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Learning and Development of Second and Foreign Language Pragmatics as a Higher-Order Language Skill: A Brief Overview of Relevant Theories

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RESEARCH REPORT

Learning and Development of Second and Foreign Language Pragmatics as a Higher-Order Language Skill: A Brief Overview of Relevant Theories

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The development of effective second and foreign (L2) language learning materials needs to be grounded in two types of theories: (a) a theory of language and language use and (b) a theory of language learning. Both are equally important, insofar as an effective learning environment requires an understanding of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are being targeted as well as an idea of how learner development progresses. Although the author and colleagues have previously provided a theoretical basis for the construct of L2 pragmatic ability, and thus a theory of language use, the current paper focuses on learner development, particularly on the theoretical orientation towards L2 pragmatic learning. Given this superordinate goal, the paper will briefly review different theoretical paradigms that have been employed in adult L2 pragmatics development research. In the first part of the paper, I will provide an overview of the cognitive, socially oriented, and emergentist perspectives used in research on L2 pragmatic development. Then, based on the different ontological perspectives, I will discuss the affordances and challenges of applying a theoretical perspective to designing L2 pragmatic learning environments, drawing upon the example of the cognitively oriented information processing theory.

Keywords Pragmatics; theories; pragmatic development; learning; second language acquisition

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Why should we care about theories when designing learning environments? Although there has been a vivid discussion about the relationship between theory, research, and practice, the benefits of theoretical knowledge and considerations for practitioners—be they teachers, material designers, or both—have been highlighted repeatedly (e.g., Haley & Rentz, 2002; Lightbown, 2000; Pica, 2005; Richards, 2006). For example, Lightbown (2000) argued that instructors benefit from knowledge about learning and acquisition processes given that theories constitute “one component of their knowledge base for teaching” which may shape their expectations and offer interpretations about classroom experiences (p. 453). Moreover, it will determine how teachers design their instruction, evaluate their learners’ progress, and facilitate student learning (Haley & Rentz, 2002).

In addition to instructors, another group, material designers, also needs to take into account theories of learning, given that these theories will directly influence the syllabus design and instructional principles fundamental to a given learning tool. In the context of second or foreign language (L2) learning, Richards (2006), for instance, highlighted the role of theories as a crucial aspect in the interrelationship between theory, research, and materials design. He argued that two factors play a vital role in how a given learning tool will look: “One is the theory of language and language use reflected in the materials, and the other is the theory of language learning on which the materials are based” (p. 6). That is to say, both types of theories can provide principled guidance in the development process as they inform and determine how a syllabus is implemented in terms of exercises, tasks, activities, and learning experiences.

Extending previous research that has been focusing on language theories and language use theories in the context of L2 pragmatics (e.g., Purpura, 2004; Timpe-Laughlin, Wain, & Schmidgall, 2015), this review will focus on the theoretical orientation towards L2 pragmatic development. Timpe-Laughlin et al. (2015), for instance, proposed a construct of pragmatic ability that outlined a theory of language and language use that can inform the theoretical foundation for L2 pragmatics learning contexts. Building upon this earlier research, the current review will focus on the theories of second language acquisition (SLA) in general, and adult L2 pragmatics learning in particular, aiming to further contribute to a theoretical basis for the design of pragmatic learning environments.

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Theories of L2 Pragmatics Development

It is imperative to distinguish between theories for L2 pragmatics *development*, on the one hand, and L2 pragmatics *use*, on the other—that is to say, whether a theory places its focus on learning outcomes or the learning process. For example, politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) have featured prominently in L2 pragmatics research, setting the stage for studies that have investigated phenomena of use. However, as Kasper and Rose (2002) pointed out, these theories “apply to the object of the study [i.e., ILP use], not the learning process” (p. 13). That is, although speech act theory provides a philosophy of language that aims to account for the performative functions an utterance may have in communication, it does not outline *how* a language user acquires the competence to understand and produce speech acts appropriately. Hence, theories intended to guide L2 pragmatic development research need to place their primary focus on processes that account for putative mechanisms by which L2 learners develop their pragmatic ability in a given target language. So far, research on L2 pragmatics learning and development has drawn upon three different ontological perspectives in particular: cognitive, socially oriented, and emergentist.

The Cognitive Perspective

The cognitive perspective contends that the development of pragmatic competence constitutes an intrapersonal mental process. Cognition theories focus on how information is processed and learned by the human mind. A common theme underlying the cognitive perspective is that the computer constitutes a metaphor for the mind; that is, language acquisition is compared to a computer’s capacity for processing, storing, and retrieving information. Research conducted under the cognitive paradigm has investigated “how interaction and the cognitive processes afforded through particular interactional arrangements contribute to learners’ [L2] acquisition” (Kasper, 2001, p. 516). Among the cognitive theories most commonly referenced in L2 pragmatics are Schmidt’s (1990, 1993) noticing hypothesis and Bialystok’s (1993) two-dimensional model of L2 proficiency development.

Schmidt’s noticing hypothesis, derived from his seminal longitudinal study of L2 pragmatic development (Schmidt, 1983), holds that in order for language input to influence a learner’s developing L2 interlanguage—that is, in order for input to become intake—the learner has to notice or detect a linguistic phenomenon. That is, learners have to consciously register “the occurrence of some event.” Although *noticing* refers to the act of becoming aware of a language aspect, it needs to be distinguished from *understanding*, which “implies the recognition of some general principle, rule or pattern” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 29). Therefore, noticing “refers to surface level phenomena and item learning, while understanding refers to deeper level [sic] of abstraction related to (semantic, syntactic, or communicative) meaning, system learning.” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 29) Several studies have provided evidence of the relationship between respondents’ noticing of pragmatic features and subsequent increase in pragmatic awareness (e.g., Hassall, 2015; Polat, 2011; Schauer, 2006; Taguchi, 2012).

Although the noticing hypothesis attempts to account for input selection, that is, what eventually becomes intake, Bialystok’s two-dimensional model seeks to explain subsequent psychological processes. In the context of L1 pragmatic development in children, Bialystok (1993) introduced a model that outlined the “processing ability of language learners in terms of the cognitive mechanisms responsible for learning and using language” (p. 47). Similar to Schmidt’s (1995) concept of *understanding*, in Bialystok’s model, new knowledge first needs to be *acquired*; that is, the learner needs to have some level of awareness, explicit knowledge, or both about a pragmatic phenomenon before putting it to use appropriately and effectively in real-time communication. The two key processing stages for pragmatic development in Bialystok’s model are (a) *analyzed representation* and (b) *control of processing*.

Analysis of representation occurs at three consecutive levels: conceptual, formal, and symbolic. Conceptual representation constitutes “the stage in which utterances can be formed to satisfy specific speech acts but the speaker is focusing on the intended meaning and not on the forms being selected to express that intention” (Bialystok, 1993, p. 51). By contrast, formal representation refers to a speaker’s knowledge of structural linguistic categories that are used to produce language output (e.g., word classes, grammar rules, and the like). Bialystok (1993) theorized that a child who has developed formal representations—mostly through formal instruction at school—will, for example, be able to detect grammatical violations. Finally, symbolic representation denotes the abstract relationship between words and meaning: Words and linguistic output carry meaning and have referential, symbolic character. At this stage, learners have explicit relational knowledge about “the pragmatic intention and the forms used to achieve that intention” (Bialystok, 1993, p. 51).

They have a repertoire of alternative forms of realizations to express a given communicative intent. Bialystok argued that control of processing cuts across the different knowledge representations and is being developed throughout childhood. Thus, learners are thought to progress from a more immediate, basic language use to a more complex and increasingly controllable repertoire of linguistic representations that they can put to use appropriately in a variety of communicative contexts.

Some researchers have commented on these theoretical views and transferred them from the field of L1 development into L2 acquisition contexts. Kasper (2001), for example, suggested that the recurrent evidence of L1 pragmatic transfer reported in the majority of L2 pragmatics studies may indicate that adult L2 learners have a mostly complete representation. Similarly, Hassall (1997) argued that in adult L2 learners, the “process of forming representations of pragmatic knowledge is already largely accomplished” (p. 287). Thus, unlike children, whose pragmatic and linguistic competences develop simultaneously, adult L2 learners have already acquired the pragmatic system of their L1, and their L2 learning builds upon a rich foundation of pragmatic knowledge and strategies within their native language and culture. They already possess implicit (and potentially also explicit) knowledge of features such as politeness, inferencing heuristics, and conversation strategies. However, L2 learners may struggle with the appropriate realization of illocutionary force (Taguchi, 2012). Moreover, they often struggle with processing control, especially in productive speech situations (Taguchi, 2011). Therefore, the most important task adult L2 learners may face is the development of attention and processing control over selecting knowledge when appropriate. In sum, they are faced with two tasks: (a) acquiring new, L2-specific socio-pragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge¹ and integrating the new set of representations into preexisting pragmatic representations, and (b) controlling the new form–function–context relations that are appropriate in a given L2 environment (Taguchi, 2015). Within the cognitive–interactionist paradigm, both of these acquisitional stages are viewed as being facilitated by exposing learners to interaction in the target language.

The Socially Oriented Perspective

In contrast, socially oriented approaches such as sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, 2007; Vygotsky, 1986) and language socialization (Ochs, 1996) reject the view of learning as a predominantly intrapersonal phenomenon. Instead, these approaches regard L2 learning as an interpersonal process dependent on social interaction. Lantolf and Thorne (2007) argued that “developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts” (p. 197). Accordingly, knowledge is created in the interaction between an expert (a more advanced speaker of the target language) and a novice (a learner). The expert mediates the interaction, enabling the learner to perform a task which he or she would not have been able to accomplish alone. Learning unfolds in this mediated interaction as the learner imitates and eventually dynamically internalizes the new knowledge, thus forming “higher mental functions” (Kozulin, 1990, p. 116).

Some studies have adopted a sociocultural stance in promoting L2 pragmatic development in classroom-based interaction (e.g., Snyder Ohta, 2001; van Compernelle & Henery, 2014). For example, van Compernelle and Henery (2014) used the French second person pronouns (*tu* and *vous*) as a mediating artifact, promoting the appropriate use of these forms among their L2 learners. In their analysis, they combined awareness questionnaires, interaction scenarios, and micro-analyses of discourse, reporting an enhancement of students’ sociopragmatic knowledge of address terms through their concept-based pragmatic instruction approach.

A related branch within the sociocultural tradition, the language socialization approach, regards L2 learning as a socially situated process in communities of practice. Novice members who enter a given speech community are gradually socialized through exposure to and participation in social practice. As novice members acquire linguistic patterns and conventions, they gradually become competent interlocutors and participants in the speech community, thus also shaping and coconstructing it (Wenger, 1998). For example, exchange students who spend a year abroad in the target-language culture may be socialized into the discourse conventions of the host university or the host family they are staying with, thus converging towards community practices (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

Within the language socialization paradigm, second language identity theories (Block, 2007; Hassall, 2013, 2015; Pavlenko, 2002) have gained momentum as a perspective from which L2 development is viewed as “a site of identity construction” (Hassall, 2015, p. 35). Given that pragmatics is situated at the intersection of the cognitive and the social (Block, 2007), Hassall (2015) argued that L2 pragmatics acquisition is tied to “L2 identity formation” (p. 35). How learners view their identity in an L2 is thought to influence and affect L2 learning in two distinct ways. First, learners’

level of comfort with their social roles and target-language practices is thought to impact their access and exposure to L2 linguistic resources. Moreover, L2 learners' investment in learning a given language may be impacted by the degree to which they wish to position themselves within the target culture (Davis, 2007).

Several researchers (Alcón Soler, 2008; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Timpe, 2013) have argued for merging the cognitive and socially oriented perspectives—or, as Kasper and Rose (2002) have called them, the intra-personal and interpersonal perspectives. Ishihara and Cohen (2010), for instance, stated that they “view the learning of pragmatics not only as a cognitive process but also as a social phenomenon, looking into how L2 speakers construct and negotiate their identities” (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. x). Thus, current theories position the L2 learner into a more complex, ecological learning context, in which pragmatic acquisition “is not the taking in of linguistic forms by learners, but the constant adaptation and enactment of language-using patterns in the service of meaning-making in response to the affordances that emerge in a dynamic communicative situation” (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p. 211). This unified stance is in line with current developments in the broader field of SLA, which, as Taguchi (2012) argued, is “doing away from [sic] the traditional reductionist approach that pursues a simple cause-effect explanation in isolation from context, to a more ecologically-oriented approach that includes context as part of the systems under investigation and considers reciprocal relationships among variables over time” (p. 69). In sum, a theory that accounts for L2 pragmatic development as a learning process needs to be anchored in the interdependence between language, cognition, and context.

The Emergentist Perspective

Three theories have been increasingly referenced to account for the complex nature of L2 pragmatic development, integrating cognitive and social aspects: dynamic systems theory, or DST (de Bot, 2008; Ellis, 2008), chaos/complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and the emergentist approach (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; MacWhinney, 2006). Although slightly different, they all advocate an epistemological trend which maintains that “language develops through interactions between context and individuals, and variability is central in development” (Taguchi, 2012, p. 66). Hence, they reject the notion of a simple, linear, cause-and-effect development process with single-factor explanations. Instead, they view L2 development, including pragmatics, as an interactive, dynamic, and coadaptive process that is shaped by a variety of interrelated variables, including learners' individual differences (IDs) such as motivation, attention, aptitude, learning style, cognition, working memory, and personality (Dörnyei, 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Taguchi, 2012). Hence, they merge the cognitive and the social aspects of pragmatics learning, arguing that their interaction leads to development.

Dynamic (or complex) systems theory regards variables and IDs as central components that mediate L2 learning over time. Accordingly, ID variables function as *attractors*, which Taguchi (2012) described as a “preferred region of a system's state space into which the system tends to move” (p. 67). In their development over time, subsystems “appear to settle in specific states, so-called ATTRACTOR STATES [sic], which are preferred but not necessarily predictable” (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007, p. 8). Transition or change in a system's state, such as in L2 pragmatics, occurs in a largely unpredictable way through the system's interaction with its environment as well as through internal self-reorganization. Thus, L2 developmental change can be viewed as the product of a number of variables that interact at multiple levels with one another and with the environment. However, in order to “fuel” change in a system, input is essential. De Bot et al. (2007) pointed out that “all natural systems will tend to come to a still stand [sic] when no additional energy is added to the system” (p. 8). Accordingly, L2 input, together with an “[o]ptimal combination of ID factors, rather than factors in isolation, [are] considered to have great predictive power” for L2 pragmatic development (Taguchi, 2012, p. 69).

Unlike the static notion of a stage structure that dominates theories of cognitive development, DST views L2 development as coregulated change. Although any system requires some force or resource (i.e., input) to grow, a large force may lead to little growth, while a small force may have a large impact. Nevertheless, despite this seeming unpredictability, there are similarities in how individuals interact with input and the social ecosystem that may result in the emergence of a developmental, universal order. Based on input, the L2 learner develops, in a self-organizing, subjective way, an idiosyncratic interlanguage system that reflects “unique characteristics of her developmental path” (de Bot, 2008, p. 171). Hence, L2 pragmatics as a complex subsystem of the larger system of language is viewed as emerging over time from the dynamic and complex interplay between an L2 learner's ID variables and environmental factors (de Bot, 2008; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

The emergentist paradigm has increasingly been adopted, especially in longitudinal pragmatics development studies (e.g., Taguchi, 2012). To account for complex, individualized L2 pragmatics development, studies in this tradition have employed a mixed methods approach, yielding results that largely confirm a U-shaped acquisitional path for aspects of L2 pragmatics. Taguchi (2012), for example, reported that the development of different pragmatic abilities in Japanese tertiary-level English as a foreign language (EFL) learners was “unevenly paced with differing rates of change and different time distributions of stability for different [pragmatic] aspects” (p. 248). Over the course of an academic year, she found the development of low- and high-imposition speech acts to be the product of intricate interactions between different subsystems, such as L2 input, classroom interaction, and individual experiential backgrounds, and concluded that the findings were “in line with the dynamic, complexity systems view of SLA” (p. 249).

To summarize, L2 pragmatics development research so far has been primarily conducted in the tradition of three different theoretical paradigms: the cognitive, the sociocultural, and the emergentist or dynamic systems approach. Within the cognitive approach, learning and L2 development is viewed as the gradual growth and refinement of knowledge representations into the cognitive system and subsequent use of the new knowledge to eventually obtain automaticity in L2 performance. The sociocultural approach provides that changes in participation status offer evidence for learning as students “move from peripheral participation in interactive practices to assisted performance and eventually autonomous accomplishments” (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 59). Conversation analyses and microanalyses have been deployed in observing how interaction in the zone of proximal development unfolds, showing students’ gradually increasing levels of autonomy in relation to different participation structures. For DST, learning constitutes the change of a subsystem over time. The given system is nested in a network of mutually interdependent relationships with ID variables, environmental factors, and other systems. A subsystem such as L2 pragmatics develops, potentially in coadaptation with other systems, in a largely unpredictable way as it interacts with internal and external variables.

Implications for Designing L2 Pragmatic Learning Contexts

Having reviewed three main theoretical perspectives from which pragmatics learning and research on acquisitional patterns have been conceptualized, a central question remains: How can we make use of these theoretical considerations in designing L2 materials and instruction? Given the large amount of potential individual variation in learning trajectories—if, for instance, just ID variables are considered—teachers may feel that pragmatics teaching is a discouraging venture. However, research has shown the importance of pragmatics instruction (e.g., Kasper & Rose, 2001). According to Ishihara and Cohen (2010), for instance, it takes over 10 years to “acquire native-like pragmatic ability, even in a second-language setting” (p. 201), but the development may be accelerated by means of effective instruction (e.g., Jeon & Kaya, 2006). Hence, it is important for practitioners to consider the SLA theories to better inform L2 instruction.

However, one cannot simply take a theory and employ it as a standard for instruction. Although Lewin (1951) noted that “[t]here is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 7), one also needs to be aware of what Eskey (2005) has called the “teaching-derived-direct-from-research fallacy” (p. 573). That is to say, researchers have repeatedly warned against the assumption that L2 educators can simply apply a theory, or that theories can readily guide instruction. Grabe and Kaplan (1996), for instance, maintained that “one does not simply ‘apply’ a theory and thereby produce a means of instruction” (p. 235) because theories do not necessarily provide enough detail. For example, none of the three theoretical perspectives discussed above account for the acquisition of *all* aspects of L2 pragmatics learning. From a cognitivist perspective, one may raise the following questions: Do IDs impact noticings? If so, how do they influence that process? What role does attention play in the process of noticing pragmatic phenomena? Does a learner who identifies with a target language notice pragmatic aspects more easily than learners who do not? Hence, theories do not provide templates or recipes for L2 instruction. Nevertheless, learning theories provide frameworks that can inform good L2 instruction practices by proposing components of a system that allow us to form hypotheses about how learning may unfold and proceed. These components and hypotheses can then be used to derive implications for specific contexts of L2 (pragmatics) instruction. Thus, the following implications should not be viewed as magic formulae for guaranteed success, but as examples that showcase how language pedagogy designers could derive guidelines from a learning theory in order to inform the design of their L2 pragmatics instruction.

Although no qualitative judgment shall be made here about the usefulness of a particular theory over others, I will attempt to exemplify from a cognitive perspective how this paradigm can provide implications for L2 pragmatics teaching. Cognitive or information processing theories highlight that learners need to be exposed to target-language input in order

to notice pragmatic phenomena (e.g., Schmidt, 1993, 1995). Moreover, it is assumed that having noticed a given pragmatic phenomenon, learners cannot achieve a deeper understanding without reflecting upon it and practicing and automatizing it in interaction (e.g., Bialystok, 1993). Thus, implications such as the following three guidelines could be derived.

Guideline 1: Provide Enhanced Input to Afford Opportunities for Noticings

Although input is acknowledged as a necessary component by all three theories discussed, the cognitive paradigm particularly highlights it as essential in order to provide learners with opportunities for noticing certain pragmatic phenomena in the L2. Thus, exposing L2 learners to highly contextualized and rich target-language input that frequently contains the pragmatic aspect that is to be taught may be ideal to facilitate and maximize the potential for noticings that trigger some sort of cognitive change—that is, learning—in a student.

Guideline 2: Provide Opportunities for Learners to Compare and Possibly Reflect on Certain Pragmatics Phenomena to Facilitate Understanding and Awareness Building

According to the cognitive theoretical perspective (Bialystok, 1993; Schmidt, 1995), it is crucial for input to become intake and for learners to develop a deeper level of understanding of a given pragmatic phenomenon—in terms of both form and function. In particular, adult L2 learners, who tend to already possess a complete pragmatic system in their L1, have been found to struggle with the illocutionary force of particular pragmatic aspects (Taguchi, 2012). Providing explicit instruction and facilitating comparisons between the L1 and L2 for specific phenomena may allow learners to obtain the deeper level of knowledge and awareness needed to internalize the pragmatic phenomena.

Guideline 3: Provide Opportunities for Social Interaction

Interaction—be it in oral, written, or hybrid format—can not only provide new input, but also serve as a means of automatizing and obtaining processing control as well as testing hypotheses. Facilitating opportunities for L2 learners to interact in the L2 in real-time communication while employing particular phenomena will allow learners to practice and eventually automatize “higher” form–function mapping processes. Moreover, in a fairly low-stakes environment, they can test hypotheses about (in)appropriate realizations of illocutionary force, thus obtaining feedback from potential interlocutors that may serve as new input and possibly lead to an even deeper understanding.

To summarize, these propositions are examples of high-level theoretical guidelines that showcase how practitioners could derive implications from cognitivist learning theories in order to inform the design of concrete L2 pragmatics learning contexts. Accordingly, language pedagogy designers would not only need to identify the different components and relationships within a proposed system of learning, but they would also need to consider how these would translate to their local instructional contexts, their own teaching styles, and a concrete body of learners. Hence, it lies within a practitioner’s expertise to select a theoretical perspective and operationalize and implement specific aspects of a development theory when creating an instructive L2 pragmatics learning environment.

Concluding Remarks and Further Research

Although learning theories such as the three theoretical paradigms reviewed in this paper provide assumptions as to how L2 learning in general and pragmatic development in particular proceed, they do not account for distinct developmental trajectories, paths, or patterns. That is, the theories propose components of a system for and conditions of learning, but they do not provide explanatory frameworks of potential developmental stages, concrete learning trajectories, or ways the emergent systems interact in mutually supportive fashion— aspects that are essential to making informed decisions for instructional sequencing and pedagogic interventions in L2 education (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Kasper & Rose, 2002). A closer look at empirical pragmatic development studies that are situated within one or more of these theoretical traditions may provide further insights into (individual) patterns of L2 pragmatic acquisition.

Theoretically grounded learning environments can also be used to further empirically explore the SLA theories. For example, if SLA theories—such as the three perspectives reviewed above—are used to provide principled guidance in the development of L2 pragmatics learning environments, the final learning context created, be it a learning tool or a

classroom setting, can itself be employed in research that is aimed at gathering evidence for or against the theoretical considerations. Thus, a theoretical frame can be used to structure a systematic research and evaluation agenda, which can not only provide empirical information about the efficacy of underlying theoretical principles, but also inform theory development. Hence, a careful consideration of learning theories is important, as it can be used to justify the components and logic of a learning system. However, empirical evidence such as that collected through the use of a learning system is critical, as it can help refine existing theoretical models and identify new ones.

Note

- 1 For a detailed discussion of the distinction between sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics, see Timpe-Laughlin et al. (2015).

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