

An Overview of Linguistic Issues in Japan: Exploring a Scheme for Diversified Linguistic Efforts¹ Management

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This paper proposes a scheme for diversified linguistic efforts management focusing on the mutual affects of different linguistic issues within a society. Before introducing the scheme, the currently important linguistic issues in Japan are briefly reviewed. Within the process, interrelationships between those different issues are described, which is connected to the author's emphasis of placing the scheme in a wheel. The wheel metaphorically indicates that balanced and harmonious linguistic practices in adequate pace should be promoted in an era of accelerating transformation of sociolinguistic environment. Features of interrelationship are determined not by language itself but by the value, perceptions and attitude toward languages lying beneath each linguistic issue, which settled as a core wheel in the scheme. Those values are also carried out in nonverbal ways and sometimes cause problematic relationships even to a fatal consequence. The scheme contributes by clarifying this aspect and facilitates discussion among policy makers, educators and scholars.

The field of applied linguistics, which is also called sociolinguistics or sociology of language, has experienced growing interest in the field of critical linguistics in recent years (Tollefson, 2002). Since Tollefson (1991) introduced a historical-structural approach to language planning research, as a powerful instrument to generate and stabilize social hierarchies and inequalities, language policies are being carefully reexamined and reevaluated. Due to this critical perspective and methodology, language policy and planning studies have begun paying more attention to unstated pressures, hidden oppressions, implicit discrimination and indirect consequences. Increasing the overlap between language policy studies and sociology leads many language policy researchers to begin to identify themselves not only as applied linguists but scholars of sociology of language.

The development and accumulation of critical language policy and planning studies expose a crucial question requiring a choice of one out of two opposite directions concerning how we can contribute to language policy and planning practices. If we regard language policy inherently as a device of generating and/or stabilizing social inequality, then the task of linguistic policy researchers would be limited to being a monitor of its practices and an investigator of their hidden pressure. One purpose will be minimizing deliberate language policy and practice. In contrast, if we believe that we can utilize language policy and planning to contribute to a flatter society, suggesting ways for possible transformation and encouraging cooperative discussion among language policy makers would be our task. Even standing on this position, outcomes from a critical approach would be guidelines to view the future learning from the past (Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

There has been a tacit and general agreement among linguists that languages cannot and should not be planned and are best left alone (Huebner, 1996). However, language policy studies from the viewpoint of critical linguistics revealed that people are often unconsciously

embedded in a language policy context (Cooper, 1989). Especially linguistic specialists such as novelists, scenario writers, journalists, publishers and broadcasters play a significant role in its context, unrelated to their willingness to do so (Jernudd & Neustupny, 1991). Moreover, linguists and language teachers are engaged in this more directly and deeply. Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996) criticize language teachers who affect linguistic usages of others on the one hand and deny any political commitment on the other hand as having an irresponsible attitude. This remark is also applicable to linguists, because their research outcomes are expected to be applied to language education and language policy.

After a series of discussions over the inevitable political commitment of educators and linguists, linguists and sociolinguists now take one of three positions. The first is a proactivistic position, which seeks a way to contribute to desirable language policy decisions and effective practices. The second is a minimizationalist position, which presumes language policy as a reproduction device of social inequalities, attempting not to overlook hidden language policies. The third one is a neutralist position. Even if critical linguists insist that linguists cannot avoid affecting and being affected by language policy and planning, linguists can still choose a way to maintain their politically neutral stance. From their ethical beliefs as scholars, to keep certain distance from political commitment is one option. Linguists or sociolinguists can take any of these positions; however, we cannot be thoughtless about political commitment.

The biggest concern is that these three positions are hardly compatible. From a proactivist viewpoint, the stance of neutralist might be conceived as hypocritical evasion. From a minimizationalist viewpoint, a proactivist would even be criticized as a source of maltreatment to the environment. From the neutralist point of view, both proactivists and minimizationalists seem to be lacking in professional and elaborated theories and disciplines. If each of us clarifies the position to take as an educator, linguist or sociolinguist, one can share her or his research output with others. Meanwhile, if we are not sufficiently aware of these differences of standpoints, misunderstandings between us easily occur, which can even trigger conflicts among us.

It is also worthwhile to debate the legitimacy of each position to seek a possible community of interests; however, proactivists, and the author admits herself as a proactivistic language policy researcher, need to show its theoretical and practical efficiency through suggestions and commitment to language policies and implementation. In this paper, the author proposes a scheme of language policy design and outlook, which contributes to linguistic human rights in Japan. Learning from the past and from the results of critical approach studies, correlation between different linguistic issues and efforts should be embedded in the center of language policy. The scheme consists of eight linguistic issues in Japan to cultivate an awareness toward interaction between linguistic issues and holistic linguistic ecosystem.

Overview of Linguistic Issues in a Wheel Model

The linguistic issues in Japan can be described in the following model (see Figure 1). Showing them not in a list but in a wheel represents that the linguistic issues are correlated with one another. There have been several proposals of models to capture linguistic issues and situations, showing interactive dynamism, such as Cooper's "two interaction networks"

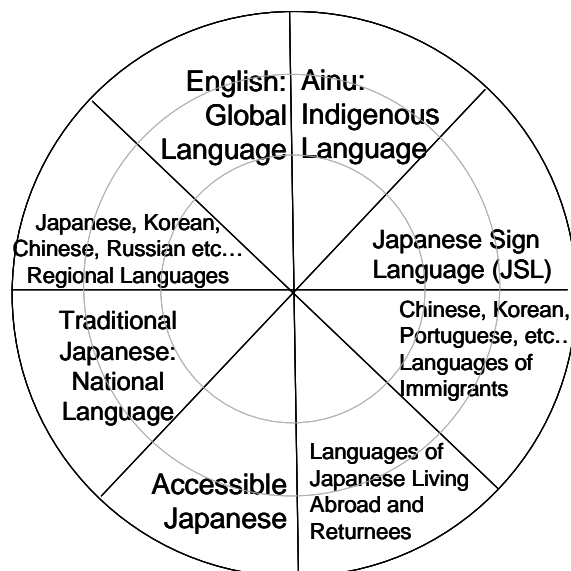


Figure 1: Language Issues in Japan

model (1989) and Kaplan and Baldauf's "linguistic eco-system" model (1997). Before proposing the three layered structure of this interactive model in detail, current major language issues in Japan are briefly reviewed.

Ainu: An Indigenous Language in the Northern Part of Japan

The Ainu language, the ethnic language of Ainu people ("Ainu" means "human" in the Ainu language, therefore some Ainu people prefer to identify themselves as "Utari" that means "fellow countrymen") had had a broad distribution area from Sakhalin in Russia, Kurile Islands, Hokkaido and Tohoku region of Japan. Due to its geographic feature, the Ainu language had rich varieties, even with a lack of mutual intelligibilities. In addition to that, the area had been caught up in a significant political struggle between Japan and Russia since the end of 19th century. The Japanese government promoted an aggressive assimilation policy toward Ainu people in Tohoku and Hokkaido. After a few decades, the Ainu language was recognized as an endangered language and many linguists from Europe and "Wajin," non-Ainu Japanese, devoted themselves to recording it. Although the records themselves are highly valuable, there is also a criticism that the notion itself of Ainu as an endangered or near extinct language accelerated language shift of the Ainu speakers to Japanese.

After a perseverant call from grass-roots activists, the Japanese government finally established the Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture (FRPAC) in 1997 according to the Hokkaido Aborigine Protection Act enacted in 1984. Among the FRPAC's total budget, amounting to 5.3 million dollars a year, nearly 50% is covered by a government fund. Included in the funding are Ainu language revitalization programs, such as providing Ainu language classes, teachers' training courses, distant language courses by radio and

speech contests. The budget for these language related programs for 2007 was about 380,000 dollars.

Japanese Sign Language: Deaf Culture in Japan and Challenges for Information Barrier-Free

It has taken a long time for Japanese Sign Language (JSL) to be admitted as a full-fledged language even among linguists. The first private school for deaf children was established in 1878 in Kyoto. The speed with which the number of schools grew was not fast enough; however, schools fulfilled an important role to offer meeting and interacting opportunities of deaf people, which helped to generate communal ties of JSL speakers and deaf culture. Meanwhile, the ultimate purpose of deaf education was settled upon as to achieve integration into the hearing society. Oralism was the designated goal, and lip-reading and mouthing with sound were strictly focused on until recently. Nowadays, no linguist denies that JSL is as an independent language. However, there need to be more effort to encourage policy makers and the general public to be aware of JSL in not a subordinate language but a full-fledged language with cultural diversities.

Indicating a growing attention to the encouragement of communication with deaf people, ministries prepare JSL translators at their open conferences and seminars. However, it is far from an enthusiastic promotion of JSL. The government amended in 2006 the Supporting Independence to People with Disabilities Act. Aiming at the enhancement of communication of deaf people, it encourages local governments to increase the number and promotion of JSL translators. Grass-roots advocates of JSL and deaf culture reserve to estimate this political decision. It takes some more time to assess whether this amendment is a meaningful promoter of JSL or a pathway to the avoidance of further commitment by the central government. There is a similar reservation concerning the bilingual education of deaf children. Educational issues are more critical because the growth of human-beings can never wait for policy makers' decisions.

To make progress in JSL, not only the grass-roots activists but also the global movements are necessary. A recent global one, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities adopted by the United Nations in 2006, plays a crucial role. Encouraging social status and awareness of JSL also affects a sense of self-pride and empowerment of deaf people and community straightforwardly (Honma, Tajima, & Minamoto, 2004).

Language of Immigrants: From Information Access to Linguistic Identity

The wave of globalization is positioning the issue of immigrants and their languages and communication as a major governmental concern. The number of foreigners living in Japan keeps breaking records every year, and the government assumes that the expanding influx is evitable to sustain the economic level of Japan. The number of foreign residents was 2.08 million in 2006, which makes up 1.63 percent of the total population. Although the rate looks still low, it has almost doubled within 15 years. Compared to indigenous Ainu language or JSL, immigrants experience drastic linguistic environment changes. The governmental policy was criticized because it had only focused on the linguistic issues of immigrant laborers.

However, in most cases, they come along with their family members or bring them over after their life in the host society has been settled. Families prefer to live closer for mutual support; therefore, small communities appear and vanish discursively. Different linguistic issues arise according to various life course situations, such as from recent settlers to long-term residents, from babies to elders, from individuals to communities and from emergency cases to the longitudinal concerns.

The central government is now recognizing that the language assistances mainly in emergency cases are directly connected to human rights. However, ideas of linguistic human rights and guaranteeing them have not been taken up for political discussion. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications released the Multicultural Symbiosis Promotion in March 2006, and the same tendency can be observed as in the case of JSL. It emphasizes the local governments' responsibilities concerning multilingual assistants and limits the commitment of the central government only to Japanese language education.

Languages of Japanese living abroad and Returnees: Maintenance of Japanese and other Languages

The number of Japanese living abroad is also increasing and exceeded 1 million in 2005. Two main linguistic issues are the maintenance of Japanese and acquisition of the host society's languages by children. There are 85 Japanese public schools around the world offering compulsory education with 1,338 dispatched teachers. The number of overseas students at the compulsory education level through junior high was 58,304 in 2006 and about 32 percent of them were learning at these overseas Japanese public schools. Sixty-eight percent of them were attending local schools and absorbing the host societies' cultures and languages. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2006, almost 70 percent of such Japanese public schools had additional curricula for host societies' languages other than English.

More than 10,000 students who lived abroad a year or longer return to Japan every year, and the total number of students who have returned to Japan within the past 12 years is about 140,000. In contrast to the balancing efforts of maintaining Japanese and acquisition of host societies' languages when they are outside of Japan, education for returnees tends to focus only on catching up on their Japanese language education. Their experiences and developed competence through intercultural contacts are occasionally mentioned. However, their correlation between their linguistic competences and their linguistic identity fostered through them is not fully recognized. Therefore, maintenance efforts of languages other than Japanese or English seldom receive priority or attention among language issues.

Understandable, Accessible, Plain Japanese

As the linguistic environment has diversified and the application of science technology has increased, discussion has focused on how to make technical terms, jargon, linguistic displays and nonverbal messages more understandable to broader audiences. Quick inspection through electric government web sites tells us that almost all the ministries are committing themselves in some manner to this issue.

Conventional language policies of Japan had only focused upon creating and elaborating Japanese terms, especially when new ideas were imported from the West. Therefore, this issue was connected to translation and remitted to language specialists. Now, the issue is neither to the lexical borrowing from Western languages nor to the opinions of linguists. Recent plain language movements and implementation are targeting not only the general public but also smaller groups, such as foreigners, children, elderly people, people with disabilities, criminal victims, patients, care takers and so on.

There seems to be quite opposite trends within two linguistic efforts and expected outcomes by them. The former, lexical elaboration, is aiming at selecting the most appropriate word and expression that contribute to solid standard Japanese. On the other hand, the latter, plain Japanese movement, is trying to widen the range of words and expressions that can switch flexibly according to the targeted audience. It is assumed that conceptual trends such as informed consent, accountability, ubiquitous networking and interactionist approach also contributed to paying more attention to receivers of information.

Traditional Japanese and National Language; Kokugo

The national language policy of Japan conducted by MEXT and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA), concerning the enrichment of lexicography, terminological modernization, writing reform guidelines and preserving regional varieties, is still a controversial issue (Honna, Tajima, & Minamoto, 2004). Japan is one of the few countries which do not have any official statement about the national language in its constitution². However, *kokugo*, literally means “the national language,” and implies a sense of the standard Japanese language vaguely shared within its society.

At the same time, supporting and promoting linguistic culture, such as poetry, playwriting, storytelling, literature, visual arts, comics, etcetera, is one of the main concerns of ACA, but it is not usually combined with a language issue. Any kind of art expresses the author’s message consisting of verbal or nonverbal messages or both. Although it is highly likely that artists would prefer their art not to be included among language policy issues, a considerable part of the Japanese linguistic culture is attributed to the works of language related art. An aspect of art as a linguistic heritage is another linguistic issue, which is worth further commitment.

Regional Languages: For Mutual Understanding

Globalization has given the English language a higher status than ever. At the same time, not only the nation states but also regional blocks are appearing as active actors in global governance. Regional peace and security systems need to be evolved based on mutual understanding. For Japan, possibilities and obstacles for the East Asian regional peace should be carefully examined. The matter of language has a dominant critical position because of the history of the Japanese government’s language policy.

The assimilationist spreading policy of the Japanese language under the challenge of colonial acquisition and administration by the Japanese government from 1885 to 1945 left unresolved issues and tense sentiments in East Asia. The assimilative pressure heated up on the Korean Peninsula with attempts to sweep the Korean language away. The policy did not

succeed; rather, it became a catalyst for Korean nationalism (Coulmas, 2002). The impact was so deeply rooted that the notions of “International Japanese” or “Japanese as a lingua franca” still recall imperialism. Therefore, in spite of considerable demands of Japanese learning and actual usage of Japanese as a lingua franca in East Asia, the Japanese government hesitates to directly contribute to it.

To solve this dilemma, the agenda should be shifted from a one-way promotion toward other countries to mutual learning within the region. Encouraging both Japanese learning in Korea and in China and Korean learning and Chinese learning in Japan represents mutual respect and facilitates intercultural communication within the region. The Japan Forum (TJF) established in 1987 provides an example. TJF’s aim is to promote mutual understanding by supporting mutual “neighboring” language learning and usage by elementary and secondary level students. Their idea is innovative; however, their budget sheet of fiscal year (FY) 2007 shows that the expense for Japanese education is going to be 200,000 dollars and Chinese and Korean are 31,700 dollars and 28,400 dollars, respectively. The budgetary gap is getting bigger compared to that of FY2004. What the imbalanced distribution of budget meant to their projects’ aims should be carefully examined.

English: An International or Global Language

Since there has been no official statement concerning an official language in Japan, concrete discussion over language statuses seldom occurs at the official level. By the customary shared agreement upon *kokugo*, dichotomic distinction of *bo-kokugo*, literally “mother country (or national) language”, and *gai-kokugo*, literally “foreign country (or national) language” are most frequently used language statuses. All languages other than Japanese are generally assumed *gai-kokugo*, no matter what functions or statuses are expected to them within the society.

When an extraordinary advisory body of the former Prime Minister Obuchi released in 2000 a report titled “Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century: The Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium,” a line saying, “In the long term, it may be possible to make English *an official second language*, but national debate will be needed” caught the public attention (author’s emphasis). Later, the term “an official second language” disappeared due to negative reactions from the public, educators and linguists (Hashimoto, 2007). In contrast to the indecisive proposal of the second official language, status of English as “the international lingua franca” was mentioned clearly and repeatedly as follows: “all Japanese acquire a working knowledge of English—not as simply a foreign language but as *the international lingua franca*” (author’s emphasis).

The status of English distinctive from other foreign languages was carried over into an educational policy implementation titled “An Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’” released in 2003. English was labeled as “a common international language,” which legitimates special educational effort focused on English.

Interrelationships between Linguistic Issues

Eight main linguistic issues are represented within a wheel model which implies that balanced awareness and development of all areas promises its smooth rotation. Reviewing

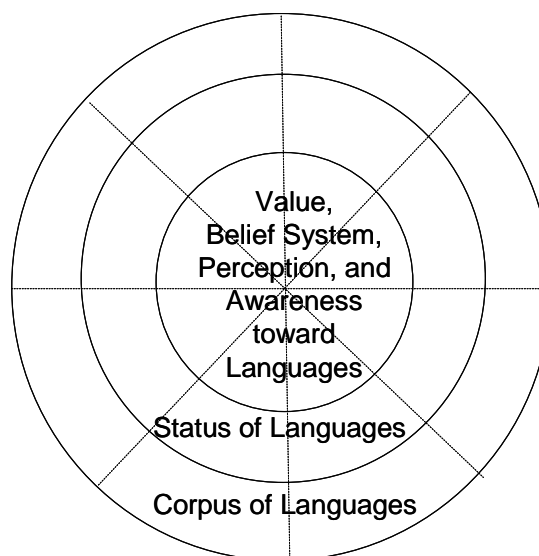
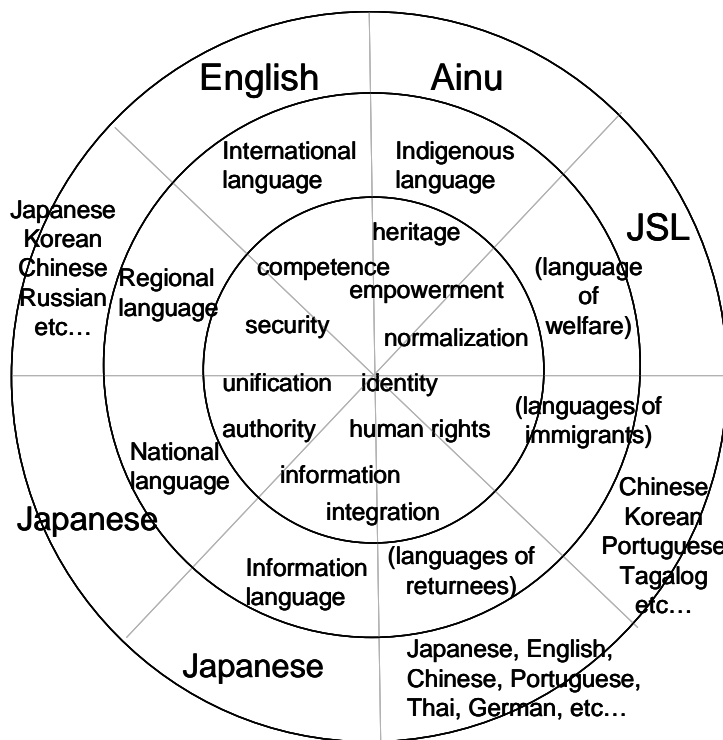


Figure 2: A Scheme for Diversified Linguistic Issues Management

each issue one by one has already indicated interdependence and correlation between them. For example, various versions of plain Japanese exploration correlate to the awareness toward various social minorities, and consciousness toward mutual learning of regional languages is connected to the globalization and expanding status of English. Not only positive impact but also conflictive interaction can be predicted. For example, applying to English the status as an international language can be threatening to the Japanese language as a national language.

Analysis by a critical approach reveals these interrelationships more obviously. Coulmas (2002) reviewed Japanese official language policies from 1850s to the present in three phases. The study tells how the one-focused (the national language centered) policy affected discouragement of the surrounding languages. When the nation was aiming at modernization and extending its hegemony, languages apparently became a tool of oppression. Then, Japan experienced crucial transformation of language policy due to the defeat in the Pacific War in 1945. Democracy became the highest priority within the reform of language policy, in which any commitment to other languages than Japanese was out of consideration. As a result, doing nothing for the estimated 600,000 left behind Korean residents brought them a harsh condition in which they could neither maintain Korean nor foster bilingualism (Saruhashi, 2004). Even with one-sided rapid policy transformation, the former values and attitudes toward languages still held by society cannot be ignored.

Therefore, interrelationships between linguistic issues and practices should be carefully examined and triggering factors of collaboration or conflicts should be included to the wheel model scheme.



Note. Language statuses within parentheses are unsettled/tentative positions in Japanese linguistic situation

Figure 3: A Scheme for Diversified Linguistic Issues Management (Case of Japan)

A Scheme for Diversified Linguistic Issues Management

As sociolinguistic environmental change accelerates due to globalization, mutual influences of linguistic issues are expected to get more complex and crucial. Language policy and implementation generally focus on corpus of a target language; however, it is not the matters of corpus that produce conflicts between linguistic communities. (Note that the matters of corpus within a linguistic community sometimes relate to conflict and humiliation, and discussions over political correctness are one option to resolve this problem.) The bigger concern for linguistic issues is the status of language, which simultaneously affects to the statuses of other surrounding languages explicitly and implicitly. In other words, perception, belief system, philosophy and awareness toward languages beneath the label of language status interact to generate either resonance or conflict on a deeper level. These three elements are combined to a scheme for diversified linguistic issues management (see Figure 2).

In a multilingual setting, the boundary between corpuses is clearer than the boundary between value systems toward languages. Value systems and awareness toward languages are revealed through both verbal and nonverbal ways within a society. People can occasionally

switch one value to another more easily than switching languages. However, at the very rooted level, values are so hard to change, such as myth and mind-sets. These complexities and ambiguity regarding belief systems and behavior toward languages provide more room for discussion. Figure 3 is an experimental scheme of the current situation in Japan.

As we can see in the inner circle of Figure 3, values toward languages are positioned discursively. Values are not compartmentalized into linguistic categories but overlap between them. For example, “Identity” is a shared value among Ainu, JSL, immigrants’ languages, returnees’ languages, the national language and the international language. Any linguistic category would be hard to keep away from gaining “authority.” At the same time, relative priorities might differ in certain ways. Plain Japanese as an information language may not reject the value of “empowerment.” However, compared to the importance as an “information vehicle,” its priority might be relatively lower. Meanwhile, there are totally opposite values, such as “competence” and “human rights.”

This model also represents that the language itself is not the cause of a threat. A socially eminent language, Japanese language in case of Japan has various issues and functions. Resonating or threatening is dependent on which value the language is trying to fulfill. Differences in values surely appear in corpuses; however, they are sometimes hard to distinguish at the first glance. Hostility between languages might obstruct possible collaboration for linguistic value achievement.

Conclusion

Sociolinguistic environment is always under dynamic transformation. Therefore, contents in a scheme have to be reexamined and revised repeatedly. Moreover, how to make a scheme work is more important than merely to describe a neat scheme. The purposes to propose this scheme are (a) to avoid a fatal consequence of language, i.e. the extinction of language, (b) to examine deep rooted factors of mutual collaboration and conflict, and (c) to seek and implement harmonized language policies at an appropriate pace. As the author has mentioned, language itself is not the cause of conflict but rather the oriented value system is; what we pour in a scheme or a container determines a future sociolinguistic direction.

Notes

¹ The term “linguistic efforts” refers any kinds of deliberate efforts to affect linguistic behavior of oneself and others, not only acquisition but also usage, maintenance, accommodation, code-switching, shift, display, translation and etc.

² According to the Most Phase 1 website (<http://www.unesco.org/most/ln2nat.htm>), Japan is also one of the 22 countries without constitutions or constitutional provisions related to linguistic rights.

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