

The Rhetorical Purposes of Tense Shift in Qur'anic Verses with Reference to English

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ABSTRACT

The Glorious Qur'an maintains the highest possible standard of rhetoric in its speech, to the extent that it is impossible to find its parallel in human works. Muslims consider the Qur'an as miraculous and inimitable in that the Qur'anic text cannot be reproduced in another language or form. Furthermore, an Arabic word may have a range of meanings depending on the context, to the extent that not a single word in the Qur'an can be exchanged for another without affecting the depth of meaning conveyed by the original word. This paper deals with one of these miraculous characters, that lies in the different forms of verbs that shift from a tense to another within the same verse.

*The paper is presented in three main sections, an introduction and conclusions. The introduction summarizes the views of Muslim writers and exegetes on such linguistic phenomenon, which they call *Iltifat*.*

The first section discusses the tense shift in English preceded by definitions of some basic terms. The second section deals with the occurrence of the present verb after the past tense in the same verse, giving sufficient examples from the glorious Qur'an and shedding light on the rhetorical purposes behind such uses. The third section discusses the reversing of the present –future tense, where the past tense is used to express present or future. The purposes and the contexts of such uses are clarified in this section.

At the end of the paper, there are the major findings that the researcher has reached at.

1. Introduction

Shifting from one tense to another is called *Illifat* in Arabic. Al-Zarkashi (1958:325) defines it as the change of speech from one mode to another, for the sake of freshness, variety for the listener, to renew his interest, and to keep his mind away from boredom, through having one mode continuously at his ear.

Ibn Al-Athir (1933: 14) states that departure from what is expected is done because the situation requires such departure, to meet a consideration more subtle than is normally expected. He explains that the shift from one form to another is employed only when it is required for some special reasons. With every shift, there is a reason for such a departure from the normal.

Al-Zamakhshari (1987: 62-63) denotes that shifting is a technique of rhetoric and it is a habit of speech of the Arabs, to vary their speech and because when speech is changed from one style to another this is more likely to raise the interest of the listener than it would if all are in a uniform style.

Al-Zarkashi (1958:325- 33) gives examples of specific benefits. There is, for instance, adding a useful piece of information contained in a noun used in place of a pronoun; or showing a particular interest in something at which the shift takes place and reproving by suddenly turning to address someone you have been talking about.

Muslim writers of rhetoric and exegesis, and Arab literary critics who have discussed examples of grammatical shifts in the Qur'an have shown us the rhetorical purposes and powerful effect of grammatical transitions. Since the Qur'anic style is unique, it is expected that the finer points of certain types of shift may not appear in the translation of the Qur'an into English, which naturally differs from Arabic in certain aspects of style. One of the grammatical shifts in the Qur'anic context that is discussed in this paper is the change in the tense of the verb in which we have a

departure from the normally expected usage of language in a particular context for a particular rhetorical purpose.

2. Some Basic Definitions

It is necessary to give some basic definitions for some terms that are dealt with in this study:

2.1. Tense is "the linguistic relations of time relations." (Jespersen, 1931:1). Some linguists see no difference between time and tense. They consider the distinctions of time expressed by the verb are distinctions of tense (Krapp, 1936: 177).

According to Lester (1971: 52), tense is different from time. Tense is accompanying to verb phrase. The meaning of tense is not restricted to present or past forms of verbs. He also states that "every language can make the distinctions between past, present and future time, but there is no obligation for the distinction to be carried solely by the inflection of the verb."

Hockett (1963: 237) states that "tenses typically indicate different locations of an event time." The distinctions of tense are distributions of the relationship of three points along time line. These three points are the utterance time, the reference time and the event time (Stedman, 1982: 128).

2.2. Time. The concept of time is defined by Quirk et al. (1973: 85) "a universal concept with three divisions, namely, past, present and future."

Gleason (1974:78) mentions that time is signaled by time adverbials and other contextual and situational devices.

2.3. Aspect is a term used to describe the state of verb action as beginning, in progress, completed, etc. (Stageberg 1972: 145).

2.4. Mood . Crystal (2003: 299) states that "mood refers to a set of syntactic and semantic contrasts signaled by alternative paradigms of the verb, e.g. indicative (the unmarked form), subjunctive, imperative."

3. Overlapping and Tense shift in English

There are two tenses in English: past and present. There is no obvious future tense corresponding to the time/tense relation for present and past. The future may be denoted by means of modal auxiliaries as in :

(1) *I will have the car repaired by next week.*

The simple present tense is not restricted to the present; it is usually used to express general time. It can include the past, present and the future. The timeless present is useful in general statements such as eternal truths and generalizations about customs of single individuals (Lyons, 1968: 306; Leech and Svartvick, 1994: 66):

(2) *The earth revolves around the earth.*

(3) *Children learn faster when their needs and interests are provided for.*

The present simple is also used to express future time with verbs like *come, go, arrive, and depart*. These verbs may also be used in present progressive to express future:

(4) *He leaves for London tomorrow. (Simple present)*

(5) *The train is leaving tonight. (present progressive)*

We can find succession of different tenses in some sentences expressing indirect speech. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:343) state that "the rule of back-shift can be ignored in cases where the validity of the statements reported holds for the present time as much as for the time of the utterance.", as in the following example:

(6: a) *"Nothing can harm a good man," said Socrates*

(6: b) *Socrates said nothing can harm a good man.*

A variety of tense interpretations is available in the embedded clauses of speech verbs. The present, in contrast to past and future, has special properties in relation to the main verb. The time space structured by the embedded present may even represent a time period which includes both the 'now' of the base and 'now' of speech event. For example:

(7) *John said that he is very happy about his new job.*

(8) *John had said that he is very happy about his new job.*

(9) *Tomorrow, John will tell Mary that he wants to divorce.*

In (7) and (8), the main clause verb is past, we may interpret the expression *he is very happy* to mean both that John is happy *now* about his new job and that John *was* happy about his new job at the time of the speech event *say*.

In (9), where the main verb is future, we may interpret the expression *he wants to divorce* to mean that John's divorce holds both now and tomorrow.

In the following example, the verb *leaves* encodes an event that is in future real time.

(10) *John said that the last metro leaves at 12:30.*

We should expect the present for an event that is posterior to the main verb, in just such cases where the future event is constructed as a fact. Although it is future in real time, it is constructed as a fact rather than a prediction [web site: www.cogsci.ucsd.edu/~ p: 374].

Sometimes, when the main clause verb is past, the verb of the embedded clause, when present, includes only the verb reference at the present and to the verb of the main clause. The interpretation is made clear in the following example:

(11) *George was in San Francisco yesterday.*

I talked to George's secretary.

She said he is in Los Angeles today.

In this sentence, the speaker makes the report *he is in Los Angeles* concerns only with what holds true in present reality, not with what was true at the time of speech event *say*. In this example, what is future or posterior to the speech event *she said* is marked a present fact. This is possible because although the event *he is in Los Angeles* is posterior or future to the time of saying, the secretary is

not making a prediction, she is stating a fact. In relation to the secretary's verb point at the time of speaking yesterday, his being in Los Angeles is a future scheduled event (ibid: 377).

In other expressions, the past tense form of the verb is used along with the present, that is with the subjunctive *were*. It is used in hypothetical meaning in conditional and concessive clauses after verbs like *wish*, as in:

(12) *If she were to study something like that, ...*

(13) *He speaks to me as if I were*

(14) *I wish I were dead.* (Eckersley and Eckersley, 1960: 228)

4. Variation in the Tense of the Verb in Arabic

There are two tenses in Arabic: past and present. There is no future tense corresponding to the time/tense relation for present and past. The future time is rendered by means of the future particles (سوف) and (س).

Arabic has two aspects: the perfect and the imperfect. The perfect refers to past time (or completed action), and the imperfect refers to present or non-past time. In Arabic, aspect-tense is shown by the addition of an aspect-tense prefix to the base form of the verb (Aziz, 1989: 60).

The shift from past tense to the present is of two cases: first, the present is used to refer to an action that is completed in the past, and the second is to refer to something that will happen in the future. Ibn Al-Athir (1933:2) states that a shift to the present tense serves a number of purposes and it will be more rhetoric than using just the past tense. It may conjure up an important action to the mind as if it were happening in the present, which is not the case with the past.

﴿ وَاللَّهُ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ الرِّيحَ فَتُبِيرُ سَحَابًا فَسُقْنَاهُ إِلَى بَلَدٍ مَيِّتٍ فَأَحْيَيْنَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا كَذَلِكَ النُّشُورُ ﴿فاطر، ٩﴾. (١٥)

[It is God Who *sent* Forth the winds, so that they *raise up* the Clouds, And we drove them to a land that was dead, and *revived* the earth there after its death, even so will be the Resurrection.]*^(*)

In respect to the above verse, Al-Ammar (2008: 1) says that the present tense verb " *فَتَنبِئُ* *raise up* " is used in contrary with what follows and precedes it, to conjure up this remarkable action in the mind as if we are looking at the scene that indicates the power of God.

Al-Zajaji (1959: 87) states that the context gives the word its past tense by coordinating it with the past tense verb or with adverbs of time like (*قَبْلُ*) (*in times gone by*) since the context requires that all the verbs must be in a uniform style.

Abdul-Ghani (2006:1) explains that when the event is in the past and it is important, the Arabs use the present instead of the past because the present makes the event revive before the reader and they interact with it more than with the past.

In the following verse, killing of the prophets was attributed to the ancestors although it happened at the time before. That is one of rhetorical uses.

﴿ وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ آمِنُوا بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا تَقُولُوا نَحْنُ آمِنُونَ بِمَا نَزَّلَ عَلَيْنَا وَيَكْفُرُونَ بِمَا وَرَاءَهُ وَهُوَ الْحَقُّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا مَعَهُمْ قُلْ فَلِمَ تَقْتُلُونَ أَنْبِيَاءَ اللَّهِ مِنْ قَبْلُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴾ (البقرة 91) (١٦)

[When it is said to them "Believe in what Allah sent down, they say "We believe in what was sent down to us ", yet they reject all besides, even if it be truth confirming what is with them, say: " Why then *are you killing* the prophets of Allah *in times gone by* if you did indeed believe?"

Thus, the verb "are killing" indicates the continuity of that event. Besides it conjures up the scene in the mind referring to the

(*) It is noted that the translation of the Qur'anic verses are taken from Ali, A.(2001). *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*.

propensity of killing prophets that flow in their blood as it flew in the blood of the forebears.

Al-Suyuti (1327 hijri: 23) adds that what is joined (by means of conjunction) to present, future or past, will have the same tense. The use of the present tense out of the general context of the verse (past) has two indications: first, a syntactic indication by the present tense verb and the contextual indication referring to the past tense; coming after the past tense.

This kind of usage is common and widely known where the reader finds a special charm. The rhetoricians say that the present is more expressing and more eloquent than the past. This way makes the scene revive before the reader, and restore our mind to the moment the action took place.

Al-Sakaki (1937: 247) considers shifting from the past to the present as one of the rhetorical basics if the context requires such a shift. Various kinds of this sort of shifts can be found in the glorious Qur'an, and it is considered as one of the main features of rhetoric. Look at the following example from the glorious Qur'an when Allah addresses the Jews:

﴿ أَفَكَلَّمَا جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ بِمَا لَا تَهْوَىٰ أَنفُسُكُمْ اسْكَبْتُمْ فَرِيقًا كَذِبًا وَفَرِيقًا تَقْتُلُونَ ﴾ (البقرة، ٨٧) (١٧)
 [That whenever there *came* to you an Apostle with what you yourselves *desire* not, you *puffed up* with pride. - some you *called* imposters and others *you slay*!]

In this verse, there is a shift from the past verb (كَذَّبْتُمْ *you called imposters*) to the present (تَقْتُلُونَ *you slay*). According to the context, it is expected that the present tense verb would be (قَتَلْتُمْ *slew*) in the past, especially the verse is talking about how the Jews accused the prophets of lying and killed them. The present tense here indicates the atrocity and horribleness of killing prophets. Thus, it conjures it in our soles and minds (Al-Zamakhshari, 1987 I: 295).

The shift may take place because the second remarkable action continues to happen now (Abdel Haleem, 1992:8).

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ جَاءَتْكُمْ جُنُودٌ فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا وَجُنُودًا لَمْ تَرَوْهَا... إِذْ جَاءُوكُمْ مِنْ فَوْقِكُمْ وَمِنْ أَسْفَلَ مِنْكُمْ وَإِذْ زَاغَتِ الْأَبْصَارُ... وَتَطَّنُونَ بِاللَّهِ الظَّنُونَا ﴾ (الأحزاب: ١٠) (١٨)

[O ye who believe! Remember the grace of God on you, when there came down on you hosts, but we sent against them a hurricane and forces that you saw not... they came on you from above you and from below you ...and you imagine various vain thoughts about God]

﴿ هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا... ﴾ (غافر: ٦٧) (١٩)

[It is God Who created you from dust, then from a sperm drop then from a clot, then does he get you out as a child]

A shift from the past to present sometimes is accompanied by the shift from the indicative to the imperative mood to highlight a requested act:

﴿ وَإِذْ جَعَلْنَا الْبَيْتَ مَثَابَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَمْنًا وَاتَّخِذُوا مِنْ مَّقَامِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ مُصَلًّى... ﴾ (البقرة: ٤٧) (٢٠)

[Remember we made the house a place of assembly for men and a place of safety and take you the station of Abraham as a place of prayer...]

﴿ قُلْ أَمْرٌ رَبِّي بِالتَّقْصِطِ وَأَقِيمُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ عِندَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ ﴾ (الاعراف: ٢٩) (٢١)

[Say: "My Lord commanded justice, and set your whole selves (to Him) at every time and place of prayer]

Prayer being a pillar of Islam, the imperative here is more effective than the indicative. Similarly, highlighting a good thing is sometimes effectively achieved by a shift from the indicative to the imperative mood as in:

﴿ أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَالْفُلْكَ تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِأَمْرِهِ... ﴾ (الحج: ٦٥) (٢٢)

[See you not that God made subject to you all that on the earth and the ships that sail through the sea by his command?]

5. Using Past to refer to Future

In the following verses, it is noted that the future action is reversed to the past for a rhetorical purpose that the context requires. In the following verse, the past tense verb (أتى) came) is used to refer to the day of judgment.

(٢٣) ﴿ أَتَىٰ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ فَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلُوهُ... ﴾ (النحل ١)
[Inevitable *Came* the commandment of Allah]

Al-Samarra'i (1980: 3) explains that the purpose behind such use is to indicate that the event will realize for certain in the future, the command of Allah is the Day of Judgment i.e. to guide the mind of the readers or the listeners to the inevitability of the event in the future.

Using the past tense has the effect of making the act appear already completed, hence it is a frequent use in talking about the hereafter. (Noor Al-Deen, 1964: 70)

(٢٤) ﴿ وَسِيقَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ زُمَرًا... ﴾ (الزمر ٧١)
[The Unbelievers *were led* o Hell in crowd...]

(٢٥) ﴿ وَفُتِحَتِ السَّمَاءُ فَكَانَتْ أَبْوَابًا. وَسُيِّرَتِ الْجِبَالُ فَكَانَتْ سَرَابًا ﴾ (النبا ١٩-٢٠)
[And the Heavens *were opened* as if they were doors. And the mountains *vanished* as if they were a mirage].

Again, the past tense is a passage way for the mind of the listener to the actuality of the future event

(٢٦) ﴿ وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَصُعِقَ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ... ﴾ (الزمر ٦٨)
[The trumpet *was sounded*, when all that are in the heavens and on earth swooned...]

Again, the past tense of the verb *was sounded* indicates the imminent event; as sure as an event that happened in the past. Thus, using the certitude of the past events as a way to show the certainty of the future event of the Day of Judgment.

(٢٧) ﴿ وَبَرَزُوا لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا فَقَالَ الضُّعَفَاءُ لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَتَمُّ مَعْنُونَ عَنَّا مِنْ عَذَابِ اللَّهِ... ﴾ (ابراهيم: ٢١)

[And they all *appeared* before Allah together, then will the weak say to those who were arrogant, "For us, we but followed you, can you then avail us to all against the wrath of Allah?"]

The past tense of the verb *appeared* here indicates the certainty of the event in the future (Al-Asfahani: 1986: 14).

﴿ وَنَادَىٰ أَصْحَابَ الْأَعْرَافِ رَجَالًا يَعْرِفُونَهُمْ بِسِيمَاهُمْ... ﴾ (الأعراف: ٤٨) (٢٨)

[The men on the heights *called* certain men whom they know from their marks, "Of what profit to you your hoards and arrogant ways?"]

Ahmed (2004) states that the past tense may be used in the verses that indicate invocation as in the following:

﴿ قَاتَلَهُمُ اللَّهُ أَنَّى يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴾ (التوبة: ٣٠) (٢٩)

[God's curse be on them: they are deluded away from the truth]

﴿ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ... ﴾ (البينة: ٨) (٣٠)

[God well pleased with them, and they with Him]

The present tense is an indication of the continuance and persistence of some past event:

﴿ أَتَأْمُرُونَ النَّاسَ بِالْبِرِّ وَتَنْسَوْنَ أَنفُسَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ تُلَوْنَ الْكِتَابَ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴾ (البقرة: ٤٤) (٣١)

[Do you order the people to do right and *forget* yourselves?]

Do you order and *forget* are both in present tense, but the verse indicates the behavior that took place in the past and continued i.e. they ordered the people continuously to do good and persistently ignored their own selves.

﴿ وَاتَّبَعُوا مَا تُلَوُّ الشَّيَاطِينُ عَلَىٰ مُلْكِ سُلَيْمَانَ... ﴾ (البقرة: ١٧٢) (٣٢)

[And they followed what the devils *are giving out* for the kingdom of Solomon...] *are giving out* again indicates a persistent action that took place in the past.

﴿ فَلَمْ تَقْتُلُونِ أَنْبِيَاءَ اللَّهِ مِنْ قَبْلُ... ﴾ (البقرة: ٩١) (٣٣)

[Say: "why do you kill the prophets of Allah in times gone by...]

Al-Badree (1404 hijri: 110) states that in some verses we see that the past tense verb is used with an adverb of time like *now* and *today*. This is an indication that the tense is not understood from the

form of the verb but from the context and the adverb of time. Consider the following verse:

(٣٤) ﴿ قَالُوا الْآنَ جِئْتَ بِالْحَقِّ ... ﴾ (البقرة: ٧٠)

[Now you brought the truth...]

﴿ الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتَمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمِي وَرَضِيتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا ... ﴾ (المائدة ٣)

[This day I perfected your religion for you, completed my favours upon you, as chose for you Islam as your religion]

(٣٦) ﴿ الْآنَ خَفَّفَ اللَّهُ عَنْكُمْ وَعَلِمَ أَنَّ فِيكُمْ ضَعْفًا ... ﴾ (الأنفال: ٦٥)

[For the present, God lightened your task, for He knew that there is a weak spot in you...]

6. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper, the researcher concludes the following:

1- The rules of rhetoric demand that the words chosen for expression should be so exact in conveying the message that they should not express too much or too little for the occasion. The more a description embodies this quality, and the more appropriate the words are to the situation, the more eloquent it is said to be. The Glorious Qur'an fulfills all the requirements of rhetoric to the highest standard.

2- In English, the present tense can be found along with the past in indirect speech, when the embedded sentence expresses a fact and not merely be applicable to the time when the statement was made, like:

(37) *He said that the sun is 90 million miles away.*

There is also a shift to the past verb *were* when the sentence expresses a wish, as in:

(38) *I wish I were dead.*

3- In English, a variety of interpretations are available for the present in the embedded clauses of speech verbs. The exact time

period represented in a present tense, is determined more by contextual information than by grammatical constraints imposed by the tense category present. The shifting also occurs in subordinate clauses, both temporal and conditional, as in:

(39) *When / if you have finished your test, [raise your hand].*
Here, a present-perfect predication is used despite the fact that its reference point is located in a (hypothetical) future rather than at the time of speaking.

- 4- Verbs in Arabic have a variety of tense indications. They are not understood from forms only, but also through context, and by the rhetorical purposes. The incompatibility of verb forms is used for rhetorical purposes and the situation in which they are said requires such style. In many cases, future events are expressed using past tense. The rhetorical secret behind such style is that it makes the act on which the verse talks appear already completed, and its occurrence is beyond doubt.

(40) ﴿ وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَصُعِقَ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ... ﴾ (الزمر ٦٨)

[The trumpet *was sounded*, when all that in the heavens and on earth *swooned*...]

(sounded) and (swooned) are expressed by using past tense verbs in spite of the fact that they will happen in the future, for the rhetorical purposes mentioned above.

- 5- Past tense is expressed through present also rhetorical purposes also. The secret behind such style is to conjure up the scene in the mind and posing it on the eyes. That use makes the event engraved in the mind, and make us consider the power of God carefully. Such style is well known in Arabic in their prose and poetry, which has a great impression.

﴿ وَبَرَى السَّمْسَ إِذَا طَلَعَتْ تَزَاوَرُ عَنْ كَهْفِهِمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَإِذَا غَرَبَتْ تَقْرَضُهُمْ ذَاتَ الشَّمَالِ وَهُمْ فِي فَجْوَةٍ مِنْهُ... وَيَقَابِلُهُمْ ذَاتَ الْيَمِينِ وَذَاتَ الشَّمَالِ... ﴾ (الكهف ١٧-١٨)

[You would have seen the sun, when it rose declining to the right from their cave, and when it set turning away from them from to the

left, while they lay in the open space in the midst of the cave ... and we *turn* them on their right and on their left sides...]

6- The shift may take place because the second remarkable action continues to happen now:

﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَتُصْبِحُ الْأَرْضُ مُخْضَرَّةً إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَطِيفٌ خَبِيرٌ﴾ (الحج: ٦٣) (٤٢)

[See you not that God sent down rain from the sky and the earth becomes covered with green]

7- Future events can also be expressed through shifting from present to past to make the action already completed, as in the verse that talks about the hereafter:

﴿وَيَوْمَ نُسَبِّحُ الْجِبَالَ وَتَرَى الْأَرْضَ بَارِزَةً وَحَشَرْنَاَهُمْ فَلَمْ نُغَادِرْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا﴾ (الكهف: ٤٧) (٤٣)

[On that day, we shall move the mountains, and *you will see the earth* as a level stretch, and we shall gather them altogether, nor shall we leave out any of them.]

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