Language Use and Unethical Practices in Contemporary Igbo Entrepreneurial Apprenticeship System

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Abstract

Igbo entrepreneurial apprenticeship system (IEAS) has been characterised by different unethical practices in contemporary time. This study explores language use in perverting unethical practices in the system. The primary data are sourced from non-participant observation and secondary data drawn from library and internet sources. Qualitative and systematic review methods and content analysis are employed. The analysis shows that unlike in the good olden days, the Igbo entrepreneurship system had become flooded with different unethical practices and language (mis)use issues, though these matters concerning IEAS are currently neglected in extant studies. Relying on evidence from an extant literature, it is realised that most contemporary Igbo entrepreneurial bosses mindlessly violate apprentices' rights and breach the apprenticeship contract, as they manipulate, indict, chastise, cheat, plot against and discharge their apprentices with partial or no settlement at/towards the completion of the apprenticeship. The study concludes that most of the bosses pervert different unethical practices and indulge in language game of deliberate negative use of language against their apprentices. It recommends that Igbo unions should outlaw all forms of unethical practices characterising the system and serve as arbitration authorities that attain justice for any affected (victimised) apprentices. Strong legislations should be

involved, implemented and sustained against any Igbo entrepreneurs and apprentices found wanting.

Keywords: language game, unethical practices, breach of contract, Igbo entrepreneurial apprenticeship, victimised, violation

1)   Introduction

The Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS henceforth) is affirmed to be a viable means of self-reliance, developing self and making a positive impact on Igbo's economic growth and development and that of Nigeria as a whole (Anago, 2023; Onyeibe, 2017; Orugun & Tunde, 2014). IAS is regarded as *Igbaboi* (Emenanjo et al., 1995). The Igbo entrepreneurs their apprentices (popularly known as *boiboi*) of this entrepreneurial system are reported to make up 74% of the business circle of Lagos state, Nigeria (Maliga, 2022). Their mercantile activities contribute significantly to national economy and the respective economy of every state of the federation (Anago, 2023; Iwara, et al., 2019; Agozino & Anyanike, 2007). Everything about Igbo entrepreneurial apprenticeship system (IEAS) involves the use of language, just as all human endeavours.

        The way in which language is used by anyone and for whatever purpose(s) matters a lot. The IAS is what involves young people serving older persons within a period of time– for certain times, with the hope of being settled at the completion of the entrepreneurship within an agreed period of time, usually from two years (Onukwube, 2022; Ogbu, 2021; Iwara et al., 2019) or above. This statement highlights the nature of the IAS or IEAS (Emenanjo et al., 1995). It should be noted that IAS and IEAS shall be used interchangeably all through to mean the same thing. The Igbo

Entrepreneurial Apprenticeship System (IEAS) is famous for being an Igbo-unique competitive cultural worldview and commercial network including the apprentice and the other apprentices, and for preparing apprentices to launch their own businesses after graduation (Onukwube, 2022). IEAS is lauded for its ability to provide students with the skills they need to launch successful entrepreneurial and inventive careers at any stage of their development, with the support of their families (Iwara et al., 2019). The unethical practices characterising the system are grounded in language use by most Igbo entrepreneurs. Thus, this study seeks to explore the practices among Igbo entrepreneurs in relation to their apprentices, with regard to language use.

2)   Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory (henceforth SFLT) by Halliday (1978; 1985; 1994) serves as the theoretical foundation for this investigation. According to SFLT proponent Halliday, language is a social semiotic that provides speakers and writers with a set of options for constructing texts (Halliday, 1985, 1994 p. 206). Therefore, SFLT views language as a tool for meaning construction. Instead, it is heuristic patterns of behaviour that contain significance. This perspective conflicts with the common understanding of language being a set of rules that constrains improvisation in communication. According to Halliday, "it seemed to me that explanations of linguistic phenomena needed to be sought in relationships among systems rather than among structures - in what I once called 'deep paradigms' since these were essentially where speakers made their choices" (Halliday, 1985, p. 1). This suggests that although linguistic phenomena (elements, structures, and other constituents of language) relate, it is more important to

focus on the systems among them than on their structures when seeking to know and analysing their relationship.

When considering Halliday's aforementioned statements, Teo (2000, p. 24) makes the astute observation that the choices made by users, particularly speakers and writers, determine the meaning of texts (messages). Communication starts with speakers and writers since they are responsible for encoding the information that will be received by readers and listeners. Meaning is attached to phenomena by linguistic means. Language may also be used to render them meaningless. That is to say, the way in which language is used has a profound effect on the quality of interactions between individuals and between groups. That is dependent on the intended purpose and the specifics of each application (Osuchukwu, 2022 p. 102). As noted by Halliday, every word concurrently encodes meaning on three different levels of linguistics, social and conceptual. In each particular speech, speakers draw on both their lexical knowledge and their grammatical abilities to:

      (i) achieve desired outcomes in social interactions;
      (iii) signify what has been experienced (Ideation Meaning);
      (iii) in effectively convey structural information (textual
          meaning).

The conceptualization of meaning in this context is often referred to as metafunctions. Metafunctions are distinguished by three words that have an impact on language usage, both in conceptual and contextual applications. The three components under consideration are field, tenor, and mode. Accordingly, the term "tenor" refers to the socially established connections between the individuals engaged in an encounter. The term "field" refers to the specific topic or subject matter addressed in the text. According to David (2002), the concept of mode refers to the medium and function of language

within a given context. The aforementioned suggests that the use of language entails the participation of two or more individuals involved in acts of communication, constituting the parties in the process of communication. Furthermore, it is important to establish a topic matter, including a theme and objective, inside any discursive encounter involving communicating partners. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that language serves as a fundamental tool for facilitating effective communication. In order to facilitate effective communication, it is necessary for the parties concerned to use a medium or several media, contingent upon the specific circumstances (Osuchukwu, 2022). Additionally, this suggests the presence of functional connection across the many systems and entities engaged in the whole of the communication process.

The idea of 'lexicogrammar' was presented by Halliday (1994) as a fundamental notion in comprehending the functions of language. Asserts that a language is comprised of relatively closed systems of words and grammatical structures, whereby the vocabulary represents a relatively open system, while grammar consists of a limited number of relatively closed systems. Language users rely on these systems to make decisions and create expressions and interpretations (Halliday, 1994 p.55). According to Halliday (1985), functional analysis should serve as the foundation for explaining the workings of language. This is because language has developed to fulfil essential functions within the "eco-social environment," facilitating interaction, relationships, and communication for both humans and animals. It may be inferred that there exists a strong interconnection between the functioning of human beings, phenomena, and society institutions and structures. The network of functional connection clearly demonstrates that any functional deficiencies or abnormalities shown by one, several, or

all participants in a communication process lead to a network of dysfunctionality.

The term "malfunctionality" is used in this context to describe the occurrence when systems, structures, and parties participating in a process have malfunctioned, resulting in failures to operate as intended. This encompasses both the problems emerging from their inability to function properly and any associated difficulties related to their functional performance. The textual metafunction pertains to the method, internal structure, and communication characteristics of a text. This encompasses elements of textual engagement, spontaneity, and conversational distance. The textual metafunction refers to the aspect of meaning that organises several coherent thematic frameworks inside the primary text. The term "textual meaning" pertains to the specific structure and organisation of texts. The subject matter pertains to the administration of information, allocation of resources, and categorization of genres. The integration of materials across several textual levels facilitates the expression of thoughts and attitudes pertaining to themes, activities, and events. The term 'textual' pertains to the process of generating written content. According to Halliday (1973), it delineates the organisation of information and the interconnection between each component of the discourse and its whole, as well as its contextual framework. The concept of tenor encompasses three distinct component regions. The elements under consideration include the persona adopted by the speaker/writer, the social distance between individuals, and the relative social position of the parties involved. The interpersonal meaning encompasses the expression of judgements and evaluations, the provision of recommendations, and the examination of interactions between individuals.

The interpersonal nature of the interaction between texts and readers/viewers, as well as the relationships shown within texts, is a significant aspect to consider. This implies that there exists a grammatical aspect of personal involvement within their interaction. The connection between the speaker and others in a speaking situation is conveyed by the speaker's role, personal commitment, and engagement with others (Halliday, 1973 p. 101). The interpersonal metafunction pertains to the tone or interactive component of a textual discourse. Texts may be categorised into four primary forms of mood in the English language. The four types of sentences identified in the text are declarative, interrogative, imperative, and subjunctive. Therefore, texts may be categorised individually. The four primary categories of mood exhibit distinct dynamics in their interactions with both the audience and the speaker. In addition to portraying the surrounding circumstances as they see them, individuals who speak a particular language also embody their roles as active participants within the given environment, as they engage in interactions with one another. In the process of interaction, individuals actively contribute to the construction of the contextual framework by engaging in negotiations pertaining to their own roles as well as the roles of those involved. According to Ogunsiji (2000), the metafunction plays a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of social ties (p.77). That is why Anderson (2014) and Eggins (1994 p.52) succinctly outlines the fundamental theoretical assumptions of SFLT as:

> (i) The SFLT theory posits that language serves a functional purpose. Linguistics is a field of study that focuses on the structure and use of language in order to convey meanings.

(ii) Language may be seen as a semiotic system. This implies that the interpretation of a text is contingent upon the decisions made by the communicator within the range of possibilities offered by the linguistic framework.
(iii) The comprehension of a document is contingent upon its contextual framework. In this context, a text is comprehended based on the information pertaining to the circumstances in which it originated, including either the situational or cultural milieu.

These assumptions make the systematic functional linguistics theory appropriate for this investigation in several aspects. For instance, when examining language use from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFLT), it becomes apparent that individuals who prioritise the analysis of linguistic events inside their structures, rather than considering the interplay among complete systems, may make incorrect decisions about language use. This is the outcome that occurs when Igbo entrepreneurs or apprentices use language in ways that the treaties of their contract are violated. On one hand, they misuse language and thereby violate the linguistic norms or rules of right use of language. On the other, they violate the conventional ethics of the IAS. Fowler (1986, p. 148) cites birthplace, family, school, and related social groupings, together with the corresponding patterns of interaction and constraints on experience, as indicative of the broader theoretical assumptions underlying Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFLT), as proposed by Halliday.

In the context of conversation, it may be seen that texts serve as a means via which speakers, authors, listeners, and readers convey and perceive worldview. The participants of the communicative exercise are responsible for the realisation and

comprehension of the meanings conveyed in the texts. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are instances when messages that are transmitted may not be fully realised or may be subject to misinterpretation. As a result of these factors, there is a development of interpersonal friction between the Igbo entrepreneurs and the apprentices. Coffin (2001, p. 94) posits that individuals are subject to the impact of both economic and social systems, as well as the roles they assume within these systems. This statement underscores Halliday's insistence on prioritising systems above buildings. In all, given the foregoing points SFLT is indeed apt for this study.

3)   Some Related Studies

Anago (2023) discusses the IAS as a model theorising a collaborative relationship between the government and the private sector. Employing qualitative method, the research examines the factors militating against the model in contemporary Nigeria. The analysis reveals three major factors to be duration of apprenticeship, the failure to combine formal education with apprenticeship and lack of capital for start-off at completion of the apprenticeship. The study does not consider language use as well as the attendant issues arising from language use by the two parties involved in the IAS. The current study does that. Anago's (2023) study concludes that a collaborative relationship between the government and the private sector is a viable means of job and wealth creation. It recommends that IAS should be imbibed and sustained in Nigeria to attain level of unemployment and pave way for a meaningful economic development.

        Onukwube (2022) discusses how the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS) serves as a means of alleviating poverty in society. Expository and analytic methods are employed in discussing the

theme. The data, gathered from observation and secondary data sources, are subjected to a systematic review. The study shows that although IAS is indeed an entrepreneurial mechanism for poverty alleviation and societal development, it lacks an institutional framework. The study recommends that government and concerned bodies should make and sustain a viable framework for efficiency, as the practice becomes legitimised and guided by an institutional framework.

Adikwuoyi (2021) make a descriptive survey of IAS in Benue state, North-Central Nigeria, as to ascertain the extent of its attraction to youth and contribution to Benue economy. The study demonstrates that IAS contributes meaningfully to Benue economy in particular and that of Nigeria at large. It is found to be less attractive to young people because of the issues this present study considers to be unethical practices. The study concludes that IAS plays a significant role in job and wealth creation. It enjoins the government to get involved and find ways of making it attractive to young people. The study, which aligns with that of Ballistus and Abijia (2021), does not take cognisance of language use in IAS. Issues concerning language use and unethical practices are left out by the study. The present study takes cognisance of these and engages with them.

Kanu (2020) makes a case for African complementary relations in entrepreneurship, as evident in IAS that empowers people and alleviates them from poverty, without waiting for white collar jobs from the government. The primary data were obtained from five professionals, while descriptive method with its allied tools is employed. The study demonstrates that IAS has potentials for wider entrepreneurship and economic growth and development in Nigeria, Africa and the globe at large, not Igbo society alone. The study claims that complementarity is the primary factor behind the

huge success of IAS. It recommends the integration of IAS into mainstream entrepreneurship. The findings, claims, submissions and conclusions of Kanu's (2020) study and others earlier reviewed tally extensively with those of Ifechukwu-Jacobs (2022), Kanu (2022), Okloi (2022), Callistus and Abijia (2021), Ekesiobi and Dimnwobi (2020), Nnonyelu and Onyeizugbe (2020). Therefore, the above reviewed studies suffice.

4)   Language Use in IAS

Language is used in all endeavours. Language is a naturally occurring phenomena that functions as a medium of communication among people and groups, including both humans and animals (Dibie & Robert, 2014; Monday & Eze, 2012; Nwala, 2008). All human activities involve language use (Uche, 1994). Uche (1994) asserts that the presence of language is crucial for the advancement of research. This highlights the need for proficient communication in scientific endeavours, which entails the capacity to use and comprehend technical terminology, as well as the ability to analyse information stored symbolically and convey it in a non-symbolic linguistic form (p. 101). Obviously, communication can never take place without language, as various communication modes (signs, gestures, attire, gesticulations, silence, dispositions, pictures, singing, dance, etc.) are all aspects of language as well as its functions and types: human, animal and sign (Dibie and Robert, 2014. 7; Nwala, 2008, p. 12; Anagbogu et al., 2001, p. 13). Essentially, all that language does agree with its general functions and characteristics across cultures of the globe. Language serves several roles in communication, including communicative, expressive, informational, performative, directive, ideational, unification, and humanization functions.

It facilitates the transmission of knowledge, enables the conveyance of information and guidance, facilitates the issuance of directives, orders and instructions, supports the execution of various activities, and facilitates the exchange of interactions and pleasantries, such as greetings, well-wishes, expressions of affection, and business transactions (Nwala, 2008 p10; Anagbogu et al., 2000 and Monday and Eze, 2012p25). Moreover, language serves the purpose of maintaining records, exerting influence on individuals, and functioning as a tool for factions. Indeed, language serves as a means communication among individuals and groups. Given the foregoing expressed facts, it is quite clear that language is used in IAS by both the entrepreneurs and the apprentices. Accordingly, the discursive constructions of identity in Igbo entrepreneurial apprenticeship system involve language use (Onyeibe, 2017). The constructions have changed overtime, following the emergent trends that characterise the system in contemporary time. Effective language use undoubtedly has a significant impact on IAS in terms of the interpersonal relations and communication between the apprentices and the entrepreneurs, their bosses.

Effective use of language allows for effective communication and mutual understanding between the two parties. When language use is negative, the parties are bound to be at war with each other. This is also the case with language use in IAS. When used otherwise, apprentices feel hurt and unsatisfied and lack the motivation to be committed, diligent and productive. Profanity is a common trend among contemporary users of language. Profanity entails much more than blasphemy against God to fellow humans. Religiously, psychologically, socially and otherwise, profanity, vulgarity obscenity is offensive and a show of indecorum. The fact that a person works under us as an apprentice, does not

mean his or her personal dignity means nothing and can trampled upon by you. Unfortunately, many Igbo entrepreneurs of the system under study seldom understand this reality; neither are they conscious of this reality. Many of them are (very) rude, arrogant, pompous and inimical to employees. Apprentices of such bosses certainly feel dissatisfied, uneasy and lack motivation. Linguistically speaking, motivation requires verbal and gestural impressions from one person to another.

Essentially, the kind of language one uses in communicating with/to others also matter. Again, whenever anyone uses hurtful, degrading, dehumanising, unpleasant and worthless words, the person (language user/speaker) demonstrates ineffective use of language. When this occurs in the workplace, workers get demoralised, unmotivated and unproductive. In what follows, let us reflect on the findings of Jeff Bowers' research for a better or an empirical understanding of the central gist of this subtitle. Here, the thesis of the gist is that effective or good language use makes IAS, while ineffective or bad use of language mars it. Let us consider the evidence from Bowers' (2011) research experiment. In a study conducted by Jeff Bowers, a researcher at the University of Bristol, the impact of profanity on human behaviour is examined. The subjects were connected to a machine by Bowers, which was designed to evaluate their stress levels by the measurement of perspiration. Subsequently, he requested their vocalisation of profanities with their corresponding euphemistic expressions. According to Tickle (2011), the stress levels of the participants were found to be significantly greater when they were instructed to use profanity compared to when they were requested to use a commonly accepted euphemism.

According to Bowers, the variation in stress levels seen between swear words and euphemisms suggests that people'

responses are not just influenced by the semantic content of a curse word, but rather, they exhibit diverse reactions to different phrases. According to Tickle (2011), Bowers argues that euphemisms are efficacious as they serve to substitute the triggering word form, which is considered offensive, with an alternative term that has a comparable conceptual meaning. He emphasises that euphemisms allows transactions and relations between/among persons with minimal discomfort, unlike swear words. Bowers further maintains that word form rather than meaning affects the how one thinks as a result of word influence on one's psychology, thinking, behaviour and emotion. Bowers (2011) provides empirical evidence to support the notion that taboo words possess the ability to elicit physiological responses. Through his research, Bowers illustrates how two semantically equivalent words can evoke disparate reactions among individuals. Furthermore, he highlights the significance of subtle distinctions in the realm of human relationships (Tickle, 2011; www.plosone).

Bowers' study demonstrates that the use of profanity elicits a physiological stress response, even in instances when such language is spoken inadvertently. Additionally, empirical evidence demonstrates that the use of offensive language elicits a greater degree of discomfort compared to the use of positive language. According to Tickle (2011), Bowers' study demonstrates that the occurrence of intense emotional responses to profanity is attributable to early linguistic training rather than the explicit meaning given by such words. It is because to this rationale that youngsters may potentially or readily see their parents' responses to forbidden language prior to comprehending the meaning of these phrases. According to Bowers, throughout an individual's formative years, a wide range of emotions become linked to the auditory perception of profanity. Once again, Bowers (Tickle, 2011)

demonstrates the influence of verbal expression on an individual's cognitive processes and worldview.

Given Bowers' research findings, it is quite clear that words and linguistic constructions used by Igbo entrepreneurs in communicating and interacting with as well as mentoring, teaching and training their apprentices adversely affect the way the apprentices think and perceive the world, especially the work world within the confine of the IAS or IEAS. It is unethical to misuse language against apprentices, as the misuse of language leads to the violation of the overall ethics of the IAS. Meanwhile, the violation of the ethical principles or standards of language use and the Igbo entrepreneurship-apprenticeship system amounts to unethical practices in the broad spectrum. Thus, violating language ethics has a bearing to the violation of the ethics of different systems of society and vice versa (Osuchukwu & Danjuma, 2022; Nkereuwem, 2022).

5)   Implications of Unethical Practices in IAS

The hope for settlement is the driving force behind the IAS (Iwara et al., 2019). The settlement motivation is shattered when there is a breach of contract by the entrepreneurial mentor. Any form of breach of the contract between the apprentice and the boss is an ethical issue. Iwara et al. (2019) are of the view that settlement motivates apprentices to becoming entrepreneurs. This means that it is the foundational factor behind the entrepreneurial journey to self-reliance, self-employment and creation of wealth and employment for self and others. As an apprenticeship system, IAS is a training-learning process, which involves trainers and trainees of mentors and mentees (Onwuka, 2022 p.106; Iwara, 2018 p. 105). Thus, this is a means for attaining professional training and development.

Unethical practices in IAS hamper efficient learning and truncate master-servant relationship. The breach contract implies that there ought to be a solidly documented and witnesses-sealed contract negotiation to check against indictment, misdeeds or gross misconduct thereafter. The poor or complete absence of documentation of contracts and the lack of concrete evidence for further reference are why many Igbo entrepreneurs violate the ethical conventions of the system (Onukwube, 2022; Emenanjo, 2009; Ikekeonwu, 2009; Okoye, 2007). In the words of Onukwube (2022 p. 10), 'where there is no such formal contract, other issues must later creep in' (15). Punishing apprentices without any atom of regard is dehumanising. Such punishments and other like acts against the Igbo apprentices are unethical and have to be halted.

Also, meting out undeserving punishment on apprentices, turning them to servants or 'slaves', making them messengers to wives and children, abusing their rights, suffering and torture, being labelled for crimes they know nothing about, etc. are all unethical. Such unethical practices might rouse mixed feelings in the apprentices and thereby trigger revolt (Ezikeojiaku, 2001). Onukwube (2022, p. 15) vividly captures the implication of unethical practices in apprenticeship system via:

> The issue of apprentice remuneration has been a significant difficulty for some enterprises. Based on general reports, very few entrepreneurs unfailingly and dutifully remunerate their apprentice at the end of the entrepreneurship scheme contract. Some of the apprentices face situations where the entrepreneurs use them for years and abruptly dismiss them with no justification, other than for filthy reasons. Individuals under servitude may potentially face allegations of stealing or engaging in extramarital relationships with

their employers' spouses, insubordination, or any cooked up warp story to pave way for their dismissal. This is no doubt very frustrating to the apprentice sequel with his poor family background and the difficulty in sourcing start-up capital.

A critical reflection on the views expressed in the above excerpt makes it clearly that a lot of unethical practices are largely taken up by many Igbo entrepreneurs to dismiss their apprentices after many years of labour, suffering and endurance. Stating that 'based on general reports, very few entrepreneurs unfailingly and dutifully remunerate their apprentice at the end of the entrepreneurship scheme contract,' one realises that over 85% Igbo entrepreneurs fail to settle their apprentices as supposed, without indicting and dismissing them. That is an affirmation of the chronic case of ethical violation. Terms and conditions of the IAS are violated by many entrepreneurs.

Another severe case of violation is that of using apprentices for years and abruptly dismissing them without any ethical and/or moral justification, merely to tactically jump settlement. It is not only unjust, but also unethical, immoral and unlawful to give 'filthy reasons' (Onukwube, 2022, p. 15) against apprentices just to indict and dismiss. Frustration is one serious implication of the violation of IAS ethics by dubious entrepreneurs. Imagine an entrepreneur increasing rather alleviating the poverty of an apprentice (Ogbu, 2021; Kanu, 2019), whose motivation to entrepreneurship had been to liberate himself and his family at last, when the apprenticeship reaches completion. It is defamation of character to label an innocent apprentice of having sexual affairs with one's wife, merely to dismiss him. In a case where it is really true and established beyond

reasonable doubt, both the apprentice and the master's wife should be punished rather than the apprentice alone being punished.

Entrepreneurs should be a thing of settlement before embarking on getting apprentices. They should also remember that nemesis is real. They should consider themselves being labelled and how they would feel and react. It is even better to settle apprentices with the little at one's disposal and make promises for completion much later than indicting and defaming the character of an apprentice. Also, it is unethical to suddenly indict a submissive apprentice of insubordination. On the other hand, some apprentices actually perpetrate evils against their masters. These include theft, disobedience, disrespectfulness, having affairs with their masters' wives, causing their bosses bankruptcy and so on.

6)   **Conclusion**

This study has so far shown that there is considerable number of studies on IAS or IEAS, but none of them considers language use issues. A few of them consider unethical practices associated with IAS in modern world. Some others glorify the IAS, project it as a model for entrepreneurship and economic growth and development across borders, and look at the challenges confronting the system. This study submits that most of the Igbo entrepreneurs pervert different unethical practices and indulge in language game of deliberate negative use of language against their apprentices. It recommends that Igbo unions should outlaw all forms of unethical practices characterising the system and serve as arbitration authorities that attain justice for any affected (victimised) apprentices. Strong legislations should be involved, implemented and sustained against any Igbo entrepreneurs and apprentices found

wanting. Neither the bosses nor the apprentices should be spared the wrath of the law when founding wanting.

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