

**SCHOLARLY PUBLICATION:
Editorial constraints versus NNS strategies****Abstract:**

The issue of scholarly publications written by Non-Native Speakers (henceforth NNS) has, over the last decade, attracted the interest and concern of a great number of researchers. They have sought to find out the reasons that lie behind the rejection of papers by academic journals and editorial boards. These range from an editorial prejudice from the North towards the South, to a linguistic bias against non-English Speakers. Despite the many difficulties which NNS scientists encounter, a few manage to carve their way into this closed world of research. The purpose of this paper is to describe the strategies which have helped Algerian scientists to acquire membership in the field of scholarly publication. Using a qualitative methodology (verbal accounts as well as written records), the research examines how Non-English Speaking scientists negotiate their contributions into peer-refereed English journals, and how the international audience responds to their submissions.

ملخص:

أثارت العراقل الكثرية و المتكررة التي ما تزال تشكل حجرة عثرة في سبيل تمكين الباحثين غير الناطقين بالانجليزية من نشر دراساتهم العلمية في المجالات المحكمة الأجنبية فضول عدد متزايد من الباحثين، خصوصا في العقد المنصرم، بغية التوصل إلى الأسباب (البادية منها والخفية) التي قد تفسر الرفض الذي غالبا ما تقابل به هيئة التحرير طلبات النشر هذه، ومنها غياب الحوار شمال جنوب وما ترتب عنه من تمييز لغوي ذهب ضحيته كل أجنبي عن العالم الأنجلوساكسوني. وبالرغم من هذه الصعاب فقد تمكن عدد محدود جدا من بلوغ غايتهم واقتحام هذا الحصن المنيع، الأمر الذي حفزنا إلى النظر بإمعان في الأساليب التي انتهجها بعض الباحثين الجزائريين الذين تمكنوا بجدارة من الظفر بالعضوية في منابر النشر الأجنبي المحكم لتقديمها في هذه الدراسة. وارتأينا استخدام المنهجية النوعية معتمدين على الاستجواب الكتابي والسرد الشفوي لبعض من هذه العينات للإجابة على بعض الأسئلة المتعلقة بعوامل نجاحها في استقطاب اهتمام كل من الناشرين والقراء الأجانب على حد سواء.

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Introduction :

The study of research papers written by non native speakers (NNS) has triggered the concern of a great number of researchers who have thus sought to find out how foreign language speakers write their papers for international publication. Based on the assumption that understanding how NNS scientists write would help to identify the problems that deny them access to scholarly publication, these studies have developed an array of research material that ranges from the scientists' cognitive processes in producing and revising their papers (St John, 1987; Rymer, 1988 ; Ventolla and Mauranen, 1991; Matsumoto, 1995)

to their individual strategies in overcoming the cross-cultural communication problems (Sionis,1995). Driven by the changes brought by the social constructionist theory, (writing is no longer perceived as a product of an individual mind, but rather as a 'social act' that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience ' (Coe in Johns 1990/27), researchers have shifted their focus from the writing processes to the audience expectations and editors' attitudes towards NNS contributors (Gosden, 1992; Flowerdew, 2001). A key finding in most of these studies indicates that NNS are at a disadvantage as compared with their native counterparts (Flowerdew, 1999, 2011; Hyland, 2010; Tang, 2012). Non-English speaking scientists suffer not only from a linguistic bias, resulting from the English domination over the world scientific production (Lillis and Curry,2010), but they also suffer from an editorial prejudice resulting from their geographical isolation (Canagarajah,1996) and a North/South prejudice (Swales, 1990; Salager-Meyer,2008). The choice of English as a lingua franca for scientific communication might be seen as a practical solution to overcome problems of international communication. Alternatively, the use of one language at the expense of other languages might be regarded as an impediment for many other scientists, particularly, in the South. Scientists not only lack language control but also lack basic research facilities, for example, translation services. The study reported in this paper will focus on these constraints which a group of Algerian scientists have attempted to overcome to secure publication in English language journals. Two questions are posed: How do Algerian scientists write and publish their papers in an English dominated research world and how do editors of international journals respond to their submissions?

1- Research methodology

The study took place in the faculty of natural sciences, in the University of Constantine in Algeria. The participants were selected based on a single criterion: they must have been published at least once in an international journal written in English. To avoid discrepancies, all of them are biologists, specializing in related disciplines (Microbiology, Biochemistry, Plant biology, photochemistry, Molecular biology, Nutrition physiology and toxicology). Nine scientists took part in the study. Seven hold PhDs, and two are doctoral research students at the writing-up stage. Despite their low proficiency in English, they have all been published in international journals. The number of times they have been published varies from those who are launching into their first attempt, to experienced researchers, who have already had five or more works published, including a long list of conference proceedings and poster presentations. The medium of instruction and communication in the faculty is both Arabic and French, but the required language for research purposes is English.

Data in this study include both the scientists' verbal accounts which were collected through semi structured interviews; and the editors' written accounts which were gathered through a survey questionnaire. The journals were selected from the online

data DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals). These are peer-reviewed journals indexed by the Journal Citation Report (JCR).

1. The research results

1.1. The scientists' strategies

The results show that scientists have developed a range of strategies which we have identified as: *Pre Writing strategies*, *Writing strategies*, *Revising and editing strategies*, and *Getting published strategies*. In this study, we explore first the scientists' strategies. Then, from the editors' perspective, we discuss whether these strategies are fully justified.

1.1.1. Pre Writing Strategies:

Whatever the motives for publication are, getting published is what all Algerian scientists look forward to achieving successfully. But how can they achieve this? How to get started and where to publish are crucial decisions in the process. For the interviewees, once the idea of publishing is generated, a long period of preparation ensues during which discussions at both formal and informal levels take place. The scientist has recourse to two strategies that make the process achievable.

- Attending scientific forums

A common practice for the scientists interviewed is to attend workshops, conferences and poster presentations. These international meetings help them to 'advertise' their work and find a potential journal editor. Participant D gives an account of how it works for them:

... the idea is subjected to debate in a conference and its fate depends on the echo, questions, interests that participants find in it... For us, the conference presentation is a kind of survey for our future publication.

- Finding the journal

If scientific meetings pave the way to publication, finding an appropriate journal seems to be a hard decision to make. The participants explained that although a journal is primarily chosen for its focus and the scope of its research, it is often targeted for its ranking. Algerian scientists never venture to submit manuscripts to highly ranked journals; they are aware of the factors that run counter to their aspiration, and that their submission may get rejected. Participant A compares his previous experience abroad and the present difficulties:

There are journals in which you are glad to place a paper only once in your life because it is a pride to publish in these journals. Since I have returned to Algeria, I have never been able to get published in these journals because I have the feeling that the quality of work that I am doing here is not the same.

While it is true that the research environment might be an impediment, participant E explains that publishing in well-rated journals requires being under the aegis of a well known scientist:

Photochemistry, in plant biochemistry, is world famous. It is highly ranked. This is the reason why we cannot be published in it without having a well-known figure as a co-author.

But the case of participant G is the most interesting. It shows a real instance of the socially-constructed nature of science writing. The Algerian scientist explained that if she had accepted that her results be published in one of the top quality journals in her field, the value of her paper would have been downgraded. The textual revisions which the editor of the journal suggested would have contributed in lowering the value of her findings. The interviewee provided explanations as to why her paper was rejected, despite the positive comments of the reviewers:

For example, Human Mutation journal, which is a highly ranked journal, has not accepted my paper in its submitted form. I was asked to change it, to shorten it. For me, doing that will downgrade it because it is not a study that does not have a scientific value. Rather, it is a piece of research with a good scientific level ... still, I would prefer to make other changes and submit it elsewhere rather than publish it in the form of notes...

Though rare in our data, this situation is typical of what Myers (1985:146) views as an instance of “negotiation of status”. The author argues that “disagreements over allowable length, for example, can be seen as “negotiations of status”. He added “when referees comment on the form and style of a manuscript, they may also be commenting on its claim”. Aware of the fact that altering the form of an article affects the status of the claim, our interviewee preferred to preserve the strength of her claim, but publish in a lower-ranked journal.

Promoting one’s work, targeting an appropriate level journal are certainly important strategies in the pre-writing stage. They help the author determine the audience for which the written product is intended. Identifying one’s audience implies writing for a particular type of readership and thus writing according to certain norms and conventions which are specific to the scientific community and to the house style of the journal. Such a skill, which requires a long period of training and apprenticeship, is almost totally missing from the Algerian scientists’ previous learning experience. None of the interviewees, in this study, has been given the basics on how to write in science. When asked about how they coped with their disciplinary demands, scientists described their individual strategies.

1.1.2. Writing strategies

Two strategies emerge from the scientists’ writing processes: writing in French and getting it translated or writing in English and getting it corrected. But in both situations the scientists are between a rock and a hard place.

- ***Translating to English***

Despite its disadvantages: costly charges, time-consuming procedure, uncertainties as to whether the intended meaning is faithfully conveyed, translation is adopted by most scientists in this study. Participant C explained the long process she went through to translate one of her papers:

*First, we write in French. We do not write directly in English. Once it is good, we send it for translation. For, **Cariología**, I tried to translate it myself. I was in Algeria, I translated my paper here and gave it to a fellow biologist who knows English. We worked together on the translation. When I submitted it, it was rejected; I was told that the translation was not good. I had to send it to a French lab. There, they have a system of hired translators who can do the job; otherwise, the staff can do it themselves. There is always one who is native speaker.*

But participant E raised the constraints which are imposed by such a system:

This way is a bit cumbersome. We would have preferred to write the article directly in English. It would have saved us time! But we have to go through the French language....

Divided between the need to fulfil her role properly and aware of her imperfect English language skills, participant C expressed her dissatisfaction as regards translation:

This is the worst! There is nothing better than knowing English!"

- ***Writing in English straight away***

‘The Only way’ or ‘the easy way out’, whatever the reason given, translation seems an inescapable stage in the process of NNS publication. However, Scientists who try to avoid the translation trap have to rely on their ‘ingenuity’. Participant G, who is publishing for the first time, argued that she refused to be pulled in two directions:

I have my own style. If another person had written it as well, there would have been two different styles. This would not have been acceptable to me and it would have created other problems. I appreciate being corrected, but having it written for me - NO! I am happy to claim responsibility for my own mistakes.

Participant A, who is the most experienced author, provided the same argument, showing clearly the dual constraints which writers of articles face: The conventions of the genre and the house style of the journal

Personally, I write taking into account the general conventions of writing ... That is to say, according to the general rules for writing research articles. I write straight away in English (i.e. in my own English); Then, I begin thinking where I can submit my paper. Once I select the journal, I revise it according to the conventions of that journal. When I finish, I get help from someone who knows English - a friend, or a colleague- to edit in the language.

The skill of writing, as described by the scientists in this study, has been acquired by trial and error. Extensive and intensive reading provided them with the essentials. For example, Participant F described his sources of inspiration.

In fact, I acquired this skill by reading articles in English (99% are in English) and translating or summarizing them in French. So when I write in French, it is just a return to the articles I have read in English. If there are words I do not understand, I look them up in the dictionary. However, for the text in general, and for the presentation of a given argument, I try to model my writing on my previous readings. This is how I write the first draft from French into English.

As explained in the quotes above, the writing strategy in these situations consists of writing the draft in English then having someone check the language. But the composing process itself is somehow what St John (1987:116) referred to as “jigsaw building”. It consists of cutting bits from here and pasting them there. Skilfully, the scientists, in this study, described their approach. Participant J, for example, revealed that:

I get inspiration from scientific articles on the same topic, borrowing some sentences, certain words, and certain turns of phrases that match my work

Participant C, also adopted the same strategy for writing the materials and methods section, arguing that scientists often use a standard pattern for this part.

Sometimes, for example, for the materials and methods section, the same stereotyped phrases are used. We just reproduce them and our problem for this section is settled.

Practical in the constructing of their articles, Algerian scientists make use of previous experience both in terms of the research paradigm to which they are scientifically committed and also in terms of writing models they use. But these “jigsaw building” and mapping out strategies also have their drawbacks. Such a

strategy is likely to result in unreadable material which is often a source of misunderstanding putting readers off writers.

1.1.3. Revision and editing strategies: “the language brokers”

All the scientists, we interviewed in this study, noted that their papers had undergone at least three types of revisions: a language revision, a specialist revision and an editorial proof-reading. The type of corrections made largely depends on whether revisers are outsiders or insiders to the scientific community.

• The language reviser

To the Algerian scientists, these “language brokers” as identified by (Lillis & Curry 2010) are very often language teachers or colleagues who graduated in an English speaking country. Occasionally, the scientist chooses a co-author who is an English speaker for whom the writing and checking tasks are assigned. But when possible, the scientist prefers pairing up with senior tutors, from northern countries, who have more experience and available facilities for scientific publishing. Participant B explained that

Once the first draft is properly written, it is read by ‘Anglophones’

Thus “Anglophone” is a broad category, but here, reference is made to the English department teachers. As they are not qualified for the task, language teachers are the least successful revisers. They not only lack scientific competence to understand what they are revising, but also their linguistic proficiency in writing scientific discourse is at stake. Participant A lamented:

I've never been satisfied ... and I mean ‘never’ ... because when I check the language with someone, the meaning totally changes. Ideas seem to lose the sense that I wanted to give them ... I have the impression that Anglophone teachers and I do not speak the same language at all. I strongly believe that if I co-authored a paper with them, it would end up as incomprehensible as when I write it by myself; and therefore the revision of language teachers does not solve the problem in my eyes.

This comment, be it a value judgment or be it unfulfilled expectations, would suggest that the language teacher is not qualified to revise scientific papers. This view is reinforced by participant H's evaluation:

They do not bring anything! They do a superficial reading. Even when they read a paper they, themselves, find it difficult to correct.

The language teachers' limitations as far as scientific writing revising/editing is concerned cannot be denied, and the issue of their status as an outsider to the community is acknowledged by all. Their textual revisions and language editing often don't meet the demands of the scientific community. Still, the question that ought to be asked is not whether language revisers are qualified for the task or not, but whether the language variable plays an important role in manuscripts evaluation and whether imperfect language skills hamper the publication process.

- ***The language variable***

According to our informants, editors of journals never reject papers because of the quality of reporting. This challenges the view that sees language inadequacy "...as an excuse for rejecting unwanted papers" (Sionis, 1995:100). For the Algerian scientists, the environment in which scientific practice takes place seems to determine the fate of a publication. The linguistic issue is not negligible, but it is not as important as science. Participant A argued that:

Never was a paper rejected for language problems. This is very rare. They (referees) mostly judge the scientific quality, but the language aspect is not totally ignored.

Similarly, participant B noted that rejection on linguistic grounds is rare.

If rejection on linguistic grounds is possible, I think it is very rare.

All other scientists, however, admitted that they have not faced the problem; they always take the necessary precautions to ensure that the paper is carefully revised before landing on the referees' desks. Participant D's comment is also illustrative of his colleagues' views.

Either written in French or English, a publication is first subjected to specialized services. We go through mediators, but it's in our interest to do so.

1.1.4. Strategies for getting published: the old boy network

To be accepted for publication, a paper has to meet the evaluation criteria. Scientists in this study argue that manuscripts submitted are primarily assessed against scientific norms which include: "reliable research design", "reproducibility of research techniques", "literature cited", "journal focus" and "Original work" ... These are the normative criteria which all scientists are aware of, and which they endeavour to meet to gain acceptance for their manuscript. Yet, there are also some variables which remain out of the scientist's control.

One of the scientists, participant C, believes that there are sometimes some "subjective reasons" which lie behind unfavourable reviewing. She explained that some subjects are the preserve of particular research teams and "stepping on these research areas" might be threatening:

This is an instance of bias because the subject was their 'preserve',so we realized that we should not approach certain subjects .

Participant E, on the other hand, raised the thorny question of "the prejudice against submissions coming from unknown places" (Swales, 1985a:100). He explained why scientists prefer such addresses as Institut Pasteur in Paris, l'INSERM (Institut National des Sciences et RecherchesMedicales) or l'INRA (Institut National de RechercheAgronomique) rather than that of the local university. He admitted that making use of the research network he is affiliated to is a precautionary measure which would possibly give his research more credit and a greater chance of getting published:

The address is significant for the editor of the journal. The address of a well-known research lab helps in getting the submission accepted. An address generally refers to a name.

Indeed, no scientist denies having recourse to ‘the old boy network’. The importance of including the name of an outstanding figure within the co-authors list is a safe way for ensuring the acceptance of a paper. Although the role of these ‘academic backers’ may differ from one situation to another, their name is a real password to the publication world. Their roles, however, are described differently. On the one hand, it is the figure to whom scientists owe a great deal. Participant G, for example, described metaphorically her promoter’s help

He is the protector. If the paper is as it is now, that’s thanks to him. My work is just like gold in the bottom of a mine. You do not see it. You must first remove all the stone and this is where you see a gold nugget. And it is precisely him, who has removed a lot of things and put things in place. He pushed me to explain certain elements, to remove others that do not have much importance, so he has allowed me to show up my article.

On the other hand, participant D observed that his mentor’s name fulfils its function,

And at times, we associate names that have not even contributed. This is done on purpose ... the fact that a well-known figure is associated, the paper is easily accepted. He did nothing, but you have to associate him.

More than a need, it is a MUST, participant H noted:

The last (co-author) is actually the head of the laboratory. He is the supervisor for this work. He must be there even if he did not provide any help (H)

The evidence is provided by participant E who showed one of the rejection letters he received for one of his submitted manuscripts.

The Entomological Society of Canada requires one author of a paper to be a member of the society.

Whether his contribution is real or token, the backer’s name is both a ‘quality label’ and a ‘key’ that opens the publication door, as summed up by participant E:

The professor’s name is the ticket or the publication tag.

1.2. Editorial responding to NNS’ strategies

The Algerian scientists, in the previous section, reported that editors and referees assessed their manuscripts primarily against scientific values. Such an attitude seems quite logical if we assume that the editors’ role is to facilitate the impartial assessment of research and to ensure that articles meet the journal’s

standards of quality, and scientific validity. However, one cannot rule out the possibility that editorial board members may have values other than the scientific criteria which influence their decision-making. Algerian scientists also observed that the name of 'a leading figure' in the field and 'the address of a well-known scientific institution' might also account for the acceptance of their papers. To what extent are these strategies justified?

1.2.1. Attributes of author(s) and locality

The results show that all the editors have a consistent attitude regarding the criteria that influence their decision-making. They value most an original work which adheres to the philosophy and aims of the journal. The quality of what is being reported is undoubtedly an important variable too. However, the attributes of the author(s) and place of origin of manuscripts do not seem to affect the editors' decision-making. For the editors, a manuscript is assessed first and foremost on its intrinsic scientific quality. Editors and peer-reviewers are mainly interested in the research process and the research findings. Their views totally contradict those of the Algerian scientists'. While these latter deem these factors to be of great importance, all editors consider the author's (or one of the co-authors) personal attributes and the place of origin of a manuscript as insignificant. Clearly, to discriminate papers on geographic grounds would impair the transparency and objectivity of scientific evaluation.

1.2.2. Prejudice against NNS submissions

The prejudice against NNS submissions has largely been echoed. Swales, (1985:100) has on many occasions lamented the "editorial prejudice against NNS manuscripts, emanating from unknown places of the world". Our results show that most of the editors seem to reject the idea that there is an editorial bias against NNS submissions, and the very few show no commitment, leaving the door open to doubt. In his comments, the editor of the journal *Biogeosciences*, for example, wrote that

"...manuscripts from Germany are much better than those from most African Countries".

This statement of fact is certainly true, but isn't it a subliminal prejudice against papers originating from the less developed countries? Isn't it a preconceived bias in favour of developed countries? Moreover, this quote from the Biology journal editor is even more expressive of this situation.

Our papers are mostly from Europe and North America and the quality of the English language has always been acceptable...When authors from non-English speaking countries submitted papers, their language usage was

effectively equivalent to a native manuscript, and in most of those cases one of the authors included someone in an English-speaking or European country.

Bias against NNS is difficult to prove, but bias in favour of the developed countries is easily justified. Developed countries have reached such a level of Excellency that even their linguistic proficiency is equated with the native counterpart. Editors nowadays speak of papers from “*Europe and North America*” on the one hand, and “*other parts of the world*” on the other. We think that Swales’ view on the subject is relevant as regards this specific point. Isn’t the very idea of streaming authors on regional grounds in itself discriminating? Isn’t the very idea of including a native speaker in the co-authors list a restrictive and exclusionary measure? Doesn’t this last idea simply imply that the inclusion of a native speaker is a prerequisite for the NNS’ entry into the research world?

1.2.3. *The Quality of reporting*

According to the scientists, language inadequacy does not seem to be a major cause for rejection. Nevertheless, an examination of the scientists’ drafts shows that referees evaluate severely the work that they do not understand. The following comments are self explanatory:

*The text is not easy to follow; this is often the result of the English used (From **Microbiol Ecology in Health and Disease Journal**)*

xxxxxxx

*The manuscript should be reviewed for appropriate English structure and rewritten where necessary to ensure the authors’ meaning is correctly and easily interpreted. (From **Infect Diseases Journal**)*

Clearly, and as anticipated, these selected comments show that the editors and referees are concerned with the language variable. How far does this interest go? The answer seems to be confined in the evaluators’ mind, and very few studies(eg. Flowerdew, 1999) have documented us as to whether the quality of reporting is a major influencing factor on the editors’ decision-making for acceptance or rejection of the papers submitted. How far does the Algerian scientists’ view hold true is what we have tried to make the editors comment on.

Results indicate that the majority(82%) of our respondents believe that rejection on linguistic grounds can definitely occur while a few(14%) believe it could be the case. Only one respondent thinks that it is rarely the case. *The Ecology of Food and Nutrition* Journal editor contends that inappropriate language leads to rejection. Clearly, he states that

“Rejection of a manuscript solely on the grounds of English usage is rare”.

But the selected views below show that unless the criterion of quality of reporting is met, the manuscript will be rejected. In their own words, the editors argue:

We reject manuscripts with bad English and suggest the authors have external help from native English speaking colleagues or professional companies. After re-editing the English, the resubmitted manuscript is evaluated for technical Excellency. **Arid Land Research and Management journal**

....As a reviewer and editor, I often get manuscripts that are horribly written, I always reject them immediately. Such manuscripts cannot be published in any decent journal. On the other hand, it's not a reviewer's or editor's job to correct trivial language errors. So there is no choice but to reject badly written manuscripts. **Algorithms for Molecular Biology journal**

"The correct language is the basic requirement for submitted manuscripts. No journal can publish articles containing grammatical and stylistic errors without affecting its image and credibility. Native speakers of English are privileged. NNS must simply ask for help from native speakers or make use of the available Internet services for the final editing of the text. There is no way round. Even a very good knowledge of English cannot assure that the text does not contain errors or other weak points, which are well visible to the native speakers." **ActaProtozoologica Journal**

As illustrated above, "poor language use", "unsatisfactory writing style" "bad English" "incorrect language" "horribly written"... are all good reasons for rejection. This is a valid motive as long as the reputation and the prestige of a journal are at stake. NNS who want to see their papers in print have no choice but to go hunting for native speakers or publish in low-impact journals. Rejection on linguistic grounds is fully justified.

2. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to explore the strategies that Algerian scientists have developed to cope with the linguistic and editorial pressure imposed by an English dominated research world, marked by a growing bias against third world submissions. While this research challenges the view that "the NNS is not as disadvantaged as it is often thought, at least in the scientific field." (Wood, 2001/77), and that sees no differences between NS & NNS in the writing strategies (Matsumoto, 1995), it provides still further support to studies on "inequalities in writing for academic publication"

(Lillis and Curry, 2010). In line with Flowerdew (1999a), we show that non-English scientists suffer a great disadvantage throughout the process of writing and then getting published. The present findings, clearly, help support the many studies on NNS survival strategies when aiming for scholarly publication. For example, the writing strategies which Algerian scientists have developed are not idiosyncratic. Writing straight in English then having the paper edited, or writing in French then having the paper translated are two strategies which are found to corroborate with the findings of previous studies on NNS scientists' writing. St John (1987), and Ventola and Mauranen (1991) respectively have found that Spanish and Finnish writers had recourse to the same approaches. Additionally, it has highlighted the strategies for getting published and the resorting to the 'old boy network'. The latter, it would seem, reinforces the concept of 'Transnational networking' Lillis and Curry(2010) as an important resource for NNS researchers, helping them to solve their language problems and to publish their articles under the aegis of their backers. The problem is there and the ultimate solution is either reducing the inequalities in language use by reconsidering the distribution of languages in more equal terms; or loosening the grip that is gradually strangling Non-English speakers in general and southern scientists in particular.

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