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Vietglish - A Reluctant Acceptance of the Close-Minded Literate Society

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A Vietglish Critique

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[1] There are many different spellings of the portmanteau (from the g-less version, *Vietlish*, to the portmanteau that take the whole of Vietnamese, *Vietnamiglish*, to even the portmanteaux that only take the V for Vietnam, *Vinish* and *Vinglish*). For the purpose of standardisation, I will be using *Vietglish* (with the *g*) to refer to the subject at hand.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this paper comes from one of my classmate's shared experience with their equivalent language mixture, Spanglish, and their experience living as a heritage language acquisitor. They have shared their experience with being a product of speaking in this portmanteau manner and I share her sympathy as a multilingual who values both the journey to master the understanding of a language, while acknowledging the common usage for communication of each. My argument remains still that there should not be a shame in such language usage and in its own way, a rather good method to expand understanding between cultures. As with the limitation of this paper, it is to be acknowledged that the line in which this argument comes from is primarily of personal experiences. Resources to support the argument presented in this writing are not as widely available comparing to its counterparts, of which researches are cited here to make the equivalent cases. What is to come from this paper is more along the line of criticism for the unwillingness of the literates to adapt to a medium where hierarchy is foregone for a shared experience.

Abstract

The portmanteau Vietglish refers to the combination of specific aspects belonging to both the Vietnamese language and the English language in particular ways, of which this paper will focus on two divisions. The first is a combination of English words in the day-to-day Vietnamese communication, signifying a lack of correct vocabulary. The speaker usually maintains the Vietnamese accents to keep the conversation mainly in Vietnamese, despite the difficulties that they have to deal with finding the lexicon needed. The other is the "incomplete" formation of Vietnamese conversation, mixing in English grammatical structures, making each sentence sound less "natural" to the mainland's standard. Its existence was not very well-documented in comparison to the many similar counterparts, usually Western ones, like Spanglish (the mixture of Spanish and English) and Franglais (the mixture of French and English). However, there is one similarity that it shares with Spanglish—that is the reluctant acceptance, mostly tolerance and some hatred and demand for reverting back to the monolingual dialect, towards such a speech mixture. In the case for Vietglish, via online newspaper, blog forums, and the popular social media—Facebook, this blatant hatred comes from Vietnamese mainlanders who claim to protect the "sacred" language and those who claim it is a notion of an attack coming from the more educated—apparently to make those who are Vietnamese monolingual to be of great stupidity. I would like to argue against both these claims, stating that Vietglish is not a detriment to the Vietnamese language, nor is it an attack from the educated to put Vietnam in a state of neo-colonialism. Vietglish is a result of the nature of language learning, specifically on the incomplete acquisition aspect. I would also expand that Vietglish is relevant to the discussion of Orality, Literacy, and Illiteracy, based on the applications made from theoretical readings, like Walter Ong's **Orality and Literacy**, Graham Furniss's **Orality: The Power of the Spoken Word**, Abraham Acosta's **Orality and Literacy in Latin America: Threshold of Illiteracy**, and Angel Rama's **The Lettered City**, as well as references towards the usage of Vietglish in the current time. I would argue further that the existence of Vietglish is a potential empowering tool to be used for illiterate purposes in expanding what Vietnam can understand about the world.

An Introduction – Vietglish: The Black Sheep of the Community

Despite the 18 years spent in the country that has given me an ethnicity and a nationality, I do not fall under the category of what most people would deem a "true native speaker" of Vietnamese. In fact, the word that Vietnamese people would use to describe the linguistic medium that I use has the same portmanteau-fication as Spanglish—Vietglish.

If you were to look up Vietglish online in the English world domains, you will most likely not stumble into many resources discussing about the phenomenon in great details, whether academic or entertainment. The least vague reference of Vietglish was in reference to discussion about the topic of sexuality and gender (Masequesmay, 2003). Even Wikipedia, a library of various contributions, does not have a fully-cited (nor even filled-out) page for the language mixture that has become so prevalent in Vietnam itself. Yet, if you search up this phenomenon in the Vietnamese language, **việc nói nửa Việt nửa Anh** (directly translated: speaking half-Vietnamese, half-English), you will find mainly news articles, blog posts, and Facebook interactions, containing the ever dissenting opinion of the "unnaturalness" in such speaking method and the rather prestigious crocodile-tears of the monolingual literates calling for the preservation of a sacred language. For this paper, I want to take a deep dive into the fundamentals of Vietglish, breaking it down under the scope of **language acquisition** theory that is focused on the discussion of struggles of heritage language acquisitors. Along the way, I will establish the orality and literacy theory that prevails within this phenomenon with readings from well-known names like Walter Ong and Graham Furniss. There will also be a discussion regarding the connection of Vietglish with the definition of **illiteracy**, as laid out by Abraham Acosta in his piece *Orality and Literacy in Latin America: Threshold of Illiteracy*. Many other references will also be used in order to support the understanding of Vietglish, such as the idea of **heteroglossia**, founded and studied by Bakhtin, **The Lettered City** by Rama, and Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone in **The Art of the Contact Zone**.

The Concept – So, what is Vietglish, in its entirety?

To understand what Vietglish consists of, it would be best to first understand a greater concept: heteroglossia. The first definition of heteroglossia, theorised by Russian literary theorist Bakhtin (Бахтин) in his essay Слово в романе (Discourse in the Novel), refers to the idea of many different varieties existing in a language (Bakhtin, 1981). Coincidentally, Vietglish not only follows this definition, as a concept that consists a mixture of multiple combinations of the lexicons and grammatical rules of Vietnamese and English, but it also belongs to it, as I would argue, due to it being a form of heteroglossia of the Vietnamese language itself, as a phenomenon that are seen in the speech of the younger generation—a variety.

The most common example[2] of Vietglish is quite similar to its counterparts as well—the mixture of English and Vietnamese words in one sentence, very similar to a word-by-word translation. Let us take a look at this line from a female candidate on a matchmaking show:

"Team help em về vấn đề này nhé. Nếu có chỗ nào wonder thì please feel free to voice up." (Tâm Diệu, 2019)

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[2] It can be argued that the first most common example of Vietglish is the reference to a phenomenon called "loaning words", which copies, either completely or partly, the pronunciation of the word in its original language. An example of complete copies are ***ban nhạc*** (which is the word ***band***, combined with the word ***music*** in Vietnamese to) (Lê, 2021). However, this will be more of a reference further in the essay, rather than the main actual Vietglish focus.

[English: Can everyone in the team help me with this problem? If anyone needs help with explaining certain parts, feel free to voice up.]
[Vietnamese: Các anh chị giúp em với vấn đề này nhé. Nếu có chỗ nào còn thắc mắc thì cứ lên tiếng nhé]

In this quote, we can see an obvious mix of English lexicons, like **team**; **help**; **wonder**; or even the expression, **please feel free to voice up**, in a fully Vietnamese grammatically-correct, structured sentence. In the same example, we see a different form of Vietglish: the direct translation of words between language, maintaining the grammar and lexical structure of the former rather than the latter. The "**please feel free to voice up**" expression is not one that is used in "correct" grammatical/lexical English, and more resembles a translation of the Vietnamese phrasal verb "lên tiếng" (translation: to make your voice heard, to let everyone know your problem).

The second most commonly talked about format is having a proficient knowledge of Vietnamese lexicons, yet still maintaining the usage of English grammatical structure. Though one can argue about the existence of flexibility in Vietnamese grammar, there is a set of unspoken cultural-grammatical rules that separates the native from the heritage speakers, and it usually falls under the fact that the heritage are more influenced by the grammatical rule of a different language. It is one that I have been "unfortunately" plagued by, noting from this particular example when I was asking my mother to think of the times that I have done so, and when she cannot think of any and ask me to just think of one randomly, I immediately answer with: "Con tự nghĩ ra không được ah." (translation: I, myself, cannot think of any). Though the meaning of the answer is kept, the cultural-grammatical structure has been broken as the word **không** (English equivalent: **not**) should have been placed right after the subject **Con** (English equivalent: **I**), yet I went and combined it with the word được, forming the English equivalent **cannot** instead.

The Origin – Vietglish Being An Inevitable Outcome For Vietnamese Heritage Language Acquisitors and for a Generation of Multilingual Speakers

There are two particular groups that I want to bring attention to that are the subject of my interest—the Vietnamese heritage language acquisitor/acquirer and the multilingual generation of Vietnam.

A heritage language acquirer (HLA) refers to someone who is acquiring the heritage language of an ethnolinguistic group. An ethnolinguistic group is best described as a group of people that are unified by their ethnicity and language. Vietnamese, as a language and a group of people, can be classify as an ethnolinguistic group, though it is of a national level more than an ethnicity level, given the 54 diverse major ethinicities existing in Vietnam. Heritage language acquisition is also often discussed in the context of immigrants that want to re-learn their "native language" from the beginning or with at most an intermediate understanding of the language (able to use it with some level of day-to-day conversations, understanding the references to objects seen in their home and/or neighbourhood). Thus, in the case of Vietnamese as hertiage language acquisition, the focus is on the group of ethinically Vietnamese[3] people, learning or re-learning their language anew, due to either or both the insufficient input and insufficient output ability that one gets during one's childhood. (Input is referring to the process of incoming knowledge about the language, while output is referring to production and

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[3] A rather great focus of the Kinh ethnicity of Vietnamese.

comprehension) (Montrul and Bowles, 2009; Montrul, 2010; Putnam and Sánchez, 2013; Sun, Waschl and Veera, 2022). This is usually the case of little exposure to the language from their rather more intimate environment—like their family and close neighbourhood (the language is not the main spoken language in the greater community). As with any language acquirer, they can be divided into 2 groups: L1 – first language acquirer (HLAs that already had some or most of the knowledge of the acquiring language, and still to some extent uses it on a day-to-day basis to great extents), and L2 – second language acquisitor (HLLs that did not grow up with the language and are learning it second-hand, less likely have some knowledge of the language).

It is without saying that both levels of language acquirers can experience some problems during their time acquiring the language, which can lead to the supposed "unfortunate" and "incomplete" turn to Vietglish speech. Regardless of the belief that L1s do not have problems learning a language that they speak, the afformentioned lack of exposure to (i.e., insufficient input) and production (i.e., insufficient output) of the language in early childhood can contribute some extent to the incomplete acquisition of Vietnamese, speaking from personal experience (as someone who although has lived in Vietnam for 18 consecutive years of their life, but used English continuously up until their current studies and work) and from study (Montrul and Bowles, 2009; Montrul, 2010). As for L2s, the difficulty is usually a product of age—as they grow older, it becomes harder to take in a language, especially under the affect of attrition.

Let's take a more detailed look at the cited researches on what many researchers are calling/deeming as **incomplete acquisition**. In technical terms, according to Silvina Montrul, it is a grammatical utilisation that is deemed to have "failed to reach [the] age-appropriate linguistics levels of proficiency", in comparison to that of their monolingual and fluent multilingual counterparts who have gone through the same cognitive development, part of the same social groups, and are of the same age. In other words, they are unable to maintain the full L1 system of the language – the totality of a language, including its grammatical rules, magnavocabularies, and the culture behind the language discussion. Montrul's main argument was that incomplete acquisition is due an "insufficient input"—i.e., very little amount of knowledge gain regarding the grammatical (and possibly lexical) aspects of the language. Insufficient, though not specifically measured, can range from when the first input was made, what type of input (vocabulary, grammar, phonology) and form of input (cultural-specific, day-to-day, oral conversation, literate reading), or even the environment where the acquisition takes place (Pires and Rothman, 2009; Montrul, 2010). Also mentioned in Montrul, but less focused upon, is the other problem that is shared between the two groups—the aforementioned problem of attrition—the erosion of already established grammatical rules and lexicons, usually due to a lack of exposure, or due to aging factors. To add on to the other possibility of incomplete acquisition, there is also the argument to be made by Putnam and Sánchez, with their remodel version of incomplete acquisition, which brings a focus on the activation of certain features of language, based on Chomsky's model of human/universal grammar (Putnam and Sánchez, 2013)[4]. Their model suggests a consideration of both the input aspect of the language and the output (in this case, output ranges from a mere activation to usage in the brain to producing comprehensive speech and text) to be of great importance, and rather interdependent of one another, because to have what qualify under "sufficient input", there is a theory to expand on the fact that interaction with the input, and ending up producing output of language is as important to the acquisition process. As a result of these problems, the semi-

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[4] Further reading/Support reading: He Sun et al. (2022) – Language Experience and Bilingual Children's Heritage Language Learning [(Sun, Waschl and Veera, 2022)]

complete speech that is developed from them (attrition and incomplete acquisition) takes in aid from other available language, thus forming the "abomination" of Vietglish.

As for the multigenerational group of Vietnamese natives who develop the Vietglish speech, they are also affected in the same fashion as a language acquisitor would—due to a lack of sufficient input of the equivalent term in Vietnamese, or even due to convenience. Smoothening out the homeostatic conversation, helped by the things one can immediately recall, translation can be added in the conversation later, focus on adding tonation to keep the conversation afloat—these are prime examples of Ong's psychodynamics of orality and also Austin and Searle's speech act theory—in speech, one must refer to words easily understood by others as appropriate. Speaking from experience, even if two Vietnamese students were to discuss about their economic studies exams, as they were taught in English, the economic terminologies would be in English as well, rather than in their native tongue. If I were to remember the exact word later, I would exclamate in excitement of remembering what the equivalent translation is, and occasionally, showing dissatisfaction of how the translation is so hard and so far away from the exact meaning in English that I have familiarized myself with. One thing I stand by with the previous studies is the fact that they acknowledge that there is a lack of focus on the co-operation with the multilingual perspectives—which comprise the whole group of Vietglish. Thus, these are only a few of the many reasons as to why the Vietglish speech was developed.

The Criticism of Vietglish – An Outrage of the Vietnamese Prideful Letrados[5]

Unlike its counterparts like Spanglish and Franglais, Vietglish has not been as closely studied, or even discussed at all. However, criticism of the phenomenon has been noted from a variety of Vietnamese mainstream media—in other words, the one with the words. One notable thing about the discussion concerning Vietglish is the Vietnamese terminology used to describe it: "**nửa Tây nửa ta**" – translation: half Westernised, half us—implying criticism for only able to fluently speak and understand half of the "real", monolanguage. It also signifies a speech production offending the pride that the Vietnamese language is made up of—a language that has been so removed and underlooked throughout the country's imperial years. Another term that is used to refer to the language is "**nói chêm tiếng Anh**"—translation: Vietnamese speech that uses English fillers, which continues to imply an inability to speak fully in a language, and is too dependent on another language to express oneself. So, what are the main arguments of the anti-Vietglish? What do people think of the fact that someone just "casually" insert English into the conversation?

Why are you trying to show-off your English? (Tại sao lại phải trổ tài tiếng Anh làm gì?)

In Vietnam, the ability to use English to any extent can be considered a privilege. It has extended to the point that the intelligence of someone can even be measured by the score on their recent exam from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) – a score that most universities, Vietnamese or not, use to identify a student's English proficiency. Though a criticism of IELTS-flexer is one that can be discussed under the lens of orality-literacy binary, it is necessary to distinguish between the use of English, as a result of globalisation, which leads to a view of how understanding English is a superior power against that of speaking Vietglish, as a lack of proficiency of Vietnamese. Vietglish users do not think of the complexity and superiority that English brings, an immediate thought that

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[5] The word *letrado* is used to refer to the people who run *The Lettered City*. The letrados can be understood as ones who concretize an official language as an ordering mechanism (superiority-inferiority) and wants other to behave like them or receive scrutiny, as a result of not.

would have come to the mind of an English letrado faster than a Vietglish speaker, but rather out of the immediate homeostatic moment, in order to not lose the participation of others in a conversation, and the nervousness of not being able to express oneself (Ong, 1982). Why would one not opt for the words that come the quickest to them? It is not like that after the expression has been sent out, if the recipient still does not understand, one cannot just add on to the conversation, can one not? But then again, this is probably coming from those who may not have a great understanding of English, who value more their immediate understanding, instead of letting the speaker reinforce their thought process via redundancy, who views the insertion of English words as declaration of a supposed "inequal" status, because only one of them is able to speak the language of the globalised world. So, what else to do but reclaim a status that has never been part of the equation?

Preservation of an Already "Beautiful and Perfect" Language, Yet Its Long History of Word Borrowing Can Go Ignored (Chúng ta phải bảo tồn sự trong sáng của tiếng Việt, nhưng hãy mặc kệ lịch sử mượn từ)

"DO NOT KILL THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE". The propaganda you are looking at was found in an opinion piece where the author's opinion is one of disapproval on how "the purity of the Vietnamese language" has been ruined with the usage of Vietglish and the language of the Vietnamese Gen Z, known as "teencode". In this piece, the author brings up the most commonly cited reason for the counter-argument of Vietglish that is so literate letrado, I do not think there exists a better version.

Tiếng Việt là ngôn ngữ phong phú và đa dạng cả về mặt ngôn từ lẫn ngữ pháp. Tiếng Việt giàu đẹp là nhờ công của ông cha ta ngày xưa đã giữ gìn qua bao nhiêu thế hệ, nhưng ngày nay, chúng ta lại đạp đổ đi những gì họ gắng công để lại. Đó là một điều đáng tiếc!

[Translation: The Vietnamese language is such an abundant and diverse language, in terms of its lexicon and its grammar rules. This richness is all thanks to the founding father having protected and developed for many years ago, but nowadays, we are destroying and "kicking down" at all that has been left for us. What a waste!] (Phạm, 2020)

Now, let us deconstruct the letrado in writing. According to this summary of **The Lettered City**, the city is controlled by a group of supposed elites (called the **letrados**—the lettered people), who "produce, transmit, execute, and dominate a universe of signs" (Galindo, 2014). It would not be a stretch to establish the connection between the letrados and the founding father in the quote above, who also established (produce) the many (abundant, dominate) lexicons and grammatical rules (controlled, execute) of this official language of the Vietnamese, with its own alphabet, and a multitude of scripts of various genres (a universe of signs). The letrados

created a "sacred colonial hierarchy that provided the colony with laws, regulations, proclamations, certificates, propaganda, and ideology" (Galindo, 2014). It is not far from the picture of the "founding father"—a word that means "an originator of an institution or a movement", with the connotation of "to be looked upon" and "to be respected" (hierarchical), as the person who established the foundation of this nation in the forms of laws, promises, plaques of wars, "propagandas, and 'nationalistic' ideologies". Let us not forget where these rules and laws are originated/adapted from—the older generation of letrados of a different ethnicity, mixing in French loanwords such as **búp bê** (poupée – doll), **xà phòng** (savon – shampoo / soap), and **sơ mi** (chemise – button shirt), or perhaps even the influence of a greater Ancient Chinese civilisation, or the borrowed alphabet from Portugese merchants. Though claiming the words that used to be part of the colonizers to now be ours is its own subversion of power, to claim that we are of complete authority by coming up with the word is re-writing history.

Meanwhile, the way that this author is speaking has given me a great impetus to compare them to the character Héctor in Rosario Castellanos's short story, **The Eagle**—someone who did not even live up to the ideals established by the founding father, who just happened to be his "indirect" ancestors of an apparent high Hispano-literacy, yet dared to come up in front of the "subalterns" indigenous community and claim that they should hold these values as established thusly (Ahern, 1988). What else but Vietnamese faux-brahmins trying to preach the word of a God that they do not even fully follow? Not to mention the fact that the author can gladly hide behind the opinion that they have produced, because how can one argue with the written document that only can be comprehend partly, at most (Ong, 1982)? This reminds me of a metaphor by Furniss in his discussion of the oral-communicative moment, where singing and music (the representation of orality/OCM)—an equivalent to those who are content with speaking Vietglish, is the sub-standard, lower social class, and where poetry (the representation of literacy, literate people)—the equivalent to the monocultural author of this blog post and illustration, is a part of the higher social class, or in other words, the apparent thing to strive for (Furniss, 2008).

A Counter-Criticism: An Oral-Communicative Moment To Be Embraced

With the deconstruction of the fallacies behind the criticism, the consequences of "the pot calling the kettle black", "back in my days" nostalgia, and the demonization of neutral changes, how should we view Vietglish users now? Well, I would want to cite some examples from a particular narrative piece, **The Pleasure Principle**, part of José Emilio Pacheco's book **Battles in the Desert and Other Stories**. Specifically, let us take the many letters exchanged between the main character Jorge, and his ex-girlfriend/love interest, Ana Luisa.

Ana Luisa is a great example of who I would deem to be a representation of Vietglish (or the Vietglish-Spanglish weird love child). In many of her letters, we can clearly see that she does understand the grammatical structure of Spanish (which was magnificently translated into English) and has a sufficient knowledge of the lexicons, yet her orthography is definitely not on par with the expectation of the protagonist (**rite** instead of write; **ant** instead of aunt; the lack of apostrophes for contractions; lack of proper punctuations; etc.) (Pacheco, 1987). However, does this discourage the literate Jorge from trying his hardest to reply immediately to the non-fully literate Ana Luisa? – not at all. He even copied down word for word, orthographic mistakes included, embracing the moment of voicing out her letter as he made his journal entry. Even the pondering of whether Ana Luisa was the right person for him, as she did not belong in the same socioeconomic class as he was, barely affected his affection to her. The same should be for Vietglish. Despite the unnecessary redundancy in words such as bò beefsteak (bò bò miếng – beef beefsteak), or test thử (thử thử), or fan hâm mộ (những người hâm mộ hâm mộ), the signification and meaning of the word, and even the sentence does not change. In the end, in that immediate moment, where the participation of all is needed, one should not be spending hours remembering and finding out which word in the magnavocabularies of a language is needed in the conversation, rather just saying the equivalent in a different language of a complete

different origin that to some can be understood right away, and if not, further explanation can be added later. Instead, for this situation, where the mind does not have more than a millisecond to reflect on the great dictionary of the Vietnamese language and conversation need not to create nervous silence, one should be allowed to live on with their verbomotor lifestyle, to give an instant answer, receive the reactions of the other participants and then, if needed, adding on to their ideas in aggregated, detail ways (Ong, 1982; Furniss, 2004).

<u>A Consideration: The Threshold of Illiteracy In The Context of Vietnamese Acceptance to Newly Globalised Concepts</u>

Let us first start this section with a quote from the man who defines this contextual-fitting **illiteracy**, Abraham Acosta. In his piece, he stated: "I define illiteracy as unintended, textual presentations of unassimilable speech that breach the established conventions of semiological, racial, and class-based coherence (oral and lettered), and critically disrupt the political field within which power and resistance are defined and positioned" (Acosta, 2013). Illiteracy, in this context, is not discussing the inability to read. It is the existent of oral-aural and literate-visual literary work that challenges the foundational oppressive ideologies, as created by the assigned letrados. Vietglish would be an exceptional tool where these literary works can thrive, debating against and defending the many new establishment of knowledge of the oppressed (the LGBTQIA+, the attack on multilingualism, the less fortunate, etc.) that are, at the time, unable to develop thrivingly in a limiting language. In fact, it has already taken place. Many terminologies in most other language about the LGBTQIA+ community still takes the English equivalents and apply them into every day speech for people of the community to address them, despite certain true Vietnamese equivalent (người đồng tính = homosexual, người lưỡng tính = bisexual, người vô tính = asexual, etc.). In such a contact zone, where "cultures meet and clash" with one another (Pratt, 1991), in a space where one has legal power over the other, we can only hope that in this Prattian area, can we stop the ever increasing letrado-breaking effect, to die for the country, but die for standing up for what is right. After all, declaring a major dialect has not resulted in any good, per se (Pires and Rothman, 2009).

<u>Conclusion – A New Beginning</u>

Vietglish, a heteroglossic phenomenon, is an enemy of the letrado, a target for the supposed literate, as it is a potential tool for the fight against the community in question, to hold up the possible new value of a forever developing Vietnam. It is also the inevitable language of the upcoming generation of Vietnamese heritage language acquisitors, not as a result of dying language, but as a result of globalisation.

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