

Mady - Voices of Immigrant Adults: Perspectives and Experiences with French as a Second Official Language in “English-dominant” Canada

Voices of Immigrant Adults: Perspectives and Experiences with French as a Second Official Language in “English-dominant” Canada

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Abstract:

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The federal government of Canada, through the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (OCOL) (2000), claims that immigration is a challenge to English/French official language duality in Canada. In its promotion of official language duality to potential immigrants, the government cites the advantages of official language bilingualism and the responsibility of immigrants to respect official language duality (OCOL, 2002). Supported by Anderson’s theory of imagined communities (2006), Lave and Wenger’s concept of situated learning (1991) and Bourdieu’s concept of capital (1977), this study reports on immigrant parents’ perspectives and experiences with French as a second official language (FSOL) in parts of English-dominant Canada as reported through interviews with adult immigrants to Canada. More precisely, the immigrants report on their pursuit of official language bilingualism for themselves and their children and their difficulty in accessing its cited advantages. I suggest the government has responsibility in converting its claims of the advantages to official language bilingualism into realities for the immigrant population.

Immigration has always been and remains vital to Canada. In recent times, the immigrant population has shifted. First, in terms of quantity, Canada has the highest immigration rates it has had in four decades. In fact, immigration is responsible for 50 percent of Canada’s population growth over the last fifteen years. At present, one in five

people living in Canada is an immigrant (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2004). Second, whereas past immigrant populations often came from countries where Canada’s official languages, English and/or French, were spoken, present immigrant populations are less likely to do so (Statistics Canada, 2001). Third, currently, immigrant populations have higher levels of education than in the past, with more immigrant adults having a university education than Canadian-born adults (Statistics Canada, 2008). While the numbers and some of the characteristics of immigrants to Canada have changed, the official discourse on official language bilingualism presented to them remains consistent.

This diverse, numerous group of immigrants arrives in Canada having been presented a flattering ideology of English/French bilingualism within a multicultural context (Duff, 2007). In fact, the official discourse on English/French bilingualism is presented to potential immigrants to Canada as part of their application process. As potential immigrants complete the application, the importance of Canada’s two official languages is highlighted as applicants receive points for the degree to which they know English and French—the greater the knowledge of both languages, the greater the points, the more advantageous for being accepted as an immigrant to Canada. Beyond advantaging the application process, the federal government claims official language bilingualism offers additional advantages to immigrants. One cited advantage is economic as the government states: “bilingualism makes it easier to integrate into Canadian society, especially into the labour force” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada/CIC, 2010). A second advantage to official language bilingualism according to the official discourse is access to a Canadian identity as the federal government recognizes official language bilingualism as a key component of the Canadian identity (OCOL, 2009). Accessing the above-cited advantages, however, supposes widely available, strong programmes to facilitate learning FSOL but, as will be argued herein, this is far from the reality on the ground.

Beyond acknowledgement of the potential advantages of official language bilingualism for immigrants, the federal government highlights respect for Canada’s linguistic duality and multicultural heritage as a responsibility of the immigrant population (OCOL, 2002). The message of the Canadian government is clearly to promote and defend official language bilingualism to immigrants. The perceived necessity for such a stance is highlighted in the federal government’s acknowledgement that immigration provides a challenge to official language duality (OCOL, 2000). More specifically, as it

pertains to immigrants, the message is clear—speaking English or French is one of the most important skills they need in order to adapt to Canadian life, but “knowing both languages is strongly encouraged” (CIC, 2010).

The immigrant population seems to have understood the message. Duff’s (2007) claim that “bilingualism and multilingualism seem to be thriving among immigrant Canadians (...) in ways that have by and large eluded the Canadian-born Anglophone population” (p. 150) accompanied by Parkin & Turcotte’s research (2003) citing that immigrants support official language bilingualism to a greater extent than that of Canadian-born Canadians suggest that the official discourse, mentioned above, may have influenced immigrant perspectives and thus experiences. In order to explore if and how the official discourse on official languages influences immigrants, this paper examines adult immigrant experiences and perspectives as they pertain to FSOL¹ in parts of English-dominant Canada prior to and after arrival to Canada as examined through a tri-partite theoretical framework that takes up some of the key concepts of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006), situated learning (Lave and Wenger, (1991), and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). The analysis then focuses on the views of immigrant parents on the schooling of their children and their own language practices.

Tri-partite framework

Anderson (2006) defines imagined communities as “communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact” (p. 6). As Anderson articulates, nations are imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). A nation, for example, is an imagined community because “the members will never know most of their fellow-members [and] regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail ..., the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson, 2006, pp. 6-7). According to Anderson, it is the members of the community who envision their imagined community. Such envisioning is, in part, made possible by media that allows for common discourse.

Beyond connecting to Canada as a nation through their imaginations, once immigrants arrive, they have direct involvement with communities in Canada. One community with which the immigrant parents, who were interviewed for this study, have

¹ The term French as a second official language is used to recognize that French is an official language in Canada and a second language for many Canadians. At the same time, French may be an additional language for immigrants and the second official language sought after English in this study’s contexts.

more direct involvement is a school community. Lave and Wegner (1991) posit that situated learning goes beyond the learning of knowledge and skills to influence participation patterns in communities. By extension, Kanno and Norton (2003) contend that situated learning impacts one’s affiliation with imagined communities.

The federal government discourse suggests that official language learning is advantageous to immigrants and can be exchanged for membership in the national projected image of Canada. In fact, in contexts of unequal social relations such as those facing immigrants to Canada, Bourdieu (1977) conveys that language and an individual’s language competence (of the dominant society) becomes “an instrument of power” (p. 648) and can be viewed to function as capital. As part of Bourdieu’s broader concept of cultural capital, such linguistic capital— defined as “fluency in, and comfort with, a high-status world-wide language which is used by groups who possess economic, social, cultural and political power and status” (Morrison & Lui, 2000, pp. 473), can lead to other forms of capital. As suggested by the Canadian federal government, linguistic capital in the form of Canada’s two official languages can lead to economic and social capital. By participating in language acquisition of the dominant society groups, for example, immigrants may be rewarded with a job (economic) and access to the Canadian community (social) (Heller, 2000). As applied to the Canadian context, immigrants, then, may find themselves in a position of wanting to gain, and/or having their children gain, additional linguistic capital by learning both of Canada’s official languages and thus gain access to various forms of capital. This view is supported by Dagenais (2003), in her work exploring immigrant parents’ views of multilingualism in English-dominant British Columbia where they perceived “multilingualism as capital and invested in language education as a means of securing their children’s access to various imagined language communities” (p. 269). The power of official language bilingualism was highlighted by the immigrant parents who viewed knowledge of multiple languages as a resource while realizing that languages do not have “equal importance within Canada” (p. 272). The parents in Dagenais’ study were found to enrol their children in French immersion² programmes in hopes that their children would be able to participate in their imagined Canadian French-English bilingual community.

The Study

² A programme in which instruction is given in the second language for at least 50% of the time.

Purpose

In light of the above tri-partite framework, I examine (a) how immigrants imagined an officially bilingual Canada before they arrived and (b) adult immigrants’ experiences with official language education in Canada with a view to investigating their perceptions of linguistic capital and their views on its conversion to access to a job or a social network.

The main objective of this qualitative study was to gather information about the educational choices, factors and experiences as they pertain to FSOL from the point of view of immigrant parents in two of English-dominant provinces that receive the most immigrants (Vancouver, British Columbia; North Bay and Toronto, Ontario).

Methodology

Data were collected in the form of three group interviews. A group interview format was adopted (Kreger & Casey, 2000) with the interviewer asking each question to each individual participant within the group setting. A total of 19 immigrant adults participated in the group interviews after having volunteered through their English as a second language instructor or through their local Canadian Parents for French branch. The participants were asked a series of 27 questions divided into two sections. The first section had 12 questions pertaining to the participants’ background, experiences with second language learning prior to arrival in Canada, and their knowledge of Canada’s officially bilingual status. The second section had 15 questions relating to education in Canada—their experiences registering their children in general and more specifically their experiences with FSOL education. The interviews in Toronto and Vancouver were audio and videotape recorded, while the North Bay group interview was audiotaped. All of the interviews were then transcribed. Subsequently, a content analysis was conducted. Keeping the themes from the literature in mind, the transcripts were pawed multiple times with key phrases highlighted thus allowing themes to emerge (Bernard, 2000).

Participants

The interviews were designed to elicit information about participants’ language background as well as information about their experiences with FSOL in Canada. Of the 19 participants, 16 were female and three were male. During the interviews, participants provided information on their country of origin, languages used in that country, factors that influenced their coming to Canada, languages known to participants, length of time in Canada, whether they had visited Canada prior to immigration and languages

presently used in their home. Of the 19 participants, 10 came from Asia, three from Europe, three from South America, two from the Middle East, and one from Africa. The majority of the participants (N=12) came from countries where more than one language was used in the community. The participants chose to come to Canada for a variety of reasons, the two most popular being to work and to join family. Ten participants saw themselves as multilingual and the remaining nine as bilingual. There were differences among the three participant groups in regard to their length of time in Canada. The participants in North Bay had all been in Canada for less than five years, the participants in Toronto from five to 20, while the Vancouver participants had been in Canada the longest with the duration ranging from 20 to 40 years. The majority (N=15) had not visited Canada prior to their immigration. In their homes in Canada, the participants reported using a variety of languages from one (N=2) to two (N=14) or more (N=3).

Findings

Imaginings of a bilingual community

In line with Anderson's concept of imagined communities being possible due to media, all of the adult interview participants knew that Canada was a bilingual country prior to their arrival. Their knowledge of Canada's bilingual status came from a variety of sources: (a) the application process for immigration, (b) media, (c) family, and (d) education. Although the question did not ask for their evaluation of the bilingual status of Canada, a minority of participants in Vancouver revealed their satisfaction:

I wanted to learn the English language so I said wow, what a country, everybody speak two languages. So I was very impressed. (V1)³

Well, like I say, my cousin, distant cousin, told me about, a little bit about Canada, so I know that, from then, it's a bilingual country and I said oh, that's good, then I can learn French. I love to learn French long... And and I say that's the right you know, the country for me! (V3)

Although all knowledgeable about Canada being an officially bilingual country, none of the participants studied French prior to arrival for the purpose of gaining entry to Canada or opportunity while here. Knowledge of Canada's bilingual status, however, allowed the adult interview participants to imagine how that bilingualism would be prior to their arrival. When asked how they imagined a bilingual Canada would be, one

³ Language kept as used by participants. NB, T, and V refer to North Bay, Toronto, and Vancouver respectively. The number indicates the participant number.

participant thought some people would speak English and others would speak French. Another participant wondered why Canada limited its status to two languages. Three quarters of the respondents, however, envisioned a Canadian population that could speak both English and French:

You know, a country that is officially bilingual, everybody speaks both languages. (T7)

My imagination of a bilingual country at that time was that everybody was speaking two languages and I was so amazed - would they like speak one sentence in French in the next sentence switch to English whenever they felt like to? And everybody, one hundred percent of the population would do that. And I was so amazed, at that you know, wow, what a country. (V1)

Situated Learning

It is interesting to note that after participants had some direct experience in their English-dominant regions of Canada, their ideas of their imagined bilingual Canada changed. The majority (approximately 60 per cent) of the participants' perceptions of bilingualism changed from daily evidence of bilingualism to one that was dominated by English:

I still have the concept of flowing back and forth, because the forms [immigration application forms] that were presented are in both languages. So, I still did believe at that time that it's the way I thought it would be, just flowing back and forth. Because, if it were just, if it's just supposed to be just English here, then it's almost useless - a waste of paper, a waste of whatever to have the other language put in, right? So my perception was still even when I arrive and even when I lived here for a few months, I still thought that it's the same way as we were doing Tagalog and English. It's just flow back and forth, because both languages are presented in all the forms and both in the receipts, in the labels of the food - that's learn a bit of French in the can labels, right? So, yeah -no, it took a while for me actually learn that they only just speak English here. (V2)

A participant from North Bay remarked:

Yeah, I don't think the French is very important for the country, I think the more important is English. (NB1)

Two participants expressed their disappointment with the lack of lived bilingualism within their region. Such disappointment was highlighted by their previous lived experiences within multilingual locations. The first explained:

I have well like I said I only learn it's bilingual with the application form, and in the application form it did ask if I am proficient in one or both language - like, it's an 'and/or' kind of thing...That it would just like, go flip back and forth. The same way as me as a Filipino speaks like what we call - we call it Taglish, because we will also be speaking in our dialect and then interspersed with English and it's almost like some of us are not able to speak our language anymore straight, without an English word. I mean, this is my concept of it being bilingual, you just flipping back and forth with ease. And my knowing at least one will help me, gain the other because I'll just flow into it, kind of, and -only to learn the reality is not that way. and not everyone knew both languages. I thought my concept would have been, yes if you belong to the same country you learn both official languages of the country. It was kind of a disappointment, yeah. (V2)

A second participant expressed his disappointment in this way:

It was a big disappointment. Yeah. But I also know about Switzerland, and that you have three languages, three basic languages and that's - wow, that is also an amazing country, that you can switch, you know, the concept, -at a time of, of, of, bilingual or trilingual language is the same right, like all -everybody can switch back and forth whenever they want to. Yeah. (V1)

Although one might anticipate such direct English-dominant experiences in communities (Lave & Wegner, 2001) to reduce the immigrants' view of the importance of learning FSOL, the vast majority of participants, all participants in Toronto and Vancouver and one participant in North Bay, sought opportunities to learn FSOL after their arrival in Canada:

We had a customer and he was a teacher. He teaches at a school, so I ask him, can you help me? ...And he's French, so he had English and French, so he teach me together. So I just sort of, worked on some papers and some were French, and my language, so I know how to speak a little. (NB2)

When we came here I realized it was important to learn French and I did try to learn French, through night school and classes but with no practice to speak to

somebody I really didn't go very far. But I still have the intention to pursue the language. Because I like the language and its advantages. 'Cause sometimes when you travel international, you need to use French as well. And I go quite often to France or Brussels and there most of them speak French. So I went to Langara College. I passed a placement test, They said, well you're up there, just go take literature classes. So I went, and I took some other classes as well. (V5)

I only have one job, so I have time to learn night time, you know, courses at night. That's when I tried to get into the French lesson, night time. And since then I've always been interested in short lessons. Cause I've never really - I don't wanna go to - to really take it as a course. I just wanted, they offered it for 2 months, like 8 weeks, so I always put myself into short lessons. I also have other things in life, other than learning French. But I'm always interested and I'm waiting for the next one to come. I'm gonna register again for the next lesson. (V3)

Language as capital

Despite their changed perceptions of a bilingual Canada that came with their lived Canadian experiences, the vast majority of adult immigrants interviewed for this study continued to recognize knowledge of FSOL as linguistic capital that they envisioned providing for their children. The parents viewed schools and, when knowledgeable, French immersion programmes in particular as sites for distribution of official language capital. As such, half of the interviewed parents chose French immersion as means of providing linguistic capital to their children:

I put my son through the French immersion school, that's what drove me to put him in there. And I wouldn't do it any more differently from the way I did it before, you know? I think I did the right thing for him. Yep. 'Cause, when he was in school I was also learning at the same time, so I benefited from that. You know, my decision before. So everything was, I did it right. For both of us. (V3)

And we were happy about it and we listed both daughters in that programme [immersion]. (T7)

I did enrol both my children in French Immersion programmes...because I can clearly tell now that the programmes – the French Immersion programmes – they function like the best private schools. And indeed, they offer great opportunities for kids to learn the language, learn the grammar. (V2)

The remaining half of the respondents were unaware of the French immersion programme upon registration of their children to school in Canada:

I feel okay, but if I know about French Immersion when I arrived to here, maybe I would have put my two oldest kids in French Immersion, but it's very important today to have two languages for any job in the future. (NB1)

Contrary to many parents' desire for their children to learn FSOL and the official discourse that promotes immigrants learning both official languages, two of the Vancouver participants were questioned as per their desire to register their children in French Immersion:

No. I actually did it myself. I decided I wanted to put my son in the French immersion school because I want him to learn another language, not just English, you know. So I did it myself, I went to the school and I asked them that I would like to put my son here, and they asked me why, because I'm not French. I said, well, just what I feel, you know? I feel that my son has to learn other language other than English and I wanted... and, ah...I did. I did it all by myself, and I didn't meet anyone, nobody. Nobody give me advice to put him there, I just did it myself.(V3)

I met, District Coordinator first, and, we talk about the possibility to enrol my daughter to French immersion, and then I spoke to a French resource teacher in the school, and we discussed thoroughly what a challenge it will be because she's a ESL student, ...so, we, we did discuss this issue to get into French Immersion programme. And, yes I did enrol her myself, register her myself. (V4)

Similarly, one Toronto participant shared his frustration upon trying to register his daughter for the Extended⁴ French programme:

Even, it's not there was a little disappointment with educational system here when we were inquiring about Extended French for our older daughter. And, there was a test that she had to do before applying for Extended French to see how good her knowledge of French is. And it was our luck that the first teacher that teaching French, she thought that four of her students are good enough to go to Extended French programme. She tested them, and then we found out what Extended French programme by luck. And then when we talked about that to the principal and her home teacher, they were both actually trying to, they were both saying, like, “Oh it's a very hard programme, maybe you should think

⁴ A programme in which 25% of the instructional time occurs in French

about it". Instead of encouraging us and encouraging student to go, to explore their interest, they were actually trying to pursue us to stay there and go with the core English programme, which was very disappointing, and it should be otherwise. It should be like "Oh go, it's a great opportunity the Extended French". It was actually the reverse process. (T7)

A North Bay participant was also discouraged from having her son take FSOL:

-Does your son study French?

-No.

-...Was he given the choice to study French?

-But the teachers say that is too hard for them.

-Do you think so?

-No, I think children need to learn more. But they say no, no, he doesn't need French, he only needs English...I said to the teacher he needs French, and she said no, maybe French is too hard for him, maybe next year he take French, and my husband say no, no, French is very important here...Yeah, they keep saying it is too hard for him.

-They don't recommend French.

-They say it's no obligation to speak French in the school...

-Did you agree?

-No, because ...he needs to learn some French. But for this year it's okay. I listen to the teacher. But next year he takes French. (NB1)

Willingness to choose such programmes, especially for the minority who were faced with additional challenges, emphasizes the parents' value of such linguistic capital. In fact, the parents judged the linguistic capital as being convertible to economic capital with the provision of job opportunities:

But when we came here, I just saw, like, his side of the family. They were all in government, and they were working there. And other one of my cousin who studied French, she's also working at the government. And, it's like really helpful. So when I had my daughter I had no doubt that I would be sending her to French Immersion, and then my husband was really motivated about it. So, yeah, that's all. (T3)

And then I enrolled her, enrolled my daughter to the French Immersion. And, what influenced my decision, is, I think 'cause Canada is a bilingual country. If you know two official language, it's probably good for your future when you're

looking for a job, a new career. It probably affects good way – a positive way. Yeah. (V4)

Just for her to have good opportunities, school and have different options offered for her. Because, when we came here we saw these different jobs which were really good, but they wanted someone who is bilingual. So that’s what I want for her. (NB3)

Discussion

The interview findings revealed that the majority of the immigrant participants arrived in Canada with the idea that official language bilingualism was affiliated with the Canadian nation. Such a perception is supported by the official discourse of the federal government as provided to potential immigrants and through the media in general. Despite a change in perception after arrival, all participants continued to pursue their imagined community and took action to study FSOL. Not only did they seek opportunities to learn FSOL for themselves, they, when knowledgeable, sought intensive opportunities for their children to learn FSOL, revealing their support of FSOL learning. Their active participation in FSOL learning may demonstrate their affiliation with their imagined Canadian community and their belief that official language bilingualism would result in community membership and its rewards. In addition, their commitment to learn French, for themselves and for their children, may be grounded in their exposure to bilingual/multilingual contexts prior to arrival, their support of their children’s FSOL acquisition, their belief and experience that it is possible and beneficial to learn multiple languages and the perceived opportunities that accompany official language bilingualism as revealed in their interviews. For example, interview findings consistently revealed parents’ belief that FSOL skills would prove beneficial in the job market. This finding is in keeping with Dagenais’ (2003) work, which showed that parents’ investment in immersion education could be attributed to the fact that parents “imagine language and educational resources will enable their children to gain membership in particular language communities in Canada and elsewhere” (p. 274).

The findings resulting from these immigrant parent interviews, however, also highlighted that opportunities remain to provide immigrant communities with information about educational choices in their regions. As it pertains to FSOL learning, findings from this study revealed a desire for intensive learning opportunities. Such a desire, however, was often not accompanied with opportunity; although desired, the majority of participants did not have such an experience. Half of the participants were unaware of

the FSOL educational options for their children. A minority of the parent groups spoke of the challenges they faced as they registered their children for intensive programming. Such challenges are congruent with the findings of other studies that suggest that FSOL learning opportunities are at times reserved for the majority (Mady, 2007; Taffee, Maguire & Pringle, 1996).

Despite such challenges, the participants in this study are motivated to learn FSOL and act on their desire in the face of obstacles. In spite of a change in perception of the Canadian nation after arrival, all participants continued to pursue their imagined community and took action to study FSOL. Not only did they seek opportunities to learn FSOL for themselves, they, when knowledgeable, sought intensive opportunities for their children to learn FSOL, revealing their support of FSOL learning. Their active participation in FSOL learning may be rooted in their imagined Canadian community and their belief that official language bilingualism would result in community membership and its rewards.

Pursuing intensive FSOL learning opportunities with the hope of reward is congruent with the roots of the French immersion programme where Anglophone parents chose the programme in hopes of maintaining their economic and political power (Heller, 1990). French immersion can be viewed as institutionalized capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in Canada as it is recognized as the best programme in which to develop fluency (Genesee, 2007) and therefore offers recognized linguistic capital. Half of the immigrant participants in this study may have therefore pursued French immersion for their children with the hopes of cited job opportunities as one of the rewards. In the case of much of the immigrant population, however, the pursuit of official language bilingualism for their children would be in hope of gaining economic power rather than maintaining it. Such a desire is mitigated by several factors. One such factor, as revealed through a minority of interview participants, is access to French immersion as they were challenged upon expressing their desire for their children to be included in the programme. Another factor associated with access, as revealed by approximately half of the interview participants, is knowledge of intensive programme options. If the participants had known about such opportunities they revealed they would have made different choices for their children. Access, then, seems to be a barrier that promotes selective inclusion at least into French immersion if not also into its associated economic gains. Thus, schools and government organizations are implicated in the selective distribution of linguistic capital. At the same time, they may be the very institutions required to democratize access for immigrants in

particular. The importance of their role in providing solutions to inequitable access for immigrants in particular is emphasized by the function of social capital— concerns norms and networks: the values people hold and the resources that they can access (Edwards, 2003), in providing accessing to learning. Half of the immigrant parents in this study did not have the knowledge of French immersion programming options nor the social capital through which they may have accessed such information (Field, 2003) and thus require government intervention to equitably enhance their knowledge in the pursuit of official language linguistic capital.

The parents in this study who were successful in gaining access to official language linguistic capital for their children were optimistic that their and their children’s investment would produce economic profit as highlighted by the federal government. Such conversion, however, may also be hampered. Pendakur and Pendakur (1997), for example, found that official language knowledge accompanied by non-official additional language knowledge served as a deficit rather than an advantage when it came to income in the Canadian market place. They posit that non-official language knowledge was judged as a deficit by potential employers. Such research suggests that conversion of official language linguistic capital to economic capital requires abandonment of the language from the country of origin as a condition for economic advancement of immigrants (Alba & Nee, 1997). Again, as with the issues of access, the government has a role to play in providing solutions. In fact, Portes and Landolt (1996) suggest that such a high barrier as language abandonment, perhaps an impassable one, can only be overcome with government intervention.

The above study shows that the Canadian federal government contributes to immigrants’ imagining of an officially bilingual Canada where official language bilingualism is capital that can lead to economic gain. As such, I suggest it behoves the government to, at minimum, facilitate immigrants’ access to language learning opportunities and then promote the conversion of linguistic capital, in all its forms, into economic profit. Such intervention may offer the potential to move the immigrants’ imagined Canadian community closer to the reality.

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