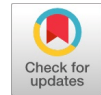


Conceptual Blending in Indian Political Cartoon Discourse

Lakshmi Prabha P, Abhishek Das



Abstract: *Conceptual blending theory has been used by scholars to study various genres of texts. Scholars studying cartoons in particular have used it to study how metaphors and metaphorical blending are used in cartoons to construct meaningful texts. This paper studies selected Indian political cartoons using the Conceptual Blending Theory of Fauconnier and Turner. The themes of the cartoons chosen for the study focused on various social issues that were part of the media discourse in contemporary times. The study was conducted to understand how cartoons depicting social issues used metaphoric blending to visualise an issue. The paper found that the graphic form of the political cartoon mediates the understanding of a communicative event through the use of cognitive devices like metaphoric blends. It was found that novel metaphoric blends were created in a cartoon text depending on the nature of the issue and that these metaphorical blends are regulated by context and background knowledge regarding the event being represented. It was also observed that the novelty of metaphoric blends in Indian editorial cartoons depended on the social, political and cultural context. Meanwhile, the metaphoric blends also draw into it everyday objects and scenarios that structure the meaning potential of the political cartoon. Another relevant finding is regarding how certain cartoon texts had more than one conceptual blend, forming a network of blends that worked in conjunction with each other. Furthermore, it was observed how conceptual blends in cartoons aided in anchoring the meaning of the cartoon and prevented polysemic confusion. The findings of the research prove that cognitive devices are prevalent in cartoon texts and could significantly direct their interpretation and use.*

Keywords: Political Cartoon, Conceptual Blending, Conceptual Metaphor

I. INTRODUCTION

Editorial cartoons have been a mainstay of satirical journalism since the advent of printing technology. As one study puts it, "Cartoons can be seen as artistic work, historical documents, forms of humour or satire and as artefacts of journalism history as well rhetorical texts. (Chen et al, 2017, [1][19][20]). Classically a cartoon meant the editorial cartoon in a newspaper as it developed from the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century.

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The epistemological limits of the genre have been pushed from the late twentieth century onwards with the growing popularity of other graphic narratives like serialised comics and graphic novels and the changing materiality of the medium.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research on editorial cartooning exists even though it is theoretically fragmented and beyond any specific disciplinary boundary. Following the trail of El Refaie (2009,[2]), Forceville (2011, [3]) and Abdel Raheem (2021,[4]) this paper takes on a cognitive approach to study the representation of social issues in Indian Editorial cartoons. The satirical presentation in cartoons presents social and political issues using various cognitive mechanisms like metaphor, metonymy, allegory, etc verbally, visually and multimodally. Studies of metaphors in political cartooning have been informed by conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor scenarios, cognitive metaphor theory and conceptual blending to name a few. Abdel Raheem (2021, [4]) made use of the blending theory along with context models (Van Dijk, 2014, [5]) to study impoliteness in political cartoons. Pavlovic (2014, [6]) studying political cartooning in Serbia has suggested that the conceptual blending theory has great exploratory potential to express the novel, short-lived, unique, highly context-dependent, dynamic construction of meaning in political cartoons. In addition, Pavlovic (2014, [6]) observes that conceptual blending theory provides for systematic analysis of political cartoons. The same opinion is held by Marin-Arrese (2008, [7]) in addition to holding that blending works in political cartoons by combining a salient scenario with an alternative non-salient scenario. The study by Marin-Arrese (2008, [7]) analysed the interpretation of humour in French political cartoons depicting the Referendum on the European Constitution held in France in 2005. The paper suggests that conceptual blending in the cartoons along with other mechanisms has created humour that criticised the dominant ideology of the French political elite. Rohrer (2004, [8]) in exploring visual manifestations of hatred in war cartoons suggests that the mechanics of visual misrepresentation and their impact as carriers of ideology can be explored using the conceptual blending theory. In this article, we analyse conceptual blending in some Indian political cartoons that portray social issues. The paper aims to study:

- (1) how different modes and techniques are used to construct conceptual blends in cartoons
- (2) and the extent of contextualisation in them.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual integration or blending.

Fauconnier and Turner (1998, [9]) put forward the theory of conceptual blending or integration which posits that ‘structures and elements from different input mental spaces, linked by cross-space mappings are selectively projected onto blended spaces’. The theory is rooted in the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, [10]) and identifies the working of metaphorical blends in discourse. In this theory, meaning is constructed through a construction of blended models that give rise to emergent structures through a process of blending. The emergence structures are generated through three different operations involved in the blending process: composition (the creation of new relations and scenarios drawing on elements, structures or frames from the input spaces), completion (enrichment of relations and scenarios in the blend by recourse to background knowledge) and elaboration (setting up the scenarios or developing the relations) (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, [11][21][22][23]). The blending model according to Coulson (2003, [12]) is appropriate for analysing political cartoons as it directly represents a blended frame and invites the viewer to unpack it into its input frames.

Cousin and Oakley (2001, [13]) added to the blending theory by suggesting that blended frames should incorporate local contextual devices that can evoke other references within the blended space.

A. Context Models

Context models are mental models that condition the discourse and are before the actual utterance of the discourse. Van Dijk (2014, [5]) has stated that contexts control the production and understanding of a discourse. Van Dijk divided cognitive mental models into (1) Semantic situation models and (2) Pragmatic context models. The semantic context is built through one's embodied experience and observation whereas pragmatic models arise from the actual communicative event and can include the setting and participants. In short, the assumption is that political cartoons are artefacts that are constructed with metaphoric blends and their production and understanding rests on knowledge of different contexts.

B. Corpus and Methods

The sample for the research is taken from the Last Laughs archives that are part of The Print website available from 1 Feb 2023 to 15 September 2023. The cartoons in the Last Laughs archive are curated by staff editors of The Print and have selections from the works of the creme de la creme of cartoonists in India. The cartoons are sourced by the editors from the X (social media platform formerly known as Twitter) accounts of the artist and are properly attributed. The chosen cartoons were published first in print, online or social media. The cartoons chosen as illustrative examples for the present study were published in the Indian Express, Times of India and the Deccan Herald depending on the affiliation of the cartoonist. The Last Laughs platform works like an online archive contributing to the finding and making of digital cartoon archives. The initial population consists of 280 cartoons. From this population, a sample was drawn consisting of editorial cartoons that had various social issues as their themes. A further selection was made to group

cartoons that made use of pictorial or multimodal metaphors and illustrative examples were chosen. This process left us with 6 cartoons all of which represented social issues that were discussed in the Indian media. In the initial stage, the corpus was annotated by the researchers to identify metaphoric blends, target domains and source domains. For the annotation of pictorial and multimodal metaphors the procedures inspired by Charles Forceville (2009, [14]) were used. The method laid out by Forceville (2009, [14]) was used in the following way by researchers:

- 1) The selected cartoon was analysed for the presence of metaphoric blending
- 2) The metaphoric blend identified was analysed to identify monomodal metaphors and multimodal metaphors
- 3) Monomodal metaphors were identified to be either pictorial or verbal.
- 4) Multimodal metaphors were identified which used both pictorial and verbal modes for the construction of the blend.

The methods employed for analysis in this paper have been inspired by the multimodal critical discourse analysis of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001, [15]). The central argument in MCDA is that meaning is construed multimodally and a visual or multimodal text exhibits a grammar that can be studied to interpret its meaning.

There does exist some ambiguity regarding the usage of the categorical term cartoon. Before we start our analysis it is proper to clarify the definition. An editorial cartoon is usually a single-panel cartoon that accompanies the editorial section of a newspaper and usually mirrors the editorial opinion. A political cartoon on the other hand deals with political issues like elections, authoritarian rule, regimes, religion etc. There exists no separate terminology for cartoons that deal with social issues even though there are ample instances of research done on cartoons related to health, women's issues, environment, development etc. For this study, we stick to the term ‘political cartoon’ or ‘cartoon’ and would define it as any cartoon that deals with current issues of political or social significance.

IV. RESULTS



Aziz | Twitter/ @MikaAziz

Fig. 1. Please Help. Aziz (2023)

[Fig 1: Aziz, Mika. (2023). Please Help. <https://theprint.in/last-laughs/karnataka-elections-sideline-manipur-violence-fuss-over-40-commission/1563710/>. Date accessed: 16 October 2023.]



Now we focus our attention on the political cartoons under study. We begin with cartoons that depict the Manipur crisis. Two cartoons in our sample Please Help by Mika Aziz and Happy Yoga Day by Satish Acharya depict the Manipur issue. The cartoon Please Help depicts two people having fallen off a cliff and one of them being saved by the cartoon look-alike of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. There are two metaphors at work here PERSON FALLING OFF CLIFF AND HANGING ONTO A BRANCH IS THE MANIPUR CRISIS and PERSON FALLING OF CLIFF AND BEING SAVED IS STATE POLLS. Both these metaphors are novel and have been built from the immediate context. The metaphorical scenario is that of an ACCIDENT. Both metaphors come from different domains: rock climbing and state affairs. The grammar of the cartoon makes use of the technique of visual hierarchy. A higher-placed person verbally coded as ‘state polls’ is given spatial predominance than the lower-placed ‘Manipur crisis’ person suggesting it is an allegory of the real political affairs. Another way to decode The metaphor PERSON HANGING ONTO BRANCH IS MANIPUR CRISIS is to view it as the precarious positioning of the Manipur society faced with an ethnic crisis The conceptual blend is created with two inputs: Input 1 is an accident involving two people falling off a cliff and input two are the issue of the Manipur Crisis and the State polls. The verbalisation of the blended frame thus is, PERSON FALLING OFF THE CLIFF IS MANIPUR CRISIS. It is an example of a multimodal space as both the verbal mode and visual mode contribute to its construal. The input spaces work through compression to combine two dissimilar real-life scenarios and the structure that emerges tries to project the relationship between the central government and the state of Manipur in terms of finding a resolution for the issue.



Fig. 2. Happy Yoga Day. Acharya (2023)

[Fig 2: Adhwaryu, S. (2023). Happy Yoga Day. <https://theprint.in/last-laughs/on-international-yoga-day-witness-kavach-asan-to-prachar-asan/1635544/>. Date accessed: 16 October 2023.]

In Fig. 2. Happy Yoga the visual setting is of the PM Modi performing yoga asanas on International Yoga Day. One of the asanas that he performs is the Manipurasan where at the centre of a ring of fire the PM has dug his head onto the surface much like an ostrich when it is alarmed. The ‘Manipurasan’ forms only a part of the depiction nevertheless it constructs the very important metaphor that YOGA ASANA IS MANIPUR CRISIS. Colour plays an important role in the visual grammar of this cartoon. As the orange colour has come to connote the BJP, the colour has become

symbolic of the party and its model of politics and governance. The blend is created in this frame with the aid of two inputs the visually cued person performing Yogasana and the verbally cued portmanteau of Manipur and Asana that refers to the Manipur crisis. Like the example of cartoon 1. This cartoon again has input spaces from two different domains and compresses a disarray of meaning into the blended space YOGASANA IS MANIPUR CRISIS. However, this is only part of a network of other blends in the same semioscape.

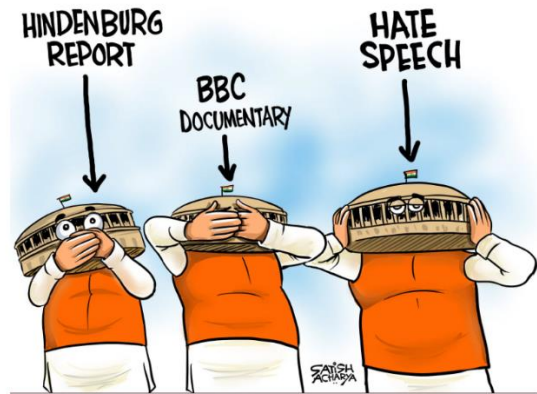


Fig. 3. Three Politicians. Acharya (2023)

[Fig 3: Acharya, S. (2023) Three Politicians. <https://theprint.in/last-laughs/robert-vadras-comeback-tour-adonis-isnt-a-billionaire-just-a-very-naughty-boy/1361988/>. Date accessed: 16 October 2023.]

The next cartoon in Fig 3 is an allegorical rendition of the Japanese pictorial maxim of the three monkeys. The surface narrative form is visually similar to the three wise monkeys who ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’. However, the surface meaning is to only lead the scanner of the cartoon to a deeper meaning. This cartoon is an example of elaborate symbolism, where rhetorical and visual devices from other cultures are co-opted and used in connection with local cultural symbols. However, this melding of the symbols does not render a global meaning to the message. The heads of the personae in the cartoon (who are politicians belonging to the ruling party as has been signalled by the orange waist jacket) have been replaced by drawings of the Indian Parliament building. Like the above two cartoons, this too is an example of multimodal construction of meaning. The input frames for this cartoon are The Three Wise Monkeys and the three personae with the parliament building as their head paying no attention to the issues cued verbally. There are two input spaces at work here: that of the three wise monkeys and the three politicians, both of which are from different conceptual domains. The colour modality plays a foregrounding role in input space two. The blend is THREE POLITICIAN WHO DO NOT HEAR THE HINDENBURG REPORT, SEE THE BBC DOCUMENTARY OR LISTEN TO HATE SPEECH ARE THE THREE WISE MONKEY. The blend works through compression and completion as we see that the symbolic affordances of the Three Wise Monkeys form a background knowledge that enriches the understanding of the event.

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The temporal dimensions of this cartoon have changed scale due to the blending, as three different events of different temporalities have been conceptually integrated into one frame. This kind of integration might lead the understander to homogenise the very different order of events and construe underly them with a common existence.

The cartoon *Roses are Red....* Fig.4 is rich in symbolism. Both the cow and the crow are sacred animals according to Hindu Mythology (Lochtefeld, 2002). From a zoological perspective crows and cows have a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship. These two perspectives, one mythological and zoological are cooccurring and point to a polysemy of meaning. It is the presence of the verbal text that anchors the meaning of the cartoon. The blend is multimodally constructed, through both the visual and the verbal mode. The verbal input is a parody of the folksong 'Roses are red' and is a popular cliché for Valentine's Day. The use of the folksong points to deliberate intertextuality within the cartoon text. The other input space is the cow and the crow working as a metonymic group representing the Hindu mythological space. The spatial layout of the cartoon uses the familiar scenario of the garbage dump thronged by crows and cows and reinforces the textual context. Input spaces for the above cartoon are 1) the cow-crow dyad, 2) the folksong 'roses are red' and 3) the image of an expansive garbage pile. The Blend here, THE COW AND THE CROW ARE SINGING A HUMOROUS PARODY OF THE FOLKSONG IN A GARBAGE DUMP works as a deixis and refers to other news items that imply move by political groups who wanted to celebrate the 2023 Valentine's day as 'hug a cow' day. The blend here works through elaboration by fitting in elements that can work as explanatory devices of the communicative event.



Fig. 4. *Roses are Red....* Adhwaryu (2023)

[Fig 4: Adhwaryu, S. (2023). *Roses are Red.* <https://theprint.in/last-laughs/the-it-crowd-now-on-bbc-world-importance-of-pawar-play-in-cricket/1370465/>. Date accessed: 16 October 2023.]



Fig. 5. *Sexually Harassed Wrestlers.* Acharya (2023)

[Fig 5: Acharya, S. (2023). *Brijbhushan Singh Sexually Harassed Wrestlers at Every Opportunity.* <https://theprint.in/last-laughs/now-its-aiadmks-turn-harasser-is-getting-away/1780176/>. Date accessed: 16 October 2023.]

The drawing in Fig.5 by Satish Acharya on the issue of sexual harassment of wrestlers by Brijbhushan Singh shows a wrestler in a win-by-fall position on a wrestling mat. The cartoon has taken visual inspiration from the lifeworlds of wrestlers and is a typical wrestling match scenario. The use of this scenario is a metaphoric referral to the harassment faced by the wrestlers and presents itself as an organising frame for the blend. The wrestler is pinned down by a hand that evokes features of a male hand. It is the verbal cueing 'Brijbhushan Singh...opportunity' that pins down the signified to Mr Singh or else the cartoon could have prompted endless signified. The input spaces in this cartoon are: input space 1) a male hand pinning down a wrestler and input space 2) a wrestler on a mat in a fallen position. The input space 1 is an allusion to the English phrase 'in the palm of one's hand', which means to have total control over somebody. The blended space incorporating both these inputs read THE HAND OF BRIJBHUSHAN SINGH HAS COMPLETE CONTROL OVER THE FALLEN WRESTLER. Like the example from cartoon 4, verbal cueing is essential to provide contextual clarity even though the cartoon text is multimodal.

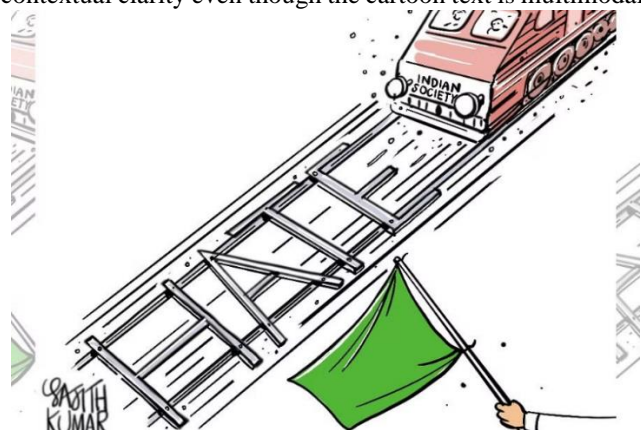


Fig. 6. *Hatred.* Kumar (2023)

[Fig 6: Kumar, S. (2023). *Hatred.* <https://theprint.in/last-laughs/all-aboard-the-hate-train-overuse-of-word-adjoined/1697052/>. Date accessed: 16 October 2023.]

In the cartoon by Sajith Kumar (Fig 6) a railway track and a speeding train manifest the concept of hatred. The complexity of this cartoon representation arises due to the abstract nature of the concept of hatred and the consequential nature of the cartoon image. However using a commonly occurring scenario of rail transportation, the cartoonist has constructed a metaphorical blend that can convey the cartoonist's intended meaning. The first input space is a railway track and a train denoted as the Indian Society. The second input space is the word hate on the track and is set up using typography as a representational technique. The presence of the blend is confirmed when one notices the incongruous element, which in this case is the derailed track. The verbal element intends to be a paradox because the rail is derailed, and the word is spelt clearly. The metaphorical blend therefore would be INDIAN SOCIETY IS A TRAIL ABOUT TO BE DERAILED and is an example of a novel blend that works through compression. It fails to capture the intentional actions of agents in general, although, the analogy drawn can be a useful comparison of the degrees of wreckage caused by incidents of hate crimes.

V. DISCUSSION

Analysing the cartoons selected for the study has given us the insight that conceptual blending is a pervasive technique in the semiosphere of cartoons. It gives rise to novel frames that can turn abstract events into concrete ones that are understood by readers. In the following paragraphs, we shall deal with specific observations from the sample. We understand that this is only a starting point for further studies.

Working within the discursive limitations of the editorial cartoon form, cartoonists have reconstructed the ethnic issue facing the state of Manipur by choosing events that have become symptomatic of the larger issues. The impossibility of narrating a complex event and its many archaeological traces, unspoken and unrecorded memories becomes evident in cartoons 1 and 2. These cartoons render an ethical summoning of the reader by nurturing an affective response (Valkenberg et al, 2015, [16]). The strategies of the cartoonists are mainly descriptive and not prescriptive or futuristic.

Within the sample analysed, we found that conceptual blends tended to act as cognitive filters that pre-constitute experience. Let us take the example of cartoons related to the Manipur conflict: in both examples, the conflict is symbolically mediated through a polarised division into the people of Manipur vs The PM of the country. In the first figure, it is evident through discursive presence and in the second through discursive absence. This frame marginalises, occludes or represses alternative frames of representation while it prioritises the 'PM fails to find a resolution to the Manipur issue' one. The PM is a metonymic representation of the government and illuminates the political relationship between the people of the state of Manipur and the Union Government. The political cartoon legitimises this structural opposition and gives the issue a foreboding sense of impasse. The artistic reduction of the multifaceted experiences of the event surrounding the Manipur conflict in the cartoon is a register for readers to deduce the sociopolitical underpinnings

of the event but a reductive one (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002)

The textual role of metaphor is to facilitate easy understanding of abstract concepts through concrete representations. The cartoon drawn by Kumar (2023) on the theme of hatred in society configures meaning through a metaphor of society as a train and the derailed tracks as haters. There could be no absolute theoretical definitions of what hatred is, other than that which are derived from human experience of it. Here in this cartoon, the cartoon has externalised the representation and taken the non-human, non-lived imagery of a running train. A train is not an image or word that should spring up a the mention of hatred. The blending of the two spaces has created a new metaphor to concretise the phenomenon of hate. The ease of transposition is facilitated by using meaningful cultural icons that are part of the everyday social self-knowledge (Lefebvre, 1991, [17][18]) of readers.

However, the ease of interpretation or understanding can often be laid off for the complexity of representation as is evidenced in the case of the cartoon in Fig 5. The meaning of this cartoon is an effect of the interplay of various representative elements. The perceived semiotic space has a crow possessing anthropomorphic features, the cow in the context is a denotation of 'cow politics', the visual scenario represents that of pollution and the verbal mode conveys the celebration of Valentine's Day. Thus the elements in the cartoon embody a mix of ideological stances making it difficult for the reader to interpret the true intent and meaning of the cartoon. The emergent structure in the cartoon is difficult to interpret without having a priori knowledge of the discursive context of the cartoon in which case it only becomes relatively significant.

Context is an important part of discourse. Van Dijk (2014, [5]) makes a distinction between local contexts which are properties of the immediate interactional situation in which the immediate event takes place, and global contexts are 'defined by social, political, cultural and historical structure in which a communicative event takes place'. (Wodak, 2001)

The cartoon that plays on the popular visual trope of the three wise monkeys is an example, of how local contexts and global contexts provide foundation for cartoon texts. The text here has taken a cultural reference at the preconception level, of that of the three wise monkeys. At the level of the local context, it has compressed three different issues into one single visual rhetoric, while the inter-discursive relationships between the issues are not made apparent to the reader. that demands superior cultural literacy from its readers. The extent of localisation of the Japanese art with ad hoc 'Indian' signs may imply control over the interpretation, although the readers may have to distil the understanding that the parliament buildings on the heads of the politicians represent a metonymic network. The cartoon demands superior multimodal and cultural literacy to unravel the intertextual relationships of the reader. Again the cartoon drawn to critique the Valentine's Day call for hugging a cow is tightly controlled by the context. The ideological criticism implicated in the cartoon is not evident but is worked through the verbal mode.

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This cartoon proved with an example of conceptual compression, which is useful to compress a diffuse range of meanings. Many visual elements in the cartoon can render a fanned-out interpretation, however, the folksong in the verbal mode provides the necessary anchorage for the entire cartoon. Literacy of various semiopraxical activities of the Indian society becomes a pre-requisite condition in these instances. The context of the everyday lifeworlds and correlated life worlds become backgrounds for almost all of the samples studied. As we proceeded, it became clearer that it became difficult to separate the everyday, the universal, the political, the cultural and the historical, that one axis immediately implies the others and that cartoons exist as an entangled artefact.

VI. CONCLUSION

Looking at political cartoons critically through the theoretical prism of conceptual blending has given us a peek into the semiotic compositionally of cartoon images, especially the anchorage offered by metaphoric blends. Our study tries to suggest that political cartoons possess a relational quality and do not possess context-free identities. Often it is local, global or even the discursive context of the news media that provides cartoons with their meanings. However, we also found that most of the cartoons are difficult to deconstruct unless there is sufficient pre-conception knowledge of contexts and other texts for the reader. We raise the issue that a cartoon is a social text where the discursive rationality of the cartoonist fights the discursive literacy of the reader. The visual and linguistic structure of a cartoon are products of manipulation and memesis. Our findings offer support to the claim that interpreting a multimodal cartoon text is complex and part of this complexity arises when conceptual blends bifurcate reality and appearance.

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| | |
|---|---|
| Funding | No, I did not receive. |
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