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An Analysis of English Tense and Aspect

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Abstract
English tense and aspect can be a daunting subject not only for English language learners but also for their teachers. In order for educators to offer satisfying and comprehensible explanations, they must first have a firm grasp of the subject matter themselves. A fourfold division of time can lead to fairly precise definitions of the various tenses/aspects found in English. This categorization of time and the resulting analysis will hopefully shed some light on several predicaments that can ensnare educators.

Introduction
Invariably, English language learners in higher education institutions are adept at developing questions about tense and aspect that have confounded many an educator throughout the ages. They want to know the difference between the present perfect and the simple past. They ask about the meaning of perfect progressive verbs, and they wonder why the McDonalds’ commercial can say, “I’m loving it,” after they were taught that non-action verbs cannot use the progressive. These are only a sampling of the kinds of quandaries that arise. To resolve these issues, a theoretical framework concerning English tense and aspect must be established. Huddleston and Pullum (2001) suggest four categories of time that will be helpful to this end. The relationships between these categories will then be analyzed, and definitions for the various tenses and aspects of English will be given.

Discussion

Background
A multitude of systems have been developed to describe the tense/aspect of English. Binnick (1991) attributes the first truly scientific analysis of tense to Otto Jespersen (pp. 53-54). Jespersen presents a seven-way division of time using a straight time line. This division consists mainly of past, present, and future, but past and future are further subdivided into before-past/future, past/future, and after-past/future (Jespersen, 1924, pp. 256-257). Reichenbach (1947) reanalyzed Jespersen’s system by defining tenses in relation to three points of time: point of speech (S), point of the event (E), and point of reference (R) (p. 288). Later, Bull (1968) proposed a theory that describes four temporal axes of orientation: retrospective, anticipated, retrospective anticipated, and an axis from which a person can retrospect or anticipate (p. 23). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) write, “…most other accounts of English tense and aspect assume one timeline…. Bull forces us to make a conceptual shift and to think in terms of viewing the tense-aspect system as a resource for taking different temporal perspectives on actions, events, and states of affairs” (p. 162). All of the above systems lay a foundation for the theory of tense presented here.
With regards to aspect, linguists have had a difficult time agreeing on theoretical bases or even proper terminology. Some common divisions of aspect found in the literature are that of perfective (i.e., simple) and imperfective (i.e., progressive or continuous). Also, authors typically point to a distinction between aspect and *aktionsarten* (a German word that denotes the inherent aspctual content of a verb) (e.g., cf. Binnick, 1991, pp. 139-149).

The perfect has been treated both as a tense and aspect. Comrie (1976), who treats the perfect as an aspect, gives a list of four “types of perfect”: perfect of result, experiential perfect, perfect or persistent situation, and perfect of recent past (pp. 52-65). This classification provides a helpful list on some of the main ways in which the perfect is used.

**Four Categories of Time**

Huddleston and Pullum (2001) describe four categories that are needed to discuss time’s relationship to grammar: deictic time, time of situation, time referred to, and time of orientation. For the current discussion, deictic time will be called *time of speaking*. Although this is a less accurate description, it should help simplify the presentation of the theory. The first category, time of speaking (T₂), is the time that it takes to make a statement. For example, if one says, “I like chocolate,” the time of speaking is the two or three seconds it takes to make this statement. Time of speaking starts when the speaker begins uttering the sentence and ends when the speaker has completed the statement.

The second category is time of situation (T₃). This is the actual progression of time that an event occupies. The word *event* is being used loosely here to describe verbal actions and states. Therefore, the T₃ of the verb *walked* in “I walked to the store” began when the speaker started walking and finished when the speaker stopped walking and arrived at the store.

The third category, time referred to (T₄), is not so straightforward. T₄ is the time that a verb is specifically describing. This may sound very much like T₃, but there is an important distinction which does not become entirely clear until the progressive aspect is used. Consider the following example, “Charlie was watching a movie when Vanessa arrived.” The T₃ of the verb *was watching* is the time that Charlie pressed play on the DVD player up to either the end of the movie or until the time that Charlie stops watching the movie. The T₄ of this verb is a much shorter period of time. The speaker is simply talking about what Charlie was doing just before and also including the time of Vanessa’s arrival (i.e., watching a movie). Again, the actual situation of *was watching* includes the entire watching event, but the speaker apparently is not talking about this whole event.

The final category is time of orientation (T₅). This is a time to which another time is relating. This category is most visible when the past/future perfect or a nonstandard tense use is employed. For example, the past perfect refers to a time before another past time. In “Wayne had lost his scholarship before the end of 1997,” the losing of the scholarship happens before some time in the past (i.e., the closing of the year). Therefore, the end of 1997 is being used as a T₅ for the past perfect verb, *had lost*. Further examples of this category will be given at a later time.
Internal Time Differentiation of Verbs

Not only does time need to be categorized, but verbs (or more accurately, lexical contents) do as well (Klein, 1994, pp. 72-98). One way to categorize verbs is based on their internal time distinction or the lack thereof. Many verbs can be internally divided into two different time stages (pp. 85-94). This includes verbs such as arrive, exit, land, leave, start, etc. When a bus arrives, a change of state takes place: the bus is not at the station and then it is. This internal temporal distinction leads to labeling these verbs as two-state verbs, and the actual duration of the action is quite ambiguous. Another category includes normal action verbs; these are often called activities. This group includes verbs such as run, eat, wash, sing, etc. There is no internal time contrast in these verbs. The beginning of a run is basically the same as the end of a running action. These verbs also have a beginning time and an end time. Finally, there are also non-action verbs (i.e., stative verbs) such as hate, like, own, be, hear, etc.

Diagramming

To help explain the framework, it will be helpful to diagram sentences. The following conventions (modified from Klein, 1994) will be used.

Time:
T\text{sit} of a non-action verb: . . . . .
T\text{sit} of a two-state verb: . . . - - - -
T\text{sit} of an action verb: + + + + +
T\text{sit} of a negative non-action verb: x x x x x
T\text{sit} of a negative action verb: X X X X X
T\text{sit} has no boundary ...
T_k
T_r []
T_o {}

Tense

With the above categories in place, one is now able to define tense. Tense appears to be a morpho-syntactic verb form that has a relationally temporal meaning. Specifically, tense shows the relationship between T_r and T_o. First, tense in English is represented by morphology (i.e., the –ed ending for the past tense, the –s ending for third person singular simple present tense verbs, and irregular past tense forms such as ate (the perfect forms are not being discussed here as they will be studied later). English also employs syntactical methods to indicate various tense forms. For example, will and be going to are helping verbs used to show future time (and arguably future tense).
Morphologically, English has two basic forms, past and not-past (the future tense and the present tense both use the base form of the verb while the past uses a distinct form).
Semantically, however, English has three basic tenses: past, present, and future. The three tense system seems to have intuitive appeal, and it makes pedagogical sense since most students readily accept this model. For these reasons, a three-tense system will be employed in the current discussion.
Formal definitions of the tenses can be given at this time. The past tense indicates that \( T_r \) is before (or less than) \( T_o \). A simple way to represent tense relationships is through the use of mathematical/logic symbols. Therefore, the past tense means \( T_r < T_o \). The sentence, “Andy went to Ford Field,” is an example of this.

\[
\begin{align*}
[+ + +] & \quad \{\ast\} \\
\text{WENT}
\end{align*}
\]

In this example, \( T_r \) is less than \( T_o \); therefore, the past tense is used.

For the present tense, \( T_r \) intersects \( T_o \) at some point in time. Symbolically, the logic symbol for intersection can be used to represent this relationship: \( T_r \cap T_o \). “I have four cats,” is an example of a non-action verb in the simple present.

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots \ldots \ldots \{\ast\} \ldots \ldots \ldots \\
\text{H A V E}
\end{align*}
\]

Here, \( T_r \) intersects with \( T_o \). In other words, the time the speaker is talking about overlaps with the time the utterance is/was made. Scientific rules also use the simple present. For example, “Water freezes at 32° F.”

\[
\begin{align*}
[\ldots + + + + + + + + + + + \{\ast\} + + + + + + + + + + + \ldots] \\
\text{F R E E Z E S}
\end{align*}
\]

Notice that here the speaker is talking about all of time, which of course overlaps with the moment of speaking. Another typical use of the simple present is for generalizations or habits. The statement, “Mary drives to work,” means that basically each time Mary goes to work, she drives. This is a bit more difficult to diagram since the time of the situation is segmental (i.e., she is not in a constant state of driving to work, so there are pauses in the action). For the sake of simplicity, only a few of the driving events will be illustrated below.

\[
\begin{align*}
[+ + + + + + + \{\ast\} + + + + + +] \\
\text{D R I V E} \quad \text{D R I V E} \quad \text{D R I V E} \quad \text{D R I V E}
\end{align*}
\]

In this example, the time referred to is quite broad and includes time periods even when the situation of driving is not actually happening. In other words, even at moments when Mary is not driving, it is still true that Mary drives to work. However, the point is that in these uses of the present tense, \( T_r \) still intersects \( T_o \).

The future tense follows the same pattern as the past and present tenses and can be defined as follows: \( T_r > T_o \) (i.e., the time referred to happens after [or is greater than] the time of orientation). For simplicity’s sake, both will and be going to are here considered to constitute the future tense (although technically be going to is probably better categorized as prospective aspect [see Klein, 1994, pp. 114-117]). A standard example of the future tense could be, “I think that Jaime will ride with Cara to the party.”

\[
\begin{align*}
\{\ast\} & \quad [+ + +]
\end{align*}
\]

123
This diagram shows how the time referred to of *ride* comes after the time of orientation (which, in this example, is equivalent to the moment of speaking).

*Aspect*

Aspect, like tense, can be a very confusing topic, but it does convey underlying meaning.

Aspect presents (or views) a verbal event from various perspectives. Technically, aspect shows the relationship between \( T_r \) and \( T_{sit} \) (see Huddleston & Pullum, 2001, pp. 125-126). English has two aspects: *simple* and *progressive*. One way to understand aspect is through an analogy with a parade (J. Laansma, personal communication, 2000). There is a large parade making its way through the center of town. High above the parade, there is a blimp. The people in the blimp can look down over the entire parade route and see the assembly from start to end. However, down on the street level, the parade is far too long to see the entire line of participants. On the street, a reporter is describing what is in front of her to a camera. The simple aspect views verbal events in a manner similar to the observer in the blimp. The verbal event is seen as a complete whole (i.e., \( T_r = T_{sit} \)), so the time to which one is referring is equal to the actual time of the situation (i.e., one is talking about a whole situation). For example, “I *ran* the race” uses the simple aspect to show that the speaker is referring to the whole running event.

\[ \text{RAN} \]

Here, the diagram is attempting to indicate that \( T_r \) and \( T_{sit} \) cover the same time duration.

The progressive aspect (also called the continuous) views verbal events in a manner similar to a reporter on the street. The whole verbal event cannot be seen; only a small piece of the event is in focus. For example, in “I am running,” only a small piece of the running event is being viewed (i.e., the portion of the running that is/was happening at the moment of speaking).

\[ \text{AM RUNNING} \]

In this example, \( T_r \) is inside \( T_{sit} \) and is smaller than \( T_{sit} \). Using logic terminology, one could say that \( T_r \) is a proper subset of \( T_{sit} \) (i.e., \( T_r \subset T_{sit} \)). Consider an example that uses the past progressive: “I *was skiing* down the mountain when I fell and broke my leg.”

\[ \text{WAS SKIING} \]

This example illustrates how \( T_r \) is inside \( T_{sit} \) and smaller than \( T_{sit} \). The speaker is not talking about the entire skiing event. Only the relevant portion is being discussed (i.e., the time just before and including the falling event). Since only a small portion of the skiing event is of interest, the progressive aspect is used.
A peculiar feature of the progressive aspect is that it is only used with action verbs. For example, the non-action verb *to be* sounds strange in the progressive: *“I am being happy”* (the asterisk is used to indicate that this sentence is ungrammatical). However, a sentence such as *“You are being a jerk”* sounds much more natural. How is this possible? A probable explanation is that when verbs which typically have a stative meaning are used in the progressive, they are being used to describe an action with a meaning related to that of the state. In the example above, the speaker being in a state of happiness implies no action. However, when one is being a jerk, this actually means they are currently acting like a jerk, and therefore this implies an action.

**The Perfect**

With tense and aspect in place, the more difficult matter of the perfect can be discussed. The clarification of two points will help in this matter. First, the features that a verb acquires (e.g., the perfect, the progressive, etc.) have a basically unchanging nature (i.e., progressive aspect is the same thing whether it is joined with the present, the future perfect, the past, etc.). Second, the conventional labels for the twelve different tense/aspect combinations are slightly misleading. More specifically, three labels, present perfect, past perfect, and future perfect, are missing the important concept that all three of these forms also have the simple aspect and its meaning. Better labels would be *simple present perfect*, *simple past perfect*, and *simple future perfect*.

In order to make this second point clear in diagramming, another dichotomy must be made: T_r must now be divided into T_{r[aspect]} and T_{r[perfect]}. Up until now, each mention of T_r has been a reference to T_{r[aspect]}. This distinction can be seen in the sentence, “I have graduated from college.” The diagram below shows only T_{r[aspect]} since this feature has already been discussed. T_{r[perfect]} will be added in the example following the one below.

```
IN COLLEGE | OUT OF COLLEGE
-------------
GRADUATED
```

Since this is a diagram of a simple present perfect verb, the verb is using the simple aspect. The simple aspect means that T_r (now T_{r[aspect]} = T_{sit}). This has been shown in the picture above. Now think about the time to which the example sentence is actually referring. The time that this verb is actually referring to starts just after the graduation event and continues up to the moment of speaking and then ceases. The state of being out of college continues indefinitely into the future (assuming that this student does not return to college for further studies), but the time of *have graduated* does not continue. Therefore, T_{r[perfect]} trumps T_{r[aspect]} as representing the actual time to which a perfect verb refers. With perfect verbs, T_r aspect plays more of a background role, helping determine the placement of T_{r[perfect]}. Therefore, T_{r[aspect]} will be shown using standard print while T_{r[perfect]} will be displayed in bold to indicate its primary importance.

```
IN COLLEGE | OUT OF COLLEGE
-------------
GRADUATED
```
This illustration shows $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ starting just after the act of graduation (and hence, just after $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$), continuing up until $T_o$ and then stopping. The ellipses at the end of the dashes, indicating the state of being out of college, show that this state continues forever.

Finally, a technical definition for the perfect can be given. $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ starts at the right bracket of $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$ and continues until it fully includes $T_o$ and then stops. One might wonder why this definition has $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ starting after $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$ when it looks as if $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ is simply coming after $T_{s[i]}$. Perfect progressive verbs help show why the above definition appears to be correct. However, before attention is given to perfect progressive verbs, it will be helpful to first look at some examples of the simple past perfect and simple future perfect.

With the past perfect, two times of orientation become necessary (the second $T_o$ will be labeled $T_{o2}$). The following example will be diagrammed and then explained:

“Lucy had already left the hotel before the fire started” (both leave and start are two-state verbs, but only the actions will be shown to simplify the illustration).

```
aspect[+ + + + +]  HAD LEFT  I_{perfect}  {*}  
LEAVE                  {[+ + + + +]}_{2}  
STARTED
```

First, the past perfect uses the past tense to show that $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ is less than $T_o$ (here, $T_s$). That $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$, not $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$, is the relevant $T_r$ for the tense of perfect verbs should become clear in the discussion on the simple future perfect. $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$, following the basic definition for the perfect, starts at the right bracket of $T_{r[\text{aspect}]}$ and continues until it fully includes a time of orientation (i.e., $T_{o2}$) and then stops. What does all of this really mean? For starters, the past tense tells the listener that the time being referred to (i.e., $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$) is less than the time of orientation (i.e., the moment of speaking). Also, one can see that the effects of leaving (i.e., $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$) coincide and interrelate with the starting of the fire. In other words, Lucy’s leaving of the hotel was relevant because she was not there when the fire began. After the time of the fire, Lucy’s leaving is no longer a matter of importance; therefore, $T_{r[\text{perfect}]}$ comes to an end.

The future perfect uses two times of orientation as well. For example, “Rie will have written her thesis by 2010.” An interesting characteristic of this sentence, and many future perfect sentences, is its ambiguous nature as to the exact time of the situation. As with many perfects, precise timing is not of importance; it is the relationship of the perfect verb to a time of orientation that is often relevant. It is clear in the above example that the time of writing begins before 2010. However, assuming that the moment of speaking takes place in January, 2009, the writing event could have begun prior to the time of speaking (e.g., in 2008), at the time of speaking, or after the time of speaking (e.g., in December, 2009). To make this example more interesting, $T_{s[i]}$ will start before the moment of speaking.

```
aspect[+ + + + + + + + + + + +]  {2010}_{2}I_{perfect}  
{*}
```
WRITING | WILL HAVE WRITTEN

This example reveals the probable importance of \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) for the tense of perfect verbs. The verb is in the future tense. According to the definition of the future tense, \( T_r \) should be greater than \( T_o \). If \( T_{\text{aspect}} \) were the relevant factor for the tense of perfect verbs, one might expect the present tense to be used in this example since \( T_r \) would intersect \( T_o \). However, it seems much more likely that \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) is what is relevant to tense since, in the above diagram, \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) is greater than \( T_o \) and the future tense is used. Once again, \( T_{\text{aspect}} \) seems to play more of a background role as it helps show where \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) begins but does not itself relate to \( T_o \) to show a tense relationship. As previously mentioned, future perfects have two times of orientation. \( T_{o2} \) is the relevant time of orientation for the perfect. \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) starts at the right bracket of \( T_{\text{aspect}} \) and continues until it includes a time of orientation and then stops.

Having examined the simple past perfect and simple future perfect, one can now return to the question of why the definition given for the perfect has \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) relating to \( T_{\text{aspect}} \) instead of \( T_{\text{sit}} \). Again, this is best explained by looking at perfect progressive verbs. Consider the following two sentences: “They had listened to the Beatles before recording their first album.” and “They had been listening to the Beatles before recording their first album.” The first sentence uses the simple past perfect, and the second sentence uses the past perfect progressive. Below is a diagram of the simple past perfect sentence.

There are no real surprises in this illustration. But in the diagram of the past perfect progressive, a new picture is seen.

Since this is a progressive verb, \( T_{\text{aspect}} \) is smaller than and inside \( T_{\text{sit}} \). This is a perfect where \( T_{\text{sit}} \) does not include a time of orientation, so \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) starts at the right bracket of \( T_{\text{aspect}} \) and continues until it reaches a \( T_o \) (i.e., \( T_{o2} \) [the time of recording]) and then stops. This verb is referring to a time after a small snapshot (or internal view) of the listening event. If this diagram is correct, then \( T_{\text{perfect}} \) is clearly relating to \( T_{\text{aspect}} \), not \( T_{\text{sit}} \). The rest of this diagram is basically the same as the simple past perfect.

The present and past perfect progressive act in a similar way to the past perfect progressive. For brevity’s sake, only the present perfect progressive will be diagrammed. A perfect that, at first glance, appears to be different from the other perfects will be looked at since this type of perfect is common. There is a group of perfects where \( T_{\text{sit}} \) appears to include \( T_o \). For example, “Reem has studied English here for nine months.”

In this example, it sounds like the \( T_{\text{sit}} \) of \textit{study} includes the present moment. While the actual studying event may or may not include the present moment, the event that is
relevant for grammar is the studying that lasted nine months. This $T_{sit}$ has finished and the speaker is now in the post-state of these nine months of studying. Now consider the following example, “Reem has been studying English for nine months.”

Since this is a progressive verb, $T_{[aspect]}$ is smaller than and inside $T_{sit}$. And since this is a present verb, $T_{[perfect]}$ intersects $T_o$. Here, due to the progressive aspect, the situation of studying continues after the nine month studying time (and most likely past $T_o$). At this point, one might ask, “What exactly is the perfect? Is it a tense or an aspect?” Not surprisingly, this is not a simple question to answer. With regards to meaning, it seems reasonable to call the perfect a tense. The reason for this is because the perfect, like tense, seems to deal with the relationship between $T_r$ and $T_o$. However, with regards to form, it is quite awkward to consider the perfect a tense. By definition, an infinitive is not bound by tense, person, or number. For example, it is impossible to know if to go is talking about the past, present, future, first person singular, third person plural, etc. without a context. Although infinitives do not have different forms for the various tenses, they do have perfect forms (e.g., “I want to have left before Mary calls”). Therefore, it appears that the perfect is not a tense form. What kind of form is it then? Since this matter is still highly debated and detailed arguments are needed to support any view, definitively answering this question seems to go beyond the scope of the current discussion. However, the following two points do seem pertinent: concerning meaning, the perfect is similar to a tense; concerning form, it is not a tense.

**Benefits and Limitations**

The proposed theory of tense and aspect seems to be a fairly accurate representation of tense and aspect in English since it can readily explain most, and possibly all (although this is certainly hard to test due to the myriads of tense uses), tense uses that are temporally related. This descriptive adequacy makes the theory both powerful and useful and is by far its greatest asset. It can help clarify the confusing nature of the perfect and distinctions between various tense/aspect combinations. Also, the theory is fairly simple to represent graphically in the form of diagrams.

Many limitations, however, also exist. The primary shortcoming of the theory is its technical nature that is neither easily nor quickly understood. This means that, in its technical form, it is of limited value in teaching English tense and aspect to speakers of other languages. Also, its technical nature renders it practical only with advanced leveled students probably in higher education institutions. Another issue is that the theory does possibly seem to struggle with a small portion of the data. For example, one difficult issue to handle is the use of progressive verbs for habitual actions. Consider the following: “He is always teasing me.” This has the idea of a repeated action. What the progressive most likely indicates is best represented pictorially. A slightly more technical representation of habitual verbs will have to be offered here to accommodate for habitual progressives.
This is probably different from the simple aspect sentence, “He always teases me,” in the following way.

Two reference times are found in these examples. The first $T_r$ is very broad and relates to the whole time about which a person is actually talking. In other words, even at moments when the speaker is not being teased or is not teased, both sentences above can still be viewed as being true. Therefore, this broad time referred to is the primary $T_r$. Within this broad frame of reference, however, even more specific verbal pictures are being created. When the progressive is used, the verbal picture of the teasing event is not a complete picture. Only a small snapshot of the inside of the event is given, so the listener might perceive a frozen picture of a boy sticking out his tongue at a girl. However, the sentence using the simple aspect views the teasing event completely, from start to end. Therefore, instead of still-frame pictures, one might perceive video renderings of the event. While this seems like a possible solution, it is a bit more elaborate than one might like. More research is necessary to show if these diagrams are accurate portrayals of habitual verbs. The point of this example is to illustrate that the theory might still have some minor (or major, depending on your point-of-view) areas of concern.

**Other Theories on Tense and Time**

Numerous other categorizations of tense/aspect exist outside of the one presented here. The Reichenbachian system and Bull framework have already been discussed and have undergone reanalysis many times. De Saussure (2007) writes, “…there is an abundant literature trying to solve the poverty, or, as Vet puts it, the ‘descriptive inadequacy’ of Reichenbach’s formalism…” (p. 1). For example, Vet (2007) offers a neo-reichenbachian system that views time from two perspective points (versus three assumed perspective points in Reichenbach’s system) (pp. 13-15). Several textbooks for English language learners present tense/aspect in English as having twelve different groupings (i.e., simple past, past perfect, past progressive, past perfect progressive, and so on for the present and future tenses). While various theories might provide adequate explanations of tense/aspect, the one presented herein seems to allow for a high degree of technical accuracy in English and is, therefore, well suited for the task of deeply understanding the role of tense/aspect.

**Conclusion**

The study of English tense and aspect is a complex field, so comprehending such matters can be a problematic endeavor. Hopefully, the framework presented will be helpful in understanding the meaning of English’s tenses and aspects. This deeper knowledge can lead to more thorough, thoughtful, and concise explanations for students once the basic ideas are repackaged in a way that is easy to understand.
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