
Social Factors and Their Impact on Language Proficiency: A Sociolinguistic Study

Dr Mohammed Zaheer Ab Khan

Associate Professor of English Language

Ajdabiya

Benghazi University, Benghazi, Libya

Sociolinguistics is an important facet in the study of language learning, and the social variables are determinants not only of the way people speak but also perceptions of their speech in the various cultural and social set ups. Learners must know how to communicate in a wide variety of settings and that is why the knowledge of the language variation, starting with regional dialects, and their generational slang is crucial. Sociolinguistic approach puts a strong focus on the awareness of the social aspects of language and realizes that language competencies are not sufficient; students need to acquire the knowledge of the social situations where language functions. Understanding the influence of these social factors, language learners would be able to increase their communicative competence and address the complex social processes much better. This paper studies various social factors, and their impact on language proficiency and also how important it is for the language learners to be adapted to these social situations.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, language learning, social aspects, ethnicity, age, education, gender, geography, cultural aspects etc.

Language is a key component of social interaction that transcends geographical borders as well as historical events. The correlation between language and social interaction is mutual in the sense that not only social interactions define language, but the language is also defined by social interactions. Language learning takes place in several learning contexts which are either indoor, outdoor, formal or non-formal learning context. Here the sociocultural aspects and linguistic differences which affect language acquisition are paramount issues that should be taken into consideration. When learning a mother tongue or foreign language, teachers should be aware of the influence of the different language and sociocultural backgrounds, since this is a major

determinant of the success of the language learning process. It is the duty of the teacher to ensure that the learner is in a position to accomplish the goals of language teaching taking into consideration such contextual variables. In linguistics, sociolinguistics gives a guide about the effects of sociocultural backgrounds and language differences. Educators need a clear grasp of the concept of language acquisition, second and foreign language education, sociolinguistics, linguistics, psycholinguistics, and special technique of teaching foreign languages. This information will provide the teachers with the instruments that they need to solve the problems of language acquisition and provide effective teaching.

Sociolinguistics as a discipline has been becoming more and more popular in recent times. It has helped us appreciate the language as a means of communication but as a mighty force that helps in establishing social identity (Dunkley, 2013). To the educators, sociolinguistics is an essential field of study since it analyses the language usage in the real world and its effects in perceptions, communication, and social roles. Knowledge of the social role of language is essential in elaborating proper language teaching plans and enhancing a better relationship between learners and their language worlds.

The teachers should have a thorough knowledge of sociolinguistics to be able to guide the process of learning the language since sociolinguistics is a very broad discipline with a great variety of solutions and knowledge. The educators must understand the linguistic differences and social requirements of the students, so that they can choose and adopt the right pedagogical strategies. It is important to identify these differences to be able to implement teaching methods that address the needs of a diverse learner so that the learning process of the language could be meaningful and culturally appropriate. One of the key questions of the sociolinguistic approaches to teaching language is the notion of nationhood. Being a characteristic conceptualization of much of critical analysis of language and culture, the concept of the nation has exerted significant impact on how languages and cultures are conceptualized both popularly and academically (Nancy & Sandra, 2010).

Nevertheless, most educators tend to ignore the sociolinguistic nature of training language, with concentration on most of their teaching efforts being on teaching the linguistic features like

vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Although these elements are significant, a sociolinguistic approach to language teaching allows the learners to elaborate on when, where, and who to address in different situations. Language can never exist outside a social context and it is essential to acquire the sociocultural context of language use to be able to communicate well. Therefore, learning materials and lessons that would involve linking language learning to social real-life situations and environment are critical in promoting not only linguistic competence but also sociocultural awareness among the teachers.

According to research carried out by Ofodu (2012), sociolinguistic input is important when it comes to acquiring a language. In his research that focused on the use of English as a second language in classrooms, he discovered that other factors like age and religious affiliation did not have a significant influence on the use of English among the secondary school learners. The paper has emphasized the role of the family as the most influential language learning source, which supports the concept of language learning starting at home. The role of parents is therefore, critical in developing language skills of children. Parents must play an active role in language development of their children and do so by establishing a conducive environment that a child can use language in meaningful situations. More than this, sociolinguistics in language education will allow learners to have a more subtle insight into the variation of languages which will enable them to deal with the intricacies of dialects, registers and cultural standards relating to various forms of language. By integrating sociolinguistic teachings into their learning instruction, teachers can ensure that students are better equipped to interact successfully in different social situations not only to acquire linguistic competence but also learn social flexibility and cultural awareness. This strategy does not only help to improve language skills but also helps developing critical thinking because students are able to analyse and consider the social aspect of using language. Sociolinguistics would, in this manner, be an important instrument in the creation of more holistic and context-sensitive language learners.

The sociolinguistic principles are quite influential to language teaching, since they directly affect the way language is applied and interpreted in various social settings. Although a lot of the examples in the field are concrete to certain languages like Portuguese, the principles that they

bring out are universal and apply to teaching of foreign language in general. The explanations of the gap between real language and the representations usually presented in learning resources are one of the essential elements of sociolinguistics in language teaching. As an illustration, the standardized versions of language that are taught in traditional language textbooks can include grammar, vocabulary, etc., but fail to embrace the difference that can exist in the real world of language usage, including regional dialects, slang and sociocultural shades. In this aspect, using sociolinguistic information in the teaching materials may be useful to fill this gap, as the learners would acquire a more realistic and holistic view of the language. Concerning phonology and syntax, sociolinguistic concepts imply that the language learners must be subjected to the diversity of accents and pronunciations, as well as syntax and structures in a language. It may entail integration of various regional differences or formality, hence giving the learners a means of finding their way around different communicative contexts. As an example, students could be taught formal written Portuguese and the informal spoken varieties applied in the day-to-day communication. Phonological and syntactic variation is not the only point to consider; it is also important to comprehend the interactional rules according to which the language can be used in various social situations. These rules are usually overlooked in the traditional language teaching resources which results in a poor knowledge of the usage of the language in certain social interrelation. Through sociolinguistic studies, the teachers may provide the learner with skills of knowing the pragmatics of language, when, and how to apply specific phrases, gestures, and registers in various situations.

According to Stephen Van Vlack (2011), it is very crucial to analyse the language under various theoretical perspectives, such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and interlanguage pragmatics. In such a way, teachers will have an opportunity to introduce students to the whole picture of language use, the one that considers not only the grammatical frameworks but also how language is used in the social context. Van Vlack proposes that learners need to be challenged to implement the theories in the classroom to real life situations in order to bridge the gap between management theory and management practice. This method enables the students to know how language is developed, which is very essential in their development as language learners. Besides, combining such theoretical frameworks, the students will be able to evaluate and adjust their

language abilities in real-life situations more effectively and acquire a deeper insight into the way language changes according to social forces.

Applying sociolinguistic concepts to language teaching not only increases the linguistic competence of the learners, but also prepares them with cultural and social consciousness to deal with the varying communication environments. The wider view of language acquisition allows learners to attain more practical skills that do not rely on grammar and vocabulary, but which ensure the use of language effectively and in contextual appropriateness in all kinds of real-life circumstances. As this increases the horizons of learning language to encompass the sociolinguistic studies, the teachers would be in a position to make sure that the students are more equipped to be able to communicate effectively and confidently in various linguistic and cultural environments.

The sociolinguistics as a discipline has since been defined in different perspectives by different scholars all with a common theme of the connection between language and society. According to Yasemin (2013) sociolinguistics refers to the study that examines the aims and uses of language in the society. This definition brings out the fact that language differs with different situations and geographical areas, and how individuals in a given context interact with others in different contexts- like with non-native to non-native or non-native to native speakers. The approach proposed by Yasemin is the one that puts more emphasis on the sociocultural settings where language functions, and how learners can be able to communicate effectively within different settings. On the same note, Sali (2012) perceives sociolinguistics as the interplay of language and culture with society. In this view, it is impossible to isolate the language out of its social context since language is inseparable to human interaction. According to Sali, the analysis of language is a social process because without the human factor, the language will not exist. This highlights the need to know how cultural and social phenomena influence and how language does. Spolsky (2010) also narrows down on this definition by concentrating on the relationship between language and society especially how language differs in various social situations and how people view language. Hudson (1996) goes further to elaborate on this by terming sociolinguistics as the study of the association between language and other social aspects, including class, age, gender, and

ethnicity. This practice brings out the importance of social identity in the formulation of linguistic behaviour and how language can be used to establish social structures.

Bell (1976) takes a more anthropological approach, making sociolinguistics an anthropological linguistics area which explores the relationship and use of language and culture in the variety of social situations. This view focuses on cultural aspects of the language, and these are the ways in which language practices are conditioned by social roles and cultural norms. Wardhaugh (2010) also adds to this opinion, emphasizing the stylistic and social differences in language, discussing the language change on the basis of various social environments and personal decisions. Van Dijk (2009) has a generalized definition where Sociolinguistics is defined as the study of language as it relates to its sociocultural background which implies that social influences like culture, norms and expectations play a central role in the way language is utilized. And to sum it up, sociolinguistics is a study where all subjects of the society such as cultural norms and expectations influence the use of language; it is important to note that there is a strong relationship between the social structure and language behaviour (Trudgill, 2000). These definitions show the various approaches that exist in the sociolinguistics that can bring about a complete picture of how language works in society. Regardless of the interest in social difference, cultural factors, and the connection between language and identity, sociolinguistics provides useful ideas on how language is and can be influenced by social situations.

Sociolinguistics is a science that falls at the crossroad between sociology and linguistics and deals with the way in which language operates within society and the way in which language and the society interact. Sociolinguistics as a sub-discipline studies how languages constitute a determinant of the linguistic needs of a society and accentuates that every society possesses its linguistic code that can be considered appropriate in communication (Meyerhoff, 2006). Such linguistic norms are influenced by the different social variables like ethnicity, religion, status, gender, age and level of education, which in the process are used to classify a person into this or that social classes (Hudson, 1996). The sociolinguistics exposes the variation in the use of language among various groups in a society and how the aspect of conformity to these social aspects affect the manner in which people are perceived and classified in relation to their sociality.

The contemporary approach to the social analysis of language recognizes the fact that language is a social phenomenon, which was initially identified by the contemporary linguists (Bell, 1976). This change of paradigm brought into awareness a social influence in the development of language, and the structural or grammatical approach was abandoned. The used definitions presented by a number of different scholars support the notion that sociolinguistics is immensely interested in the interaction between language and social reaction to it. Simply put, sociolinguistics explores the way language is mirrored and influenced by social processes and it sheds light on the complexity of interaction between language and the social processes within which it functions.

The study of sociolinguistics makes us perceive the language in a new light by focusing on its fluidity and variability. Language is not a fixed and homogeneous entity; it is a changing and heterogeneous one that can be influenced by time and in various situations. This difference can be seen in the manner in which people use words alone, as well as the manner in which various categories of speakers in the same linguistic group of people communicate. This dynamism renders language to be inconsistent by nature and such inconsistency varies according to factors like time, place and social identities of the speakers. Consequently, sociolinguistics can provide important details about the issues that affect the way language develops and evolves in various social environments. Sociolinguistic phenomena intertwine closely with the language teaching because to successfully teach language, it is necessary to learn more about social aspects of language. During the process of learning a language, one should not only look at the linguistic components of the language like grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but also looking at the social situations where the language is applied. Students who learn a language have to be exposed to the relationship patterns, cultural values, and interpersonal functions that dictate language use in various contexts. Through learning sociolinguistics, teachers are able to prepare students in a more holistic sense to language in order to move beyond learning how language works to understanding more the social complexity involved in communication. Thus, sociolinguistics is a study that is inevitable in the process of language teaching since it equips the learners with the means to apply language in various societal situations.

Relationship between Sociolinguistics and Language Learning

Language is the expression of ideas and emotions in a set of subjective cues through voice sounds, gestures or written symbols that a country, group or other discrete community uses. Society on the other hand refers to a category of individuals who are connected together by their enduring relations, are under the same geographical or vital domain, are under the same political rule, and are under the same cultural demands. Language and society are inseparable as the dynamics of communication is defined through their interaction, so sociolinguistics is a field that requires study. Sociolinguistics deals with the relationship between language and society, as well as how the society influences language and vice versa.

The focus of sociolinguistics is not only on the social situation that language is applied in but also on the linguistic variation that occurs as a result of social forces like social class, ethnicity, gender, age as well as education status. Such social variables influence the process of learning, speaking and seeing a language. When it comes to second language learning, a number of social variables are influential in learning and usage of a new language. As an example, the socio-economic status of a learner usually determines the resources the learner has access to in the learning of the languages e.g. access to formal education or language tutors (Bourdieu, 1991). Also, the social environment that the learner will be exposed to, including the existence of language community or the target language exposure, may have a drastic influence on the motivation and chances of the learner to practice (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

The field of sociolinguistics provides different ways of contemplating on the intricate association between language and society. These methods look into the way in which language articulates and determines social identity, social structures and social interactions. Sociolinguistics has three main approaches which are variationist approach, interactionist approach and discourse analysis approach. The variationist way is concerned with the nature of variability of language with regard to various social variables like class, gender, age, ethnicity, and region. The approach is based on the works of sociolinguists such as William Labov, who examined the language usage among the speakers of various social groups using their different forms of language. The variationist approach and approach underlines the concept that language is not a static and homogenous construct but that it is varied systematically in relation to social variables. To illustrate, in his popular

investigations in New York, City, Labov demonstrated that pronunciations of some speakers (such as the absence of r sound) were related to their social status. It is a method of trying to record and articulate the variation in language and its relationship to other variables in the society, and the focus is to learn how language change takes place in various social settings. It is also interested in the ways in which some forms of language are linked to certain social groups or regions and the ways in which these links impact upon the ways in which people speak language in their daily interactions. It is usually concerned with dialects, accents and internal variation in a language.

Need for sociolinguists in language learning

Sociolinguistics is a sub-negotiation of linguistics, which focuses on how language is shaped by society and vice versa. The area deals with a number of issues regarding the acquisition of languages, and how languages change or adjust to the social settings. It also discusses the ways of how the use of language indicates the norms, values and hierarchies that exist in the society. It is critical to learn these dynamics to comprehend the sophistication of language and its intricacy outside the vocabulary and grammar. Sociolinguistics gives us an understanding of how we can study language learning, alteration and usage in particular ways that depend on the social and cultural practices as well as the circumstances inherent in any given situation. This view assists to reveal the facets of language, which could have otherwise been concealed especially the values that are traditional to language that are paramount to gaining insight into the real nature of language. It is an important factor in language teaching and expanding the scope of language teaching. Generally, teaching language has traditionally been a major emphasis that did not pay full emphasis on the expansive nature of communication. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient that one should just learn the vocabulary and grammar to be able to use a language. It is also necessary to comprehend the cultural and social matters of the usage of the language. Language is different in various settings, diverse social groups and uses and all these issues play a significant role in the way language is used during communication. Without an integrated approach to teaching the language, learners will not be able to become fluent and be able to use the language properly in the real-life setting.

The two key elements of sociolinguistics, relevant to answering questions of how and why certain forms of language are applied in particular situations, are the connection between language and society. As an example, the manner in which individuals converse can vary on the basis of their social identity like age, sex, social standing, or race. The language as Hudson (1996) points out is not merely a collection of language structures, but a social practice that reproduces and reinforces social differences and social relations. Sociolinguistics therefore highlights the fact that the language is always context-related to any social situations and that it is very important to comprehend this relationship to the learners of language as well as their teachers.

In addition, language acquisition is also affected by the social environment of the learner. Variationist sociolinguistics postulates that social, economic factors like social classes, ethnicity, and social networks are very important determinants in the acquisition and use of language (Labov, 1972). This is an essential point in the context of language teaching because it helps put emphasis on the fact that the background of the learner, his or her social identity and exposure to the cultural environment of the target language should be taken into account. On one hand, it is possible that learners who have been placed in a community where the target language is used will learn the language more naturally, and students in less immersive settings will need extra assistance in deciphering the social aspects of the target language.

Sociolinguistics also informs us on the subject of changing language with time. Linguistic change is usually propelled by social and cultural changes as new words, phrases, and even pronunciations are developed to meet the changing needs in the society. Fishman (1972) has highlighted the use of language to mirror and keep social arrangements alive, as a way of language being used as a means of sustaining or upsetting power relations. As an example, the development of the language can be explored through the process of some words or phrases becoming less popular because of the shift in the social attitudes, like the language transformation in terms of gender or race. These shifts are usually considered to be a result of larger social shifts and the interdependence of language and society.

The knowledge of sociolinguistics also contributes to the development of effective communication within any social environment. However, as the language learners advance, they should not just

know how to form the grammatically correct sentences but also learn to use the language in various situations. The fact that there is a change in language based on the formality of the situation and the relationship of the speakers is what is referred to as the concept of register such as the idea of register (Biber, 1995). Sociolinguistic competence therefore encompasses the capability to select the appropriate words, tone and style of communication depending on the social situation. This is particularly significant in second language acquisition that requires the learner to operate in different social environments and these environments might actually be very different with the native language environment.

Essentially, sociolinguistics is a central element in language teaching since it expands the knowledge on the way language operates in society. Language is a social phenomenon and its usage is greatly affected by culture, social and contextual implications. Thus, through incorporating the sociolinguistics in the language education, an educator can provide not only the technical training required to speak a second language but also some knowledge about the culture and society that is required to communicate successfully. The more language learners become sensitive to these social aspects, the more they are equipped to interact with the target language speakers in a real-world situation, and engage with them in a manner that is even more meaningful and contextually relevant. The social aspects of language were first studied within the framework of the linguistic anthropology in the previous centuries. The connection between language and society was drawn into the limelight by pioneers such as William Labov in the United States, and Basil Bernstein in the United Kingdom. The initial sociolinguistic research attracted much attention to exotic cultures and languages with little consideration made to the social relations of the Western or mother language. Sociolinguistics has however broadened its boundaries over the years to examine language in its daily social situations, by focusing on how language is used as a social tool in different societies.

Sociolinguistics is in a special position in the linguistic study and examines issues which the traditional linguistics usually tabled back. It tries to learn about the social interactions, like the social class, gender, age and ethnicity which are represented in the language use, language variations and the various attitudes that people have over the language. This sector of linguistics

is concerned with the way in which individual and group language decisions influence social interactions and the way in which language, in its turn, represents and supports social set ups. An example of this is that sociolinguists have always been aware of the differences in speech between men and women, children or teenagers and how individuals in various social classes or backgrounds communicate. Such differences bring forth the complex nature of language as not necessarily a form of communication but as a social element that may determine identity and social relationships.

Sociolinguistics and Social Norms

Among the most important questions about sociolinguistics, the knowledge of social norms and manners which regulate the communication of various societies should be mentioned. Learners of a language that are retained in the unfamiliar with these social conventions may end up in awkward or embarrassing experiences. An example of this is pointing which is perceived as an almost neutral gesture in most western cultures but is perceived as incredibly rude in Italy, even when one points at an object as opposed to a person. The use of pointing is normally associated with the United States where it is used to indicate direction or refer to things during communication. But when an American points to talk Italian, this may be taken as rude and aggressive and the learner will not be able to establish good social relationships. Such a social gaffe may make the speaker seem ignorant or rude as others will see him or her, potentially harming his social status and communication impact, according to sociolinguist David Broersma. The greater the fluency of a given individual in a language, the more he or she will find his/her general communication and texture of using gestures to be analyzed. Thus, sociolinguistic norms are extremely important to be understood by the language learners in order to escape misunderstanding and negotiate in social relationships even better.

The role of sociolinguistic development as a part of language learning cannot be overestimated. Language is not learning the words and grammar, but applying them in social life. To be able to communicate effectively and in the right way, it is necessary that the learners of the language are only familiar with the rules of the language itself, but they are also familiar with the social circumstances under which the language is used. This involves the identification of the cultural

peculiarities and social norms and the dynamics in the interactions that influence the use of language. Students may learn a language by adding sociolinguistics to their study that will help them better navigate the social cultures in which it is practiced to have deeper and more significant relationships with language speakers.

Ethnicity has manifested itself in the use of language as some ethnic groups normally use different languages, dialects or even accents. As an example, in the United States, AAVE is often used by African Americans in their community, and Standard American English is often used in the sphere of formal communication. Whereas AAVE is completely a working language system, there is a possibility of it being stigmatized in some situations, which is a sign of the social stratification that makes Standard American English a symbol of education and status. On the same note, in other countries such as India, language can also define ethnicity and certain groups in the country are speaking languages such as Hindi, Tamil, or Punjabi, which are also cultural identities. The varieties of the ethnic languages are sometimes considered as less proper, and this may influence the way people are regarded by others.

The age is also an important factor in the variation in language. The language spoken by older generations is sometimes inexplicable to the younger generation as they tend to adopt slang or less formal expressions. As an example, the adolescent generation might refer to things as lit or fam, which is not understandable to an elderly person. The linguistic gaps between the generations tend to presuppose the transformation of social attitude to the novel cultural factors. This is also observed in the manner that the elderly may tend to use a more formal or traditional language like addressing someone as sir or madam in the workplace when the younger generations may tend to use more relaxed terminologies. The level of education plays a critical role when it comes to the proficiency of languages and the kind of language one speaks in social circles, as well as in the work environment. As an example, the more educated people are, the more complex vocabulary, more advanced grammar, and formal speech patterns they use. Conversely, individuals who have less formal education might have to be more dependent on informal language, colloquialisms, and the simplified sentence structure. An impressive illustration is found in academic writing, which is obligatory in the use of a formal language and the use of disciplinary jargon (legal or medical)

is prevalent. This formality is contrary to the common use of language that can be much more informal. Also, students with limited education experience cannot adapt to these formal registers and may experience a decline in their performance at the academic or professional level.

The use of language is also dependent on gender and in this case, it is the societal norms that determine how men and women should communicate. Studies have revealed that women tend to speak in polite and indirect terms as compared to men. As an illustration, in the workplace, women tend to employ hedging words like I think or perhaps in order to dilute their pronouncements, where men tend to be socialized and direct in their words. Such a variation in communication ways may affect the reception of language whereby women can be considered less authoritative or less confident even when addressing a subject within the same level of expertise as the male counterparts. This is observed particularly in a scenario where gender roles are stressed, like in the corporate sector or even in academic discourse. Another aspect that contributes immensely to the use of language is social class especially on the aspect of how formal a language should be used. As an example, working-class people can speak local dialects or informal language in daily discussions, whereas people in higher social classes are more inclined to use more standardized language as more educated and civilized. In Britain, the distinction between Received Pronunciation (RP), that form of accent which is linked with the upper social classes, and regional accents such as Cockney or Scouse, displays these differences in social classes. The aspect of using Standard English over regional dialects in the United States like the use of Southern English or New York English may also indicate the social status of an individual. The social values that have been ascribed to these various forms of language may affect how people are treated socially and professionally.

The factor of geography is vital in the variation of the language since various regions will create various accents, dialects, and vocables. An example of that is the English that is spoken in the United Kingdom differing with English that is spoken in the countries of Australia or the United States; not only in the accent, but also in the use of words and expressions. A person in the southern states could say things such as yall and have a drawl where someone in the northeastern states could call things wicked and have a short, fast paced, clipped accent. These geographic linguistic

identifiers may make people feel a community but may also cause misunderstanding or stereotyping particularly when one accent or dialect is perceived as superior over the others. The language learners need to adjust to these regional variations in order to prevent miscommunications and to be able to communicate in different places.

The other influence that directly affects language use is occupation since every occupation has its own vocabulary, jargon and forms of communication. An example is such that doctors, lawyers, and engineers speak a specialized language, which might not be understood by other people. A physician might call it myocardial infarction as opposed to heart attack, and a lawyer might call it *prima facie* or *habeas corpus* which are jargon words unknown to the non-legal community. Conversely, employees in the service sector may use more casual words or language, and have certain terminologies within their industry, e.g. front-of-house, or back-of-house in a restaurant. Such professional language difference is based on the jobs and skills needed in various careers. In the case of language learners, language requirement of their intended profession is very critical in their professional achievement and participation in the workforce. The language learners hence should be aware of these dynamics in order to know how to communicate effectively and appropriately in various social situations, adjusting themselves to the different norms, expectations and power arrangements.

Conclusion

Language is not a communication tool alone but also an expression of social identities and social formations. All those factors impact the manner in which individuals speak and communicate with each other, be it accents, dialects, formal registers or social cues. Sensitizing the learners to the importance of these social variables will help them navigate various linguistic environments they are exposed to and adjust their communication styles to their various cultural, social, and professional situations. A better insight into these dynamics eventually contributes to the knowledge of language, enabling learners to communicate better, prevent misunderstandings, and interact socially and meaningfully with people of different backgrounds.

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