

## Some Effects of L1 (Japanese) on L2 (English) Writing

Douglas JARRELL

The purpose of this paper is to investigate errors that were made by a group of first-year junior college students in an English composition class in order to see how their first language (L1), Japanese, has affected their production in a foreign language (L2), in this case English. By choosing examples of mistakes that were made and translating these mistakes back into Japanese, I hope to detect general patterns of errors that can then be dealt with in the classroom. I think that the error patterns discovered will demonstrate that students need to be made more aware of not only the linguistic but also the cultural differences between the L1 and the L2.

45 students in my composition class were assigned journals and asked to write 5 pages a week about any topic. These journals were collected after the first week, but the pages were only counted; the material went unread and no comments were made. They were collected again three weeks later and read thoroughly; at this time comments were made only on the content. By this time most students had written between 15-20 pages. Once the journals were returned, students had to write for 2 more weeks. It was from this last 2-week period that I took my examples because I assumed that they had worked out some of the awkwardness usually associated with performing a task for the first time. I hoped that what was to them a heavy writing load had by this time forced them to write more quickly, without constant reference to a dictionary. In spite of the pressure of time and my instructions to rely as much as possible on their known vocabulary, students did make use of their dictionaries so, inevitably, many of their mistakes reflect this situation.

James H. Webb, in his *121 Common Mistakes of Japanese Students of English*, has already done a lot of the footwork on this subject and I owe a great deal to his research and the ideas behind it, but I'd like to point out that whereas Webb has chosen to deal with any common error, my research is focused on how the students' L1 affects their L2 production. I have ignored spelling mistakes because, aside from foreign loanwords that have come into Japanese, misspelled words cannot be explained by direct influence of the L1. When the examples I give come from Webb's book, this means that I've also run across the same mistaken usage in my first-year students' journals but I find his example more appropriate. I have avoided any of Webb's examples that I couldn't find in my sampling of the 45 students' journals. For the sake of simplicity, I have restricted myself to *The Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus* mentioned in the bibliography. All quoted English definitions are from this source.

I have purposely avoided dealing with the problems that the use of articles and plurals pose to Japanese learners. Mistakes can arise from what is called "avoidance", the

tendency of non-natives to avoid using a linguistic structure that doesn't exist in their own language. However, the particular difficulty that the use of articles and plurals in English presents to students in whose L1 they don't occur is such a large problem that I won't go into it in this paper.

Many of the mistakes presented in this paper may be due to the student's lack of dictionary skills. There are often two or more translations of a single word, and yet many students will pick the first definition they see and insert it into the sentence. Imagine the composition teacher's surprise when confronted with the following: "My boyfriend didn't have any money last weekend because he spent too much money on his dress." Looking up "fuku" in the full-size *Kenkyusha's New Japanese English Dictionary*, we find in this order the following definitions in English: (1)"dress", (2)"costume", (3)"wear" and finally (4) "clothes". Admittedly the first three definitions were preceded by the word "fukuso" in brackets and examples are given below with definition #4 such as "fuku o kiru" = "put on/wear clothes", but there is a problem with the order of translations which would lead one to believe that "dress" is the most common usage.

Another reason for errors may be that once an English equivalent has been learned for a Japanese word, students have the impression that they know how to translate that particular word. They assume that the chosen word has exactly the same meaning and nuance as the Japanese word it is replacing. I, myself, have experienced this difficulty in Japanese. Once I used the only word I knew (and I assumed there was only one) to indicate my disagreement with one of my former employers. Unfortunately the words that I chose, "Shochi shimasen", gave me an imperious tone. I realized later that I should have used "Nattoku dekimasen" (which would have shown the proper deference of employee to employer). This distinction, however, cannot be understood by looking up the words in the average dictionary. *Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* gives the definition for the first as "consent; assent; agreement; compliance" whereas for second it gives "assent; consent; compliance". Even while writing this paper, I made the mistaken assumption that the phrase "get a driver's license" would be translated as "untenmenkyosho o toru" until I was corrected by a native Japanese speaker who pointed out that "untenmenkyo o toru" is the correct form. Japanese makes a distinction between the abstract meaning of "permission" and the physical meaning of the card which are combined in the one English word, "license".

One of the difficulties of translating an idea into another language seems to come from learning how to weigh the strength or the intensity of a particular word. I will list below examples of words that are commonly misused because students do not realize how strong or weak the English translations are.

Example 1: "They were delicious (so) I was *satisfied* with them."

おいしかったから満足でした。

"Satisfied", the first definition in any Japanese-English dictionary, has a more neutral tone than the Japanese word, "manzoku". The English word indicates a feeling of sufficiency rather than one of pleasure. To show that the writer is actually happy with the

meal, he or she must add a modifier before “satisfied” such as “completely.” Otherwise the reader will think that the writer is unimpressed with the delicious meal and must be leading a pampered lifestyle in which even the best things don’t excite her.

Example 2: “The meal was very *delicious!*”

食事はとてもおいしかったです。

In this case “delicious” is much stronger than the Japanese word nearest in meaning, “oishii”. As Webb points out, there are a number of adjectives in English which Japanese learners assume are equally in need of “very”, words such as “terrible”, “wonderful”, “enormous” and “exhausted”. However, if an English-English dictionary is consulted it becomes evident that each word already contains the idea of “very” or “completely”. “Delicious” is defined as “very appealing, especially to taste or smell”; “terrible” - “very serious or extreme”; “wonderful” - “extremely fine, excellent”; “enormous” - “unusually large in size”; and “exhausted” is paired with “worn out” and “used up”, two idioms where “out” and “up” indicate “completely”. Modifying these words with “very” creates an unnatural redundancy.

In the following example, the translation used is too strong emotionally and is also idiomatically inappropriate for the context:

Example 3: “I was *moved* by the (soccer) game”

サッカーの試合には感動した。

Generally we are “moved” by something that “arouses affection, pity, or compassion in” and not by something that arouses excitement. Therefore we can say “I was moved by the film” if it’s a love story or a tragedy but we cannot in the case of an adventure story or a thriller. Because the Japanese word, “kando suru,” has a broader range of nuance, it can be applied to many situations where someone’s emotions are put into play.

In many instances learners are confronted with two or more possible translations for a particular word when they look it up in the dictionary. They must distinguish between the most common translation (which they may already know) and the translation appropriate in a specific case. In the case of English and Japanese which are structurally, lexically and idiomatically different, direct word-for-word translation is impossible; a phrasal knowledge of the language is what is really needed. In spite of the various translations given for a single word in their dictionaries, many learners assume that one English word can be suitably substituted for each Japanese word. Below is a long but by no means complete list of this type of mistake.

Example 1: “*How* do you think of them?”

どう思いますか?

The question word “Do” is often translated as “How?”, e.g. “Atarashii uchi wa do desu ka?” which means “How is your new house?” or “Tennis wa do desu ka?” which means “How about a game of tennis?” The students who have learned these usages of “how” feel no need to use the dictionary. They are sure that they already know the correct translation.

Example 2: “I want to *take* a car license quickly.”

運転免許速く取りたいです。

In many cases this Japanese verb would be translated as “take”, but learners should be wary whenever they encounter a common verb followed by a long list of possible definitions. Due to the frequency of this mistake among my students, I assume that they have not consulted their dictionaries carefully and have relied on their previously acquired knowledge to make this sentence.

Example 3: “I have to *drink* medicine.”

薬を飲まなければなりません。

The Japanese verb would usually be translated as “drink” except that in this case it is idiomatically incorrect. “Take” is the verb that must be used with “medicine”.

Example 4: “She is *making* leeks and cherry tomatoes.”

葱やミニトマトを作っています。

As in examples 2 & 3, the verb would usually be translated a different way. In this case, however, it is idiomatically correct to say “grow” rather than “make” when talking about plants. “Make” implies creative activity, “to bring into being by shaping, changing, or combining materials, ideas, etc.” and indicates action whereas “grow”, although implying some activity, retains a certain ambiguity because of its dual nature as both a transitive and intransitive verb. Compare the two uses in the following examples, “They grow potatoes in Idaho” and “Potatoes grow well in Idaho.”

Example 5: “I want (a professional soccer player) to *take an active part* (in games this season).”

かれにもっと活躍してほしい。

In politics we can say “I hope he’ll take a more active role” meaning that we hope for greater involvement by him in a political movement or in a particular issue. In the above example the writer wants her favorite player to be out on the field playing more games. The English phrase deals with the unmeasurable concept of “involvement” while the Japanese phrase encompasses the measurable concept of playing more games as well. For this reason we would normally express the thought in example 5 more directly, e.g., “I want him to play more often.”

Example 6: “I couldn’t fall asleep *early*.”

早く眠れませんでした。

The context makes it clear that the writer means “right away” or “quickly” when she says “early”. Because the Japanese word for all three is “hayaku”, the learner is asked to make a distinction where one doesn’t exist in her native language. Unless all three possibilities are pointed out to her and the meaning and situational appropriateness of each is explained, she will be unable to determine that “right away” and “quickly” both mean “within a short period of time” whereas “early” means “before the expected time, in the first part of a period (of time)”.

Example 7: “It is very *severe* for me!” (The writer is speaking of not having any money.)

私にとって厳しいです。

“Severe” is used to modify nouns rather than to describe a general situation using “it”, i.e., “severe weather conditions prevented them from climbing Mt. Everest” and “he had to

go through a severe test of strength". It is defined as "rigorous in treatment of others", "serious", "hard to perform". While the Japanese word is suitable in other situations, "(Not having money) is *hard* on me" is the natural way to translate example 7.

Example 8: "...lost my way so I *heard* various people."

道に迷ったので沢山の人に聞きました。

If the reader knows that "hear" and "ask" can be translated by the same word, it is obvious from this context that "heard" should be "asked". This demonstrates again how difficult it can be for the learner to distinguish between two foreign words whose meanings exist within one word in the student's native language. Webb brings up other Japanese verbs that can be translated two ways and that, as a result, are often used incorrectly: "oshieru" can be translated as either "tell (someone your name)" or "teach (someone the piano)" and "fuku o kiru" can be translated as either "put on clothes" or "wear clothes". Another similar example that doesn't appear in Webb's book is "neru" which can be translated either as "sleep" or "go to bed".

Example 9: "But there were tickets *yet*."

まだチケットがありました。

In this case the correct sentence would read, "But there were still tickets." The Japanese word combines the meanings of "yet" and "still" so that, as in example 6, the student must choose one or the other side of what to her is an undivided concept.

Example 10: "I had a *promise* to go out with my classmates."

クラスメイトと出かける約束がありました。

"Date" or "appointment" would be appropriate in this sentence. "Promise" is usually used with "give" in the phrase "give me your promise that you will..." As *The Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus* says, it is "an assurance *given* by one person to another agreeing or guaranteeing to do or not to do something." An appointment, on the other hand, is "an arrangement to meet a person or be at a place at a certain time." If the verb had been used, however, as in "I promised to go out with my classmates," the sentence would be grammatically and idiomatically correct.

Another problem facing the Japanese learner of English is more of a cultural than a linguistic barrier. Because a word exists in their native language, learners assume, understandably, that there must be a translation for it in English. Attempts are made to translate words into English that have no cultural meaning in the West. There is also a reluctance, at an early stage of language learning, to use general English words for Japanese words that have a narrower meaning even though the context renders such detail superfluous.

Example 1: "...my *seniors* in college..."

大学の先輩……

Because society in English-speaking countries is not based on age hierarchy, translations that don't take this account tend to be idiomatically awkward. In example 1, the statement is incomprehensible to the reader who knows nothing of Japanese society. A "senior" is indeed "older in years" as in the following example: "He is my senior by 3

years”, but this has no connotation of a relationship between the two people that the Japanese term implies. A more likely interpretation of the above example, in American English at least, would be “student in the last year of school or university.” In order to avoid this confusion the student should use a term less likely to be misconstrued such as “students at my college” or “friends”. Because age is not a factor in many Western relationships there is no need to mention it, and in fact any attempt to insert age into the sentence, because it is irrelevant, adds confusion.

Example 2: “I think that *member of society* is very hard. Because they must work all day.”

社会人は大変だとおもいます。一日中働かなければならないからです。

The West doesn't make the clear-cut distinction between college students or high school students and those who have graduated and have started a full-time job. Therefore “member of society” is, like “senior” in the previous example, a poor, or worse, an incomprehensible translation. A “member of society”, if it is even natural English, may imply adulthood, but it lacks the idea of a contrast with non-working people that the writer obviously wants to make. A more effective way to get the idea across would be to replace the noun with the noun clause, “having a full-time job”.

Example 3: “I *think* I am sorry about it” (she couldn't make any friends)

残念だと思えます。

“I *think* I want to enjoy camping as much as possible.”

できるだけキャンプを楽しみたいと思えます。

When we use “think” + the present tense, it means that we aren't sure, as in “I think he's at home,” or “I think I have my key. Let me check.” Used with “want” or the “going to” future it can mean that a decision is being made as in “I think I want to go home now” or “I think I'm going to buy it.” The writer in example 3 is not trying to indicate any doubt nor is she coming to a decision, so the kind of construction here can only be a direct translation from the Japanese in which a soft, indirect way of speaking is considered appropriate. In English the writer will be judged wishy-washy and indecisive.

Example 4: “What is the *teacher's* plans?”

先生のプランは?

Speaking directly to the teacher using “you” and “your” would be considered rude in Japanese whereas it's the proper way to address someone in English. Use of a title and the 3rd person singular instead of “you” can only be found in conversations from a distant past based on feudal lord/vassal relationships as in “Will the master be dining at home tonight?”

Another kind of mistake that learners make is what has been called “avoidance.” Words necessary to an English sentence are avoided because there are no such words in the learners' native tongue. The learner either doesn't know how to use or, consciously or unconsciously, avoids using words or phrases that she feels uncomfortable with. I will cite several examples here.

Example 1: “We *enjoyed very much.*” (see Webb, #25)

とても楽しかった。

As Webb points out, “enjoy” must always be followed by an object, be it a noun as in “the party”, a pronoun such as “ourselves”, or “.....ing” as in “I enjoyed talking to her.” In Japanese, however, the word “tanoshii” requires no object and so learners frequently neglect to add the object necessary in the English translation.

Example 2: “During the war *food was little*, but now *food is much*.” (see Webb, #61)  
戦争中、食べものは少なかったが、今は豊かになりました。

When describing amounts in English we usually use “there is/are” or the impersonal “we/they have”. Low-level learners don’t try to incorporate these forms in their work and, in the process, end up separating the quantitative adjective from the noun it’s modifying. Certain quantitative adjectives such as “few”, “little” and “much” must be together with the noun as can be seen in the corrected sentence below, “There was little food during the war, but now there is a lot.”

Example 3: “...but recently I became tired. So I think I *quit* it (my part-time job).”  
だから辞めると思います。

I have found several examples of this construction, “I think” + simple present, where the future is necessary in English but isn’t used. The same writers have used the future tenses in other parts of their journals so they aren’t ignorant of those tenses; they are avoiding them because they don’t realize their necessity.

“Gairaigo” or other foreign words which have been incorporated into the vocabulary of Japanese have been a major source of confusion for learners and their interlocutors alike. Some learners often assume that because the words come from a foreign language, they must be English. Others who are more knowledgeable realize that English is not the only source of foreign words, but they do assume that Japanese words derived from English are used in the same manner in the original language as they are in Japanese. They consider the words to be bona fide English when, in fact, many have either changed their meaning or usage since they entered Japanese.

Example 1: “I *challenged* the entrance examination of Tokyo University.”  
東大入試にチャレンジしました。

“Challenge” is either a verb or a noun in English. The verb must be followed by a pronoun + “to” and is defined as “to invite or summon”. The noun is defined as “a call to engage in a fight, argument.” In the above example neither definition fits and yet the only definition given for it in *Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary* is the English “a challenge”. The Japanese word, as can be seen from the example, is actually used to mean “attempt something difficult” or “try your hand at”, but in natural English we would tend to rephrase the sentence to read, “I took the Tokyo University entrance examination.”

Example 2: “*Fight!*” (talking about her upcoming job-hunting)  
ファイト!

If we were to give ourselves this kind of pep cheer in English, we’d probably use “will” and say “I can’t become discouraged!” or “I’ll keep on trying!” “Fight” is only used with a similar meaning as a noun in the following example, “he’s got a lot of fight in him”. As a

verb it is unambiguous: the meaning is “oppose, struggle against”. It can only be interpreted as an army command in example 2.

English and Japanese are different not only lexically and culturally, but also structurally. Many English words are verbs as well as nouns, but learners have a tendency to use a word in only one way. They will choose the form closer to the structure of their own language. Even when English words are more commonly used as verbs than as nouns, learners consistently choose the noun forms because of their resemblance to Japanese structure.

Example 1: “...as long as *its taste is good*...”

味さえ良ければ……

English generally uses “taste” as a verb. The above example would be much more natural if it were “...as long as it tastes good.” “Taste” can be used as a noun when it is modified by an adjective such as “salty” or when we describe “the taste of something”, but the verb is preferred when it is a question of good or bad.

Example 2: “That *suit's cost was* about ¥12,800.”

あの服の値段は大体一万二千八百円でした。

Here either the verb “cost” or the noun “price” could be substituted to make this idiomatically correct: “That suit cost about ¥12,800.” or “That suit’s price was ¥12,800.” As with “taste”, we use “cost” as a noun when we modify it with adjectives as in “the high cost of medicine” and when we discuss “cutting costs”. We prefer to use the verb when we are stating prices.

Example 3: “Today *was heavy rain*.”

今日は土砂降りでした。

“Rain” and “snow” are most likely to be used as verbs in general statements about the weather, e.g., “It rained heavily today” or “It’s going to snow tomorrow.” When discussing the effects of the weather, we tend to use these words more as nouns, e.g., “The rain caused a flood...” or “My flight was delayed because of snow.”

Another structural cause of mistakes comes from attempts at direct word-for-word translation where the structure or the word order of the sentence has been taken directly out of Japanese and put into English without any significant changes.

Example 1: “I went to bed at *a. m. one o'clock*.”

am1:00 に寝ました。

This is a direct transfer of the positioning of “a.m.” from the Japanese. In English we would place “a.m.” after the number.

Example 2: “*It was* 3 classes today.”

今日は三クラスでした。

We would normally say that “we had 3 classes” today. “It is / was...” is the way to describe weather conditions or time but not actions.

Example 3: “*Let's* clean my room this Sunday.” (the writer is talking to herself in her journal)

今度の日曜日に部屋をかたづけよう。

I found a number of mistakes like this one so there must be a close association in many students minds between “shimasho” and other “-yo” forms in Japanese and the English “Let’s....” Evidently, the writers don’t realize that “Let’s” is an abbreviation of “Let us....” and use it to mean “I’m going to” or “I will clean....” as a promise to themselves.

Example 4: “I concentrate *my nerves*” (talking about preparing for a calligraphy class).

神経を集中する/させる。

“I like to *sing a song* at the karaoke box.”

カラオケボックスで歌を歌うのが好きです。

In the above example the objects of the verbs are necessary in Japanese. This leads learners to include the same objects in their English sentences which makes the sentences unwieldy and redundant. Here we have the reverse of the phenomenon of avoidance.

Example 5: “My part-time job was very *busy*.”

アルバイトはとても忙しかった。

A modifier which goes together with a particular noun in one language does not always go with the same noun in another language. A “busy” place indicates a crowded place with many people coming and going and a “busy” person is someone with many things going on, but a job doesn’t fit either case. The student should have said, “I was very busy at my part-time job.”

Example 6: “I felt very *humid*.”

私はとても蒸し暑いと感じました。

As in example 5, we have a modifier that doesn’t fit the subject. In this example the student should say that the *weather*, not a person, is humid. Another possibility, perhaps closer in feeling to the example, would be “It felt very humid.”

Example 7: “So *I think I can’t* go bike riding.”

だからサイクリングに行けないと思います。

In the case of the verb “think” + another verb, we make the negative by putting “think” rather than the other verb in the negative. The structure in example 6, although perfectly understandable, is unnatural. The student should write, “So I don’t think I can go bike riding.”

Example 8: “*I was a rubella*”.

風疹でした。

The English construction “we are” is usually used with an adjective, or when we do use “we are” + noun, we are talking about professions and other defining traits. We “have” a disease, or we can say “It was rubella” in response to the question, “What did you have?” In this case the student should have written “I had rubella”, or even more naturally, “I had the German measles” because that is the common layman’s term for this illness.

Example 9: “*It was 8:25 that* I went home.”

家に帰ったのは八時二十五分でした。

Although it would be difficult to call the example a mistake, it is not current English. We would usually say “I went home at 8:25.” The example owes its two-clause construction to Japanese

and not to English.

Finally I'd like to bring up the subject of bilingual dictionaries as one reason for the prevalence of mistakes in English. Students often choose the first definition in a list or use the most common translation of a word even when the context calls for a different meaning. That can be put down to poor use of a dictionary by the student, or to the teacher's failure to teach proper dictionary usage. That being said, dictionary editors still have a responsibility to point their users in the right direction. In the following examples they are doing a disservice to their users by providing translations illogically ordered, some of which are of doubtful veracity. I would like to mention, however, that there has been a considerable improvement in dictionaries in recent years. The increase in examples of usage should herald a reduction in the number of these kinds of mistakes in the future.

Example 1: "I started *associating with* my boyfriend last year." (see Webb, #48)

去年からボーイフレンドと付き合い始めた。

In the Second Edition of *Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* there are no common words at the beginning of the entry such as "dating" as a definition for "tsukiau". The first definitions listed, "keep company with", "associate with", and "hold intercourse with", sound antiquated. Native speakers are familiar with these usages from texts that were generally written before the turn of the century, but the definitions do not reflect modern usage. At the end of the same list there is finally a translation applicable to the writer's message, "to go [run] with", but it suffers from the lack of an example. The user is given no idea how to use it and can hardly be expected to choose it as the correct translation in the above example. On the other hand, newer dictionaries such as *Proceed* and even *Kenkyusha's New Little English Dictionary* list "go out with" and "date / have a date with" as translations, with examples to ensure that the learner understands the usage.

Example 2: "When I was a child, my father often *smacked my hip*." (see Webb, #82)

子供の頃、父が私のおしりをよくたたきました。

First of all, polite Japanese tend to bring up the subject of "buttocks" more often than is considered acceptable in the West. This may present a problem to editors, but not one to be solved using misleading translations. Many dictionaries carry "hip" as the first definition of "oshiri", but the English definition of "hip" is "either *side* of the body below the waist and above the thigh" (the emphasis is mine). *Kenkyusha* does provide an accurate translation, "the backside, the behind", but *Proceed* was the only dictionary I examined with an example indicating that "oshiri o tataku" is commonly translated as "spank".

Example 3: "My father is a mechanic."

父は機械工です。

In both the British vocabulary book, *A Way With Words, Book 1*, and the American English coursebook, *New English Firsthand*, a "mechanic" is defined as someone who repairs your car and who works in a garage or at a car dealership. Despite this consensus among the Americans and the British *all* of my students wrote down that a mechanic worked in a factory and repaired machines. Upon inspection of their dictionaries I realized that

only 20 percent even had "jidoshako" listed as a definition and it was inevitably at the end of the list. Small wonder that not a single student in a class of 50 came up with the answer that any native speaker would have automatically chosen. *Shogakukan's Progressive English-Japanese Dictionary* did have the definition listed under a subheading, "a garage mechanic", *Obunsha's Sunrise Dictionary* listed "a car mechanic" as a definition, and *Taishukan's Genius Dictionary* listed it under "a motor mechanic". In spite of improvement in the new dictionaries, however, the fact that they still place the most common definition last will continue to affect the student's choices.

In this paper I have tried to show how students' mistakes arise from (a) a misunderstanding of the strength of L2 words, (b) the difficulty of choosing the appropriate translation in the L2, (c) a cultural barrier that linguistic knowledge alone cannot transcend, (d) avoidance of unfamiliar or difficult structures in the L2, (e) the misuse of the numerous foreign words that have become part of the Japanese language, (f) the tendency to use words as nouns rather than as verbs, (g) direct structural implantation from the L1 to the L2, and finally (h) misleading dictionary definitions. In order to help Japanese learners improve their expressive ability in English, it appears that students should be given more guidance in choosing and using bilingual dictionaries so that they will buy ones with better examples, check each example to discover that particular meaning, and go on to make the correct choice in the L2. At the same time I hope that publishers will take the time to improve their dictionaries by consulting English-English dictionaries to compare their own translations with the English definitions and by consulting native speakers who can help to determine a more logical listing of definitions based on their frequency of use. Finally, students of a foreign language must be given a better cultural understanding in order to understand the non-linguistic components of the language.

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