

Unmasking the Mistakes: Insights into the Origins of the Morpho-Syntactic Flaws in University Students' Writing

كشف الأخطاء: رؤى حول أصول العيوب التركيبية والصرفية في كتابة طلاب الجامعة

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Abstract (English):

The present study is grounded on error analysis (EA) of the written work of Master one LMD students of the English department at the University of 8 Mai 1945 - Guelma -. This research work intends to detect the morpho-syntactic errors in English language writing. To attain the desired goals of the study, the researcher has relied on case study approach. In this respect, we hypothesize that overgeneralization and false concept hypothesized may cause morpho-syntactic error. a corpus analysis of sixty- three (63) written compositions where errors have been analyzed. Research findings revealed that errors Master one LMD students often commit are basically due to the lack of foreign language (FL) knowledge that has been caused by overgeneralization and false concept hypothesized at the morpho-syntactic level.

Keywords: English language writing; Morpho-syntactic errors; Overgeneralization; False concept hypothesized; Written Compositions.

ملخص باللغة العربية

تعتمد الدراسة الحالية على تحليل الأخطاء للعمل الكتابي لطلبة الماستر LMD بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة 8 مايو 1945 - قالمة -. يهدف هذا العمل البحثي إلى الكشف عن الأخطاء الصرفية النحوية في الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. لتحقيق الأهداف المرجوة من الدراسة، اعتمد الباحث على منهج دراسة الحالة. في هذا الصدد، افترضنا أن التعميم المفرط والمفهوم الخاطئ المفترض قد يسبب خطأ صرفيًا نحويًا. ولتحقيق ذلك تم تحليل مجموعة من ستة وثلاثين (63) مقالة مكتوبة. كشفت نتائج البحث أن الأخطاء التي يرتكبها طلاب الماستر LMD غالبًا ما ترجع في الأساس إلى نقص المعرفة باللغة الأجنبية التي نتجت عن التعميم المفرط والمفهوم الخاطئ المفترض على المستوى الصرفي النحوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية؛ الأخطاء الصرفية النحوية؛ الإفراط في التعميم؛ افتراض مفهوم خاطئ؛ المؤلفات المكتوبة.

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1. Introduction

The writing expertise is greatly considered in language teaching and learning. It is seen as the most crucial and sophisticated skill in comparison to other skills; reading, listening and speaking. It is the ground for evolving students' learning competence and raising up their learning accomplishments. Writing is the ability in which learners have to maintain during the journey of learning a foreign language (FL). Furthermore, it is not a spontaneous skill that can be learned easily. In fact, it is demanding and challenging task because non-native language learners are subject to numerous types of errors; as many researchers claim. Making errors is unpreventable in FL learning. Which, in fact, makes English teachers face many errors in different language system such as: verb tense, word formation, word order, prepositions, articles, and mechanics ...etc; in addition to, semantic gapping in their learners' writings. Most instructors baffled because they are often unable of pointing out the causes behind those errors. There will be, then, a need for an investigation which would help to identify the areas of difficulties in the FL learning which need reinforcement.

In most Algerian Universities; FL faculties, the learners' final written output in English has been in most situations a problematic case for teachers; which reveal serious weaknesses of English learners. Therefore, the study intends to scrutinize the issue of English students' difficulties in writing. To spot light on the types of the committed errors, investigate their sources and suggest plausible interpretations.

2. Literature Review

The essence of writing does not stop at the boundaries of symbols and visual marks; yet it goes far away to the array of letters in given way to build words and these words are structured to come up with sentences. Accordingly, Hochman and Wexler (2025) claimed that writing is dynamic, situated practice that involves not only the mechanics of language but also the ability to engage with complex ideas, audience and genre conventions. It is viewed as a process of making meaning through language that is responsive to context and purpose (p. 1).

The complication of writing is primarily by reason of the cognitive procedures that any writer requires to obtain and go through so as to create a piece of writing. For Bean (2021) writing is a process that includes creating and refining text for communication (p. 4).

The effectiveness of a learning process of writing skill can be measured through an evaluation activity. Brown (2000b) offered wider description about six elements or categories often used as the basis for evaluating students' writing; that are:

a) Content: The term content for Brown includes how effectively writers related ideas in their writing and developed those ideas through personal experiences, illustrations, facts and opinions. Use of description and consistent focus in writing is also important (p. 357).

b) Organization: Includes things as effective introductions, logical sequence of ideas, and appropriate length which are not met in all students' written compositions (p. 357).

c) Discourse: Refers to such elements as the students' effective use of topic sentences, paragraph unity, transition, cohesion, and rhetorical conventions... etc (p. 357).

d) Syntax: Crystal (2008) defined it as: "A traditional term for the study of rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences in a language" (p. 471).

e) Vocabulary: In the "*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*" Procter (1995) defined the term as: "All the words used by a particular person or all the words which exist in particular language or subject" (p. 1628).

f) Mechanics: It includes spelling, punctuation, and citations of references, neatness and appearance (Brown, 2000b, p. 357). The theory of categories, for evaluating writing, is used by the researcher to assess the students' narrative and recount writing. The order emphasizes the importance of content, organization, and discourse over syntax, vocabulary, and mechanics.

Corder (1981) states that error analysis (EA) has two justifications: One theoretical and one applied. The theoretical object is to understand what and how a learner acquires a second or foreign language. The applied object provides chances for systematic tools of eradication (p. 1). Additionally, Gass and Selinker (2008) stated that one of the alternative ways of validating the results of the theoretical comparative analysis is to investigate learners' errors committed in actual productions, which is called error analysis.

The methodology of error analysis has different steps. As a consequence, the majority of linguists agree on a given number of error analysis procedures; even though, they differ in the naming and ordering of them.

Error analysis is an experimental tool for validating a theoretical framework of transfer. The first step in carrying on an error analysis, to gather the raw material to work on, is *a corpus* formed of students' errors; either in speech or writing (in our case is a written corpus). Corder (1973) suggested two types of elicitation in order to obtain data:

A Clinical Elicitation refers to the data performed by the participants in the form of an interview or asking them to write compositions.

An Experimental Elicitation denotes the collection of data through the use of specific research mean to detect linguistic areas that a researcher wanted to study (as cited in Ellis, p. 50). The following represents Corder's steps of EA:

A. Recognition/ Identification of Errors

There are four key questions that guide this identification process. The first question addresses the choice of a native language and its significance for evaluating the research. The second question

focuses on the distinction between errors due to a lack of knowledge of a foreign language (overt errors) and those related to learner performance (covert errors). The third question emphasizes the interpretation of the different types of errors that may arise. Lastly, the text references Corder (1971) and Ellis (1994) to underscore the complexity of error identification and the importance of understanding the context in which errors occur.

After collecting the corpus, the errors should be identified. Consequently, the identification depends on four main questions. First, is to put-up what a non-native language should be used as the point of evaluation for the research study (Ellis, 1994, p. 51). The second question is the distinction made between *errors* and *mistakes or slips*. (Corder, 1967, p. 51). The third question is about interpretation; which appears into two major forms: Overt and Covert. The last question concerns two sorts of deviations: Correctness and appropriateness. The former is about the deviation of the rules of language usage; while, the latter is about deviation of language use such as a learner who invites a relative stranger by saying: "*I want you to come to the cinema with me*"; which is a correct but an inappropriate sentence (Corder, 1973, p. 52).

B. Description of Errors

Describing the errors of a learner entails specifying how the learner produced forms that are different from those produced by the corresponding native speaker as a learner. Many researchers suggested that there are two descriptive classifications of errors: *Linguistic categories* are correlated with a traditional EA that carries out pedagogic purposes that are selected to communicate directly to those found in structural syllabi and language textbooks.

C. Classification and Explanation of Errors

To identify learners' deviant forms; analysts have to subgroup them into categories and classify them into types or labelling subgroups within a corpus. Explanation of errors requires explanation of their causes/sources; i.e., it is an important step for SLA research; since it entails the determination of the errors' sources, to know why they are made (Ellis, 1994, p. 57). Generally speaking, EA usually has assigned errors to Richards' (1973) causes of errors (overgeneralization, ignorance of rules restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesized).

D. Correction of Errors

The practice of correcting errors is not only about representing the data and passing through alike drills and exercises to build the state *over learning*, but it also needs, from the teacher's part, to understand the causes of the learners' deviants; so that, he can offer suitable information by usually comparing between sentences produced by foreign language learners, and what would be the correct sentence in target language. Therefore, he can aid students to resolve their problems and permit them to find out the pertinent rules. Recognition and depiction of learner's deviants as

omission, addition, wrong selection, and ordering has a modest explanatory significance and importance "...knowledge of being wrong is only a starting point" (Corder, 1973, p. 293).

The following explanation is going to introduce the notion of reasons of errors in second language learning and present discrepancies of the causes made by outstanding language theorists.

In his article "*A Non-Contrastive Approach to Error Analysis*", Richards (1970), reported four major causes of errors; in the realm of SL learning, intralingual transfer is considerably denoted to as:

Overgeneralization is a process where learners extend language rules to context where they do not apply while performing in the target language. Overgeneralization essentially concerns cases where a student makes an ill-formed structure relying on his/ her previous experience of other structures in the target language. Here the learner generalizes a particular rule or item based on fractional knowledge of the foreign language. (pp. 6-8).

Ignorance of Rule Restrictions exercises a failure to catch the limitations of existing structures when rules are extended to another context. It might result from analogical extension or rote learning of rules. A good example of this case is seen in "*the man who I saw him*", violates the limitation on subjects in structures with "*who*". This is again a type of generalization of transfer, since the student is making use of previously acquired rule in a novel situation (p. 9).

Incomplete Application of Rules stands for abnormal structures the learner produces in the TL to show how much he has developed the required rules; so as to construct good utterances. Students tend to use some of the rules and keep making deviant forms in order to understand. An example of incomplete application of rules can be seen in the question forms; such as, when the teacher asks a question and the learner responds to the teacher's question by following the same pattern of the utterance form as the teacher constructs. (pp. 12-14).

False Concept Hypothesized Refers to errors grow from an erroneous comprehension of the second or foreign language or inaccurate ideas about its rules. These are usually resulted from poor gradation of teaching items. This cause of errors can be illustrated as the following: "was" might be understood as a marker of past tense and "is" as a marker of present tense. This kind of deviants drew from presentation inside classrooms, and to presentation which is anchored on contrastive analysis of English with another language or distinct within English itself (pp. 14-15).

3. Method:

This study employs a **case study approach**, allowing for an **in depth examination** and **assessment** for the targeted sample (63) to explore and to jot down the different committed errors and their possible causes. The study deals with the analysis of students' major types of errors and causes/ reasons behind them in the written production of English compositions of Master One LMD students (students' corpus). Thus, the students who were selected randomly were asked to write in a

well polish and organize composition about the following statement “*what challenges have you set for yourself?*”

Corpus Analysis

The analysis of the written compositions will be based on the five shared procedures of error analysis:

- **Data Collection:** The collection of Master One students' written papers.
- **Recognition/ Identification of Errors:** At this stage, we studied the acquired data and tried to find out the morpho-syntactic errors by underlying or circling the errors (using Harmer's correction symbols table).
- **Description of Errors:** We described the errors made by Master One subjects, which entails how the students produced them.
- **Classification and Explanation of Errors:** Once the errors have been described, we provided the possible explanation by mentioning their causes/sources based on **Jack Richards' theory (1970)**.
- **Correction of Errors:** We offered the correct form for the fallacious words and/or sentences that have been constructed by our sample.

Our results will be represented by percentages; which they will be provided by the means of histograms, tables and chart pies. The percentage of errors was calculated using the following formula:

$$P = \frac{n1}{\sum N} \times 100$$

P: Percentage of each error

n1: Total of the given error

$\sum N$: Total of the whole errors

For the average/mean:

$$X^- = (\text{Sum of values} \div \text{Number of values})$$

$$X^- = (x1 + x2 + x3 + \dots + xn)/n$$

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Morphological Level

Table 1 shows the total number of errors for each category of morphological errors (misformation, addition of the plural “-s”, omission of the plural “-s”, subject-verb agreement, articles, and clipping errors), the mean of error and the percentage of each category of errors. The results of the table to be analysed in the discussion section:

Table 1: Frequency of Morphological Errors

Error Classification	Number Of errors	Average of error	Percentage of error	Cause of error
1.Misformation	248	3.93	54.26%	1. Overgeneralization
2.addition of Plural marker "s"	63	1	13.78%	Ignorance of rule restrictions.
3.omission of plural marker "s"	27	0.42	5.91%	2.Overgeneralization
4.Lack of subject verb agreement	68	1.07	14.88%	3.Incomplete application of rules.
5.Clipping errors	30	0.47	6.57%	4. Overgeneralization
6.Articles	21	0.33	4.60%	Incomplete application of rules.
Total number	457		100%	5. False concept hypothesized.
				6. False concept hypothesized.

By: Makabrou.S and Grine.N

Out of 457 errors, the highest percentage were misformation (54.26%), lack of subject – verb agreement (14.88%), addition of the plural marker "s" (13.78%) together these errors suggest a struggle with the fundamental grammatical structure and rules. These were followed by the least frequent errors, clipping errors (6.57%), omission of the plural marker "s" (5.91%), and articles (4.60%). Although less frequent, these errors together denote challenges with understanding word forms, grammatical rules, and how they function to convey meaning effectively in language.

4.2. Syntactic Level

Syntactic errors are those which disobey the phrase structure rules; and hence, violate the formation of grammatically correct sentences. Syntactic errors that have been identified in our samples' corpus are classified into the following four categories (**Table 2**): Verb tense, prepositions, model verbs and word order. In addition to the mean and the percentage for each error category. The results of the table to be analysed in the discussion section.

Table 2: Frequency of Syntactic Errors

Error Classification	Number of errors	Average of Error	Percentage of error	Cause of error
1. Verb tense	92	1.46	43.20%	1. False concept hypothesized Incomplete application of rules and Overgeneralization.
2. Prepositions	69	1.09	32.40%	
3. Model verbs	29		13.61%	2. False concept hypothesized L1 interference.
4. Word Order	23	0.46	10.79%	
Total number	213	0.36	100%	3. Ignorance of rule restriction 4. Ignorance of rule restriction. 5. L1 interference

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The most relevant percentage of error was found in verb tense (**43.20%**) followed by preposition (**32.40%**) then, model verb (**13.61%**) and finally, word order (**10.97%**). Verb tense errors, preposition errors, model verb errors and word order errors denote specific types of grammatical mistakes commonly encountered in language use. Collectively such types of errors suggest difficulties in mastering the nuances of grammatical structure, which can impede effective communication and understanding in both spoken and written language.

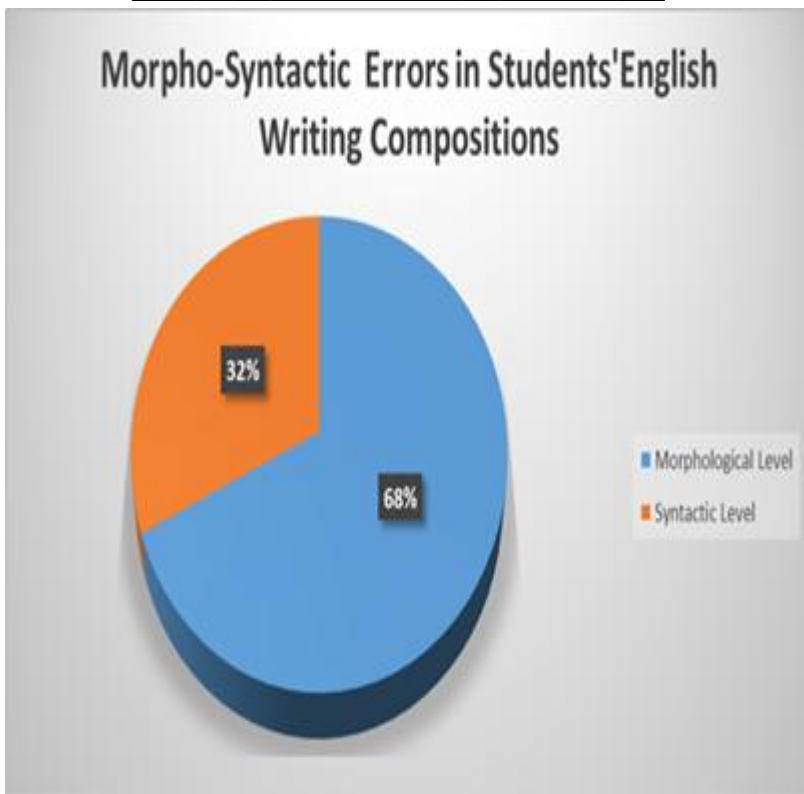


Figure1. Morpho-syntactic Errors in Students' English Writing Compositions

The higher rate of morphological errors (**68%**) shown in **figure1** indicates that students may struggle more with the rules governing word formation, such as inflectional and derivational morphemes. This suggests a need for targeted instruction in morphological awareness and its application in writing. matching results with our results were held by Hidayati (2011) Errors are not only found in students' writing but also in speaking when the students' produced utterances. The topic of her study is Error Analysis on a Short Speech. The analysis comprised pronunciation, morphology, and syntactic analysis. The researcher used the theory proposed by Brown (2000), namely omission, addition, and substitution type of errors. The findings of the study showed that the most dominant errors produced by the learners are morphological errors, followed by phonological errors, and syntactic errors which align our results with (**68%**) for morphological level and (**32%**) for syntactic level.

5. Discussion and Analysis

5.1. Morphological Level

The following types of errors were the most relevant ones made by Master one LMD students at 8 Mai 1945 university (Guelma University) related to morphology were misformation (**54.26%**), subject-verb agreement (**14.88%**), addition of plural marker 's'(**13.78%**) , similar to that found in

some studies ;and in a hierarchical manner , Hidayati 's findings (2024) indicated that the highest-ranked errors committed by her sample were misformation (36%) and errors of addition (32%). A possible explanation for such errors can be assigned to **overgeneralization** and **ignorance of rules restrictions** where our sample students extend the use of the grammatical rule of the plural marker “-s” beyond its accepted uses. Thus, they over generalize; thinking that for every plural word or noun they should add “-s”.

Al-Khasawneh (2014) explores the writings of undergraduate students in Jordan. His research spotlights on analyzing a collection of 26 English paragraphs produced by 26 students from Ajloun National University in Jordan ; the findings indicate that a larg number of students made mistakes chiefly ; in subject-verb agreement area. The study concludes with recommendations, suggesting that Jordanian EFL students should engage in regular English writing practice to improve their writing skills.

The least relevant errors committed by our sample were clipping errors (6.57%), omissing of the plural marker 's'(5.91%) and articles (4.60%). In their article ; Daquilema and Arias (2024) noted that errors in omitting plural morphemes might occur due to incorrect pronunciation in the native language, particularly with irregular plural nouns in English. The prevalent errors identified are largely mechanical and grammatical. Further research is necessary to assist educators in addressing these issues and their educational implications. According to Bakar et al. (2020), certain factors contribute to second language learners struggling with addressing and academic language acquisition.

In our study, it was found that errors related to articles were among the least frequently made, accounting for only (4.60%). This finding contrasts with the results reported by Haris (2023), which indicated that the errors in this category were actually the most common, with a notable incidence of (17%). This discrepancy highlights differences in error patterns between the studies, suggesting a need for further investigation into the specific contexts and reasons behind these variations in article usage errors. Based on the limited amount of English exposure, there seems to be another cause operating behind article errors, namely that all English nouns require the definite article. There is clearly a confusion arising within the article system. Numerous errors seem to be the result of this **false hypothesis** (Richards' 1970) and this confusion. Hence, Errors of the wrong use of articles in some of the previous seven cases might be due to **transfer of training** (Selinker'1972); which involves that certain teaching techniques may lead to erroneous sentences like the errors which result from pedagogical procedures found in a text or employed by a teacher.

5.2. Syntactic Level

The study indicates that the predominant errors made by Master one LMD students at 8 Mai 1945 university (Guelma University) related to syntax is verb tense (**43.20%**) including verb confusion, verb inflection, and irregular verb cases, coinciding with the findings of Hourani (2008). And matching the causes of our study and Mammeri's (2015) research who pointed out that errors in word order, verb structure, and noun/adjective/adverb structure are the most frequent errors in both recognition and production. He cited that Overgeneralization, false concept hypothesized, and interlanguage interference are the main sources of such types of errors. Hidayat (2024) suggested that Editing workshop to improve students' self-editing skills, adopting precise and proactive approaches to effectively enhance student linguistic competence. And Sequencing Exercises to arrange sentences accurately, could aid in the reduction of errors and overall improvement in sentence cohesion.

The second most common error is preposition (**32.40%**), as in the study conducted by Nentis and Syafei (2019) the results of their research revealed that out of **1240 answers** on a gap filling test, **796 errors** were detected by their sample; a total of (**64%**) in which they attributed the occurrence of preposition errors to students' lack of proficiency in grammar. Prepositions, in fact, pose a great difficulty for our sample too where the subjects tend to omit necessary prepositions, add unnecessary prepositions or misuse them. The subjects used certain prepositions like: in, on, for...etc, in inappropriate contexts. Henceforth, the source of these errors probably refers to the influence of the learning situation; because students, in the classroom, often make errors due to a misleading explanation from the teacher via a faulty presentation of a structure or a word in a textbook. Students then make incorrect and false hypotheses about those structures of the FL based on their teacher's misleading or false explanation. In Selinker's term this source is called transfer of training that is similar to Richards's false concept hypothesized.

The third most common error identified in this research was model verb (**13.61%**), which matches with studies such as that of Maisaroh (2018). According to this study, the researcher declared that the causes of model verb errors are owing to the lack of knowledge of the language uses, hindering learners' ability to write correctly. And she added that most students are unaware of applying translation method to the use of models.

The fourth most important error made by students is word order (**10.79%**), in like manner Mammeri's (2015) research identified word order as the primary category (**13%**) . According to Hidayati (2024), she identified this type of problems, with fragmented sentences being the least frequent error; Hidayati (2024) concluded that these errors arise when students create grammatically incorrect statements by positioning specific morphemes out of sequence in an

utterance. In other terms, mis-ordering errors reflect the improper syntax of a sentence, where elements are not organized correctly, leading to ungrammatical constructions.

A number of studies engaging with morphosyntactic errors that were undertaken by some researchers. Mammeri (2015) A study was conducted on the morphosyntactic aspects of written compositions by EFL students. It involved analyzing 120 English compositions from second-year LMD students at Bejaia University in Algeria. The overall findings indicated that the students made numerous morphosyntactic errors, including issues related to word order, subject-verb agreement, verb structure, and omitted morphemes. Additionally, the research included an examination of the students' skills in terms of morphosyntax. Our investigation was on the level of morphosyntax and our results quite matching the results of this study.

Elsewhere, the outcomes of Haris (2023) indicated that errors primarily occurred at the morphological level. These errors included issues with inflection, derivation, prepositions, articles, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs. Inflection emerged as a frequent error, noted at a rate of **39%**. Additionally, it was found that omissions were common, with **73%** of students frequently not including descriptive elements in their writing. The research highlighted that many students often omitted aspects related to inflection, derivation, prepositions, articles, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs. Similar morphological errors categories appeared in our study too mainly: articles, omission, preposition, and verb issues (tense or omission).

6. Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that our respondents still have a long way to go in writing satisfactory compositions in English. The way they composed their pieces of writing clearly showed their weak grasp of the basic tenets of English grammar. According to the obtained results of Master one LMD sample students' corpus analysis, that was carried out in order to identify, describe, categorize and diagnose the types and causes of their errors, we found that my subjects still produce serious errors at the morpho-syntactic levels. The causes of these errors are explained using Error analysis technique. Therefore, I have proved that *overgeneralization* and *false concept hypothesized* are the main causes of students' errors production; as we had hypothesized to be the two most frequent explicative causes.

Overall errors caused by *overgeneralization* were the addition of plural marker "-s", subject-verb agreement, preposition, Misformation, and irregular verbs. Overall errors caused by *false concepts hypothesized* included, clipping errors, prepositions, articles and confusion of tenses. Hence, the researcher is recommending the application of writing self-assessment checklist or self-assessment rubrics as an effective instrument that may make a difference in students' writing.

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