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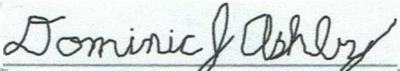
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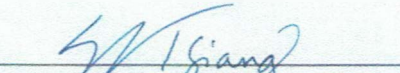
NOT ANGRY BUT ANGY: THE RHETORICAL EFFECTS OF NON-STANDARD LANGUAGE  
IN MEMES


BY

CAILIN WILE

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NOT ANGRY BUT ANGY: THE RHETORICAL EFFECTS OF NON-STANDARD  
LANGUAGE IN MEMES

BY

CAILIN WILE

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

The use of non-standard language on the internet has long been a topic of controversy, as some believe its prevalence indicates carelessness or a lack of intelligence in the (mostly) younger generations who use it. Non-standard language can refer to spelling or grammar that deviates from preferred language conventions, and is popular in what are called internet “memes.” Though the definition of a “meme” can vary, the term can be used to refer to pieces of culture that are remixed and disseminated by internet users. This thesis identifies patterns of non-standard language in memes to demonstrate that these changes are not accidental, but follow their own set of conventions. Examples of these patterns were collected and documented by the types of change that standard language undergoes. They were then matched to existing rhetorical figures, or figures of speech, that have historically been used by authors and orators to create a desired rhetorical effect. These rhetorical figures could include changing the length of a vowel sound, or adding or cutting a syllable. It was found that for each pattern of change, there was a rhetorical figure that matched in both pattern and effect. This illustrates that the presence of non-standard language in memes is intentional, and that it is often used where text, rather than tone of voice or body language, is all that the user has at their disposal. The use of rhetorical figures in memes can also textually represent paralinguistic, which includes pitch and tone of voice, in order to express a more nuanced message than could be conveyed through standard text alone.

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## I. Introduction

The increasing prevalence of the internet as a medium for discourse has led to changes in text-based communication methods. Where face-to-face speech is interpreted in part through nonverbal cues such as body language and variations in voice, text-based conversation lacks this same nuance. The absence of paralanguage, defined by communication scholar Joseph Devito as “the vocal (but nonverbal) dimension of speech,” (485) forces a person to interpret a message based on dry text alone, without pitch or inflection to guide this interpretation. The absence of these nonverbal cues can inhibit a reader’s ability to gauge the full meaning or effect of a text.

This issue of misconstrued text-only communication is illustrated in part by the numerous articles about “email etiquette” that one can find online. *Harvard Business Review* released an article in 2013 about avoiding textual miscommunication in the workplace, noting that “even the simplest of things can be misinterpreted. For instance, does the use of an exclamation mark in a text message (“I didn’t know that!”) indicate that the writer is excited, surprised, or angry?” (Ferrazzi). The risk associated with miscommunication can be high, especially as it relates to someone’s livelihood; however, these issues are not limited to digitally mediated *business* interactions. Though not specific to the internet itself, text-based communication with friends or family through SMS also runs the risk of being misconstrued: something as simple as a punctuation mark can change the whole effect of a message. Linguist Gretchen McCulloch states that using a period at the end of a text message is similar to “making your voice deeper at the end of the sentence... [which] adds a note of solemnity or finality or seriousness to what you're

saying” (qtd. in Cornish). This can cause the recipient of the message to misconstrue the text as more serious or even aggressive than the author intended.

This “passive-aggressive” (Cornish) period is one text-based effort at reproducing paralanguage, but these efforts span a range of strategies, including using capital letters to signify shouting, or using bold to emphasize a single word. In addition to paralanguage, other forms of nonverbal communication have also been represented on the internet. The pairing of a text with an image—sometimes referred to as an internet “meme”—offered a visual aspect that could act as “body language” to help readers interpret the superimposed text. For example, the plain text “It’s Valentine’s Day” could be interpreted in different ways depending on the reader’s idea of the holiday, but when paired with an image of someone rolling their eyes, the writer’s true feelings become clear.

These text-and-image pairs quickly became a popular way to share content on the internet. Users’ ability to share text with accompanying “body language” overcame many of the hurdles associated with text-only communication. These multimodal constructions are mostly used for lighthearted communication between friends or family, and are thus akin to rhetorical playgrounds in which users are free to take risks with language and the ways in which they use it. As these methods of communication became more popular, users engaged in more rhetorical play; soon, non-standard language (unusual spelling, word usage, and grammar) came into common use. These deliberate misspellings and so-called “broken” grammar showed that the image was not the only cue by which the reader could interpret the meme’s full message. These new conventions might include the lengthening or switching of a vowel sound to replicate paralinguistic features, which rounds out the interpretation of the meme as a whole.

There are many people, however, who believe that the use of non-standard spelling and grammar is not purposive, but rather comes from ignorance, even citing such usages as proof of how the internet is negatively impacting the intelligence of its users. The use of descriptive grammar, which encompasses the imperfect, everyday use of language (as opposed to how preferred language rules dictate its use) is not indicative of lower intelligence. In fact, most people use “ungrammatical” language every day without realizing it and this does not interfere with the accuracy of the message conveyed. The sentences, “There are a lot of things to do in New York” and “There’s a lot of things to do in New York” both communicate the exact same idea, though one is grammatical while the other is not.

A person’s use of descriptive grammar simply reflects the language conventions of the communities in which they<sup>1</sup> frequently interact. This idea that internet users are becoming increasingly unintelligent, especially due to their use of non-standard language or new slang, is often brought up in generational arguments to discredit younger age groups. The digital divide is explored in linguist Susan Herring’s article “Questioning the Generational Divide: Technological Exoticism and Adult Constructions of Online Youth Identity.” Herring mentions textspeak in particular and how “[t]hese typing practices have given new impetus to the age-old fear of older generations that language in the mouths (or on the keyboards) of youth is in a state of rapid decay” (5). Herring argues that, though most internet users are from younger generations, it is the older generations who “interpret new technologies and youth practices in normative, moral terms, a process that reinscribes youth as ‘other’” (1). As people from these older generations do the most

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<sup>1</sup> The singular “they” will be used in this thesis in an effort to promote linguistic inclusivity and avoid gendered language (Modern Language Association).

writing about how the internet is used, they control most of the narrative about technology and its effects, resulting in the youth's "struggle to reconcile the concerns of mainstream media discourses... with their own and their friends' experiences of the Internet" (13). In fact, the so-called "internet generation" tends to see the internet as a tool rather than something to avoid. This mentality exists in direct opposition to the idea that the internet makes life more complicated or is damaging to its users: for many people, especially those who grew up using the internet, having access to the web at all times can be convenient and even comforting, rather than frustrating and difficult.

This thesis is a response to the idea that non-standard language on the internet is indicative of carelessness or a lack of intelligence. By documenting occurrences of non-standard language, identifying the features that make them non-standard, and pinpointing the rhetorical figures that correlate with these variations, I demonstrate that such usages are actually indicative of a complex method of manipulating language to suit needs outside of those that written text can normally serve. Herring writes that "[younger generations] abbreviate and use language creatively to signal their in-group identity, much as my friends and I wrote backwards... and created special writing conventions to pass notes in class" (Herring 8). This manipulation of language (or other mediums) to suit one's purposes is not a new concept; however, internet-based linguistic changes have not yet had enough light shed in their direction, as many people consider them to be lacking in academic merit. Non-standard spelling and grammar on the internet typically falls into identifiable patterns which correspond to existing rhetorical figures; this correspondence indicates that the processes involved in creating non-standard language are more complex than mere errors born of ignorance.

## II. Background and Review of Literature

The term “meme,” a shortened version of the Greek *mimeme*, was first coined by British biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Though the original definition of a “meme” was more biological in nature, meant to convey “the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (143), its usage has changed in recent years to refer to certain types of posts on the internet. In a 2013 interview, Dawkins himself approved of its use in reference to the internet phenomenon, confirming that “[t]he [present-day] meaning is not that far away from the original... It's anything that goes viral. In... *The Selfish Gene*, I did actually use the metaphor of a virus. So when anybody talks about something going viral on the internet, that is exactly what a meme is” (qtd. in Solon). While Dawkins’s original “meme” was something that “propagate[s] itself” (Dawkins 143) naturally over time, the use of the term meme on the internet defies this definition, as *these* memes are propagated by the users who consciously create, remix, and share them.

The definition of “meme” as it pertains to the internet phenomenon is difficult to pin down to a single kind of post. In his dissertation, “Meme as a Rhetorical Concept for Digital Media Genres,” Thomas Ballard describes the posts that could be called a “meme,” which include: “News items... a statement or action by a celebrity... a grammatical or lexical formation such as a particular sentence structure or saying... a viral video... a tweet... [or] a screenshot of a text message conversation” (9), among other things. He defines memes as “ubiquitous artifacts [that] combine pictures and words to visualize messages about a wide array of topics” (1). With an emphasis on the

humorous aspect of most internet memes, researchers Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Elena Shalevska define them as “part of the online culture; mostly jokes, that are presented through mediums such as image+text or GIF+text combinations or just plain text and are spread virally on all Internet-based platforms, changing along the way” (158).

A meme’s success, or virality, largely depends on the rhetorical concept of *kairos*: commonly translated as “the right time,” *kairos* “generally refers to the way a given context for communication both calls for and constrains one's speech” (“*Kairos*”). Though it is used mostly in the field of rhetoric and composition, professor James Kinneavy states that “the concept of *kairos* is much larger than just composition. I frankly think that you could probably take a concept of *kairos* and apply it to practically almost anything” (qtd. in Thompson 81). In order to be considered successful a meme must go “viral,” and this concept is especially important because “[e]very interaction [on the internet] ... might be *kairotic* but might also be forgotten (Gallagher 52). Before posting a meme, internet users must have an awareness of the types of posts that are currently popular. According to John Gallagher, “[d]igital users observe and manipulate their templates when they decide which moments are the ideal contextual moments of interaction” (53). Researcher Aurora Matzke argues that “[m]any socially networked spaces used in online communications have become predicated on the wisdom of the crowd... where members of a community decide what is and is not included, highlighted, or dismissed” (208). This “wisdom of the crowd” is largely based on what has previously been successful, as users strive to create the next *kairotic* meme. If a user waits too long to post a meme, there is a good chance that the right time has passed and a new meme is



in the spotlight instead. “Dead” memes, or memes that are no longer in frequent circulation, generally lose their humorous effect, which is exhausted through users’ constant exposure to their content. After a while, these dead memes tend to fade out of use entirely; because of this, it can also be argued that even a kairotic meme can be forgotten, as a meme’s virality does not ensure its permanence.

Previous studies about memes have typically focused on the concepts of remix culture (Lessig) and intertextuality (Rigney) over rhetoric-based investigations. According to linguists Eline Zenner and Dirk Geeraerts in their chapter “One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions,” memes “encompass all kinds of online objects that are mixed and remixed, copied and imitated, propagated and diffused by participants on the web” (168). This idea of “remix” is further discussed by internet activist Lawrence Lessig in his book *REMIX: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. Lessig quotes Greg Gillis, a disc jockey (DJ) whose job relies heavily on remixing audio: “We’re living in this remix culture... where any grade-school kid has a copy of Photoshop and can download a picture of George Bush and manipulate his face how they want and send it to their friends. And that’s just what they do” (14). Though the term “remix” is heavily associated with music, “remix culture” can apply to anything that is changed and disseminated, such as memes. Most memes begin with either a phrase or an image, where one or more aspects of the original are altered by another user to achieve the desired rhetorical effect, such as cuteness, humor, or even mockery. For example, an image of a person wearing an expression of horror might bear the caption, “When it’s 11:59 and you remember the assignment that’s due at midnight.” Another user might take the same image and change the text to “When

you see her without makeup for the first time.” Conversely, a user might take the latter caption and superimpose it onto an image of a cartoon character with heart eyes, changing the meaning of the phrase entirely. The image and the basic format remain the same, but users can change the subject matter to suit their own needs. These resulting memes can be shared and taken by others who repeat the process, creating a virtually endless cycle of remix and redistribution.

Remix culture also contributes to meme intertextuality, which can help to create a sense of community among internet users. Zenner and Geeraerts discuss the layers of meme interpretation, stating that “many memes only make sense when the recipient has sufficient experience with Internet memes” (172). Internet users can either use original content or remix aspects of other memes to create a new one. According to cultural scholar Ann Rigney, the term “intertextuality” has two main meanings: “all the possible relationships between a text and previous utterances” and “an aesthetic device whereby a new text cites, with varying degrees of explicitness, a specific text” (99). In memes, this intertextuality usually takes the form of the latter, with old memes being incorporated into new formats. For example, the popular meme called “Loss” began as a four-panel strip taken from artist Tim Buckley’s webcomic *Ctrl+Alt+Del*. The strip depicted a man rushing into a hospital to be with a woman who was suffering a miscarriage. Internet users took the web-comic and parodied it, portraying the characters as simplified versions of themselves, for example, as lines or other objects, as in Figure 1.

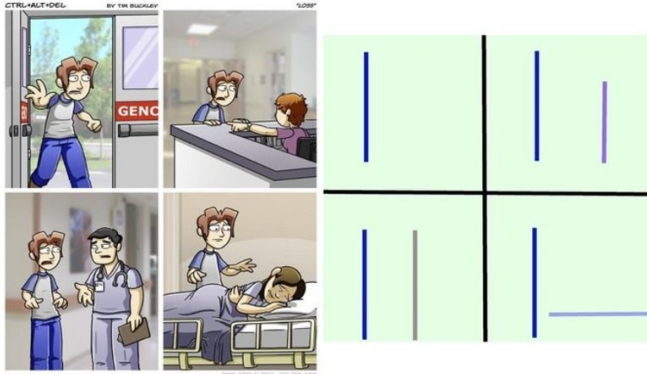


Figure 1. The original “Loss” alongside a simplified version. *Source:* “Loss”; KnowYourMeme; Literally Media Ltd.; 2008; <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/loss>

It should be noted that internet users did not parody the strip because they found the themes to be humorous, but because, according to the website Know Your Meme, “the dramatic tonal shift for the [webcomic] series was unexpected, and for many readers, unsuccessful, leading to the strip being widely mocked online” (“Loss”). From there, the “Loss” meme was added into other memes. Sometimes a simplified form of the image was hidden in a regular meme to frustrate the viewer, using a concept similar to a “Rick Roll,” in which an unsuspecting internet user is tricked into watching the music video to Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up,” by clicking on a link that appears to take them to different content. “Loss,” when hidden in another meme, can cause the viewer to experience humorous frustration at having been “tricked” into looking at it.

Figure 2 is one of the best examples of how meme intertextuality can also create a sense of community and belonging for internet users, as the layers of memes that require background information create an “inside joke” feel.

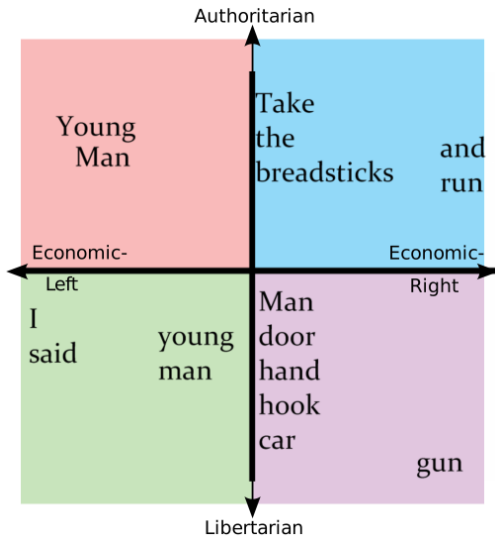


Figure 2. A meme referencing six others by Tumblr user @politicalcompassmemes. *Source:* Tumblr; Automattic Inc.; <https://adulthoodisokay.tumblr.com/post/616201708574490624/plaid-n-converse-memeception>

Figure 2 contains references to *six* other memes in one single image. Tumblr user @pagesofkenna identified these memes in a Tumblr post for an audience that was already familiar with them; I will concisely describe these memes for an audience that may not be. The included memes are: the trend of changing the lyrics to the YMCA theme song to fit the content of a post; the political compass, which generally includes silly, everyday things that are lined up with political sides (“Political Compass”); the aforementioned pattern of “Loss” created with words; the “stealing breadsticks” meme, where users allude to the fact that they are at a restaurant on a (bad) date and depict a few lines of a conversation that would lead them to “shove breadsticks in [their] purse” before they run out the door (“Breadsticks”); the “man door hand hook car door” meme, which depicts the nonsensical last line of an infamous internet “scary” story (“Man Door”); and the non-sequitur “gun,” or “with a gun,” which is used to add a humorous, over-the-top effect to a description. These six memes work in conjunction to make the whole image

indecipherable to someone who has never been exposed to these meme trends. As time goes by, more and more memes become layered like the one in Figure 2, which creates a sense of community among users who understand each other's intertextual references.

This sense of community can lead to an “in-group” and an “out-group:” those who use social media and are exposed to memes and those who are not. However, these groups existed long before the internet was invented. The manipulation of language for amusement has already briefly been mentioned by Herring, who talked about writing backwards to create a special kind of communication with what she had available to her. These practices don't just stop at written language, however: Pig Latin, thought to have originated sometime in the 19th century, has stood the test of time as a language game that children often play to confuse those who do not know how to speak it (“Pig Latin”). This effectively creates an in-group that hinges on prior exposure to this language. Thus, in the same way that in-groups have been created through the manipulation of handwriting or of everyday speech, so too are today's younger generations creating in-groups by manipulating the modes of communication that they have the most exposure to—in this case, digital text—in order to fit their specific needs.

Those from the out-group, which often include older individuals, tend to see non-standard language as a threat to language purity or to the intelligence of its users. In fact, many articles discuss the effects that “internet language” will have on the general public: subjects range from vilifying the internet by saying that it is responsible for the decline of the younger generation's intelligence, to defending this type of speech because there is no quantifiable proof that it is harmful. Professor Eleanor Johnson expresses her concern in the 2010 article “Experts Divided Over Internet Changes to Language,” stating that her

students' frequent messaging makes them think "screamingly atrocious spelling and grammatical errors" ("Experts") are acceptable. She also mentions the use of slang in students' academic papers; however, linguist David Crystal asserts that "linguistic changes caused by the Internet run parallel to changes in the existing lexicon" ("Experts"). This means that it is not certain that Johnson's students are using slang because their internet use makes them think it's okay, but because they are used to using this type of speech with their friends, both online and off. The issue then becomes the students' inability to code switch, rather than their internet use as a whole.

Similarly, internet documentarian Douglas Rushkoff argues in his 2013 *New York Times* article "It's Not Just Grammar; It's Clear Thinking," that "without grammar, we lose the agreed-upon standards about what means what. We lose the ability to communicate when respondents are not actually in the same room . . . Without grammar, we lose the precision required to be effective and purposeful in writing." However, ungrammatical language is used for effective communication every day. As previously mentioned, descriptive grammar details how language is *actually* used, while prescriptive grammar concerns itself with the rules and conventions of so-called correct language use. The phrase "I ain't seen nothing" is technically grammatically incorrect, but conveys the same message as its grammatical counterpart: "I haven't seen anything." Similarly, the commonly used regional/colloquial expression "y'all'd've," the contraction for "you all would have" ("Y'all'd've"), would be fought by prescriptivists, but would most likely be recognized as a valid form of communication by those who seek only to document how language is currently used.

Linguistics and memes have previously been studied together in academia: Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Elena Shalevska discuss particular linguistic concepts in their article, “Internet Memes and Their Socio-Linguistic Features.” They state that “[m]emes use vernacular English . . . jargon, slang, shortenings and neologisms as well as patterned ways of incorrect spelling and multiple intentional or unintentional grammar and syntax mistakes” (159). The authors mention LOLspeak, a type of internet “dialect” associated with animals in which words are misspelled intentionally, as though the animal in the photo is saying them. Examples of this include “I can haz cheezburger?” and “oh hai,” where common words are spelled in a sensational and childlike way. The authors also mention unintentional misspellings that come from a user’s (possible) ignorance of the spelling conventions for that word, for example, “their” instead of “they’re.” It is more likely, however, that the majority of these misspellings come from a purposive use of nonstandard language, with users mimicking popular posts at the time in the hopes of going viral. Though the authors mention LOLspeak in particular, they do not discuss the rhetorical effects that these misspellings create.

Gretchen McCulloch, author of the New York Times bestseller *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* and creator of the blog *All Things Linguistic*, has delved into the specifics of communication on the internet and how these methods of communication can be drastically different from day-to-day speech. Though she mainly studies internet language in general, McCulloch has also studied attributes of the meme subgenres “doge speak,” “doggo speak,” and “snek speak,” among others. “Doge,” a meme format that gained popularity in late 2013, features images of Shiba Inus surrounded by their own thoughts, which are written in the font comic sans. These

thoughts are in a specialized language called “doge speak” (“Doge”). Doge speak is best characterized by the use of “the five main doge modifiers[:] much, many, so, very, such” (McCulloch). These are used in short, grammatically incorrect phrases such as “such wow,” “so amaze,” or “very food.” Snek speak, which bears a lot of similarities to doggo speak, is the cutesy dialect associated with snakes. This dialect contains creative phrases like “doing a scare” or “doing a hiss.” Each of these meme subgenres includes specific and easily-identifiable patterns of language, and McCulloch explains how they function, why they became popular, and the reasons for their success. “You’re taking on characteristics of how people would address their animals in the first place,” McCulloch says in an interview with NPR, “a new cutesy word for a thing you’re already used to using cutesy words for? That’s such an easy entry to vocabulary” (qtd. in Boddy).

“Doggo,” a type of meme featuring any kind of cute dog or puppy, also features very specific grammatical rules that are explained in detail by Jennifer Bivens in her master’s thesis, “Describing Doggo-Speak: Features of Doggo Meme Language.” Bivens studied the most prominent and recognizable features of doggo speak to put a name to the specific grammatical changes that were taking place in these memes. She uses the phrase “He is frightening me” (8) to illustrate the changes that phrases undergo to create doggo speak. She states that this kind of speech has “a basic sentence ordering of [do, INDIRECT OBJ, a, GERUND]... Without an indirect object in the sentence, the ordering would be [do, a, GERUND]” (Bivens 7). The gerund then gets turned into its base form, “frighten,” to complete the transformation. This often looks like “Do me a frighten” or “do a bark.”



While some of the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of memes have already been studied, I will use rhetorical figures, which describe deliberate alterations to standard language in order to achieve a rhetorical effect, to analyze their non-standard features. These are also commonly referred to as figures of speech, though the term “rhetorical figures” best suits the purposes of this thesis for its roots in rhetoric. Most of these more specific figures fall under the category of metaplasms, which refers to “alteration of the letters or syllables in single words, including additions, omissions, inversions, and substitutions” (“Metaplasms”), but encompasses many more specific types of changes. The changes that I’ve tracked that are not directly related to metaplasms relate to figures of order or to Delivery, the fifth canon of rhetoric.

Delivery historically “referred to the oral/aural and bodily aspects of an oral speech or performance—i.e., to the speaker’s voice (intonation, volume, rhythm) and to bodily movements and gestures” (Porter 207). The deliberate misspelling of words and use of unusual grammar in internet memes can be interpreted as a form of visual or textual Delivery that has similar effects on the audience as gesticulation or variations in tone of voice. As previously stated, many of these changes mimic paralanguage, which is responsible for the appropriate interpretation of words or phrases in face-to-face speech. Furthermore, many of the figures that exist in rhetoric can be directly applied to non-standard language in memes. These rhetorical figures came into being through the categorization of existing, successful rhetorical techniques: once these had names, students of rhetoric could study them with purpose, seeking them out rather than coming across them incidentally. Though many early students of rhetoric may not have known the names for the specific techniques they were using, their familiarity with them came

through prior exposure; similarly, those who create memes using these existing rhetorical figures are mirroring what they have seen on the internet and are not necessarily using these figures with creative intention.

### III. Methodology and Analysis

As the definition of the word “meme” can vary depending on context, for this study in particular it will be used to refer to a piece of culture that is widely disseminated and remixed by people on the internet to slightly change the original idea and rhetorical effect. These memes will range from regular text posts to text-and-image pairings. More specifically, they will contain examples of non-standard language, especially spelling and grammar, that contribute to the interpretation of the meme as a whole. This non-standard language will be further limited to the prevalent, recognizable patterns that I have observed and documented. Though there is already research on the different categories of non-standard language in animal memes, like doge, doggo, and snek speak (McCulloch), the particular patterns that I analyze are not limited to a certain kind of animal or type of meme, but will be classified by the rhetorical figures that they imitate.

Through a series of Google searches, I sought out patterns of non-standard grammar or spelling in memes. These were memes that I had seen before and looked up again through the use of Google. Once I found a considerable number of memes (over 100) that contained identifiable patterns, I charted the changes that the original words or phrases underwent to get to the end word or phrase. This resulted in a type of “key” that explained the most common transformation patterns. Though there are many more examples of words that fall into one or more of these categories, the most common ones are displayed in table 1.

Table 1

Common Patterns of Transformation

<b>Original Word</b>	<b>Replace Vowel with O</b>	<b>Replace Letter with M</b>	<b>Combination</b>
<b>Chunky</b>	Chonky	X	Chomky
<b>Chubby</b>	X	Chumby	Chomby
<b>Crunch</b>	Cronch	Crunch	Cromch
<b>Small</b>	Smol	X	X

Using Google Image searches, I found multiple examples of each new word or phrase and saved the memes to my computer. These ~130 memes composed the corpus that served as the basis for my research. I then turned to the website *Silva Rhetoricae* to look for concepts that applied to these usages. The site, run by Dr. Gideon Burton of Brigham Young University, serves as a guide to rhetorical concepts, both general (such as Delivery) and specific (such as epenthesis or diastole). My previously-documented patterns allowed me to tell at a glance whether a rhetorical figure would be applicable to the type of change that I was describing. As I soon discovered, most of the changes that words or phrases undergo in memes can be traced back to existing rhetorical figures. This list is not exhaustive and does not cover all of the patterns of non-standard language on the internet; however, it provides a glimpse into some of the most common instances of these language changes and seeks to describe them in terms of their rhetorical value that can be used for different effects.

### **Metaplasms**

Metaplasms is a blanket term for changes to “the letters or syllables in single words, including additions, omissions, inversions, and substitutions” (“Metaplasms”).

Most non-standard language in memes is the result of some kind of metaplasm. These changes will be categorized by type and described in terms of the rhetorical effects that they create.

### *Metaplasm by Addition*

The addition of a letter or sound can be categorized depending on where the addition takes place within a word.

### *Epenthesis*

Epenthesis, the “addition of a letter, sound, or syllable to the middle of a word,” (“Epenthesis” [Silva Rhetoricae]) is often used in metered writing (such as poetry) to make a word fit into the desired form. However, it can also be used to create a humorous effect (“Epenthesis” [Changing Minds]). The word “chubby” is often changed to “chumby” in cute memes, where the extra sound softens the effect of the word. This addition creates a funnier sound, but also serves to change the connotation of the word. Where “chubby” is sometimes used in a negative way and can have a negative connotation, “chumby” is nearly always used in a positive manner. “Chumby” appears most often in memes of large animals, thus the connotation of “chumby,” through exposure to the word in cute settings, becomes something that is both chubby and cute.

The word “henlo” is also an example of epenthesis. This variant of “hello” is widely used in informal greetings on the internet, as in the popular phrase, “henlo fren.” “Henlo” began as an internet meme in which an animal was shown in front of a computer reading messages from its cyberbully. The text in the messages always began with the phrase “Henlo [type of animal],” and then went on to call the animal names. The original context of the misspelled word added humor to the situation, making it sound like another

animal was the one doing the bullying. Since then, however, the humorous effect of epenthesis has been lost, as “henlo” is now, “used most commonly during internet chatting and text messaging as a new way of saying ‘hello’... [and] has now become a widely accepted and cuter way to greet people” (“Henlo Meaning”).

### *Anaptyxis*

A more specific form of epenthesis, known as anaptyxis, is the addition of a vowel sound to the middle of a word, usually between consonants (“Anaptyxis”).

The rhetorical figure anaptyxis can be used in a similar manner to its broader counterpart, epenthesis, to create a humorous effect. This effect can be seen in words like “angery,” where the addition of the extra syllable to the word “angry” makes the word sound childlike, funny, and even dramatic. In Figure 3, the red filter effect on the image sends the message of anger, but the dog’s small stature serves to reinforce the idea that its anger is more humorous than serious: this is a small dog that is not of a breed that is generally associated with being dangerous or threatening.



Figure 3. An upset-looking dog with the caption “angery.” *Source:* WeHeartIt; WeHeartIt.com, <https://weheartit.com/entry/304970959>

### *Metaplasm by Omission*

As with addition, the name for the omission of a sound or letter within a word depends on the location of its removal.

### *Syncope*

Syncope, the removal of a sound or syllable in the middle of a word, can be detected by the absence of a letter or letters from the center of the original word. This can be used “to speed up [a] conversation,” as it shortens the number of syllables needed for self-expression. While mostly used in poetry to make a word fit in the desired place (ex. o’er in place of over), “different kinds of colloquial contractions may also be called syncope” (“Syncope”).

In memes, the cutting of sounds in the middle of a word generally results in a more childlike utterance, as exemplified in the term “angy,” shown in Figure 4. These “angy” memes feature animals with their backs to the camera, as though giving the viewer the cold shoulder. Recent memes, in light of the Coronavirus pandemic, have followed this same trend, this time shortening “social distancing” to “social disty.”



Figure 4. The original (A) and an offshoot (B) of “no talk us we angy”. *Adapted from:* “Angy as Fuk”; MemeCenter; Meme Center; <https://www.memecenter.com/fun/3377699722005668/angy-as-fuk>, and “No Touch Me I Social Disty”; AhSeeit; AhSeeit.com; <https://ahseeit.com/?qa=24495/no-touch-me-i-social-disty-meme>

People who are not familiar with the first memes will understand the phrase from the second one, but might wonder why “distancing” is shortened to “disty.” The second meme’s mirroring of the language from the first illustrates the ways in which memes can inform each other. “Distancing” could very well be shortened in another manner: I propose “disting.” “Disting” contains the same number of syllables and eliminates the same sounds as “disty,” all while maintaining the look of the original word. In order for the link between the memes to be obvious, the user had to mirror the language from the first meme, dropping the -ing ending and adding -y.

Furthermore, the -y and -ie suffixes are commonly used to make a word sound cuter. Words like “blankie” or “stuffie” are often used by parents or children to mean “blanket” or “stuffed animal.” Oddly enough, some internet users have even begun to change the word “pandemic” to “pandemmy,” and to shorten “stimulus” to “stimmy,” turning a serious topic into something that is silly and almost cutesy. Not only have the words been changed to make them easier to type and to say, the subversion of the viewer’s expectations about the cute -y and -ie suffixes creates the effect of dark humor, a common coping mechanism in times of difficulty.

### *Apocope*

Apocope, the removal of a letter or syllable at the *end* of a word, (“Apocope”) is another type of omission. The most popular example of apocope is in the word “fren,” for “friend,” which has been previously mentioned in regards to the phrase “henlo fren,” a common internet greeting. In Figure 5, a dog uses this word to address a rabbit.; the word “fren” has a child-like sound and is used most often in “doggo” memes, where childlike language and syntax are used to depict thoughts from a dog’s point of view.





Figure 5. A dog meets a rabbit and calls it “fren.” Source: “Heckin Doggo”; MemesMonkey; MemesMonkey.com; <https://www.memesmonkey.com/topic/heckin+doggo#&gid=1&pid=8>

Another phrase in Figure 5, “Doin’ me a heckin concern,” already has the same syntax as doggo speak, which conveys cuteness and childishness. The addition of “fren” to this statement indicates that “fren” aligns with the same message, and that this word is supposed to be cuter than the original.

### *Metaplasms by Substitution*

Metaplasms by substitution is simply called “antisthecon.”

### *Antisthecon*

Antisthecon is the replacement of “one sound, syllable, or letter for another within a word” (“Antisthecon” [Silva Rhetoricae]). This strategy is used very often to create puns, forced rhymes, or other plays on words, but can also be used to depict an accent or way of speaking. The popular internet phrase “Listen, sweaty” is an example of antisthecon, as the second E in “sweaty” or “sweetie” has been changed to an A. “Sweaty” is generally used to poke fun at people who use terms of endearment to be condescending on the internet, for example, “No sweetie, you’re wrong. Try again.” The

term *should* be pronounced the same way as “sweaty,” but the E to A letter change provides the visual cue by which the viewer can interpret the sarcasm in its use. When the meme is referred to in speech, “sweaty” is pronounced as it normally is.

Similarly, the use of “screm” for “scream,” and “snek” for “snake” are examples of how antisthecon can serve to make words sound cuter by replacing a tense vowel with a lax one (“Tense and Lax”), as in the word “hen.” Lax vowels require less mouth movement to enunciate; in memes, the use of these vowels may serve to create a cute effect by imitating the simplistic sounds that children make. The word “screm” is mostly used in bird memes, to portray the cute yet loud noises that these animals produce. The most common types of birds in memes are domestic ones, such as parakeets, budgies, and cockatiels, mostly because they are kept in closer proximity to humans. Their status as pets elevates their cuteness to a higher degree than that of their wild avian counterparts.

In the case of snakes, the pet that people either love or hate, the term “snek” and its related vocabulary helps snake non-fans to enjoy them in the same way that someone might love a dog or a cat. The shortening of the vowel creates a cuter sound; however, the connotation of the new word “snek” differs greatly from the original. “Snek” has come to mean a mixture of “snake” plus “cute.” A Google image search for “snake” returns photographs of these animals ready to strike, baring their fangs. The image results for “snek,” however, contain snapshots of snakes in cute positions such as in beds of flowers or wearing hats. Some of these snakes are so non-threatening that they look worm-like. Their language is censored in a similar way to doggo speak (McCulloch) in order to make them sound innocent, with common expletives replaced with “heck,” as in “heck off.” According to writer and comedian Nick Douglas, “Snek turns snakes into

ferocious little guys pathetically trying to assert themselves. Sneks aren't scary. They talk a big game, but they're basically puppies" (Douglas). The childlike grammar mirrors that of doggo speak, yet still remains specific to snek, mostly for the "pathetic" bravado that these "danger noodles" or "nope ropes" exhibit.

### *Diastole<sup>2</sup>*

Antisthecon can also result in diastole, the lengthening of a "vowel or syllable beyond its typical length" ("Diastole"). In fact, diastole is one of the most common effects that non-standard spelling achieves, as it occurs most often when the main vowel in a word is changed to O. A popular example of this is "smol," a variant of "small." As people tend to draw out the O sound in "smol," this lengthens the word to make it sound cute. In the same way that a pet owner might stretch out syllables when speaking to a pet ("You want a treaat?" "Who's a good booy?"), the O spelling change creates this effect when spoken. The effect is still there even just visually, as a reader's prior exposure to the cute circumstances in which these spellings most frequently occur can condition them to think of "smol" as cute.

"Smol" is not the only word that frequently undergoes this vowel change on the internet: "Large" to "Lorge," "Chunky" to "Chonky," "Munch" to "Monch," and "Crunch" to "Cronch" all follow this same pattern of change to create a cute effect. Additionally, some of these words undergo a second change in which the letter N or B is replaced by M. The words "chomby" (chubby), "cromch" (crunch), and "chomky" (chunky) all undergo this consonant change to create a new word. The longer vowel

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<sup>2</sup> Though diastole is technically metaplasm by addition, the lengthening of the vowel sound only comes after the change in spelling categorized by antisthecon, which is why it is included in this section.

sound paired with the softer consonant serve to make these words as linguistically cute as they can be.

Each of the aforementioned words are used almost exclusively in cute memes, with the exception of “cronch.” The word “cronch” is most often used in absurdist memes in which the sound change adds to the meme’s strangeness rather than its cuteness. In Figure 6, the longer sound created by the stylistic lengthening of the O is reminiscent of a silly voice rather than a cute one. The use of diastole in memes can create a range of effects depending on the intent with which the meme was created and the circumstances in which the new word is used. In memes that feature animals, the effect is almost always that of cuteness; however, when animals are not present in the memes, the effect quickly becomes that of humor.

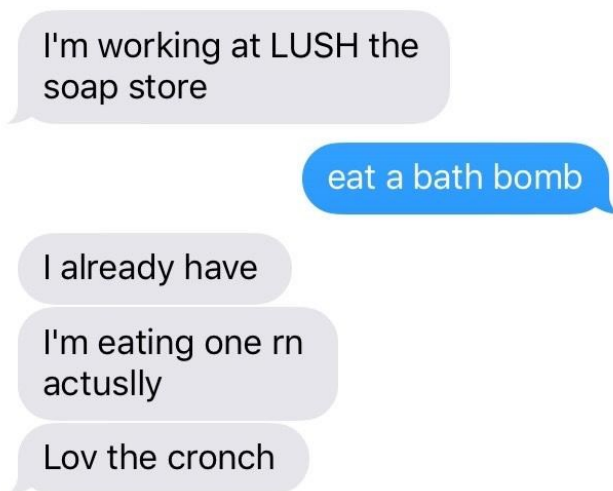


Figure 6. A text message about the crunchiness of a bath bomb. *Source*: “Lov the Cronch”; KnowYourMeme; Literally Media Ltd.; <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lov-the-cronch>

## Word Arrangement and Delivery

### *Synchysis*

Synchysis, the “confused arrangement of words in a sentence... either accidentally or purposefully” (“Synchysis”), is used frequently in memes as a source of humor. The unusual arrangement serves to surprise and befuddle the reader. Though many of these phrases may have begun as accidents, many have been appropriated into the meme “canon” (I use this term lightly, of course, to refer to a group of the most commonly-known memes), and are even mashed up with other memes for an extra humorous effect.

The meme “none pizza with left beef” also rose to internet fame for its surprising syntax and even odder origin story. A Tumblr user posted an image of an online pizza order form where they had filled out that they wanted “none” of all toppings except beef, which they wanted only on the left side. The unnamed pizza place actually fulfilled their request, and the user posted a second image of “none pizza with left beef:” a bare crust with hunks of meat haphazardly thrown onto the left side. Though this meme can be considered “dead” now, it enjoyed enough fame on platforms like Tumblr that it is well-known on the internet even today. It can be argued that most of its fame is due to the absurd phrasing of “none pizza” and “left beef,” which take the reader by surprise. A meme called “plain pizza with beef on the left side” would likely not have provoked the same humor response, due to the familiarity of its syntax. “Plain pizza with beef on the left side” then becomes a meme about the fact that a pizza place would actually fulfill such a bizarre order, but “none pizza with left beef” is humorous not only in occurrence but also in name.

“Man door hand hook car door” is another such phrase, and is even incorporated into other types of memes—often as the punchline. This phrase is comprised of the final six words of a 20-sentence horror story, in which a boy leaves his girlfriend in their broken-down car to go get fuel and doesn’t come back, so the girlfriend “gets out [of the car] to check and man door hand hook car door” (“Man Door”). The story is puzzling and poorly-written, but the absurdity of those last six words has solidified the phrase in internet fame. The intertextual aspect of memes is clearly seen in posts that contain this phrase.

A popular internet trend involves parodying the lyrics to the hit song “Mr. Sandman,” as in Figure 7. “Man car door hook hand” happens to have the same flow as the original lyrics, and thus is a perfect fit.<sup>3</sup> Though these could be isolated instances of users changing lyrics to be funny, these two songs in particular are changed frequently to include bits of other memes.



Figure 7. A text post in which the lyrics to the song “Mr. Sandman” have been replaced by “man car door hook hand.” *Source:* iFunny, iFunny.com, <https://ifunny.co/picture/redpyros-mr-sandman-man-me-a-sand-make-it-the-YE2im5IF4>

<sup>3</sup> Though the word order is different to account for the specific flow of the song, it is safe to say that this is a direct reference to the original meme

The effect of synchysis on the intended audience (young internet users) may actually be best described by an internet text post in which Tumblr user @twinberry states that:

[M]illennial/gen z/internet native humor is so weird and abstract because of the sheer amount of words we're exposed to daily. we've heard a lot of words in a lot of different orders so if you wanna get a reaction out of us you usually gotta put words in an order we haven't seen before. So like normally structured jokes aren't as funny anymore but "lemon lime spine" is a one-hit K.O. (@twinberry)

As this user points out, these groups of individuals who have grown up using computers and phones almost every day of their lives are exposed to so much text that its effect is deadened by repeated exposure. The addition of funny images, as in image macros, helped create a layered humorous effect; however, synchysis, whether intentional or accidental, mixes things up enough for words on their own to be funny again for these users.

### *Delivery*

Delivery, Aristotle's fifth canon of rhetoric, involves how a message is said rather than its oral or written content. As online communication is text-based, Delivery can be imitated through specific conventions that change how the reader "hears" the message that is presented. The rhetorical concept of mycterismus is part of a message's delivery, and is the act of "sarcastically mocking someone but with an additional emphasizing gesture" ("Mycterismus"). The word comes from the Greek "*mukterizein*, to sneer," ("Mycterismus") and this concept makes an appearance in one commonly-shared meme, usually called "Mocking SpongeBob" or "Spongemoock" ("Mocking SpongeBob"). These

memes are image macros that feature a picture of the popular character SpongeBob bent at the waist, hands on his hips, with an expression of ridicule on his face. In addition to the image, however, users have created a specialized way of typing<sup>4</sup> that makes the reader *hear* a mocking voice as well.

The mixture of uppercase and lowercase letters as in Figure 8 signals to the reader/viewer that the sentence is to be read in a tone that corresponds to the look that SpongeBob portrays: mockery. The meme became so popular that the image was no longer needed for the viewer to understand the meaning behind the stylized writing. The image of SpongeBob, though not present visually, is conjured by this font in order to make the text “sneer” at the subject that it mentions. As a result, internet users are able to write text-only posts that make readers “hear” a mocking voice just from text alone.

\*failing classes\*

Me: "Can I get some extra credit?"

Professor: "cAn i GEt SomE eXtRa creDiT?"



Figure 8. SpongeBob bent over, wearing a mocking expression. *Source*: “SpongeMock”; Medium; Medium.com, <https://medium.com/@lmrramos/them-spongemoock-isnt-funny-me-spongemoock-is-nt-funny-2fc432395226>

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this example is not about grammar or spelling, but non-standard orthography.



#### IV. Discussion and Conclusion

Most instances of non-standard spelling or grammar in memes can be grouped by the features of their language change patterns. On a surface level, these changes often create the effect of humor or of cuteness. These are caused in part by the childlike sounds and new connotations associated with the non-standard version of a word or phrase. Furthermore, a deeper look into these changes shows that each pattern corresponds to existing rhetorical figures that have historically been used to create rhetorical effects; among these effects is the recreation of paralanguage, the audible but nonverbal characteristics of speech that include pitch and tone of voice. Together, these aspects of non-standard language help the viewer interpret the full rhetorical effect of a meme or text post, even without paralanguage to guide them.

Though these instances of non-standard spelling and grammar mirror existing rhetorical figures that have been used by a range of authors and rhetoricians, they (and other memes like them) may still be viewed as less valid in terms of research because of their location on the internet and their association with youth culture. That which is associated with youth often gets dismissed as shallow due to “social and economic stratification that persists most notably along the lines of gender, ethnicity, class, and age” (Gray et. al.). However, these same adults who dismiss the culture of the youth are often the ones who write the most about it, constructing an identity for them rather than allowing the youth to create one for themselves (Herring, “Questioning” 1-2). As these are the people who are making the majority of claims about youth culture, there is a large risk of bias and misrepresentation, even if these are not intentional. Focusing on the ways

in which people communicate on the internet and researching these methods can often result in findings such as the ones in this study: that non-standard language is sometimes more complex and meaningful than one might originally assume. The different uses of language merit academic study whether they are “refined” or purely for fun, as research like this can only help further our understanding of how people communicate as a whole.

Furthermore, the study of memes and the language therein can help identify certain discourse communities on the internet. This shared language creates a feeling of belonging for the users who participate in its perpetuation, and certain groups are more likely to use these new patterns of language than others. For example, those who frequent forums dedicated to fat animals might find themselves using more variants of the word “chunky,” both in memes and in plain text posts, than those who do not participate in those forums.

As these patterns of non-standard language are traceable and can be tied back to existing rhetorical figures, it can be concluded that these are natural ways of expressing meaning that even sidestep the limitations posed by the absence of paralanguage. However, there are several limitations to this study. One such limitation is what is referred to as convenience sampling. The words and phrases that I chose to include were ones that I was already familiar with and could easily interpret the changes for. A deeper look into this topic might involve a systematic collection of data based on everyday use of certain social media platforms—such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit—where the researcher recorded *every* instance of non-standard language that they came across. This would allow for a more accurate representation of how non-standard language is used in both memes and through text-based mediums like text posts or

comments, and would offer a wider range of spelling and grammar changes than this study has.

The use of non-standard language in memes can serve many rhetorical purposes, from visually depicting how a word would sound if spoken to surprising the viewer in order to elicit a laugh. These changes are arguably clever, as they help circumvent the limitations of text-based communication due to the lack of paralanguage; however, this is still a controversial topic for those who believe that the English language should stay “pure.” It is important to note that, barring even the natural changes that languages undergo as time goes by, language itself is very easy to manipulate to suit one’s purposes. Portmanteau words illustrate this concept very well: common words like “spork,” “electrocute,” and “brunch” are widely accepted as legitimate words, but were invented to describe something that previously did not have a word associated with it. In the same way, new terminology like “snek” or “smol” came from a desire to describe something as both “cute” and another word. Though not portmanteau words, these new words contain some of the same characteristics. While the former describes two words that are orthographically combined to create a new one that carries both meanings, the latter is more conceptual: rather than taking pieces of both words and stitching them together visually, two *concepts* are combined. This new meaning is then signaled to the viewer through the non-standard spelling of the new word. This leads to more ambiguity of meaning, but also allows the words to exist in a wider range of contexts.

It can also be argued (as Douglas Rushkoff argued in the aforementioned article “It’s Not Just Grammar; It’s Clear Thinking”) that without standard grammar or language conventions, writing becomes less accurate and meaning is lost. The conventions of

academic and professional writing may be strict for a multitude of reasons: these may include the need for specialized language due to the technical nature of a topic, or the desire to hold people to a certain standard regarding writing style; however, in casual discourse, the ambiguity that text-only communication can create is often mitigated through the use of non-standard language. One would never use “smol” or “angery” in a serious situation; the use of these words helps to soften a message or meaning. “I have a small problem” could be used as an understatement for something grave, but “I have a smol problem” would never be serious. Similarly, the meaning behind “I am angry” depends on the context, but “I am angery” signals playful frustration rather than anger. Non-standard grammar can have the same effect on communication: the difference between the oft-quoted meme phrase, “He boot too big for he gotdamn [sic] feet,” and “His boots are too big for his goddamn feet” is the difference in humor. While the former is humorous, the latter can be read as serious, even stern. These nuances, which would not appear if one used standard spelling or grammar, are essential to the correct interpretation of a message when text is the only medium by which to convey it.

Furthermore, the study of memes can be used in a pedagogical context, to illustrate how rhetorical concepts have real-life applications. College students are generally familiar with the internet and with youth culture, and might benefit from instruction tailored to their particular interests. The concepts of mycterismus or epenthesis, for example, could be illustrated by an image or two in a PowerPoint presentation. Students’ familiarity with the chosen memes could help to drive home the concepts’ relevance to their everyday lives. The generation that uses the internet to do research, complete homework assignments, stay in touch with friends and loved ones,

find restaurant recommendations, look up directions, and carry out even the most basic functions is inclined to be receptive to the inclusion of internet-based content in academic study. In fact, as the lines between the two blur, and more memes are included in public presentations for humorous effect, it stands to reason that one day instructors might even use memes to educate their students.

Though the ideological divides that make it necessary to defend the use of non-standard language on the internet will not likely disappear anytime soon, research into its rhetorical merit can help legitimize it as a field of study. Following the specific patterns of language change for use on the internet is arguably no different than following the ways in which the meaning and use of certain words have changed over time. Language change is, for the most part, inevitable, and rather than representing the decline of the English language, it could instead be something that simply adds to its richness.

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