

in Languages/Cultures: Case of Frozen Expressions in the French Language

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Abstract ;(not more than 10 Lines)

*Understanding written texts in an intercultural context represents a field of study and application where its specificities are connected to scripturality. The present article aims to address the phenomenon of analysis, description, and understanding of the pedagogical challenges encountered during activities related to written texts in a language/culture context. Our research is based on an experience involving a teaching-learning situation in French as a Foreign Language (FFL). First, it aims to improve pedagogical practices for teaching reading. Second, it seeks to contribute to the development of learners' linguistic abilities. Finally, it allows both teachers and learners to place greater emphasis on (inter)cultural competence, enabling them to **interpret** any coded message that conveys an ambiguous context linked to the learner's sociocultural reality. As such, this study focuses on the idea of the good reader. The study employs a qualitative research approach that considers classroom heterogeneity from cognitive, linguistic, social, and affective perspectives in terms of literacy.*

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1. Introduction

*“Knowledge is a state, Explaining is a method,
Understanding is a pleasure, Progressing is
to anticipate the future.”*

Marie-Laure FERRIER

This article focuses on research in the domain of reading, inspired by the theories of textual semio-linguistics advanced by Bakhtine and further developed by Souchon (1997). These theories guide our reflection and view "reading as the construction of a communicative link between a sender and a receiver through a text or a written piece" (Souchon, 2004:56). In this context, the act of reading is defined as “the construction of a relationship with subjectivity” (Souchon, 2004:56).

Literacy is defined as “the ability to understand and use written information in daily life—at home, at work, and in the community—to achieve personal goals and expand one’s knowledge and abilities” (OECD, 2000, p. x of the introduction). Grossmann explains that literacy can be understood as a *"capacité à lire, à écrire, à comprendre et à utiliser des textes présents dans l'environnement quotidien"*, (Grossmann, 1999: 140) (translate to english): "capacity to read, write, understand, and use texts present in the daily environment," particularly in functional contexts such as signs or labels.

The aim here is to explore solutions and possible remedies that enable any foreign-language reader to correctly read, analyze, and understand a written text. This involves identifying teaching practices contextualized to the linguistic, sociocultural, and intercultural realities of the learners. In this sense, every pedagogical act should follow a process that accounts for textual socialization processes and the institutional, psychosocial, and affective factors involved in the activity (Souchon, 2002; Babot et al., 1999). Accordingly, the reader must be introduced to openness to the plural and sociocultural dimensions, respecting otherness and diversity to strengthen their individual, familial, local, and national identity and belonging.

2. Contextualizing Learning

To foster a good environment for learning to read, several conditions are proposed:

2.1. Sociocultural Context

This context is somewhat neglected as texts addressing these situations are rare due to the predominance of materials focusing on subjects and domains unrelated to society.

2.2. Institutional Context

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This refers to guided and goal-oriented reading that targets pre-defined objectives within content aimed at two main goals:

- Developing competencies related to writing.
- Enhancing skills in reading and writing.

In this regard, the communicative dimension must be incorporated into reading activities.

2.3. Didactic Context

This context adheres to the didactic framework governing exchanges and positions in the realm of writing and reading (Babot et al., 2007)

3. Reading

This section examines perceptions of reading in general and reading in FFL (French as a Foreign Language) classrooms in particular. It involves observing readers' behaviours towards a text and their approaches to understanding a written piece.

According to Vygotsky's concept of language, writing can be defined as a social activity and an achievement that varies from one society to another (Babot et al., 2007). In other words, writing employs a specific link and status in each language/culture, enabling it to establish culturally manifested relational modes.

3.1. Text / Document

Peytard and Moirand (1992, in Babot et al., op. cit.) distinguish in differential semiotics between "text" and "document." The genre of "text" includes literary discourses, while "document" encompasses media and didactic discourses (such as editorials, advertisements, critiques, comic strips, and teaching-learning materials for FFL, among others).

At the textual level, several observations were made:

- 3.1.1. Regarding reading:** Readers do not limit themselves to personal understanding but often aim to meet institutional objectives (e.g., reading for classwork or to answer questions in exams).
- 3.1.2. Concerning didactic discourses:** Written language tends to be more normative than communicative. The dominance of linguistic codes places greater emphasis on well-structured sentence levels, often at the expense of textual and sociocultural levels.
- 4. According to Umberto Eco (1985):** The reader is not a homogeneous and harmonious entity but is characterized by two main traits:

4.1. A **physical, individual, and collective trait** situating the reader outside the reading context.

4.2. A **trait provoked within the text** by the sender. The learner-reader, in turn, is guided by the teacher, who selects texts according to the reading objectives established by the institution.

4.3. Why Literacy and Culture?

The choice of this topic stems from experience, revealing that most educational programs neglect this competency. University learners often struggle to express or interpret idioms, proverbs, or even fixed or "cultural" expressions. These reflect sociocultural realities that do not align with their daily lives.

4.4. Literacy and Cultural Competence

In this research, literacy must be associated with diverse cultural competencies rooted in heterogeneous social practices, as stated by Grossman (1999). This includes the comprehension of texts containing cultural expressions or fixed phrases composed of a series of words that cannot be altered. These expressions often have figurative meanings. For example:

"Je dois me lever tôt, car j'ai du pain sur la planche."
Here, *"j'ai du pain sur la planche"* takes a figurative meaning, signifying *"I have a lot of work to do"* (Zebiri, 2021).

Cultural or fixed expressions can consist of a group of words or a complete phrase. They cannot be interpreted literally, nor can their words or structure be modified. They are "frozen," as the name suggests. Some are tied to regionalisms, being used specifically in France or Quebec, while others are common across francophone countries.

- Research Problem

Do the students in question manage to read and understand fixed expressions? To clarify this problem, we propose the following questions:

- a. Can they read, understand, and decipher the meaning of these expressions easily?
- b. Do they encounter difficulties in moving beyond the connotative meaning of fixed expressions?

- Hypotheses

To address these questions, the following hypotheses are suggested:

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- a- These students might be able to read and understand the connotative meaning of fixed expressions easily.
- b- These students might struggle to go beyond the literal (denotative) meaning of fixed expressions and may fail to interpret their "cultural" essence.

4.5. Literacy in the School Environment

Reading comprehension in school and institutional settings defines the reader as a co-creator of meaning, based on three elements that form the communication situation: the didactic context, the text or written object, and the reading subject or reader. To address various difficulties that hinder effective reading comprehension, five types of reading strategies should be adopted by learners, depending on contextual factors:

- **Strategies related to the social representation of reading**
- **Strategies related to the representation of the foreign language**
- **Strategies related to the role and position of the reader**
- **Strategies related to the textual category**
- **Strategies related to the cultural category**

5. Experimentation

The study examines written texts, considering their linguistic, textual, and discursive characteristics. It views them as carriers of cultural elements while recognizing their role as objects to be read, grasped, and interpreted to evoke meaning for the good reader.

A sample of fixed expressions referred to as "cultural" were selected and presented to first-year French LMD students as part of this research. The aim was to assess the degree to which these students grasp such "cultural" expressions.

To achieve this, ten small tables were designed. Each table included

5.1. Sampling

5.1.1. Expression No. 01 "Couper les ponts" "to cut ties" or "to break off relations."

For example: "Il a décidé de couper les ponts avec eux." → "He decided to cut ties with them."

- **First meaning (etymology):** "A relatively recent French expression, dating back to the early 20th century, based on the literal and figurative definition of a bridge,

which serves to connect people who are more or less distant and difficult to reach over time and space."

- **Primary meaning (denoted) given by students:** No response from the students.
- **Connotative meaning (definition):** To sever all ties with someone.
- **Example:**
 1. He cut ties with his friends to focus on his thesis.
 2. "So, you won't mind if I cut all ties—yes, all ties. In two or three years, when I've become someone else, as I earnestly aspire to, we can meet again without consequence. Farewell." – Alain Bosquet, *Les bonnes intentions*, 1975.
- **Observations:** No responses.

5.1.2. Expression No. 02

Expression: "Mettre la charrue avant les bœufs""Mettre la charrue avant les bœufs" is translated into English as "**to put the cart before the horse.**"

It means doing things in the wrong order or prioritizing things incorrectly.

For example:

- "Ne mets pas la charrue avant les bœufs !" → "Don't put the cart before the horse!"
- **First meaning (etymology):** "Placing the cart before the oxen symbolized a certain illogicality or lack of practical sense."
- **Primary meaning (denoted) given by students:** "Not to disorder things." Students understood the expression correctly since it is familiar in the Arabic language.
- **Connotative meaning (definition):** Not doing things in the correct order.
- **Example:** With such reasoning, you're putting the cart before the oxen.
- **Observations:** Correct response and literal translation.

4.1.3. Expression No. 03

Expression: "Mettre la main à la pâte""Mettre la main à la pâte" in English is translated as "**to pitch in**" or "**to lend a hand.**"

It conveys the idea of actively participating or getting involved in a task.

For example:

- "Tout le monde doit mettre la main à la pâte." → "Everyone needs to pitch in."
- **First meaning (etymology):** "This expression dates back to the 13th century. Its meaning evolved, initially signifying 'to act or intervene personally' (to set to work), and later gaining a lucrative connotation ('to have a good job that generates profit')."

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Now, it refers to hands-on involvement, akin to a baker working dough to make bread."

- **Primary meaning (denoted) given by students:** Interpreted using Algerian Arabic as "My hands are in the dough," meaning "I am busy."
- **Connotative meaning (definition):** To participate in the work, to lend a hand.
- **Example:** All members of the group must get involved.
- **Observations:** Implausible response.

4.1.4. Expression No. 04

Expression: "Se lever du pied gauche""Se lever du pied gauche" is translated into English as "**to get up on the wrong side of the bed.**"

It means starting the day in a bad mood or having a day filled with misfortune.

For example:

- "Il s'est levé du pied gauche ce matin." → "He got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."
- **First meaning (etymology):** "It is believed that a normal person is right-handed and thus clumsy (or gauche) with their left limbs. Rising from bed with the left foot first metaphorically means starting the day badly, leading to a foul mood. The term 'gauche' also has ties to 'sinistre' (sinister), hinting at misfortune."
- **Primary meaning (denoted) given by students:** "He is sick in his right foot, so he uses the left."
- **Connotative meaning (definition):** To be in a bad mood.
- **Example:** Hey, Joel, did you get out of bed on the wrong side this morning?
- **Observations:** Incorrect response.

4.1.5. Expression No. 05

Expression: "Voir midi à sa porte" "Voir midi à sa porte" is translated into English as "**to see things from one's own perspective**" or "**to see things in one's own way.**"

It means interpreting situations based on personal interests or biases, without considering others' viewpoints.

For example:

- "Chacun voit midi à sa porte." → "Everyone sees things from their own perspective."

- **First meaning (etymology):** "This metaphor means to see (things or problems) based on one's own interests. 'Noon' symbolizes the heart of the matter, and 'one's door' signifies personal interest over collective interests."
- **Primary meaning (denoted) given by students:** "Perhaps there's a clock hanging on the door inside the house, and noon is mealtime."
- **Connotative meaning (definition):** To consider things based on one's personal interests.
- **Example:** Nowadays, people have become selfish; they only care about their own interests—each sees noon at their own door.
- **Observations:** Incorrect response.

Expression n°06: "To take French leave" In French, "filer à l'anglaise" attributes this behavior to the English (leaving without saying goodbye). However, in English, it's the opposite: English speakers use the expression "to take French leave," suggesting that this behavior is associated with the French. This highlights a cultural difference in how each language attributes this behavior to the other.

- **Etymology:**
"The origin of this expression is uncertain. It may represent a relatively recent retaliation against the English, who use the phrase 'to take French leave' to signify the same thing. It could also be a phonetic distortion of the word 'eel' (anguille). Other explanations suggest that, in the 16th century, a creditor was called an 'Englishman,' and one can easily imagine the debtor 'slipping away in the English style' when their 'favorite' creditor was nearby."
- **Literal Meaning (Students):**
"To leave like an Englishman might mean leaving quickly, as we say an American start."
- **Connotative Meaning (Definition):**
To leave without saying goodbye, unnoticed.
- **Example:**
He left quietly, without saying goodbye—a true French leave!
- **Observations:**
Incorrect response.

Expression n°07: "Faire l'école buissonnière". "Play hooky" Voici quelques exemples utilisant "**to play hooky**" ou "**to skip school**" en anglais :

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1. **"Tom decided to play hooky and spend the day at the beach instead of going to school."**

(Tom a décidé de faire l'école buissonnière et de passer la journée à la plage au lieu d'aller à l'école.)

2. **"She used to skip school every Friday to go to the amusement park with her friends."**

(Elle faisait l'école buissonnière tous les vendredis pour aller au parc d'attractions avec ses amis.)

3. **"The teacher caught two students playing hooky at the mall during school hours."**

(Le professeur a surpris deux élèves faisant l'école buissonnière au centre commercial pendant les heures de classe.)

4. **"Back in the day, we would sometimes play hooky and explore the woods near the town."**

(À l'époque, nous faisons parfois l'école buissonnière pour explorer les bois près de la ville.)

Ces exemples montrent comment utiliser ces expressions dans différents contextes ! □

- **Etymology:**

"There are multiple explanations for this expression. Some suggest it originated from the Council of Pavia in 1423, where the prelates refused to attend due to the plague in the city, an episode described by Marot: 'Vray est qu'elle fust buissonnière, l'escolle de ceux de Pavie.' Others, dating back to the 15th century, link it to hollow paths and bushes used to hide absconders or those avoiding school. Another theory connects it to secret schools, called 'buissonnières,' established in the countryside by Protestants persecuted during the early Reformation. Finally, in the 17th century, authors noted that schools were called 'buissonnières' when they were so poorly attended that bushes grew there."

- **Literal Meaning (Students):**

"A name given to a school—it might be called Buissonnière. Perhaps it's the name of a region!"

- **Connotative Meaning (Definition):**

To wander or play instead of attending school.

- **Example:**

For students who skip school, it's called playing hooky.

- **Observations:**

Incorrect response.

Expression n°08 : "Éclairer la lanterne (de quelqu'un)". "Shed light on something" L'expression française "**Éclairer la lanterne (de quelqu'un)**" se traduit en anglais par "**to shed light (on something for someone)**" ou "**to enlighten someone.**"

Sens :

Cela signifie expliquer ou clarifier quelque chose à quelqu'un pour qu'il comprenne mieux.

Exemples en anglais:

1. "**Can you shed some light on this topic? I don't fully understand it.**"
(Peux-tu éclairer ma lanterne sur ce sujet ? Je ne le comprends pas entièrement.)
2. "**The teacher enlightened the students about the historical context of the novel.**"
(Le professeur a éclairé la lanterne des élèves sur le contexte historique du roman.)
3. "**I was confused about the instructions, but my colleague shed some light on them.**"
(J'étais confus à propos des instructions, mais mon collègue a éclairé ma lanterne.)

C'est une belle expression figurative qui fonctionne bien dans les deux langues !

- **Etymology:**

"You cannot deny that when you're in the dark and a kind soul flips the switch, you can suddenly see much better (not to mention confirming you're not deaf from hearing the numerous 'Ahhhh!' of relief from those around). This expression is similar: a small additional detail helps you see more clearly. It reflects the frequent association between 'light' and 'intellectual understanding' (e.g., 'He's not a bright one!').

This expression originates from Florian's fable, *Le singe qui montre la lanterne magique* ('The monkey who shows the magic lantern'), where a learned monkey impresses various animal colleagues by inviting them to a show using his master's magic lantern. However, he forgets one 'small detail'—lighting the lantern—leaving the other animals confused about their purpose there. Following the fable's

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publication, 'forgetting to light one's lantern' came to mean 'omitting an essential point for clarity.' Over time, the phrase evolved into its modern usage. Historically, the 'magic lantern' was a 17th-century projection device with optical systems for enlarging painted glass images onto a screen."

- **Literal Meaning (Students):**

No response provided by the students.

- **Connotative Meaning (Definition):**

To provide the necessary details or explanation to ensure understanding.

- **Example:**

Students asked their teacher to shed light on an ambiguous point in the lesson.

- **Observations:**

Incorrect response.

L'Expression n°09 : "Un pavé dans la mare". "A stone in the pond" L'expression française "Un pavé dans la mare" se traduit en anglais par "a stone in the pond" ou, plus idiomatiquement, "to throw a cat among the pigeons."

Sens :

Cela signifie provoquer un choc, une controverse ou un trouble soudain en apportant une idée ou une déclaration inattendue.

Exemples en anglais :

1. **"His resignation was like throwing a stone in the pond; nobody saw it coming."**
(Sa démission était comme un pavé dans la mare ; personne ne s'y attendait.)
2. **"She threw a cat among the pigeons when she accused the company of corruption during the meeting."**
(Elle a jeté un pavé dans la mare en accusant l'entreprise de corruption lors de la réunion.)
3. **"The journalist's report was a stone in the pond, sparking outrage across the nation."**
(Le reportage du journaliste a été un pavé dans la mare, déclenchant l'indignation à travers le pays.)

Les deux expressions anglaises peuvent convenir, selon le contexte ! □

The French expression "**un pavé dans la mare**" literally translates to "**a paving stone in the pond.**" Its meaning in English is:

"To create a stir", "to cause a commotion", or "to spark controversy by making an unexpected or shocking statement or action."

It describes an event or action that disrupts the status quo, causing surprise or debate.

- **Etymology:**

"This expression's exact origin is difficult to trace, but its meaning is quite clear. Imagine sitting by a small pond on a beautiful day, it's still surface reflecting your image. Naturally, you might even ask it, 'Who's the fairest of them all?' Suddenly, before the mirror can deliver any flattery, a passer-by hurls a large stone into the water. The immediate consequences of this foolish act are as follows:

- The pond's water becomes very agitated and muddy.
- You can no longer admire yourself and don't get the answer to your pressing question.
- You are drenched from head to toe.
- Unless you're very calm by nature, anger overwhelms you. You might retaliate against the culprit and perhaps send them tumbling into the pond—though there's little chance they'll meet Alice and her white rabbit on the other side.

In short, the first consequence alone—disturbing the water—fully explains the metaphor behind this expression."

- **Literal Meaning (Students):**

"Something in the trunk of the car."

- **Connotative Meaning (Definition):**

Something that disrupts a calm situation, causes scandal, or disturbs peaceful habits.

- **Example:**

Sadly, like a stone in the pond, the tolling bell disturbs the calm blue air. (H. Pichette)

- **Observations:**

Incorrect response.

l'Expression n°10 : "Une république bananière". "A banana republic «The French expression "**Une république bananière**" translates to "**a banana republic**" in English.

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Meaning:

It refers to a politically unstable country, often characterized by corruption, a weak economy, and heavy reliance on exporting a limited resource (originally bananas). The term is commonly used in a derogatory sense to criticize governments perceived as corrupt or inept.

Examples in English:

1. **"The country was accused of becoming a banana republic due to widespread corruption and political instability."**

(Le pays a été accusé de devenir une république bananière en raison de la corruption généralisée et de l'instabilité politique.)

2. **"Some critics warn that unchecked corruption could turn the nation into a banana republic."**

(Certains critiques avertissent qu'une corruption incontrôlée pourrait transformer la nation en république bananière.)

This term is widely recognized in both languages and retains its critical tone.

- **Etymology:**

"Some claim that this expression, applied to France, originates from banana trees grown in Hyères, Var. However, those familiar with the region know that while there are many orchards, banana trees (other than decorative ones) are rare. Nonetheless, some argue that, in certain respects, France resembles a banana republic. The expression gained broader context through the satirical *Les Guignols de l'Info* on Canal+, which depicted the 'World Company,' an entity exploiting people and resources to dominate the world.\n\nA prime example of this exploitation was the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International), whose label you might recognize on some bananas. For 50 years, the company financed and manipulated most Latin American dictatorships in banana-producing countries to serve U.S. interests. It actively suppressed land redistribution reforms, ensuring continued control over banana plantations and underpaying workers. This large-scale corruption in banana-producing countries birthed the expression."

- **Literal Meaning (Students):**

"A country producing bananas."

- **Connotative Meaning (Definition):**

A 'republic,' a state, or a government that is corrupt.

- **Example:**

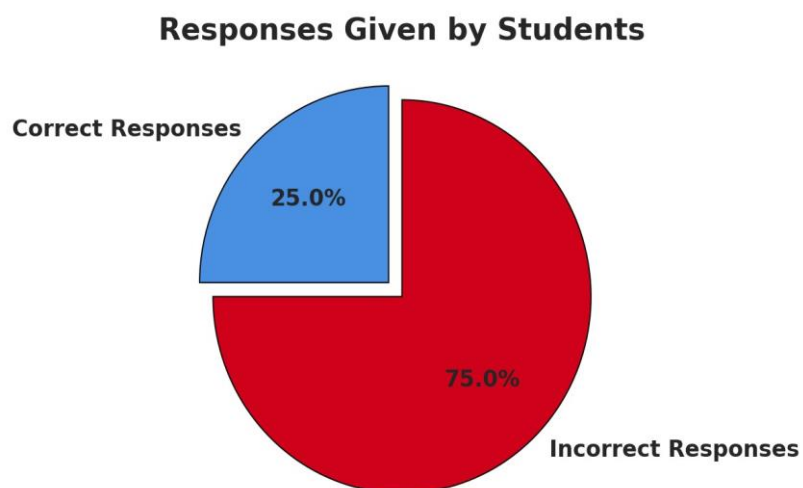
This country is often called a banana republic because it is governed by corrupt leaders.

- **Observations:**

Incorrect response.

5. Conclusion

The results with first-year French LMD students, revealed that out of a sample of ten fixed expressions, these students succeeded in only two responses out of ten, representing 2/10 or 20%. This indicates that these students struggle to grasp the meaning of idiomatic expressions and even to create personal sentences using the same expressions they encountered. The issue lies in their neglect of the cultural aspect, focusing more on the linguistic dimension, which they have studied extensively throughout their education. This observation also highlights that when learners attempt to express themselves on a cultural topic, they consistently rely on the Algerian context.



"Figure N°. 1: Rates Representing the Responses Given by Students."

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Based on the problem statement and hypotheses suggested earlier, cultural competence plays a crucial role in understanding the message conveyed by expressions. Consequently, we refute the first hypothesis:

a. These students could read and understand the connotative meaning of these fixed expressions.

In this regard, we observed that the students could not easily discern the meaning of the expressions. As a result, this leads us to confirm the second hypothesis, which is true and reflected in the previous tables:

b. These students could not go beyond the literal (denotative) meaning of fixed expressions and were unable to decipher the cultural expression.

Therefore, we can affirm that the cultural dimension is of great importance. Students must master it for a better understanding of cultural expressions. During evaluation and remediation sessions in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) classes, teachers could offer students an evaluation grid to self-assess and identify cultural points they have not grasped. This approach would allow the entire class to address all errors and shortcomings, whether in reading comprehension or written production.

As such, to ensure better outcomes, we ultimately proposed implementing qualitative parameters to validate the comprehension of all selected examples. This includes providing all learners in our sample with the meanings and solutions for all selected 'cultural' idiomatic expressions in this study. This strategy aims to overcome all learning and comprehension difficulties, particularly the cultural and intercultural aspects faced by Algerian FFL learners. Integrating the cultural dimension into teaching programs, as a subject in various levels of education, remains essential. Mastering language solely through its linguistic aspect is insufficient without also considering the duality of language and culture.

The study revealed that first-year French LMD students achieved only a 20% success rate in interpreting idiomatic expressions. This underscores a lack of cultural competence and reliance on linguistic knowledge. Integrating cultural dimensions into teaching programs is essential for fostering a deeper understanding of language and its cultural contexts.

Future Directions:

- Implement qualitative measures to improve comprehension of cultural idioms.
- Provide students with definitions and solutions for cultural idiomatic expressions.
- Encourage cultural inclusion in teaching curricula to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps.

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