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Phonological Interference in the Spoken English Performance of the Izon Speaker in Nigeria: A Product of Systemic and Interlanguage Factors.

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the phonological interference in the spoken English performance of the Izon speaker. It emphasizes that the level of interference is not just as a result of the systemic differences that exist between both language systems (Izon and English) but also as a result of the interlanguage factors such as the level of the individual's interaction in and

with the L1, his level of education and access to oral English lessons while in school. The research reveals some troublesome contrasts in the two languages. The three factors that determine the level of interference are: the level of immersion of the individual in Izon; the level of the individual's education; the individual's oral English education exposure. The English language teacher has to be aware of these factors and pay particular attention to the differences in the phonological systems of the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) which can cause interference.

Key words: Mother-tongue, First language, Second language, Interlanguage, and Immersion.

Introduction

It can be reasonably said that nobody is born with an accent. Be that as it may, the large number of languages and the need for interaction across linguistic and cultural boundaries have made it necessary for humans at one time or the other to acquire or learn a language which is different from that which is their mother-tongue and second language (L2) acquisition presupposes interference. For most Nigerians, when it comes to formal and official purposes, that other necessary language is the English language and most Nigerians who were bred in Nigeria speak English with accents. The Nigerian who is the focus of this study is the educated Izon-English bilingual.

Why Iẓon rather than Ijaw? "Ijọ (Ijaw) is a language spoken over a wide area in Southern Nigeria" (Williamson, 1965, p.1). It is a "language cluster" (Williamson & Timitimi, 1983, p. xiv) because it possesses dialects that are considerably different. "Each dialect is at least partially intelligible with several others, but those from the extreme east of the Ijọ area are not mutually intelligible with those from the west" (Williamson, 1965, p.1). The speakers of Ijọ are divided into groups along some major dialectal lines: the Eastern group comprising the Kalabari, Okrika and the Ibani (Bonny) which are mutually intelligible; the Nembe and the Akassa people; Biseni, Oḳodia and Oruma which are very different dialects from the other dialects of Ijọ and Iẓon comprising all the remaining dialects of Ijọ in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo and Ondo states.

Each of these groups of dialects can be referred to as a language. Within each of these groups there is a relative mutual intelligibility, which does not really exist over their boundaries. Even though people from all of these groups

generally exhibit the same phonological traits in their spoken English, the focus of this study is the speaker of the Izon dialect of Ijo.

Although so much focus has been placed on interference, many linguists have agreed that it is just one source of error in second language learning/acquisition. They all in their various ways explain that when a second language user resorts to falling back onto the L1 for filling up the gaps created by insufficient knowledge of the L2, they are bound to make errors especially when the L1 and L2 are very different (Corder, 1974; d'Anglejan 1990; Hubbard et al., 1983 and Odlin 1989). Knowing that differences exist between the phonological systems of both languages which may cause interference, a comparison of both phonological systems restricted to only consonantal phonemes is carried out and set out as the systemic difference factor.

From casual interaction with an Izon man when he speaks English, it is observable that first, he speaks like a Nigerian and then, he pronounces certain words in a way that marks him out as an Izon. It can be noticed also that these disturbing traits are more marked in some than in others. That, the differences between both language systems are a factor of interference is not in doubt. But the question is, if that is the only factor responsible for interference, how come there are varying levels of interference between the individual Izon speakers? They ought to have the same level of interference. We are convinced in this study that apart from the language difference factor, there are other factors that are extra-systemic and that is why this study sets out to specifically investigate the following:

Whether those individuals with a total level of immersion in the Izon environment and by implication the language, have a higher degree of interference than those with partial immersion;

Whether among those with total immersion, those with tertiary education have a lesser degree of interference than those with post-primary education;

Whether those taught oral English among this group have a lesser degree of interference than those not taught oral English.

Whether those with tertiary education among those with partial immersion have a lesser degree of interference than those with post-primary education and;

Whether those taught oral English in this group have a lesser degree of interference than those not taught oral English.

Following various works looked at in the course of this study, it can be said that the Iẓon speaker's problem with spoken English is not just that arising from the systemic differences between the two languages but also that arising from interlanguage differences that lie between individual speakers, such as varying levels of immersion in the Iẓon language and culture; varying levels of education and the presence or absence of Oral English education.

Systemic Differences

In this section, the consonantal phonemes of both languages are compared. These phonemes are set out in similar consonant charts to make for easy comparison. Even though several authors were consulted for the description of the English phonemes, three of them were heavily relied upon for this work Christophersen (1956) for simplicity; Roach (1983) for clarity; and Gimson (1989) for details. For the Iẓon phonemes, Dunstan (1969) and Williamson (1983 and 1965) were used.

Consonant Charts

The consonant sound charts are divided into rows and columns. The columns show manner of articulation, while the rows show place of articulation. The consonant charts also show whether sounds are voiced or voiceless by placing voiceless sounds to the left of the centre of the column and then voiced sounds to the right of the centre of the column. The glottal sounds like /h/ are however placed wide in the centre because they are neither voiced nor voiceless.

Table 1: English Consonant Chart

	BILABIAL	LABIO-DENTAL	DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	POST-ALVEOLAR	PALATO-ALVEOLAR	PALATAL	VELAR	GLOTTAL
PLOSIVES	p b			t d				k g	
FRICATIVES		f v	θ ð	s z		ʃ ʒ			h
AFFRICATES						tʃ dʒ			
NASALS	m			n				ŋ	
LATERAL				l					
APPROXIMANTS	w				r		j		

Table 2: Izon Consonant Chart

	BILABIAL	LABIO-DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	PALATAL	VELAR	LABIO-VELAR	GLOTTAL
PLOSIVES	p b		t d		k g	kp gb	
FRICATIVES		f v	s z		ʃ ʒ		h
NASALS	m		n		ŋ		
TAP			r				
LATERAL			l				
APPROXIMANT	w				j		

(Dunstan, 1969, p. 98)

Plosives: Tables 1 and 2 show that except for the Iẓon labio-velars /kp/ and /gb/, which are a voiceless and voiced pair of plosives with simultaneous labial and velar release with rounded lips (Williamson, 1965), all the other plosives /p, b, t, d, k, g/ are common to both languages. They all share similar characteristics in both languages except that the voiced plosives in Iẓon are always fully voiced in every environment of their distribution.

Fricatives: Iẓon does not have the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, neither does it have the palato-alveolar fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. The rest /f, v, s, z, h/ are however common to both languages, and in terms of place and manner of articulation, they share the same properties. Unlike the English /h/ however, the Iẓon /h/ is, according to Williamson (1965), not necessary to the main sound system of the Iẓon language because it only accounts for the interjections, ehèè! and ‘oho!’ (p. 19).

The /ɣ/, a very weak voiced velar fricative orthographically realized as ‘gh’ is not in the English system and even in the Iẓon system, it occurs in four forms viz-*gho* ‘locative’, *-gha* ‘negative’ and *-ghamee* ‘past tense before reported speech’. Its only intervocalic appearance is in the word, *sagha* ‘cotton wood’. It is not an allophone of /g/ or /h/ because it contrasts with them (Williamson, 1965, p20).

Africates: Iẓon has no affricates.

Nasals: /m, n, ŋ/ are common to both languages and they behave alike in both languages except that in Iẓon, they have the tendency to nasalize the vowels in their vicinity. Also Iẓon does not have the syllabic variant of /n/. /ŋ/ occurs only as a second consonant except in the single form *-ŋimi* or *-ŋi* where it occurs after a hyphen juncture.

Laterals: /l/ in the Iẓon language is always a clear variety unlike in the English language where it has three variants: the clear, the dark and the voiceless /l/.

Approximants: The English post-alveolar approximant /r/ has an alveolar tap /ɾ/ as a counterpart in the Iẓon language. Like the English /r/, /r/ is never syllable final and it always comes before vowels. But, unlike its English partner, it hardly occurs in word initial positions. There are only two instances of that which are *ràtà* ‘yam storage frame’ and the word, *irri* ‘sorrowful feeling’ where it is in free variation with the vowel /i/ *iriri*. /w/ and /j/ are common to both languages and they have the same properties.

Generally, both languages have a large number of consonants that are physically similar. However, unlike in the English system where most of the consonants have variants, Iẏon consonants do not have variants and in terms of distribution, only /h, l, r, w, j, ŋ/ have restricted distribution in the English language. All the other consonants can occur in initial, medial, final and intervocalic positions. The Iẏon consonants on the other hand are all relatively restricted in distribution in that most of them only occur initially and in intervocalic positions largely because of the syllabic structure of the Iẏon language.

Description of Troublesome Contrasts

In describing the contrasts, we focus on those elements in the English language which are absent in Iẏon and also on those that are present in Iẏon but are slightly different from those of the English language.

It has been established that the Iẏon language does not have the English fricatives /ʃ, ʒ, θ, ð/, the affricates /tʃ, dʒ/ and that differences exist between the Iẏon lateral /l/ and that of the English. Iẏon has a tap /l/ and not the English approximant /r/ and that Iẏon does not have a syllabic /n/. For /θ/ and /ð/, since dental fricatives do not occur in Iẏon, /θ/ is commonly substituted with /t/ and /ð/ with /d/. This is irrespective of the positions in which they are distributed. As a result, such words like *thigh~tie, teeth~teat, thank~, tank, three~tree, thing~tin, then~ den, they~ day* and so on, are confused thereby causing a problem of intelligibility for the Iẏon speaker.

/ʃ/ and /ʒ/ and the affricate pair /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are other sets of phonemes that constitute a problem for the Iẏon speaker. They are not found in the Iẏon sound system and as a result, /s/ is substituted for /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ and /z/ are substituted for /ʒ/ and /dʒ/. It has been closely observed that in terms of segmental phonemes, these four are in fact the ones that largely mark out the Iẏon speaker from other users of English as a second language in Nigeria. It is not uncommon to hear people make fun of Iẏon speakers with such utterances as [mai neim iz zɔn zeims] ‘My name is John James’, [ai zɔmp tu intu di riva tu cas fis] ‘I jumped into the river to catch fish’. These sets of consonants have a way of being problematic in that each of the pairs /ʃ/ and /tʃ/, /ʒ/ and /dʒ/ are dephonemized by being substituted with /s/ and /z/

respectively. As a result, you hear words like ‘major’ and ‘measure’ being pronounced as [mezɔ], ‘ship’ and ‘chip’ as [sip], *latch* and *lash* as [lass]. It is interesting to note that the Iẓon speaker’s problem with these phonemes is not one of articulation because he can articulate them in isolation and also, they are not totally eliminated from his speech. Where any of these phonemes occur with the substituting phoneme in the same word, there is a tendency for the Iẓon speaker to do a metathesis. Metathesis, “is a process whereby the order of segments is changed. The process involves movement, permutation or reversal of segments in a string” (Yul-Ifode 1995, p. 167). Therefore in words like ‘Jesus’ and ‘research’, the order of the two phonemes in the words are reversed giving [zid₃s] for [dʒi:zɔs] and [rit[es] for [risɔ:t].

Another problem is one of interchange of these phonemes one for the other in words i.e. an exchange of /dʒ/ for /z/, /j/ for /s/ and vice versa. It is found that where /z/ occurs, the Iẓon speaker uses /dʒ/ and where /dʒ/ occurs, he uses /z/. Therefore one hears [did₃ain] for [dizain] ‘design’, [dʒu:] for [zu:] ‘zoo’, [zu:] for [dʒu:] ‘Jew’ and so on. He uses /s/ for /j/, and /j/ for /s/ resulting in [su:] for [ju:] ‘shoe’, [dis] for [diʃ] ‘dish’, [ʃa] for [sɜ:] ‘sir’ and so on. These phonemes are a major cause of intelligibility problems for the Iẓon speaker.

The approximant /r/ is not present in Iẓon but the tap /ɾ/ is substituted for it, so one hears [fait] for [rait] and so on. This difference is however so minor that the tap usually proves adequate.

The two phonemes /l/ and /n/ are found in Iẓon but the syllabic variants of both sounds that is, as they are found in final position after other consonants, are not a part of the Iẓon sound system. When articulated in isolation they, especially /n/ do not constitute a problem because /n/ is found as a nasalization unit after nasalized vowels in unit final position. These two phonemes only constitute a problem when they come after other consonants without intervening vowels. There is a tendency for an Iẓon speaker to insert a vowel between a syllabic /n/ or /l/ and the preceding consonant. The general rule concerning /n/ is that “where *en*, *on* or *an* occurs after *d* or *t*, the *n* is syllabic unless the *d* or *t* is preceded by another consonant” (Christophersen, 1956, p. 47). Such words as *garden*, *student*, *hidden*, *button*, *warden*, do not fall in the category of those that permit /ɔ/. The Iẓon speaker generally inserts vowels in such places and even the wrong vowel at that, using /ɔ/ or /i/. For such words as *bottle*, *little*, *sparkle*, *single* etc. he tends to insert / u / e.g. [litu1].

/h/ as a phoneme is almost non-existent in the Iẓon sound system. It is only found in interjections. For this reason, there is the tendency for Iẓon speakers to drop it totally when speaking English. Therefore, one hears such words as [aus] for [haus] ‘house’, [ɔt] for [hɔt] ‘hot’, [wʌn hʌndred] for [wʌn hʌndred] ‘one hundred’. This is not just a case of elision because even in slow and deliberate articulation of words containing /h/ the problem still occurs. For the very conscious ones however, this difficulty is only noticed in intervocalic positions like in [wʌn hʌndred].

Interlanguage Differences

The University Writing Centre of the JFK library (2005) talks about interlanguage as “a structured grammatical system of the language being acquired; as acquisition proceeds, the interlanguage system evolves into a better approximation of the standard system” (p.2). Jowitt feels that “a learner’s interlanguage can be thought of as a ‘special sort of dialect’, since it shares some rules with the TL. It is unlike a social dialect (or variety) in being idiosyncratic (some of its rules are peculiar to an individual) and transitional...” (Jowitt, 1991, p.52). Due to this transitional nature it is expected that an interlanguage develops until a high or near native-like proficiency in the L2 is attained. In the process of doing this however, “if some learners develop a fairly fixed repertoire of L2 forms, containing many features which do not match the target language and they do not progress any further, their interlanguage is said to have ‘fossilized’” (Yule 2002, p.195). According to Yule (2002), the process of fossilization in L2 pronunciation is an obvious cause of a foreign accent.

‘Interlanguage factors’ in this study therefore refer to those things other than systemic differences that could be responsible for the varying stages of phonological fossilization in some Iẓon speakers of English. This section sets out to investigate and reveal some of these factors. In answer to the questions raised in an earlier section, several hypotheses were drawn and investigated including the ones below:

1. People with total Iẓon immersion are more likely to have a higher degree of interference than those with partial Iẓon immersion.
2. Among those with total Iẓon immersion, the ones with tertiary education have a lesser degree of interference than those with post-primary education.

3. In the group of those with partial Izõn immersion, those who were taught Oral English at one time or another are less likely to exhibit interference than those who were not taught Oral English.

In order to investigate these variables, a questionnaire designed to find out the linguistic environment of the samples in developmental years, level of education, and Oral English status, was distributed to 40 samples randomly selected from randomly visited private and public establishments in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state of Nigeria. Also, each respondent had to read aloud a number of lexical items chosen with due consideration for phonemes that highlight the differences between the two sound systems. These read aloud sessions were tape-recorded and the words later phonetically transcribed.

Since this study is out to measure the relationship between interference and each of the variables to be tested, the chi-square is used for analysis of the data collected. As Iyamu (1999) explains:

The chi-square test is used in any situation where we categorize in anyway, the subject or samples. The chi-square test is a measure of relationship, association as independence [sic]. It involves a measure of reliability by comparing observed frequency distribution with theoretical or expected distributions. (p. 15)

In the analysis of data, level of interference is measured in degrees rather than in absolutes thereby having ‘low degree of interference’ (L.D.I) and ‘high degree of interference’ (H.D.I). The reason for this is that each of the samples used already has a measure of interference which is present in almost every Nigerian’s speech e.g. /α/ for /α:/; /α/ for /æ:/; /ɔ/ for /ɔ:/; /o/ for /o:/; /e/ for /ɜ:/; /ɔ/ for /Λ/; /i/ for /i/ and so on.

Aside from these general elements that were found, the following ones stood out like a sore thumb:

/dʒ/ for /z/ e.g. [dʒi:1] for [zi:1] ‘zeal’; [si:dʒ] for [si:z] ‘seize’

/z/ for /dʒ/ e.g. [1ɔz] for [1ɔdʒ] ‘lodge’

/z/ for /ʒ/ e.g. [mezɔ] for [meʒɔ] ‘measure’

/dʒ/ for /ʒ/ e.g. [medʒɔ] for [meʒɔ] ‘measure’

/s/ for /ʃ/ e.g. [lɑ:] for [læ:] ‘lash’

/ʃ/ for /tʃ/ e.g. [tʃI:t] for [tʃI:t] ‘cheat’

/t/ for /θ/ e.g. [ti:t] for [ti:θ] ‘teeth’

/d/ for /ð/ e.g. [den] for [ðen] ‘then’

Addition/subtraction of /h/ e.g. [hefɔt] for [efɔt] ‘effort’; [eit] for [heit] ‘hate’.

A look at the comparative charts of the consonantal system of both languages seen earlier shows that these phonological ‘errors’ are definitely a product of these systemic differences that exist between the two phonological systems. It is based on this set of ‘errors’ rather than on the general ones that the analysis of the data in this section is done.

Hypothesis One

People with total Izon immersion are more likely to have a higher degree of interference than those with partial Izon immersion.

Table 3: Hypothesis one

LEVEL OF IMMERSION	DEGREE OF INTERFERENCE		TOTAL
	L.DI	H.D.I	
TOTAL IZON IMMERSION	6	15	21
PARTIAL IZON IMMERSION	12	9.45	11.55
TOTAL	18	8.55	10.45

$$X^2 \sum \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i} = X^2 \frac{47.61}{40} = 1.19 = 1.19 < 3.84.$$

From table 3 and the result of the chi-square, it can be seen that the result of 1.19 is less than the critical value of 3.84. This means therefore that the hypothesis is accepted as stated. The results of the analysis of hypothesis one show that those with total Izon immersion actually do have a higher degree of

interference than those with partial Iẓon immersion. This can be attributed to the probability that those with total Iẓon immersion had their first contact with the English language after the age of six. And if this is the case, then the hypothesis, which suggests that there does exist a critical period for learning a second language becomes relevant. La Porta (2005) says that, “in certain linguistic domains, such as phonology, this may happen as early as the age of six” (p. 5). She quotes Long as saying that “starting after age six appears to make it impossible for many learners (and after age 12 for the remainder) to achieve native-like competence in phonology...” (Cited in La Porta, 2005, p. 3). Mackey asserts that “a child is surrounded by the language of the neighbourhood into which he is born and this often [is]... the most important influence on his speech” (Mackey (1968, p. 560). The implication of this statement to this hypothesis is that the samples with total Iẓon immersion already have the influence of the Iẓon language even before their encounter with the English language and this gives those with partial immersion an edge over them.

Krashen (1989) explains that even children who are placed in early immersion programs sometimes do not succeed in producing speech that is totally without accent. If this can happen with children who supposedly still have very active language acquisition devices and more so under such closely monitored- programmes, it is not a surprise therefore that those with total Iẓon immersion have a higher degree of interference than their counterparts with partial Iẓon immersion.

Amayo (1989) lends weight to the result of this hypothesis when he says that “... it is far easier to superimpose an L2 syntactic-semantic structure over an already internalized L1 structure than to do the same for articulatory habits” (p.316). It would seem that those with total Iẓon immersion have already so internalized the Iẓon phonological structure thereby making it difficult for these individuals to attain high proficiency in the English language.

From all the foregoing, it can be safely concluded that the level of immersion in the Iẓon language is one of the interlanguage factors that determines the degree of interference in the phonological performance of the Iẓon speaker in the English language.

Hypothesis Two

Among those with total Iẓon immersion, the ones with tertiary education have a lesser degree of interference than those with post-primary education.

Table 4: Hypothesis two

LEVEL OF EDUCATION	DEGREE OF INTERFERENCE		TOTAL
	L. D I	H. D. I	
TERTIARY EDUCATION	6	11	17
POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION	0	4.857142857	12.14285714
TOTAL	6	1.142857143	2.857142857

$$X^2 \sum \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i} = X^2 \frac{5.224489789}{21} = 3.887269095 = 0.24 < 3.84$$

The result of the test in table 4 is 0.24 and this is less than the critical value of 3.84. This means that hypothesis two is accepted as stated. This shows that among those with total Izon immersion, those that have tertiary education have a lesser degree of interference than those with post-primary education. It will not be far-fetched to say that the higher the educational level of the individual, the more conscious he is of his/her errors and the greater the effort to eliminate these errors from his/her speech.

Cummins and Merrill (1986,) quote the New York Times editorial of 10th October, 1981 as saying that "... A language is best learned through immersion in..." and they support this by saying that "the development of English academic skills is directly related to exposure to English" and also that there is a direct relationship between exposure to a language (in home or school) and achievement in that language" (p. 80-81). In direct relationship to exposure, Mackey (1968), in talking about the media through which a language is acquired and used is of the opinion that the amount of influence of each of these media on the language habits depends on the duration, frequency and pressure of the contact.

These statements are true to the result of this hypothesis because in Nigeria, campuses of tertiary institutions are cosmopolitan in nature and in almost every sphere of interaction the medium of communication is the English language. Also, by the nature of the courses in most of these schools, an

individual is bound to spend a minimum of two years under this continuous exposure to the English language. Such differences in exposure make a big difference to the level of improvement towards proficiency. Also the pressure of contact which Mackey (1968) talks about plays a role in this improvement because the fear of being laughed at and the desire to measure up to their fellow students ginger most of these samples in this group to better performance. An improvement in the level of education of the Iẓon speaker with total Iẓon immersion can therefore bring about a lesser degree of interference in his spoken English.

Hypothesis Three

Those who were taught Oral English in the group of partial Iẓon immersion are less likely to suffer interference than those who were not taught Oral English.

Table 5: Hypothesis three

ORAL ENGLISH EDUCATION	DEGREE OF INTERFERENCE		TOTAL
	L.DI	H.D.I	
TAUGHT ORAL ENGLISH	10	5	15
NOT TAUGHT ORAL ENGLISH	2	9.473684211	5.526315789
TOTAL	12	2.526315789	1.473684211

$$X^2 \sum \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i} = X^2 \frac{1.108033236}{19} = 0.058317538 = 0.05 < 3.84$$

From table 5, it can be seen that the sum of it all is 0.05 which is less than 3.84 and this makes the hypothesis accepted as stated. A look at the figures shows that while just 50% of those not taught Oral English exhibit a lesser degree of interference, up to 70% of those taught Oral English have a lesser degree of interference in their speech.

The level of awareness, which the electronic media has created towards Spoken English, has not gained ground in the rural areas. Therefore, there is

still this apathy towards improving pronunciation skills. In the urban areas where this group with partial immersion developed, however, people are getting more aware of how certain words should be pronounced. So even without Oral English classes, with the help of the language programmes on the electronic media, most people are honing their English phonological skills. Oral English classes therefore get more attention in these cosmopolitan areas and so serve as further improvement. This gives an added advantage to those who benefit from them.

Conclusion

This study sets out to show and emphasize that the level of interference the Izon speaker exhibits in his spoken English is not just as a result of the differences that exist between both language systems but also as a result of interlanguage factors such as the level of the individual's interaction in and with the L1, his level of education and access to oral English lessons while in school. This study is done via the comparison of the two sound systems on the level of consonantal phonemes which reveal some troublesome contrasts, which are described. Also analyses of data collected via questionnaires to investigate the three hypotheses formulated for the study reveal that.

1. The level of immersion in Izon for each of the individuals used is a factor that determines the level of interference she/he exhibits in his or her spoken English;
2. The level of education makes a marked difference between individuals in the group of those with total Izon immersion and constitutes a factor of phonological interferences and;
3. That oral English is also a factor that determines the level of interference the Izon speaker exhibits in his or her spoken English.

Thus, this study can be concluded by stating that, interference in the spoken English performance of the Izon speaker is not just a product of systemic differences but also that of interlanguage differences.

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