

# A comparison of anger in Kenyan Sign Language and English

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the emotion ANGER in Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) and in English. It looks at the lexical range of words used in both languages to refer to this emotion, making note of some of the difficulties and misconceptions associated with lexical analysis of sign languages. It then gives a grammatical analysis of the words used to express ANGER, showing how these lexical expressions can be used within each language. It notes that emotion lexemes in KSL appear to be verbs and not adjectives. It discusses the metaphorical expressions used in each language to describe ANGER looking at similarities as well as cultural differences. Finally, it notes that the cognitive model for how anger is understood in each of these language communities appears to be very similar.

*Keywords:* anger, Kenyan Sign Language (KSL), metaphor, prototypical cognitive model.

## 1. Introduction

Kövecses (2000) points out that emotions have both a universal aspect and a culturally specific aspect to them. Much of what is universal in our understanding of emotions has to do with the physiological similarity our bodies undergo when we experience an emotion. The culturally diverse understandings of our emotions occur as we attempt to understand our emotions and explain them appropriately in a given time or culture. “The generic or schematic structure of the concepts seems to be shaped by possibly universal aspects of human physiology in anger, which structure is, at the same time, given differentiated specific-level contents by particular modes of cultural explanation.” (Kövecses 2000:169).

This paper looks at the prototypical emotion, ANGER, in both KSL and in English. It considers the great amount of similarity to be found in the conceptualization of this emotion and the metaphors used to discuss ANGER in these two languages. It also looks for culturally specific understandings and descriptions of this emotion.

Anger is a normal emotion with a wide range of intensity, from mild irritation and frustration to rage. It is a reaction to a perceived threat to ourselves, our loved ones, our

property, our self-image, or some part of our identity. Anger is a warning bell that tells us that something is wrong. (Public Broadcasting System).

Anger is something that can seem to happen to us spontaneously. It is something we experience. It can also be something we dwell on, feed, and participate in. In the next section of this paper we will look at the lexical expressions used in relation to the emotion ANGER in both English and KSL.

## 2. Lexical analysis

Studying the lexical expressions of a sign language can be a bit misleading if you are not careful. Your results will be greatly affected by how you determine a lexeme. What is a lexeme being inflected and what is a completely new lexeme? Because of the nature of sign language, gesture and facial expressions radically affect the meaning of a basic lexeme. For example, the sign “angry” and the sign “sad” are very similar apart from the change of facial expression. I believe these should be considered two separate lexemes. The non-manual facial expression is a part of the sign itself. However, the sign “angry” and “furious” are also very similar. In this case, the facial expression is more intense, with eyes almost closed for the word “furious” and the head is turned all the way to the shoulder and the sign is larger. But do these non-manual additions to the sign create a new lexeme or are they more like an adverb indicating intensity within the initial lexeme? For this very reason it can often seem that sign languages have a smaller vocabulary than many spoken languages. For the purposes of this paper I am going to consider the above example to be one lexical unit. I will then describe how modifications to this lexeme affect the meaning.

There are five fairly common signs for ANGER in KSL. Each of these signs can be inflected for grammatical reasons or for the purpose of showing intensity. I will describe them below and then for the remainder of the paper refer to them by the number associated with their description.

### (1.) Flat hand (Open B handshape<sup>1</sup>)

Palm up starting at the front of the body near the waist and rising upward.



**Figure 1.** ANGER: To be frustrated or annoyed

I would typically gloss this sign in its most basic form as ANGER. It can be inflected in several ways. The speed of the hand rising along the chest affects the meaning. A slow continuous movement up the body indicates a steadily increasing anger. The sign can also be preceded by an intake of breath, followed by a sudden upward movement. This indicates a very rapid outburst of anger and is usually followed by a physical action of revenge or retribution. The motion of the sign can also happen multiple times. The hand would rise up at a medium speed and then return back down to the starting point and repeat this process several times. This can indicate the idea of brooding over the anger or stewing, as we might say in English. Within each of these variations additional changes to the facial expression can indicate different degrees of intensity. The most basic form of the sign in each case seems to be accompanied by an opening of the mouth and a squinting of the eyes. Sign 1 sometimes uses one hand and at other times uses two hands. This appears to be predominately stylistic and to not change the meaning of the sign.

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<sup>1</sup> The designations given to handshapes in this paper are taken from the 40 standard handshapes used in ASL.

**(2.) Hand coming to the forehead like a claw (C Claw handshape).**



**Figure 2.** ANGER: To feel frustration, indignation or annoyance

I have glossed the basic form of this sign as ANGER. When eliciting signs for ANGER this sign was always the first sign given. For this reason, I consider lexeme 2 to be the most basic. It can be inflected in various ways for intensity. The head is often turned to the side to increase intensity and the mouth is sometimes opened wide. The sign can also be initially slowed down and slightly enlarged to increase intensity. If the sign has undergone these changes it might be glossed as FURIOUS or ENRAGED.

**(3.) Hand like a claw (C Claw handshape) against the body rising from around the waist upwards.**



**Figure 3.** ANGER: Intense anger

This sign, like the first sign, can be signed with either one or two hands with little effect on the meaning of the sign. I would gloss the basic sign as ANGER. The motion of this sign is very similar to that of sign 1 and the handshape is identical to that in sign 2. The motion within the two signs is certainly related as both metaphorically point to the body filling with a rising substance. It is less likely that the use of the same handshape in signs 2 and 3 shows any connection between the two words. Handshapes are essentially the phonemes of sign language.<sup>2</sup> In the same way that two words containing the letter A are not any more or less likely to be related, two signs using the same handshape need not be related. The same claw handshape is used in the KSL sign for ORANGE. Sign 3 can be inflected with a fast upward motion to indicate a sudden burst of anger. The sign can also pause momentarily when the hands reach the starting point of the sign before thrusting upwards. This also indicates a degree of intensity. With these inflections it would probably best be glossed as FURIOUS or ENRAGED. The sign can also be slowed down and the hand slowly moved up the chest. This would roughly translate to the English idea of seething anger.

**(4.) Two hands with index fingers pointing upwards (D handshape) facing inwards against the body moving up and down.**



**Figure 4.** ANGER: To burn with anger

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<sup>2</sup> “The smallest units of language in spoken language are called *phonemes*. In signed language, each sign consists of the five basic parts, called *parameters*, in which each of the five parameters has its set of *primes*. Each ASL sign (or word) consists of all these parameters: handshape, movement, location, palm orientation, and non-manual signal/marker.” (Basic ASL linguistics)

I would probably gloss this sign as BURNING WITH ANGER or FURIOUS. It can be intensified by increasing the speed of the up and down movement of the hands. There is also a leaning forward posture to the body and a slight downward tilt to the head.

**(5.) Two hands pinching fingers to thumb (O Flat handshape), held like you might hold a teacup, with the tips of the fingers against the outside of the forehead moving together to the center of the forehead.**



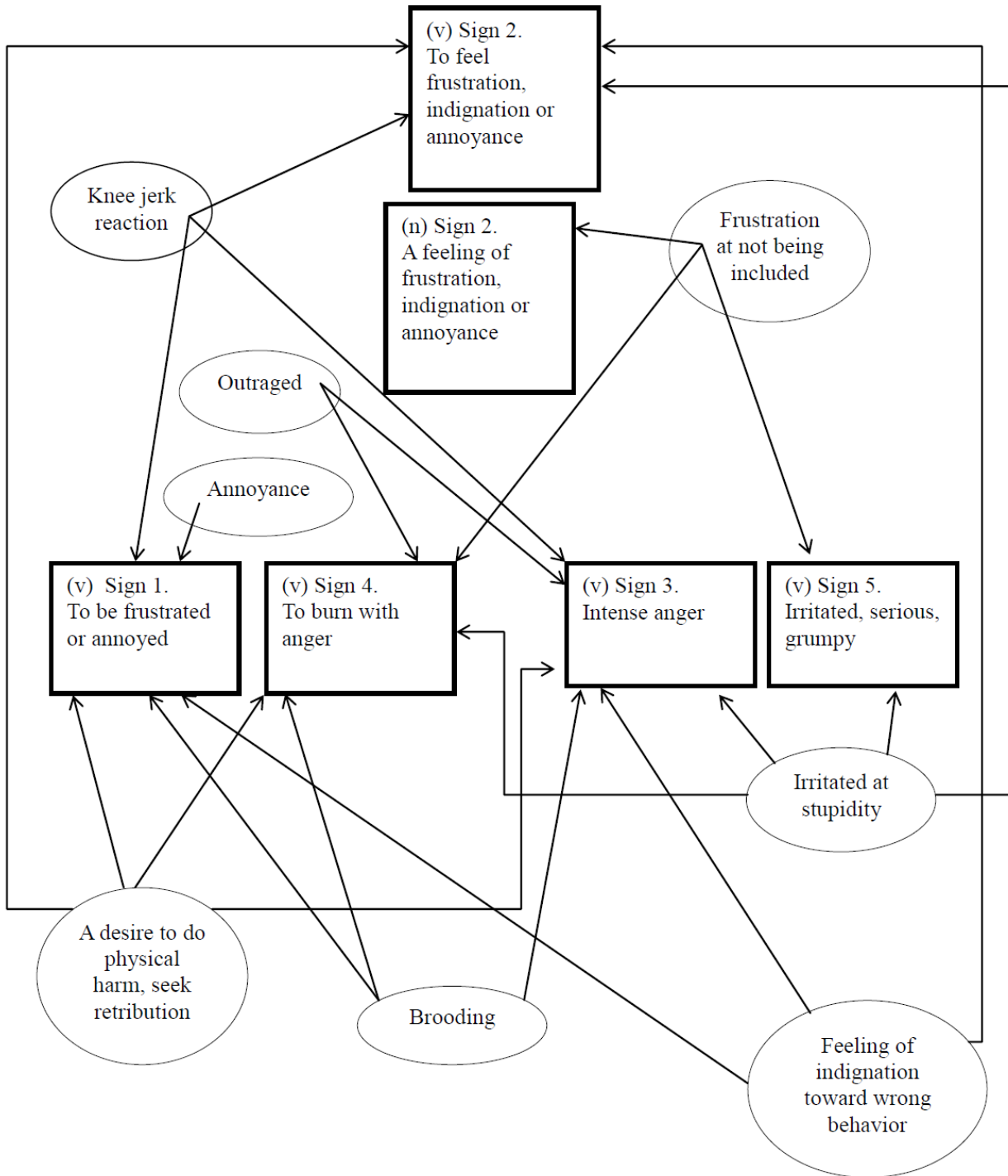
**Figure 5.** ANGER: Irritated, serious, grumpy

This sign could be glossed as ANGRY or IRRITATED or even SERIOUS. It is a metonymic lexeme using the wrinkling of the forehead to stand for the whole emotional attitude.

English has numerous lexical expressions for the emotion of ANGER. The most prototypical lexeme used for the concept ANGER in English is the word anger. Other ANGER lexemes include frustration, fury, wrath, annoyance, lividness, vexation, madness, aggravation, exasperation, rage, and ire. Unlike KSL, where each sign can be inflected to add intensity, in English many of the words themselves carry an internal intensity.

The following page provides a basic semantic network for these five KSL signs for ANGER based on my interpretation of the gathered data. However, it is difficult to accurately show the meanings of each lexeme when they can all be so dramatically altered by how the sign is inflected.

## Semantic Network for KSL ANGER lexemes



### 3. Grammatical analysis

Each of the five KSL signs for ANGER mentioned above can be expressed as nouns. When the sign is a noun the facial expressions accompanying the sign are less intense (the mouth only slightly open) and the eyebrows may be raised (rather than squinted) to indicate that the lexeme being signed is the topic.

1) IN CHURCH<sub>i</sub>; THIS<sub>i</sub>, PASTOR PREACH ABOUT WHAT? ANGER (2.).

In church the pastor taught about anger.

Example 2) below is from the translation of Joshua 7:26. After Achan has been stoned the Lord turns from his anger.

2) NOW LORD ANGER (2.) DISSIPATE.

After this the Lord's anger dissipated.

The above KSL signs for ANGER can also be expressed as intransitive verbs.

3) KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR<sub>i</sub>; HEAR THIS<sub>j</sub>; ANGER (4.).

King Nebuchadnezzar heard this and he was/became angry.

To express the concept in example 4) English uses the copula “to be” along with the adjective “angry”. KSL does not use copulas. One criterion suggested for determining if a lexeme is an adjective with a silent copula or a verb is stated as follows:

If words with adjectival and verbal meaning have the same pattern of inflection (the same grammatical categories and affixes), then there is probably just one category of verbs. If they have completely different morphology, then there are probably two categories: adjectives and verbs. (Bickford 1998:198).

Using this criterion it seems that KSL only has the verbs category. KSL inflects for tense identically for ANGER and for WORK. In examples 4) and 7) any of the five lexemes discussed in this paper would work equally well.

4) PAST I ANGER.

I was angry.

5) PAST I WORK.

I worked.



Some KSL verbs can also inflect for aspect. In the case of ANGER and WORK, again both inflect in the same manner.

6) I WORK WORK WORK.

I worked over a period of time.

7) I ANGER ANGER ANGER.

I was angry over a period of time.

Example 8) from 1 Sam 17:28a shows David's brother angry after hearing David talking with the other soldiers. In English this concept can be described using a noun or using an adjective. The ESV translates this verse making ANGER a noun, "Now Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spoke to the men. And Eliab's anger was kindled against David." The NLT translation of this same verse uses an adjectival form of ANGER, "But when David's oldest brother, Eliab, heard David talking to the men, he was angry." KSL translated the same verse with ANGER being talked about in a verbal form.

8) DAVID HIS BROTHER<sub>i</sub>; BORN FIRST THIS<sub>i</sub>; SEE ANGER (2.).

David's eldest brother saw this and was angry.

Example 9) is from Exodus 32:10a. God is angry with the stubbornness of the Israelite people to the point that he is ready to destroy them. In five English translations of this verse some nominal form of ANGER is used. KSL however uses an intransitive verb.

9) I ANGER (2.) WITH PEOPLE<sub>i</sub>; THESE<sub>i</sub>.

I am angry with these people.

In English ANGER is also able to take a verbal form. In example 10) ANGER is expressed using the lexeme rage. In this example "raged" is an intransitive verb.

10) John raged around the room.

ANGER can also be expressed using a transitive verb in English. In example 11) the lexeme "anger" is a transitive verb.

11) The cat angered John.

In English certain ANGER lexemes are able to be both transitive and intransitive (e.g. grieve) while others can only be expressed in a transitive form (e.g. anger) and still others can only be expressed in an intransitive form (e.g. rage). All five of the KSL lexemes for ANGER discussed in this paper can only be expressed as intransitive verbs. I am not aware of any KSL ANGER sign which is able to be expressed as a transitive verb. Rather the stimulus of the anger is presented first and then the experiencer is shown to become angry. This format can be seen in example 12) below. Example 13) shows an alternate way to structure the sentence. A hypothetical question can be posed (thus placing the experiencer at the head of the sentence) and then answered, providing the stimulus. In examples 12), 13), and 14) any of the five lexemes discussed in this paper could be used to express ANGER.

12) MIKE<sub>i</sub> THIS<sub>i</sub>, DOG PESTER. THIS<sub>i</sub> ANGER.

The dog pestered Mike. He became angry.

13) MIKE ANGER WHY, DOG<sub>i</sub> THIS<sub>i</sub>.

Mike is angry because of the dog.

The mention of experiencer and stimulus above brings up the semantic roles associated with ANGER. Below are some additional examples of semantic roles in KSL.

14) JOHN<sub>i</sub> THIS<sub>i</sub> ANGER.

John is angry.

John = Experiencer

In example 14) in both English and in KSL John is the experiencer.

15) MOSES SEE ANGER (2.) WITH ISRAELITE PEOPLE<sub>i</sub> THESE<sub>i</sub>.

Moses saw and was angry with the Israelite people.

Moses = Experiencer Israelite people = Percept/Stimulus

In example 15) Moses is the experiencer because his anger is something that happens to him. He is aware of it but not necessarily controlling it and making it

happen. The Israelite people are the percept/stimulus because they are what are perceived and cause a psychological state.

In English it is possible to move the sentence around and say, “The Israelite people angered Moses.” In this sentence the Israelite people would be the agents and Moses would be the patient. This construction does not appear to be possible in KSL. This is because KSL only uses an intransitive verbal form for ANGER.

#### 4. Metaphorical expressions

Wilcox (2009:745) has noted that,

signed languages are expressed by handshapes, movements, and location, which themselves carry conceptual import reflected in the overriding iconicity exhibited by signed languages. The strong presence of iconicity in the lexicon of signed languages has created a smoke screen, sometimes leading linguists to confuse metaphor with iconicity.

Since this is the case it is especially important to be sure that there is indeed a mapping from a source domain onto a target domain.

Lakoff and Kövecses (1983) present a list of common metaphors in English used as vehicles with which to illuminate a target concept of ANGER. KSL is full of metaphor and uses many of the same metaphors associated with ANGER. Below is a list of some of these which overlap with KSL.

THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS  
 ANGER IS HEAT  
 ANGER IS THE HEAT OF FLUID IN A CONTAINER  
 ANGER IS FIRE  
 ANGER IS AN OPPONENT

At least three of the five KSL ANGER signs discussed in this paper employ the use of the metaphor THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS. In the signs numbered (1.) and (3.) above, the torso of the body is the container and the movement of the hand upwards along the torso indicates the rising of the ANGER within the container. Interestingly, the sign CALM is signed with two hands, one above the other palms down, moving slowly down the torso and again making use of the THE BODY AS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS metaphor.

Sign (4.) above also uses the CONTAINER metaphor. In the KSL sign for FIRE, two hands are held out in front of the body with the index fingers pointing upwards and the palms of the hands toward the body. The two hands are moved up and down and iconically to represent the flames of the fire. Sign (4.) moves the sign FIRE back against the torso of the body to indicate that the fire is internal.

It is even possible to use this metaphor with sign (2.) in the following way:

16) I ANGER FULL  
I am full of anger

It is likely that sign (2.) makes use of the THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS metaphor within the sign itself. If this is the case then the hand in the shape of a claw coming to the forehead indicates that the body is now completely full. One piece of evidence that would support this hypothesis is the following statement from the translation of Acts 7:54a. The NIV translates this verse, “When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.”

17) JEWISH COUNCIL<sub>i</sub> MEET THESE<sub>j</sub> HEAR ANGER (3.), ANGER (2.)  
The Jewish council heard this and were enraged

In the above example we see that sign (3.) is used indicating that anger is rapidly rising in the container and then sign (2.) indicates that anger has filled the container completely.

In the KSL signs (1.), (2.), and (3.) for ANGER it is clear that the metaphor ANGER IS THE HEAT OF FLUID IN A CONTAINER is being used. In sign (1.) and (3.) the hot liquid anger rises within the torso. In sign (2.) the fluid reaches maximum capacity in the container. Notably, sign (2.) has a slightly varied form in which, instead of the hand in the shape of a claw being brought to the forehead, the hand starts at the forehead and is rapidly pulled outward. This could certainly indicate that the pressure in the container has exceeded the capacity that the container is able to hold and is now bursting out of the container.

The metaphor ANGER IS FIRE is clearly seen in ANGER sign (4.) In this sign, the sign for fire is moved from the space in front of the body and is placed directly on the

body indicating that the fire is happening internally. This sign can be placed generally on the torso or more directly over the heart indicating a burning within the heart.

ANGER IS AN OPPONENT is another metaphor that KSL employs. In this case it is not directly within the sign but can be seen conceptually in the following statement:

18) JOHN HIS ANGER TRY TRY CONTROL  
John tried to control his anger

There are several English metaphors for ANGER for which I have found no evidence in KSL. These include ANGER IS COLD, ANGER IS DISTANCE, and ANGER IS INSANITY. It is probable that there are more metaphors used by KSL to map the concept ANGER. However, given my limited knowledge of the language and the limited corpus available for study, the examples above are what stood out.

## 5. Cognitive model

In the process of investigating metaphors and metonyms used to express the concept of ANGER in English, Lakoff and Kövecses (1983) found a convergence around “a certain prototypical cognitive model of anger.” They explained that this prototypical cognitive model does not exclude other models but, “all of the others can be characterized as minimal variants of the model that the metaphors converge on.” Kövecses (2000:160) presents their prototypical cognitive model for the folk understanding of ANGER in English as follows.

### 1 Offending event

Wrongdoer offends self.

Wrongdoer is at fault.

The offending event displeases self.

The intensity of the offense outweighs the intensity of the retribution (which equals zero at this point), thus creating an imbalance.

The offense causes anger to come into existence.

### 2 Anger

Anger exists.

Self experiences physiological effects (heat, pressure, agitation).

Anger exerts force on the self to attempt an act of retribution.

**3 Attempt to control anger**

Self exerts a counterforce in an attempt to control anger.

**4 Loss of control**

The intensity of anger goes above the limit.

Anger takes control of self.

Self exhibits angry behavior (loss of judgment, aggressive actions).

There is damage to self.

There is danger to the target of anger, in this case, the wrongdoer.

**5 Retribution**

Self performs retributive act against wrongdoer (this is usually angry behavior).

The intensity of retribution balances the intensity of offense.

The intensity of anger drops to zero.

Anger ceases to exist.

It is apparent given the metaphorical and metonymic expression used in relation to ANGER in the section above that the prototypical cognitive model of ANGER in KSL would look very similar to the model given above. Since I am not a native signer of KSL and the corpora of KSL is extremely small it is difficult to determine if there is any need for adjustment to this prototypical cognitive model. Several interviews I conducted with native KSL signers indicated that the above model works equally well for KSL. Since varying models exist within each cultural context it is nearly impossible to tell if the above model is the best possible prototypical model without further study. However, it is safe to say that it can be a useful tool as we consider ANGER in KSL.

## 6. Conclusion

As in all languages metaphor plays an important role in how KSL understands and talks about the world we live in physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually. Taking notice of these metaphors is helpful as we attempt to better understand the emotion ANGER globally and as we look to see how it is nuanced in a given culture. From the study conducted for this paper it appears that the concept of ANGER in both English and KSL is very similar. Both languages use many of the same metaphors as they attempt to speak about ANGER. They also appear to share a very similar prototypical cognitive model of ANGER.

As a larger corpus of KSL materials becomes available additional study will be both necessary and elucidating. Further study taken on by KSL native signers is also needed to help in this area for a better understanding of what is indeed prototypical within the KSL context.

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