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Language and Communication at Work

Discourse, Narrativity, and Organizing Introducing the Fourth Volume of “Perspectives on Process Organization Studies”

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Abstract: Studying language and communication at work implies that we connect them to the very processes, activities, and practices that constitute organizations or organizational phenomena. We demonstrate in this chapter that language and communication at work can mean many things and that there are a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches that can be used for such analysis. Four characteristic features of such studies are highlighted: (1) interest in the communicative constitution of organization, (2) focus on discursive or communicative practices, (3) emphasis on temporal aspects and dynamics, and (4) placing language and communication in its socio-material context. Not all studies can focus on all these aspects, but these features are central in this nascent stream of research.

1.1 Introduction

With the growing influence of discursive perspectives in general (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2005; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996), and of research on organizational discourse (Grant *et al.*, 2004; Phillips and Oswick, 2012), business discourse (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009), and narrative perspectives on organizing (Czarniawska and Gagliardi, 2003;

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Boje, 1995, 2001; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Sonenshein, 2010), organizational scholars are focusing increasing attention on the *constitutive* role that language and communication play in organizational processes (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009; Robichaud *et al.*, 2004; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). This view conceptualizes language and communication as bringing organization into being in every instant and is therefore inherently sympathetic to a process perspective.

However, our understanding of the role of language in unfolding organizational processes and as a part of organizational action is still limited. This is partly due to the tendency in discourse analysis to focus on language alone, without explicit linkages to other organizational practices, activities, and actions (Fairclough, 2005; Phillips and Oswick, 2012). Moreover, analyses elucidating the agency and power of texts and discourses in specific organizational contexts have been scarce (Cooren *et al.*, 2006; Cooren, 2010). Thus, there is a paucity of knowledge of the ways in which language and communication enable, constrain, or otherwise form a part of unfolding organizational activity in its sociomaterial context.

For the Fourth International Symposium on Process Organization Studies from which this volume to a large extent draws, we sought empirical and/or conceptual submissions that would consider language and communication *at work*. With the metaphor *work*, we wished to inspire scholars to examine language and communication as an inherent part of ongoing organizational processes at various levels of analysis. In particular, we wanted to encourage scholars to not only explore the question of language and communication as constitutive of *work*, but also analyze how language and communication *actually work*, i.e. do things in the context of organizing, as well as examine the role language and communication play as part of *strategic and institutional work* in and around organizational phenomena.

Such analyses can draw from various theories and methods of linguistics, discourse analysis, and communication studies. In fact, a key part of this endeavor is to draw from existing traditions and to apply them to better understand language and communication at work. These perspectives include various forms of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2005; Wodak, 2011), narrative analysis (Boje, 2008; Czarniawska, 2004), ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010), rhetoric (Cheney *et al.*, 2004), and the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) (Cooren *et al.*, 2006; Taylor and Van Every, 2000; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009)—among others. However, it is equally important to connect these approaches to studies of organizational work. Thus, studies of language and communication at work can be linked with streams

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of research such as workplace studies (Heath and Luff, 2000; Heath *et al.*, 2004), distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1990, 1995), activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 1990, 1995, 1996), actor network theory (Latour, 2005), strategy-as-practice (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2010; Whittington, 2003, 2006; Vaara and Whittington, 2012), or institutional work (Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Philips *et al.*, 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Vaara and Monin, 2010).

In the following, we will first elaborate on what we see as key aspects of language and communication at work. We will then proceed to provide an overview of the chapters of this volume, after which we will reflect on theoretical and methodological implications for discursive studies of organizations in general and organization process studies in particular.

1.2 Language and communication at work

Studying language and communication at work implies a general tendency to connect language and communication to the very processes, activities, and practices that constitute organizations or organizational phenomena. The title and content of this volume reflect in part what Phillips and Lawrence (2012) label “the turn to work” in organization studies more generally. These authors refer to notions such as “identity work” (Watson, 2008), “institutional work” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) and “boundary work” (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009) as part of a trend in which scholars have been highlighting “the role of actors in socially constructing elements of work and organizations that were previously seen as either ‘natural’ or beyond the control of individual actors” (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012: 224). This constructivist view is clearly compatible with a process perspective since apparently statically understood phenomena (e.g. identity, institutions, routines, boundaries, or organizations themselves) are rendered more dynamic. Ongoing “work” is implicated in the construction, maintenance, and adaptation of such phenomena. It is our premise in this volume that language and communication more generally are the media through which much of this “work” takes place, whether or not conscious intentions lie behind it. The individual chapters included in the book illustrate in multiple ways how this happens.

However, language and communication at work can mean many things, and there are a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches that can be used for such analysis. In the following, we wish to highlight four characteristic features of such studies: (1) interest in the communicative

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constitution of organization, (2) focus on discursive or communicative practices, (3) emphasis on temporal aspects and dynamics, and (4) placing language and communication in its sociomaterial context. Not all studies can focus on all these aspects, but these features are central in this nascent stream of research.

First, studying language and communication at work usually means a special emphasis on the constitutive power of communication or what can also be called, more restrictively, discursive agency. In this view, discourses and other forms of communication can be considered a key building block by which organizations come to be and function. Thus, one can analyze the performative effects of speech acts (Austin, 1962), the disciplinary power of discourses (Foucault, 1980) or the agency of specific texts and documents (Cooren, 2004, 2010). The key insight is the constitutive role of discourse and communication in and around organizations. Sometimes the effects are more directive and apparent, at times the most fundamental effects are the ones that easily pass unnoticed (and therefore require special attention).

Second, studying language at work usually implies a focus on the discursive or communicative practices that are a constitutive part of the daily life of organizations. The practice perspective is useful as it allows one to focus on the micro-level to identify and elaborate on the recurring elements in organizational, strategic, and institutional work (Philips and Lawrence, 2012). This is important *per se* to better understand the discursive and communicative aspects of organizing. Moreover, this view also helps to comprehend stability and change; how the reproduction of these practices tends to produce stability and how changes in them may lead to incremental or radical transformation. The practice focus allows one to examine how actors are enabled and constrained by discourses and also how they may—more or less skillfully—make use of language—e.g. in their rhetoric or storytelling—to pursue specific ideas, interests, or ideologies.

Third, analysis of language and communication at work implies attention to spatiality and temporality. The temporal dimension is central when studying organizational processes both in terms of how discourses capture and produce specific times and how these discourses may change over time in unfolding organizational processes (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002). In fact, the very essence of organizations is often constructed and reconstructed in discursive sensemaking where repetition reflects or produces stability and change in discourse may reflect or itself trigger transformation. Furthermore, language and discourse allow us to explicitly make sense of space and produce trajectories in organizations (Vasquez, 2013). An important part of

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any work process or project is its spatiotemporal ontology that often requires reinterpretation over time and through spaces.

Fourth, analysis of language and communication at work implies a need to connect language to its context. Discursive practices are linked with other social and material practices (Fairclough, 2005) and communication never takes place in a vacuum (Cooren *et al.*, 2006). First of all, the very nature of discourse and communication depends on context. This is reflected in the genres of communication: e.g. meetings, speeches in public, press releases, official plans, Facebook updates, or tweets all take place in a specific kind of context—concrete or virtual. Historical context and intertextuality are important in processual analysis (Wodak *et al.*, 1999). The sociomaterial context is, however, particularly important when analyzing the implications of language and communication in organizational work. While linguistics and communication studies often focus on discourse or communication alone, analysis of language and communication at work usually requires focus on both the discursive and the sociomaterial aspects of work processes. This relationship can be seen as dialectical to elucidate the interrelationships of communicative and material aspects of organizational work. Thus, it is important to examine both how language constructs organizational reality (including its material aspects) and how sociomateriality impacts language and communication (Carlile *et al.*, 2013; Orlikowski, 2007).

1.3 An overview of the chapters

The twelve contributions that appear in this volume depart from abstract and static considerations about organization to concentrate on *communicational activities and practices* that constitute the daily life of organizations or capture the ways in which they change over time. Although they focus on cultural, artifactual, ideological, or technological aspects of work, they systematically scrutinize and highlight the communicational dimension of these activities, whether from a theoretical or empirical perspective.

James R. Taylor (Chapter 2) proposes to explore the notion of transaction, which he presents as the recursive and reflexive basis of organization. As he shows, any transaction presupposes the establishment of complementary rights and obligations that bind human actors, making them accountable to a third party—the organization—which is both authored through and authoring what is taking place when they communicate with each other. Starting from Thomas Hobbes’s reflection on the organization as an

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artificial person, Taylor mobilizes Peirce's category of thirdness to identify this person as the omnipresent law, the ultimate point of reference that is constituted *in* communication processes through the transactions that people construct with it through their sensemaking. Echoing Lorino's reflections on Peirce's notion of habit (Chapter 5), Taylor thus insists on the triadic dimension of (organizational) communication, i.e. what authorizes or dictates the sense of collective action.

As Ruth Wodak (Chapter 3) reminds us, language is in a very concrete sense work in organizational meetings. Adopting a historical critical discourse analysis perspective, her chapter focuses on power struggles and decision-making in meetings. More specifically, she combines this lens with a socio-cognitive approach to genre. This allows her to elaborate on the discursive dynamics in a meeting of European Union decision-makers. In particular, she identifies and elaborates on discursive strategies that often characterize such meetings: bonding to create cooperating identities; establishing salience via urgency; and mobilizing via threat and scenarios of danger. This analysis helps to better understand what goes on in such decision-making processes and especially the micro-level discursive dynamics involved.

Andrea Whittle, William Housley, Alan Gilchrist, Frank Mueller, and Peter Lenney (Chapter 4) focus on discursive dynamics in a meeting. They examine power and politics in a strategy meeting from an ethnomethodological perspective. While power and politics have been long recognized as important aspects of organizational life, little is known about how they are used as categories in organizational sensemaking. Their chapter elucidates this aspect of sensemaking in meetings. In particular, the study demonstrates how power and politics were associated with the category-bound reasoning about the firm's external key account customers and the internal company hierarchy, how talk-in-interaction *constituted* the customer and the company as a particular type of actor, with particular category-bound predicates (attributes, agendas, activities, etc.), and how this stock of knowledge and associated reasoning procedures influenced key strategic decisions. This analysis also highlights the value of ethnomethodology in organizational process studies more generally.

Philippe Lorino (Chapter 5) proposes to work out an interesting contrast: What if we decided to focus not only on how speaking amounts to acting (i.e. how speech acts), but also on *how acting amounts to speaking* (i.e. act speeches)? Mobilizing Peirce's (1992) notions of thirdness and semiosis, he elegantly shows to what extent any activity can be analyzed as what he calls "a discourse in acts," that is, as a sign that points to instituted and stabilized

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areas of meanings, i.e. habits or laws that define and tell us what is taking place in a given situation. As shown by Lorino, habits can thus be considered the language of activity. They tell us a story about the sense of collective practices, professional genres, and archetypical inquiries. Using a case study, he also shows how this discursive view of activity could inform the way managers implement organizational change. Changing activities, according to this perspective, indeed means disrupting habits, genres, and narratives that these activities express, i.e. what people mean by doing what they do. According to Lorino, managers and organizational scholars should thus pay more attention to these other figures that not only inhabit members, but also express themselves in and through their activities.

Geneviève Musca, Linda Rouleau, and Bertrand Fauré (Chapter 6) examine organizational sensemaking in an expedition. Their careful analysis focuses on a *chronotope*—i.e. a linguistic expression of time and space—that proved to be central for making sense of the expedition’s objectives when confronted with a failure to meet the original ones. Their analysis shows in great detail, based on the actual recordings of the key conversation, how the expression of ‘a crow’s flight’ provided the team members with a means to make sense of the situation and frame the expedition in positive terms. This analysis adds to existing research on literature on spacing and timing in organizational communication (Cooren and Fairhurst, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Putnam and Nicotera, 2010). In particular, it elucidates the central role of specific linguistic expressions when making sense of a project’s or more generally an organization’s objectives. By so doing, this analysis highlights another important aspect of the central role of language in organizational work.

Timothy Kuhn and Nicholas R. Burk (Chapter 7) show us how spatial design manages to not only do things, but also say things. As they point out, it “indexes both an activity and a stand-point on activity,” a position that illustrates the communicative constitution of space. Exploring the (dis)organizing properties of spatial design, Kuhn and Burk draw on the study of a US government research organization to show how spatial arrangements not only enact a specific order but also sometimes resist what scientists would like to do with the building in which they operate. This recalcitrance illustrates how some preoccupations, interests, and viewpoints get to be integrated into design, while others remain disqualified and ineligible. Spatial design thus tells us something about what or who gets represented in it, i.e. what interests, concerns, or stances are made present or absent in and through a given space. Kuhn and Burk invite us to

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recognize who/what both authors and gets author(ize)d by these spatial arrangements.

Florian Schulz and Chris Steyaert (Chapter 8) propose to examine in detail key excerpts taken from conversations involving a professional coach and a middle manager. While the current literature on organizational discourse tends to maintain a strict separation between big D and small d discourses (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000, 2011), they elegantly show how predefined discourses about the management of emotions tend to be actively (re-)enacted by the coach. By subjecting the manager to what they call “empathetic persuasion,” Schulz and Steyaert demonstrate how a specific interpretive repertoire tends to emotionalize and internalize what the manager initially presented as contextual problems he was facing. Overall, this processual analysis illustrates how specific Discourses come to constitute the management of emotions at work.

David Boje and Rohny Saylor (Chapter 9) focus on narratives and storytelling. Drawing on recent work on the epistemological aspects of storytelling (Boje, 2008, 2011), they present and elaborate on ‘quantum storytelling’ as a new kind of ontological perspective that helps to better understand processual aspects of organizational narrativity. They illustrate these ideas with reflection on blacksmithing that David Boje has been practicing for several years. This very personal organic story revolves around eleven Ds (directionality, datability, duration, disclosability, destining, deployment, dwelling, deseverance, drafts, dispersion, and detaching) that are inspired by Heidegger’s process philosophy. As a result, the chapter provides a very rare kind of example of reflexive theorizing, written in a style that is different from what we as organization scholars are used to.

Maxim Ganzin, Robert P. Gephart Jr., and Roy Suddaby (Chapter 10) also examine narrative work (Boje, 2008) that reproduces organizational myths. They draw from Bormann (1972), Campbell (1974), and Eliade (1960) to construct an original three-part framework that elucidates key aspects of organizational myth-making. In the focus of their analysis is the Commencement speech provided by Steve Jobs at Stanford University in 2005. This speech can be seen as narrative-at-work as it reveals rhetorical processes at play when constructing and reconstructing organizational myths. Their analysis identifies three ‘layers’ of myth-making: stories that can be found in the speech (delivered in a persuasive manner), a monomyth structure that describes the stages in the hero’s journey, and mythemes (mythological archetypes) that the speech can be seen to be based on. Whilst this special speech warrants attention in its own right, the analysis

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also provides a framework that helps to understand organizational myth-making more generally.

Time is of the essence, in more ways than one, in Jeanne Mengis and Katharina Hohmann’s in-depth ethnographic study of a hospital emergency department (Chapter 11). Drawing on a communication-as-constitutive of organization perspective, the authors show how coordination occurs dynamically in a rapidly evolving situation as professionals co-orient around a “fleeting object of concern”—a patient during the first minutes and hours of arrival in the resuscitation bay. Mengis and Hohmann illustrate how in these highly intense moments, professionals engage in three types of temporal co-orientation practices simultaneously. The practice of “fabricating the present” is manifested in streams of communication that enable co-construction of the ongoing situation, the practice of “re-performing the past in the present” involves referencing past situations to interject new understandings of the current situation, while the practice of “expanding the future present” comprises interactions that anticipate future developments and expand possibilities for action. This study contributes to an emerging view of temporality, not simply as a context for action (whether objectively or culturally defined), but as reconstructed in every moment through active “temporal work” (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002), manifested importantly in language.

Emmanouil Gkeredakis, Davide Nicolini, and Jacky Swan (Chapter 12) analyze how senior decision-makers of the English National Health service perform moral judgments in the case of requests made by patients to receive “exceptional treatments.” Focusing on the organizational work that is accomplished to come to these decisions, they show that the making of moral judgments entails three types of practice: aligning with procedures, “emplotting” the clinical case at stake (i.e. creating a narrative order), and testing the solidity of the emerging arguments for or against a specific decision. All these activities do not take place in a vacuum, but result from the skillful mobilization of authoritative and trans-local conventions that dislocate the interactions, making the decisions accountable and legitimate (Vaara *et al.*, 2006).

Drawing on Lévinas’s (1969) distinctions between the fluid “saying” and the static “said,” Kjersti Bjørkeng, Arne Carlsen, and Carl Rhodes (Chapter 13) emphasize the limitations of conventional research approaches that attempt to pin down, and freeze interpretations forever in language (the said), implicitly imposing on them the researcher’s viewpoint. They challenge traditional notions of researcher reflexivity as a way to mitigate such

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concerns, and argue instead for a stance of “other vulnerability” in which researchers and researched are seen as participating in joint saying, where there is no absolute and final known, but a continued openness to being taught by the other. Bjørkeng *et al.* illustrate these ideas building on two of their own research experiences, one more and one less successful in these terms. The chapter offers a provocative perspective on methodology that brings together process thinking with a concern for the ethical dimension of the research enterprise.

1.4 Constitution, language use, timing/spacing and methodologies

The above overview highlights both the diversity and complementarity of these contributions. Taken together, the chapters can be divided into four topics that elucidate the key aspects of language at work discussed above: (1) Communication as constitutive of organizations, (2) Practices of language use, (3) Communication as timing and spacing, and (4) Epistemological and methodological reflections.

1.4.1 *Communication as constitutive of organizations*

James R. Taylor (Chapter 2), Philippe Lorino (Chapter 5) as well as Timothy Kuhn and Nicholas R. Burk (Chapter 7) all propose in their own way to question the traditional way we conceive of the communication–organization link. While we tend to think of communication as something that happens in organizations, these three chapters propose to reverse this inclusion by exploring how organization can, in fact, also be found in communication (Dewey, 1916; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Communication is therefore explored according to its organizing properties (Cooren, 2000), not only because interacting is the way by which we constantly reinstate—implicitly or explicitly—the existence of the organization itself, but also because it is through communication that we get organized and act collectively. As illustrated by these chapters, communication should, however, be conceived very broadly as we need to acknowledge that not only humans, but also practices, architectural elements, and habits communicate something.

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1.4.2 *Practices of language use*

In keeping with the constitutive position defended in the previous chapters, Ruth Wodak (Chapter 3), Andrea Whittle, William Housley, Alan Gilchrist, Frank Mueller, and Peter Lenney (Chapter 4), Florian Schulz and Chris Steyaert (Chapter 8), Maxim Ganzin, Robert P. Gephart Jr., and Roy Suddaby (Chapter 10), as well as Emmanuel Gkeredakis, Davide Nicolini and Jacky Swan (Chapter 12), all show, following Boden (1994: 8), that “talk is the lifeblood of all organizations.” While analyses of interactions have often been accused of being unequipped to deal with questions of power, control, and ideology (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), these five chapters demonstrate how the detailed study of discourse and interaction can, on the contrary, illuminate these questions. Power, control, and ideology have, by definition, to be enacted and produced for another next first time in discourse, whether we speak of strategy meetings, judicial authorities, professional coaching sessions, or official speeches. As shown in these chapters, genres, repertoires, categories, ethical frameworks, and myths are constantly mobilized in our discussions, orient and control decision-making processes, as well as define situations and influence the future.

1.4.3 *Communication as timing and spacing*

Geneviève Musca, Linda Rouleau and Bertrand Fauré (Chapter 6) as well as Jeanne Mengis and Katharina Hohmann (Chapter 11) address a key question related to the processual paradigm, i.e. how language and communication allow us to enact specific times and spaces in which we can then navigate. While processes are always ongoing, in the making and unfolding, language also allows us to identify discontinuities, hiatuses, or breaks on which to rely to make sense of what is happening. Although always enfolded in our activities and practices, we can then articulate a past with a present and a future.

1.4.4 *Epistemological and methodological reflections*

In a welcome methodological contribution to this volume and to process organization studies in general, David Boje and Rohny Saylor (Chapter 9) as well as Kjersti Bjørkeng, Arne Carlsen, and Carl Rhodes (Chapter 13) consider some of the implications of applying a process ontological view to the field research endeavor itself. By so doing, both chapters open up new epistemological and methodological avenues for future research on process studies.

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1.5 Theoretical and methodological implications

As illustrated in these twelve chapters, studying language and communication at work proves to be a fruitful way to study organizational life in all its aspects (meetings, speeches, routines, operations, expeditions, etc.). In keeping with the processual perspective promoted in this collection, they all show that organizations should not only be viewed as ‘things made’ but also as “processes in the making” (Hernes, 2007), whether we want to study reproduction, development, or change. If analyzing and conceiving of processes is indeed a difficult thing to do (Bergson, 2002), it is, we believe, the price we have to pay to study organizational matters in a very concrete and incarnated manner.

If organizations are dynamically constituted, we thus need to start thinking *processually*, that is, we need to invent new ways of studying and conceiving of these “works in process” we call companies, firms, businesses, institutions, NGOs, and associations. In keeping with Derrida’s (1978) (often misunderstood) concept of *differance*, this processual way of thinking might lead us to study any organizational course, sequence, or practice in terms of both its *passive* and *active* dimensions, i.e. in terms of what leads it to be what it is, but also in terms of what it produces, enacts, and contributes to. Studying processes indeed means that there cannot be an absolute point of origin and that we need, as analysts, to always pay attention to what is ongoing.

Methodologically speaking, this can have serious consequences, as thinking and analyzing the organizational world processually might also lead us to rely more and more on actual recordings of activities, conversations, and practices, which is what most of the chapters included in this volume propose to do. Although interviews certainly remain relevant ways to access what is taking place in organizational settings, they seem poorly equipped to study processes *per se*, as they rely on *post-hoc* reconstructions that cannot always do justice to what really happens ‘in the making’ (except, of course, if the interviews themselves are analyzed processually). Whether video- or audio-recordings (Jones and LeBaron, 2002) or “videoshadowing” (Meunier and Vasquez, 2008), the detailed study of language and communication at work seems to require that we “pay our due” to the phenomena themselves, i.e. that we record them as faithfully as possible.

But studying processually also means that we ~~also~~ have to develop tools and methodologies that allow us to not only make some gains in terms of

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details, but also in terms of longitudinality. As some of the chapters of this volume remind us, the detailed study of processes always implies, by definition, that we follow them through time and space, a methodological requirement that often seems hard to reconcile with the thoroughness of detailed analyses. It is in this uncomfortable tension that the future of process studies might lie.

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