Introducing Jamaican Creole into the Jamaican Educational Curriculum

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Introduction

A WIDE RANGE OF ENGLISHES, often referred to as a Creole Continuum, is spoken in Jamaica. It ranges from the basilect variety, Jamaican Creole (JC), to Standard Jamaican English (SJE) which is the acrolect variety (Brown-Blake 2008, 34). These are organized hierarchically, because the use of SJE is appropriate in public domains, whereas the use of JC is restricted to informal communication and entertainment. Because JC and SJE are used in separate domains, they evoke different social and political connotations. SJE indicates high status and is prestigious in official domains, whereas JC is disregarded in official spheres and receives only covert prestige. JC has often been perceived as a degraded version of English, or even “broken English” which represents the lower classes (cp. Wassink 1999). Breaking the language code by using JC out of its domain can be easily interpreted as a subversive act. The introduction of JC in education has therefore been highly contentious, since it would indirectly alter class relations.

During colonialism, British English was considered the only language spoken in Jamaica. Presently, education policies are still based on regulations that were established under colonial rule. Thus, SJE is the language of instruction and teaching material is predominantly based on British culture. At the same time, students’ language proficiency is considerably low. UNESCO observed in the 1980’s that half of the students who entered secondary school were illiterate (McCourtie 1998, 122). It has been demonstrated that this trend continued by comparing language competence in the beginning and towards the end of the 20th century (McCourtie 1998, 122). High rates of illiteracy still prevail today, regardless of facilitated school access. Scholars have assumed that the instruction in SJE is the reason for low language performance. Therefore, several studies have been conducted to investigate whether education based on JC improves students’ performance. The overall results indicate that it has positive effects on students’ performance because it increases students’ motivation, reduces anxiety about committing mistakes, and improves comprehension of school content. However, the introduction of JC and Jamaican texts in education has larger effects than only improving students’ performance. Its wider scope affects social and political issues related to the position of JC and SJE in Jamaica. This complicates the implementation of JC in education, because the Jamaican upper class is interested in maintaining proximity to European culture and keeping its privileged status. A survey by Wassink shows that command of SJE correlates with social class (Wassink 1999,
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Persons with high income proved to have a better command of SJE than those with lower income. This means that the Jamaican education system reproduces class divisions by privileging students with better English proficiency. Furthermore, the persistence of colonial education strategies continues to suppress Jamaican culture. As a result, students are culturally alienated. Hence, colonial power structures are still preserved even after Jamaica has been independent for more than 50 years.

The introduction of JC into education also influences the official position of JC. Its public use is still contentious and efforts to enhance the position of JC in public spheres have been met with reservation. The marginal position of JC in education is partly responsible for the reluctance to use JC in official domains, because educational practice has affected the perception of JC negatively. During school classes the use of JC is prohibited and often corrected when it emerges. Hence, students start to perceive JC as inferior to SJE. The acceptance of JC in schools, however, could change the perception of JC by the next generations and clear the way for JC to become a publicly accepted language.

This paper argues that the low status of JC in Jamaica is significantly influenced by its position in education and that the mandatory use of SJE in education serves to maintain class divisions. As a result of students having been trained to perceive JC as a ‘wrong’ version of English, JC is not acceptable in public domains. First, I will expose the impact of colonialism on language policy and education. Then I will show how class relations are connected to language and education. Selected examples will demonstrate the effects of using JC in education. Finally, I will discuss possible consequences of JC in education for its position as an official language.

Colonial Impact

In the colonial period, British and Scottish settlers introduced European varieties of English to Jamaica. They supported the prevalence of the British standard variety as the official language, while they did not recognize the emerging Creolization of it. The policy of promoting only the standard variety is related to nationalist ideologies of the 19th century which considered that it was important to have a national language for the consolidation of power and national unity (Wright 2004, 57). Consequently, the British desired to spread Standard English to important domains of public communication and education in order to secure British domination in their colonies. Education was one of the most important areas for this purpose, because linguistic behavior can be trained in schools. This is why SJE was mandatory for school instruction and education was based on the British model. As a result, native speakers of SJE were privileged as opposed to Creole speakers. The consequences of these policies are still noticeable today. Speakers of SJE can reach higher levels of education than speakers of JC.

Several attempts have been made to render the Jamaican education system less stratifying. After Jamaica became independent in 1962, it was tried to achieve a more equal education system. In 1966, a new policy provided secondary schools with open access, and it was stated in the education curriculum that its goal was to improve students’ capacity of SJE. However, a study by McCourtie shows that these changes have not contributed to students’ competence of SJE (cp. McCourtie 1998). In her study, she compares language proficiency surveys conducted between 1891 and 1921 with a survey conducted in the 1990s. The results of both surveys show that the degree of language competence achieved by students did not
reach the expected level. Thus, the persistence of language discrimination within education can be analyzed critically with regard to cultural domination. McCourtie argues that education policies that favor SJE speakers are control mechanisms of the ruling classes who try to substitute physical control of slavery with other forms of control. Therefore, the upper classes are interested in maintaining linguistic separation between the upper and the lower classes. McCourtie draws on Foucault’s analysis of the relationship between power, knowledge and discourse (McCourtie 1998, 124). According to Foucault, the upper classes exercise power by controlling knowledge of the lower classes so that there is no option for the lower classes to revolt. This shows that colonial strategies have only changed in their methodology; control through slavery has been replaced by control through education. The consequences of these policies reach even further, because the self-perception of students is affected by the position of JC. The obligation to use SJE for class instruction in ordinary primary schools forces most participants to operate in their second language. Therefore, the ‘superiority’ of the colonizer is demonstrated continuously and becomes an innate disposition.

In addition to the use of SJE as a language of instruction, most of the educational content is based on British culture. The use of British schoolbooks increases the perception of cultural inferiority by Jamaican students because much more time is devoted to British culture than to African and Jamaican culture. Murdloch notices that colonial power relations within Caribbean societies have led people to imitate the dominating culture. He states that this relationship is “re-inscribing the sense of inferiority and insufficiency which the colonized traditionally attempt to overcome through mimetic replication of the other” (Murdloch 1992, 2). By imitating Western culture which has received higher prestige by the colonizers, the attempt is made to create a culture which receives the same status of the former colonial culture. Hence, policies often tried to erase African cultural traits from Jamaican culture so that it would receive the same social prestige. However, instead of creating a prestigious new culture, European literature rather filled a gap for the new middle class in Jamaica, who had not yet developed a West Indian literary tradition. The focus on Western culture impeded the emergence of a unique Jamaican culture, since “West Indian modernism was always a rejection and adoption of European models” (Hodges 2008, 101).

In literature, the domination of British culture took on extreme forms during the 18th century. For instance, the black Jamaican Francis William wrote poetry in Latin and English using ornaments and a high style that seemed highly exaggerated (D'Costa 1994, 667). Just as the phenomenon of hyper-correction in language reveals linguistic self-awareness, the exaggerated use of high style in poetry is an expression of an overly cultural self-awareness. The content of his poems reflects the rejection of Jamaican culture and the glorification of Western culture. An excerpt of an English translation of one of his Latin poems states: ‘Oh! Muse of blackest tint, why shrinks thy breast, Why fears t’ approach the Caesar of the West!’ (D'Costa 1994, 668). This example depicts the feeling of intimidation by many Jamaicans of the 18th century in confrontation with Western culture. The sentiment of inferiority was increased because European culture could offer itself in the form of material goods, whereas African culture was mainly based on oral traditions. Thus, economic and material domination by British colonizers played an important role in securing the dominant position of British culture. D’Costa notes figuratively that:
Comparing itself to the European or American, the child sees itself with nothing to match the imported books, machines, and goods of the ‘real’ world up north. [...] the child has been told again and again, that its language, rituals, and ideas have no value (D’Costa 1994, 664).

The absence of Jamaican literature in print is another factor which supports the domination of British literature, and the lack of Jamaican school material continues to complicate the inclusion of Jamaican language texts in education. Economic constraints have further impaired students’ aspirations to engage in literature and motivated those who had literary ambitions to emigrate to North America or England.

Another effect of using foreign school materials is that students may experience cultural alienation. Since educational content is based on Western culture, many Jamaican students have difficulties relating to it with their personal experience. The Caribbean writer Edward Brathwaite expressed this problem by stating that snow is referred to in European literature much more than, for example, hurricanes. However, snow is a typical experience of people from the Northern Hemisphere, whereas people from the Caribbean experience other natural phenomena, for example hurricanes or tropical rain. Lorna Goodison describes her personal experience of cultural alienation in her autobiographic novel From Harvey River:

I had been made to memorize Wordsworth, along with other English Romantic poets, from the time that I went to All Saints School in Kingston at the age of seven, and one day [...] it occurred to me that I had no idea what a daffodil looked like. (Goodison 2007, 280)

This example demonstrates that education which is dominated by Western culture has provoked resentment and misunderstanding among students. Counter movements have emerged as a response to superior treatment of Western culture and simultaneous negation of African traditions. One of the best known Jamaican examples of counter-movements to cultural domination is the movement of Rastafarians who criticize Western domination and devaluation of African culture. Rastafarians have tried to escape the condition of linguistic control by creating the so-called ‘Dread Talk’ (cp. Pollard 1994). This means that words have been altered in order to express linguistic consciousness and to use language independently from official regulations. However, since school policies are regulated by the political elite, counter movements could not influence the use of language within the school curriculum. Nonetheless, counter movements reveal that there are opposing groups in Jamaica which are in conflict with respect to the question of language use in education.

Effects on Class Division

Jamaican society can be roughly divided into a small elite and a large lower class. This is important in relation to language policies in Jamaica because the command of SJE in addition to JC correlates strongly with social position. Separate schools for upper and lower class children have maintained class divisions since colonialism. The richly equipped high schools with mostly European staff for English mother-tongue speakers were opposed to poorly equipped schools for Creole speakers and have thus kept different language speakers apart (McCourtie 1998, 110). Although the former colonial elite are now mainly replaced by
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the Jamaican upper class, the orientation towards British English has endured. As a result, people from lower classes have developed a hostile attitude towards JC because they are striving to receive the same education as upper class students. Even though recent attitudes towards JC are changing, class separation has resulted in the perception of JC as a ‘fragmented language of a fragmented people’ whose lexical items with African origin were considered uncultivated (Wassink 1999, 58). Interestingly, class based language practices are observed even by immigrants to Jamaica. Whereas wealthy Syrian or Chinese Jamaicans refuse to use JC, the Syrians or Chinese Jamaicans in the lower classes use it to the same degree as Black Jamaicans (Wassink 1999, 71). This demonstrates the close relation between economic conditions and language practices within the Creole Continuum.

Another important component of class and education is related to the formation of attitudes in education. Devine-Eller has applied Bourdieu’s theory in Distinction with regard to racial and class differentiation in education (Devine-Eller 2005, 2). She notes that there is a strong relationship between education and taste, so that an ‘aesthetic disposition towards the world’ is transmitted through schooling. This means that upper class schooling encourages students to expand their capacities, which ultimately helps them to maintain their status. On the other hand, lower class students experience discouragement, for example through high standards of language requirements, which hinders them to pursue educational success. As a result, working class children learn a strategy of restraint, whereas middle-class children are trained towards entitlement (Devine-Eller 2005, 6). With regard to Jamaica, this is relevant because restraint is an important factor that causes low school performance (McCourtie 1998, 118). Students are even more restraining when there are language difficulties. Therefore, the introduction of JC in education could reduce students’ restraint and thereby level class divisions.

Introducing Jamaican Creole in Education

Studies have shown that educational reforms after Jamaican independence have not significantly improved SJE proficiency of JC-speaking students. For example, a study by McCourtie shows that there is no difference between the proficiency of SJE by Creole speakers who attended primary school and those who did not (McCourtie 1998, 111). Even though the Ministry of Education recognized that JC is the first and SJE the second language of most students, SJE is not taught as a second language while a high command of SJE is expected (McCourtie 1998, 115). This contradiction provokes insecurity among students with respect to their use of SJE. This is a problem because SJE is often not understood, rejected, or misunderstood by pupils (McCourtie 1998, 112). Since many teachers were not trained with respect to language teaching, they use a strategy of ‘correction’. This method requires students to reproduce the correction of their mistakes instead of learning the difference between the varieties of the continuum (McCourtie 1998, 114). The concept of ‘correction’ emerged because Creole varieties have often been perceived as ‘improper’ English. The consequence of this method is that students cannot improve their language capacity because the root of the mistake is not explained. Since no contrastive language approach is applied, educational goals cannot be achieved and students remain insecure about the use of SJE even after they complete primary school. The results of an essay writing task are alarming: only 0.9 % succeeded in completing the task satisfactorily, 14.7 % did not understand the
task, 73.1% were off-target and 11.2% did not attempt it at all (McCourtie 1998, 118). The essay writing results indicate the continuing insecurities about the use of written SJE.

In addition, the importance of distinguishing JC and SJE as two language systems becomes more obvious when Jamaican students are studying in an English speaking country abroad. Pratt-Johnson investigated the situation of Jamaican students in New York and found that the majority of students had major problems in expressing themselves or understanding their teachers (Pratt-Johnson 1993, 258). Apart from the hindrance of clear communication, students reported adapting difficulties because JC was ridiculed in class, which lowered their self-esteem with respect to language. Systematic interferences led students to deviate from Standard English, and these deviations were perceived as errors. In order to avoid students’ disadvantages because of language, Pratt-Johnson proposed a second language curriculum for Jamaican students who study abroad. This shows that the recognition of JC as a language could advance students performance not only within Jamaica, but also provide students abroad with the opportunity to learn Standard English systematically.

The lack of contrastive teaching has motivated projects which introduce JC and Jamaican texts into education. One of these projects is the ‘Dr. Bird Reader’, a Jamaican school reader which is based on culturally relevant material for Jamaican schoolchildren. The aim of this project was to improve students’ language skills by providing content and vocabulary from the Jamaican context. A survey indicates that the majority of stories in the reader were considered relevant by Jamaican students (Headlam 1990, 7). The relevance to the Jamaican context made the reader approachable and raised students’ motivation considerably, while the occasional use of JC made the reading enjoyable. This example demonstrates that cultural relevance is crucial for students’ learning motivation. Another project in a secondary school class introduced a poem written in JC by Michael Smith. The project intended to respond to the lack of Black literature in the Jamaican national curriculum. Smith’s poem ‘Mi C-YaaN believe iT’ describes the difficulties of a person in Kingston who is searching for a room:

Me seh me cyaan believe it
Me seh me cyaan believe it
Room dem a rent
Me apply widdin
But as me go een
Cockroch rat an scorpion
Also come een
Waan good nose haffi run
But me naw go siddung
Pon high wal like Humpty Dumpty
Me a face me reality

(Smith 1982)

Students’ responses to the poem were overwhelmingly positive. Students who had disliked poetry before, developed interest and responded emotionally to it. A student wrote the following about the experience in a school journal: ‘I really love these poems because they give a full description of most of what is happening in the present society. […] Reality is revealed while pleasure is still coming’ (Bryan 1995, 45). Students’ reactions show that the
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relation of the poem’s content to reality is decisive for their appreciation. A parallel can be drawn between the Dr. Bird reader and the poem by Michael Smith with regard to the effects of Jamaican texts on students. The use of JC generally makes the reading pleasurable and culturally relevant content increases students’ interest and understanding of the material. The effect of increased pleasure by the use of JC is especially interesting with regard to its restriction in official domains. The use of JC has been prohibited in public domains, thus, its use in these situations breaks a norm. The transgression of language rules is perceived as a positive release because, regardless of official disdain, among younger Jamaicans ‘there is an acceptance of Creole as a language […] [because] it is the mode for displaying culture’ (Bryan 1995, 47). The tension between perceived pressure to reject JC and personal attachment to it is expressed by the comment of a student during class: ‘It’s like everyday talking […] Not that it’s right to do it but based on the fact that here we are facing a poem that is the same way how we would talk ourselves’ (Bryan 1995, 44). The reaction shows that on the one hand, SJE use in education has already become internalized by students, and on the other hand, JC is important to students. That is, the exclusion of JC in education has promoted the view of JC as objectionable even though students appreciate JC because it relates language closeness to important experiences.

Moreover, rhythm and structure of the poem differentiate it from most British poems that are taught in Jamaican schools. Edward Brathwaite refers to the difference of rhythm with the metaphorical comparison of the sound of snow and hurricanes. He states that different cultural experiences can be reflected in poetry, stating that ‘the hurricane does not roar in pentameters’ (Brathwaite 1984, 10). Most of the poems taught in Jamaican classrooms are Limericks with a steady iambic pentameter rhythm. Jamaican poetry, however, employs different patterns of rhythm which reflect Jamaican culture better than the rhythm of Limericks. For example, many Caribbean poems employ dactyls. To explain the difference in rhythm, Brathwaite draws an interesting connection between music and language saying that ‘music is, in fact, the surest threshold to the language which comes out of it’ (Brathwaite 1984, 16). This means that the rhythm of a poem often reflects the rhythm of culture specific music. The parts ‘room dem a rent’ and ‘nose haffi run’ (lines 3 and 9) of Smith’s poem show for example how the dactyl rhyme scheme reflects Caribbean Calypso music.

A problem that becomes obvious with this poem, however, is the lack of a coherent writing system of JC, which complicates the use of JC in education. Ambiguity prevails concerning words that are similar to SJE lexemes. The transcription of this poem is still very close to the SJE spelling; however, it is not clear why ‘come’ is spelled as in SJE, whereas ‘wal’ is spelled differently than ‘wall’ in the SJE writing system. The lack of coherence is a source of confusion and shows that JC needs to be standardized if it is to be used as a language of instruction. Nonetheless, ‘Me Cyaan Believe It’ contains Jamaican elements on the level of language, rhythm and content which make it approachable and enable students to have a closer relation to their own language and culture.

A more comprehensive experiment has been conducted by researchers of the University of the West Indies (UWI) from 2004 to 2008, for which Haiti and Curacao served as models because of their bilingual education systems (Devonish 2007, 281). A bilingual education project (BEP) was designed to teach subjects in JC in addition to teaching in SJE (cp. Devonish 2007). Hubert Devonish, a Professor at the Linguistic Department at the University of the West Indies, is the director of the project. He argues that language situations do not remain frozen in time and that education can play a leading role in changing them. He states that the BEP could push the development of JC as a proper
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language, because it requires school material in JC and students will learn how to use a JC writing system. The objectives of the project were to improve students’ literacy skills and understanding of the subject material. It further expected to enhance students’ self-concept with respect to language. The first results of the BEP show that oral participation in class increased, especially by students who were monolingual speakers of JC. The assessment of the project further proves that language awareness among Grade 1 students, who are 5 to 6 years old, is relatively low and usually no distinction is made between different varieties of Jamaican English. However, the project is raising linguistic awareness of the system of JC. A difficulty of the bilingual project is that certain expressions in English cannot be translated into JC. For example, expressions of courtesy in SJE cannot be directly translated into JC, because expressions in JC are often felt to be more direct and impolite than SJE expressions. Therefore, many students have doubts about the appropriateness of using JC in class. For example, in a JC lesson, second grade students expressed discomfort and started to correct their teacher, providing him with Standard English expressions. Hence, the introduction of JC in education needs time for the students and teachers to become accustomed to it because a feeling of guilt to use JC in official domains still prevails. Parents contribute to this perception by telling their children to correct their language when they use JC. Instead of pointing out the difference between distinct varieties, they criticize children for their choice of language. To reduce the confusion between ‘wrong English’ and JC, the BEP has the goal to teach the difference between JC and SJE. With regard to the future of the bilingual project, Prof. Devonish states that public opinion and the lack of a standardized writing system reduce the possibility of the project to be widely accepted. Morren, who evaluated the project, further notes a lack of material and BEP trained teachers (Morren 2007, 8).

Official status of JC

Regardless of the widespread support for the use of SJE, a shift in favor of JC is taking place. One of the first advances of the public use of JC was made by Louise Bennett, who performed in a theatre using JC and directly addressed the problem of language division in Jamaica. She pioneered the use of JC in literature and demonstrated the richness of Jamaican culture that draws from African, European and Jamaican sources. She argued that not only JC derived from English, but that Standard English is also a dialect that derived from other languages. This comparison evokes the work Dante Alighieri, who wrote literature in his regional Italian dialect instead of Latin and thereby promoted the development of an Italian Standard language (Brathwaite 1984, 14). With regard to recognition of Louise Bennett and her achievements in upgrading JC, it is surprising that JC continues to be banned from most public domains. For example, former President Seaga once noted that Louise Bennett ‘uplifted the disdained Jamaica “patois” from the backyard to the stage’ (The Jamaica Observer). D’Costa further notes that JC constitutes a variety with ‘an immense range of ironic, satiric, parodic, pathetic, and melodramatic language in which metaphor and word-games flourished’ (D’Costa 1992, 673). However, whereas JC is considered to be a humorous language, it is also perceived to be ‘anti-intellectual’. This stereotype alienates Jamaicans from their language and increases linguistic self-consciousness. Today, these characteristics produce ambiguous effects. On the one hand, Dancehall lyrics profit from the wittiness and irony that becomes possible in JC; on the other hand, JC becomes an object of ridiculousness abroad, which has been exemplified with the introduction of Smith’s poem in the British
school class who did not take it seriously. To assess language attitudes among Jamaicans, Wassink conducted a study on language attitudes to find out whether people perceive JC as ‘broken English’ or as a language mixed with English. The results of the study show that elder people considered JC more often as ‘broken English’ than younger respondents (Wassink 1999, 68). This may be due to recent developments of JC, which is increasingly used in the media and which is popular within Reggae and Dancehall music. In addition, other domains are increasingly employing JC. For example, the Bible Society demanded to translate the Bible into JC (Wassink 1999, 60).

However, JC is still far from being publicly accepted. Whereas projects of performance, literature and educational experiments have been successful, a major obstacle to the legitimation in public sphere seems to be language policy that regulates its official status. In 2001, a Member of Parliament proposed the ‘inclusion of language among the grounds upon which discrimination should be constitutionally prohibited’ (Brown-Blake 2008, 32). This proposal has been rejected because of concerns about translation requirements in public communication, disputes about bilingualism, the effects on other languages spoken in Jamaica and concerns regarding the status of SJE in education. Since the adoption of this law would give students the right to be educated in JC, it was not tolerated by policy makers and the law was not adopted. These concerns about a possible official status of JC and the final rejection of the proposal show that the influence of the elite is still determining language policies. Brown-Blake explains the rejection of JC by the elite with relation to class. She argues that the upper class rejects equal status of JC and SJE because language is a critical marker for social class. Hence, upper classes attempt to reject any policy that protects the status of the lower classes because it would endanger their privileged position (Brown-Blake 2008, 43). Therefore, to reduce one-sided cultural domination and class divisions, JC would need to be publicly accepted and introduced into the educational curriculum.

**Conclusion**

The introduction of JC into education has strong effects on various social and political areas. Studies have shown that bilingual education improves students’ school performance and language command. It is decisive for students to be able to separate the structures of JC and SJE in order to control their choice of language. Better language proficiency would also enhance their self-concept, because students will not be ridiculed by native speakers of Standard English if they are able to distinguish JC and SJE. Apart from improved language competence, the introduction of JC would have effects on class divisions. The current education system reinforces class divisions in a way that students with better command of SJE can achieve higher levels of education. Bilingual education would provide lower class students with more effective education, which would give them a chance to compete with native speakers of SJE. The upper class, however, is aware of the fact that such a language reform has the potential to alter class relations. Therefore, changes in policies concerning the language of instruction meet resistance from policy makers, who mainly belong to the upper class.

Moreover, the content of school material is based on British or North American culture. This alienates students from school material. Studies have shown that cultural relevance of school material increases students’ motivation and comprehension. The
problem of students’ refusal could be overcome by using school material which is relevant for them. The main obstacle to the increase of Jamaican school books is the financial aspect and their availability.

With regard to the official status of JC, education could play an important role in promoting the acceptability of JC. Recent developments show that younger people are less prejudiced towards JC. Therefore, it is a good moment to introduce JC into education. The inclusion of contrastive teaching could thus change the general perception of JC as ‘anti-intellectual’ and improve its social status. However, time is needed to change the language attitudes that were formed since colonialism, when JC was perceived as a lower variant of British Standard English.
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Language Policy and Education

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