

## **Linguistic elitism and the conflict of ideologies: The African perspective**

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### ***Abstract***

*The English language has consistently grown in linguistic ethos and has been connoted with an identity of class stratification, where the speakers are placed at the pinnacle of societal totem by their fellow indigenous people. Dexterity and fluency in language use, has falsely become a standard for the assessment of intellectualism. Even in climes where the English language is a second language (L2), the aboriginal language is grossly dominated as a run-of-the-mill language. The hegemony of the English language over native languages, the categorization of people into social constructs based on language proficiency and the danger of the elitists' tendencies in Africa are critically examined. The paper argues that the hegemonic hold of the English language over local languages is anti-cultural, that the placement of persons in social classes based on language proficiency is imperialistic; having both social and linguistic consequences and that proficient use of the English language does not connote intelligence. It advocates a new social order, where same standards for the English language and indigenous languages must be upheld and propagated.*

**Keywords:** Linguistics; elitism; conflict; ideologies; Africa

### **Introduction**

### **Hegemony of the English language over native languages**

The number of English speakers during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I ranged between five and seven million, while in 1952, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, the number reached 250 million (Crystal, 1988). Recently, it has been shown that the English language is spoken as a second or foreign language by an estimated 950 million people worldwide, in addition to the 427 million native speakers (Saville-Troike, 2006). This is as a result of the expansion of the English language from the British Isles to different areas and constituents of the world. The expansion of the English language has been described as another form of linguistic imperialism. According to Phillipson (1992), linguistic imperialism is the dominance asserted and retained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. As a result of linguistic imperialism, the English language has become the most dominant and the most powerful language in the world and Kachru (1982) has described it as an international language. It has become so dominant that more than two thirds of English speakers are non-natives (Crystal, 1992). The dominance of the English language is strongly attributed to the British colonial activities in Africa, North America, Oceania, South Asia and South America.

However, in addition to spreading the English language across the globe, colonization has resulted in the creation of varieties of the English language affected by the aboriginal languages of the colonized nations. British colonization is not without linguistic consequences; it resulted in what has come to be described as 'language contact'. In sociolinguistics, language contact is the use of more than one language in the same place and time (Thomason, 2001). In all the colonized countries, the

aboriginal languages of the countries came in contact with the English language. According to Mufwene (2002), the variety in the populations of colonies, in addition to the regular interactions between the people, led to the formation of new languages that can either be labelled as either Pidgins or Creoles, new regional dialects of the English language such as Australian English, in addition to the formation of new Englishes, with their own standards and codes.

In many parts of the world where the English Language is spoken as the second language (L2), the first language (L1) of the people has been in existence before the adoption of the English language as their *lingua franca*. In some of such places, there were persistent and deliberate imposition of the English Language on the people and a bureaucratic adoption of the English language as the *lingua franca*.

In order not to perpetuate this hegemonic order, the UNESCO had set out February 21st as UNESCO'S International Mother Language Day. This is intended to encourage people to maintain the knowledge of their mother tongue while learning and using more than one language. This annual event was set out to commemorate a protest march at the University of Darka (now Bangladesh) on 21st February, 1952. At that time, the government of Pakistan had intended to impose Urdu as the sole national language. Urdu is the dominant language of Pakistan, but in the eastern part, the great majority had Bengali as their mother tongue. The demonstration resulted in the death of four students. Similarly, in Spain, during the Franco era, the government tried to impose Spanish on the people of Catalonia and banned the use of Catalan in public and official institutions. In colonial Ireland, the indigenous Irish language was suppressed and for most of the 19th century, it was banned in secondary schools. It was not until

the ‘Gaelic Revival’ of the late 19th century that the steep decline in the use of the Irish language began to be reversed. Language shift has continued, not in the form of officially-enforced proscriptions, but by stigmatization, where the use of a local language is considered unsophisticated and backward, while the dominant language is regarded as having a higher status and offering greater economic values. The dominance of the English language as a *lingua franca* in education, communication, research, science, business, international commerce and as the language of the internet appears unstoppable and the roles of the English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) Movement seems to further consolidate the scope attained by the English language.

### **Categorization of people into social constructs based on language proficiency**

Social class is a social system in which people are classified according to perceived status, esteem and prestige based on factors such as economy, wealth, educational background and employment. During the 19th century, Britain experienced a significant class segregation leading to a significant language variation between the classes especially between the working class and the economic elites. This led to a reasonable variation in accent and dialect among both classes.

Trudgill (1974) identified phonetic and grammatical variations according to social class in the United Kingdom. He discovered a greater regional variation among lower status classes. He surveyed sixty (60) people from Norwich and divided them into classes based on occupational status, income, education, locality and housing type. This led to the group being categorized into the following classes:

-lower working class

- middle working class
- upper working class
- lower middle class
- middle middle class

He found out that the higher one was on his scale; the more likely they were to use standard language forms of pronunciation, grammar and so on, more of the time. He also found out that the lower the class, the more likely they were to:

- drop the final 's' in the third person verbs. ('She wear Jeans' rather than 'She wears Jeans').
- use-in instead of -ing. ('Jumpin' rather than 'Jumping').
- use glottal stops instead of /t/ (replacing the 't' sound in bottle with an 'uh' sound made in the throat as the epiglottis is used to restrict, then release the air -bo-uhl).
- drop the 'h' sound at the start of words (-ave rather than have). This does vary from region to region and according to age (younger people now more likely to pronounce the H).

Cheshire, Kerswill and Williams(2005) found similar outcomes in a study of working class and middle-class adolescents in Reading and Milton Keynes. They focused on the use of glottal stops (among other similar things) and found that the middle-class cohort used them much less frequently than the working class. They also found the following grammatical variables, almost exclusively used by the working-class adolescents, while the middle-class groups use standard forms.

- Double negatives (I don't want nothing).
- Non-standard use of was (We was).
- Non-standard use of were (He were).
- Non-standard use of don't (He don't).
- Non-standard use of come (She come here today).
- Non-standard use of done (He done that today).

-Non-standard use of relative pronouns (the house what we saw, rather than ‘that’).

-Non-standard use of them (look at them cars).

Bernstein (1971) suggested that working class children were being educated, so that they operated with a ‘restricted code’ in language using:

-fewer adjectives and adverbs

-a greater reliance on repeated ‘stock phrases’ and clichés.

-sympathetic circularity (It’s only natural, isn’t it?).

-looser (non-standard) syntax.

-simpler coordination (mainly using and or bet).

-more reliance on pronouns rather than explicit references. (‘It’ rather than the specific thing).

-more focus on communicating attitudes and feelings.

According to him, middle class children were more likely to use an ‘elaborated code’ that included far more varied and meaningful words and phrases utilizing:

-standard (correct syntax)

-more subordinate clauses.

-more logical connectives (moreover, therefore, etc.).

-fewer minor (unfinished) sentences.

-more explicit references (rather than pronouns).

-more ‘imaginative’ or ‘original’ content.

-more focus on communicating facts and abstract ideas often associated with intelligence and maturity.

According to Labov (1973), the dominant social group displays overt prestige in its language usage and expectations to which others are assumed to aspire, while urban/working classes diverge from that, seeking prestige in the process of differentiating themselves from the dominant class. Many a time, language is used differently by different social groups, and there

is no way to speak in a completely neutral way that doesn't signal anything about one's identity.

Some styles have been adopted to identify people within a certain prestigious class. For example, most traditional prescriptive grammars were invented to group people within a social class. Some of the grammatical rules were created so that English will resemble Latin and French, which were highly esteemed, then. Most of these things have nothing to do with grammar, but rather, signal prestige. In many cases, prescriptive grammar is used as a method of stigmatizing groups that speak non-standard types of English.

### **The danger of the elitist tendency**

Fluency and proficiency in the usage of the English language have erroneously become standards for the assessment of intelligence and instruments of social placement. People who can read and write the English language fluently are accorded a certain level of prestige and recognition. Language prejudice, invariably, has imposed some social dangers, where those who do not speak the English language are utterly relegated to the back doors of social and intellectual engagements.

In South Africa, for example, the English language and Afrikaans have been institutionalized to foster national integration. But recently, there has been an overwhelming demand from (black) South African students that training programs be taught in English, to the neglect of their indigenous Afrikaans language (Webb, 2006). Many universities in South Africa have adopted the monopolization of the English language as a language of instruction and in such universities, the ESL students may have been excluded from developing to their full educational potential, leading eventually, to the non-promotion of

equity and redress (Webb, 2006). Therefore, in such universities, the use of the English language has become both inclusionary and exclusionary, with effective use of the English language being an identification mark for *bona fide* membership of the academic community. On the other hand, the superiority of a dialect of the English language is often perceived, based on its association with a certain social class or race (Ryan, 2014). Little wonder then, the English language has been associated with racial, geographical and class connotations. Irrespective of concerted efforts by the United Nations, UNESCO and indigenous governments to entrench the local languages into the entire co-operate live of many African nations, the adoption of African languages as official languages is still a work in progress. In 2018, the 10th anniversary of the United Nations' International Year of Languages was celebrated and the Pan South African Language Board, a constitutionally established body tasked with the promotion and development of the 11 official languages of South Africa, declared February the annual language activism month. It is worrisome that these awareness programs have not significantly and explicitly achieved their set objectives in Africa.

Therefore, Wolff (2018) opined thus 'one might expect a high degree of awareness in intellectual, academic and political circles with regard to issues of linguistic plurality and diversity. This, however, is far from the case.' Wolff further postulated that 'more than half a century after independence from colonial rule with its imposition of the language of the colonial master, the education systems in Africa might be expected to reflect this importance. Alas, they don't. Linguistic imperialism still prevails.' In many Anglophone African nations, intelligent students who are proficient in Language other than English (LOTE) struggle because the English language is the only

language of instruction, while in the developed countries, students are thought in their mother tongue.

On careful observation, Alidou and Mazrui (1999) asked ‘can there be genuine democracy in South Africa when prevailing post-apartheid institutions continue to foster forms of knowledge that continue to produce inequalities which continue to underprivilege the African majority? According to Alidou and Mazrui, ‘The forms of knowledge fostered is knowledge built on European culture and tradition and delivered in European languages. The forms of knowledge that could have empowered the underprivileged would have to be built on African culture and tradition and be delivered in African languages.’ Learning is enhanced when instructions are issued in a familiar language. According to Klaus (2001), “There appears to be general agreement that students learn better when they understand what the teacher is saying.”

In August 2015, the South African Government issued circular S10 of 2015, informing education authorities that mandarin would be thought in the schools starting from January 2016. Subsequently, the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union rejected the proposal because it considered it a subtle and ‘new form of colonization’. The government of South Africa argued that China was the biggest trade partner of South Africa and considered it invaluable for her young population to acquire proficiency in mandarin and develop a good understanding of Chinese culture (Nkosi, 2015). Unfortunately, nothing was said about the reciprocity of China in moderating their language curriculum to accommodate the interest of South Africa. The asymmetrical relationship between China, South Africa and probably other African nations, is a reflection of the extent to which Africans are willing to trade off their languages and

cultures for a morsel of meal. In many African nations, governments are enforcing and legitimizing the use of the English language without a commensurate attention to the local languages, for instance, in 2012, the Malawi Government issued the Education Act of 2012 that decreed that English would be studied and used as the medium of instruction from grade 1.

According to Rubagumya (2003), many private primary schools in Tanzania are using English medium as the language of instruction and many parents who prefer these schools have argued that the English language is a language of globalization, therefore, ought to be given more attention than the native language. Consequently, this has resulted in a shift from “siasa” (political education) taught in Kiswahili in secondary school to “civics” taught in English.

However, what most Americans, for example, consider as ‘proper English’ is simply the language spoken by the majority; since such dialects are spoken by the majority, they have wrongly been adopted as their dialect of choice (Vajda, 2014). Nonetheless, the minority are those who speak standard English. The implication of this misconception is that those in the minority face a lot of challenges with employment and other vital areas of life. Therefore, in many instances, people who cannot engage the English language the way the majority does, have problems finding jobs and ultimately have a higher rate of involvement in crimes (Vajda, 2014). Language prejudice has more far-reaching implications than we can imagine. When the society begins to judge the superiority of people based on the fluency of their English language, incorrect inferences are drawn and very unfair conclusions are made.

### **Indigenous languages’ conflicts**

The dominance of the English language over indigenous languages is traceable to linguistic imperialism, which in itself, is a consequence of colonization. It can be argued that since most of the countries have regained their independence, their native languages should also be decolonized. In many countries, the real challenge becomes the language of choice over the English language. Rather than resolve the hegemonic connotation of the English language, the conflict of linguistic ideologies perpetrates its dominance over the aboriginal languages. Within this conflict of linguistic ideologies, there have been systematic, deliberate and officially-sponsored designs of impositions of one native language over the rest in some linguistic communities. In all the nations where these conflicts were unresolved, the English language has continued to grow in scope and acceptance; this trend is utterly imperialistic and challenges the resolve of such linguistic communities. If two or more native languages struggle for acceptance and dominance, the comparative advantage is automatically conceded to the English language. Such communities or nations must seek and possibly design an acceptable national language, which must be a combination of the native languages.

In Nigeria, for example, the WAZOBIA concept was reasonably propagated, but technically failed because there was no political will to drive the project. In many countries, the decision to adopt the native language of the majority or the native language of the political or economic elites is an ongoing battle; this conflict of ideologies has made the supremacy of the English language unstoppable. Rather than develop a national aboriginal language, the language contact has resulted in the development of various Englishes, such as, Pidgin and Creole. These hybrid

languages, in themselves, are neither native nor standard, and are therefore restricted to the domains of informal communications.

The apparent dominance of the English language over indigenous languages, perpetrated by social labeling and the creation of an illusory picture of socio-political and economic values, can be argued not to have a far-reaching benefit, as popularly upheld. The advantages advanced by the English language cannot be compared to the danger of cultural and ideological cleansing which it portends. Indeed, Sir Winston Churchill described the alleged ‘value’ and ‘enhancement’ clauses enshrined in the French definition of colonialism thus: There has been no lack of critics, at home and abroad, to belittle Britain’s colonial achievement and to impugn her motives. But the record confounds them. Look where you will, you will find that the British have ended wars, put a stop to savage customs, opened churches, schools and hospitals, built railways, roads and harbours, and developed the natural resources of the countries so as to mitigate the almost universal, desperate poverty. They have given freely in money and materials and in the services of a devoted band of Civil Servants; yet no tax is imposed upon any of the colonial peoples that is not spent by their own governments on projects for their own good (Tregonning, 1960).

Contrary to the colonizer’s perspective, the colonized challenges the notion of a beneficial colonial legacy. Colonization is seen as bringing value and enhancement to the colonizer alone through the exploitation and oppression of the colonized. Therefore, a Ugandan historian; T.B. Kabwegyene challenged the European claim to colonial development thus; “The argument suggests that, on the one hand, there was exploitation and oppression but on the other hand the colonial governments did much for the benefit of Africans and they developed Africa. It is

our contention that this is completely false. Colonialism had only one hand – it was a one-armed bandit” (Boahen, 1987).

Generally speaking, colonialism “involves the direct territorial appropriation of another geopolitical entity, combined with forthright exploitation of its resources and labor, and systematic interference in the capacity of the appropriated culture (itself not necessarily a homogeneous entity) to organize its dispensations of power” (McClintock, 1992)

Colonialism is a “thoroughgoing, comprehensive and deliberate penetration of a local or ‘residential’ system by the agents of an external system, who aim to restructure the patterns of organization, resource use, circulation and outlook so as to bring these into a linked relationship with their own systems”(Brookfield, 1972).

Colonization, in its entirety, entails the subjugation of the colonized culture and languages and the conferment of supremacy to the colonizer’s culture and language, with the perception of the native culture and language as inferior to the colonizer’s. This, supposedly, may be accountable for the perception of people who do not speak English as uneducated and unintelligent.

Language and culture are inseparable therefore; if the language of a people becomes extinct, their culture and ideologies will be abrogated; if their culture dies, their whole identity will be lost. This consciousness had led to an increased advocacy for linguistic and cultural preservation, while retaining the benefits offered by the inclusion of the English language in the battery of acceptable languages.

Proficiency and fluency in the English language have become models of social stratification. In many countries, the proficient use of the English language has erroneously been

associated with intellectualism; this misconception is grossly misleading. Although it has been observed that different social groups use languages in different ways and that there is no way to speak in a completely neutral way that does not signal anything about identity, it can be argued that effective language use is a function of many other variables. It can also be argued that it connotes linguistic imperialism because both the native and English languages should be accorded equal prestige. Why would the fluent use of the English language connote intellectualism, prestige and class while the native language does not? Does it mean that all natives were unintelligent before linguistic colonization? These are frontline questions that must be addressed. This paper strongly argues that the English Language is alien and therefore, cannot be used for the assessment of intellectualism and placement of people into prestigious social groups. Nations must make concerted efforts to strengthen and sustain their native languages. In this regard, the present paper argues that though this might be an up-hill task because of the understandable roles the English language plays in social stratification and the already existing traditional stratifications in various communities, however, the socio-political profits are too enormous to be overlooked.

Intelligence and language proficiency, in many instances, have been linked, although their equivalence is strongly queried. Bonar (2005) has strongly argued that a connection exists between language proficiency and intelligence and indistinguishably relates the general intelligence or g-factor of intelligence to language proficiency, arguing that g-factor of intelligence correlates with inductive reasoning which stands as an intermediary and has strong affiliation with both intelligence and language proficiency and that language development depends

on mental development, while Jones (2006) posits that language proficiency in L1 is a positive predictor of reading achievement in L1.

Boyle (1986) quoted Oller to have asked; ‘what would be the implications if the g-factor turned out to be indistinguishable from global language proficiency?’. He further asked, ‘Is there any reason to suppose that the g-factor of intelligence so widely recognized by educational psychologists and psychometrists might actually be something other than global language proficiency?’ and therefore submitted thus; ‘Apparently, the g-factor of intelligence is indistinguishable from global language proficiency. Moreover, the relative indivisibility of the g-factor seems to hold for first and second language proficiency’.

In disagreement with Oller, Boyle (1986) referred to Carroll as accepting that ‘the correlation of general intelligence (g) with verbal ability will probably be high but maintains that it will be far from perfect because mental development can express itself in other ways than by language. Language proficiency tends to be related to ‘g’, but it is clearly distinguishable from it’.

The position of Carroll suggests that the possibility exists that language proficiency connotes general intelligence, but caution must be applied because the strength of this relationship is not ascertained and conclusions cannot be made without empirical and specific definitions of ‘language proficiency’ and ‘general intelligence’. Since these concepts have not been properly defined, it is therefore, misleading to hypothesize that one affects or depends on the other.

### **The Southeast Nigerian experiences**

The Southeast of Nigeria is the home of the Igbo people. While the origin of the Igbo people remains an ongoing study, some

schools of thought suggest that the Igbo originated from the Jewish State of Isreal while others opine that they migrated from the ancient kingdom of Egypt during the stone age era. Irrespective of their origin, it has been ascertained that they have an intriguing and very rich cultural heritage and have continued to play very active roles in the economic and political development of Nigeria.

The first contact between Igboland and Europe came in the mid-fifteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese. From 1434-1807 the Niger coast acted as a contact point between African and European traders, beginning with the Portuguese, then the Dutch and finally the English. The attempt to take over the political control of Igboland met with resistance and cultural protest in the early decades of the twentieth century (Slattery,n.d). Despite the resistances, protests and rich cultural heritage, the Igbo culture was not spared from the engine of western imperialism, hence, could no longer be the same again. Once the culture was desecrated, the language became polluted and began to suffer relegation.

Unlike the Northern part of Nigeria, where there were strong engagements and agreements with colonial educationists that children will be taught in their native languages alongside the English language, the Southeast did not perceive this as an instrument of linguistic and cultural preservation. This surmises the aversion of the north to western education and has enabled the northern children stick to their culture and language while learning the English language. However, According to Oke (2012) and Bamgbade (2012), the problem of using and promoting indigenous languages is more prominent in the Southern and Western Nigeria. The Igbo as a people are confronted with the daunting challenge of transmitting their

native language to the younger generation; a task which is more pronounced among ‘diasporans’. Therefore, Amunike (2016) queries ‘Will these children live overseas forever? Won’t the boys come home someday to live in their father’s compound? If the boys eventually come home, how would they manage in the midst of their kinsmen? Would they feel at home with them or would they feel like people in a strange land in their father’s land? Would they be able to communicate with them? Furthermore, many Nigerian indigenous languages are faced with a lot of challenges and their continuous existence is being threatened-----It is a known fact that in most of the educated elites’ homes, children are not encouraged to speak their mother tongues but English (Folorunso, 2016).This portends a generational disconnect in language transfer and may remain so for a long time if nothing is done about it. According to UNESCO (2012), ‘A language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/or stop passing it on to the next generation’.

Nwankwere, Mmadike and Eme (2017) cited the Nations Newspaper of November 2013 as reporting that 70% of children between 6-11 years and 90% of children aged 5 years and below are unable to speak the Igbo language. 50% of the Igbo parents in Imo State and 80% in Lagos State spoke mostly English or a mixture of English and Igbo to their children. The revelation is worrisome and calls for urgent measures to protect the Igbo language from extinction and Okolo (2015) captures it thus ‘A language dies when its speakers neglect it and do not care to pass it across to the upcoming generation’. Language development is tied to economic and technological development, therefore, for the Southeast to advance economically and technologically, it has

to battle remnants of colonial imperialism, liberate its language and re-entrench the Igbo language into the psyche of her indigenous people. Corroborating this hypothesis, Eme (2016), therefore avers that some under-developed societies achieved greatness and shot to limelight through their insistence on the use of their language in all their affairs, including education at all levels, politics, trade and commerce, science and technology'. The Igbo need to re-work their mentality and appreciate the uniqueness of every language to its natives. According to Usman (2014), 'Every language is special in its unique way...and endows this uniqueness on the social landscape where it flourishes. When the speakers of a language...abandon their language in favour of a more populous, prestigious, or economically viable one, they give up their birthright, since their language embodies their distinctive, self-defining civilization and symbolizes their exclusive contributions to human knowledge and development. When a language dies, an irreplaceable, intellectual and social wealth of the people also die, and the larger society's pool of educational, social and cultural values is diminished. The death of any language is a tragedy'. It is amazing that the Igbo language has significantly suffered regression in the hands of its owners. It is expected that, in commercializing their skills and trades, the Igbo will market their language beyond the national frontiers; this, unfortunately has not happened. The Igbo language, by all standards, qualifies to express the collective way of life of its people and foster effective communication within its speech community. Therefore, Obinna (2002) opines 'The Igbo language qualifies as any other in the world to express fully and wholly all concepts, precepts, phenomena and value systems embedded in the natural environment, philosophical, and socio-cultural existential localization. It is a living, growing and

expanding medium of communication which is capable of doing what any other one does’’. Several opinions have inferred that the Igbo language is on the verge of extinction and needs to be rescued from the claws of the English language which has dominated the linguistic space of the Southeast of Nigeria. Akponye (2007) therefore opines ‘The United Nations Organization (UNO) has conducted a research on the language being spoken around the world today in order to determine the longevity. Shockingly, Igbo is listed as one of the languages that will become extinct in the next Twenty-five years because it is losing vibrancy and dynamism’’.

### **Conclusion**

The dominance of the English Language over native languages is not as a result of sophistication or superiority, but a function of colonization. If the natives had colonized the British, the native language would have become the dominant language in Britain. It is therefore a social misnomer to ascribe intellectualism and class to proficiency in the use of the English language.

Although substantial arguments have been advanced for a link between general intelligence and language proficiency, the present paper argues strongly against these, and considers such postulations as grossly erroneous, while insisting that every linguistic community must strive to develop and propagate her native language. Irrespective of linguistic heterogeneity, nations must conceptualize effective and acceptable aboriginal national languages, in such a way that such native languages, in due course, can effectively compete with the English language. This remains the only sustainable approach towards linguistic decolonization.

## **Recommendations**

1. Nations must develop a sustainable program of indigenous language preservation to save their languages from extinction.
2. In multilingual communities, an integrative approach which embraces all the local languages should be adopted in the development of a native national language.
3. Native language education should be incorporated into the early childhood learning curriculum of schools.
4. Attractive incentives should be granted to pupils and students who do well in native languages during school examinations.
5. Political and opinion leaders in Igboland must declare a State of Emergency in the linguistic domain and create effective sensitization programs towards the revival of Igbo language.

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