: I combine a general survey with a closer look to showcase a typical instantiation of English in use in a given context. I assume no prior familiarity with any of these issues or regions and assuming that you, my readership, will comprise both linguistics students and not, I will offer some technical terms but will explain them and indicate what you need to pay attention to (Schneider 2011: 3, all emphasis added).

Schneider represents his approach to English as that of an advanced camera able to capture reality both in general, universal, scope and in close detail. It's a disquieting twofold perspective that reminds one of the overall invigilating gaze of the panopticon as representative of the working mechanisms of colonial discourse at its apex, with subjects in check having interiorized the watcher and, therefore, the degrees of variation, of transgression, allowed (Pennycook 1994). The title of Schneider's introductory passage, "English, both globalizing and

nativizing", (Schneider 2011: 2) uncannily refers to a similar checking action, as English is indirectly compared to a towering surveillance tool which both rules and determines the forms that English may take up as well as those that it has illegitimately made to acquire and which are kept under control.

Unsurprisingly, the last paragraph leads us to know that, after all, this is knowledge that students already possess, which they naturally gather in their daily experience of its standard forms alongside the odd uses they may come across; all they need to learn is how to articulate such common sense into technical terms, which will give them access into the consolidated vision of linguists, as some meanings, Conrad's novel explains, do not lie in the kernel but in the cracked shell, in the way they are expressed.

IF THIS SOUNDS A LITTLE ABSTRACT AND ALIEN TO YOU – LET ME ASSURE YOU IT ISN'T, REALLY. Whenever we talk **this machinery** works inside us. We **assess**



what we hear – not only the meaning, the message, but the way it is encoded. And the details of this encoding (one's accent, for instance) signal quite a lot to us in terms of background, status, age, etc. To each new communicative situation we bring our

accumulated familiarity with different ways of talking. And we not only listen explicitly, but we also read between the lines, as it were. Frequently what we do as linguists is no more than spelling out what we "know" anyhow. This also means we need to develop methods and "theories" to collect data objectively, to systematize our observations, to make our claims convincing to others (what we could call "proving our theory") (Schneider 2011: 3, all emphasis added).

Conclusions

Overall, a student embarking on a similar exercise would learn, with Said, that "a nativist cultural tradition that pretends to authenticity and priority is but fundamentalist ideology" (Said 2004: 47). That student will acquire a view of English learning that includes its worldly strata, which will make living in today's

world a more critical and engaging experience, as one sees that language is never neutral and that as English language learners and users "our social and cultural fate is already defined in it" (Said 2004: 29). Furthermore, that student will see that English may be a tool that enables one's way through its thick and alienating forest, where one can learn to exert basic rights to understanding, reformulation, discussion, self-expression, and that in such a role language is "the basic material [...] the place where we can most effectively register our dissent" (Said 2004: 49). That student will know that there can be two stages in this journey: understanding, the voluntary penetration of words, a close reading that proceeds philologically, literally through a love of words (Said 2004: 58), by which like new disenchanted naturalists we try to understand the meanings of words by themselves, in context and in their constant noisy association with other apparently distant words, fighting the peace of the pre-packed style and preferring "a deliberate process of reflection and research" (Said 2004: 74), in fact a "technique of trouble" (Said 2004: 77). This is where reception gives way to resistance and negotiation between what language offers and what we understand and know about it on the basis of our linguistic and cultural experiences, which would introduce new assumptions, new references that would contribute to English and change it, to a degree. Thus equipped, one is in the position of getting hold of those rivets that Marlow never received, as without the chance of joining words to meanings we won't be able to navigate today's era, where a simplistic command of English and an essentialist rudimentary compass can no longer help, especially so, as soon as the cultural paradigm shift, long advocated by Said, becomes one with the linguistic shift theorised by contemporary and as emancipated linguists.

For now, as one awaits change, our little exercise may provide a minimal positive as well as practical reply to the challenging question recently asked by Spivak who, by way of dealing with the 'burden of English' in postcolonial countries, briefly lingers on the sliding crossways where English literatures and language dovetail, yet leaves the possibilities lying in that very junction unexplored: how can we provide a critical aesthetic education in a globalised era where students have commodified English – and vice versa – and students are not interested in exploring contents, but rather in 'using' the language in a call center? (Spivak 2012: 35-56).

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