Descriptions of Difficult Conversations between Native and Non-Native English Speakers: In-group Membership and Helping Behaviors

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Abstract

This study illustrated the perceptions of native English speakers about difficult conversations with non-native English speakers. A total of 114 native English speakers enrolled in undergraduate communication courses at a regional state university answered a questionnaire about a recent difficult conversation the respondent had with a non-native English speaker. A thematic analysis of their responses revealed that helping occurred when the non-native speaker was considered to be a customer, in-group member, or "fellow human being." Helping behavior was characterized by actions that fostered understanding between the interactants and aided the non-native speaker in completion of a task or goal. Non-helping occurred when the non-native speaker was considered to be an out-group member violating role expectations or cultural norms.

Keywords

Difficult Conversations, Helping Behavior, Group Identity, and Intercultural Communication

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Intercultural interaction potentially may provoke feelings of being misunderstood. Misunderstandings especially occur when native and non-native English speakers converse. Language barriers are noted as the primary contributing factor within such interactions. However, other relational contextual influences have an impact upon such interactions regardless of a speaker's language proficiency or fluency (Olaniran, 1996). For example, variances in phonation and pronunciation (an accent) have been demonstrated to have little to no influence on a message's content information (Gill & Badzinski, 1992). Rather, more effort is required by listeners to process a message's content (Schmidt & Yeni-Komoshian, 1999). Hence, examination of other contextual factors which influence perceptions within interactions where accents are present is valuable (Chen, 1989; Stewart, Ryan, & Giles, 1985). This study illustrates the contextual, strategic, and role relational factors associated with helping behaviors of native English speakers in conversations with non-native English speakers.

Influence of Accent

Accents signal both in-group and out-group membership by providing auditory cues associated with regional, ethnic, and class membership (Berk-Seligson, 1984; Callan, Gallois, & Forbes, 1983; Jury, 1997; Leeman, 1999; Willemyns, Gallois, Callan, & Patton, 1997). Accents engender negative or positive attributions through a stereotyping process reinforcing attitudes and beliefs (Berk-Seligson; Bochner & Bochner, 1973; Ryan & Sebastian, 1980; Stewart et al., 1985).

An evaluative function such as stereotyping requires a language norm or standard from which an individual may judge the right way of doing things within interactions (Rogers, 1998; Schmidt & Yeni-Komoshian, 1999). Such norms may encourage a belief that one's own culture is "natural and correct," whereas other cultures are perceived to be "unnatural and incorrect" (Ting-Toomey, 1997, p. 135). Study of the interactions between native and non-native English speakers may yield perceptual influences leading to stereotyping and account for other contextual factors harboring misunderstandings within intercultural interaction. The role expectations of native and non-native speakers within specific contexts elicit certain strategic behaviors.

Roles and Membership

Salience of group membership is another contextual level that influences the interactions between individuals. Turner (1985) identifies that group membership comprises of "human" and "social" levels. Within the human level, individuals identify communally with others as group members belonging to the human species; at the social level, individuals identify others as either belonging to or being outside of one's own group.

Moreover, research suggests that once such identifications are made, the possibility for other identifications is "switched off" and that such closure contributes to in-group cohesion and stereotyping of non-group members (Turner, 1985). The salience of one group identity over another depends on the negotiated relational roles within particular contexts (Collier, 2005). For example, membership within the role identity of customer may trump a national identity if the seller wants to make the sale. On the other hand, if a customer violates expected norms, the seller may then perceive their nationality as more salient. Thus, the seller ascribes the customer as a member of an out-group.

Perceiving self and others as belonging to a particular group is an informative process. In fact, Sacks (1992) identifies that, "…a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of categories" (p. 40). Categories access the "commonsense knowledge" groups use to accomplish normal activities and identify membership (Hester & Eglin, 1997). Individuals enact membership within a category by allowing others to interpret performances or actions that are assigned to said categories and then infer membership to particular categories (Sacks). Hence, when interlocutors employ categories, membership is established and expectations arise, and both have an influence upon perceived competencies.

The authors acknowledge their own membership within particular categories that informs them about the interpretation of the descriptions that are shared by the respondents. Specifically, each author comes from a different methodological perspective. One is a quantitative researcher in interpersonal communication and the other a qualitative researcher in intercultural communication. Together, the authors use these different perspectives to explore how group membership impacts intercultural communication by engaging in a dialogue leading to collaboration.

The authors are both White males that acknowledge they have certain privileges and advantages in US society. One author has empirically researched interpersonal competency in different contexts including counseling in crisis centers (Young, 1987) and mentoring of teachers (Young & Cates, 2004). A common finding from these studies

is that empathy is a critical element of competent communication. Likewise, the other author has noted how the lack of empathy exacerbates conflict within intercultural communication because he is in an international and interracial marriage. The author and his spouse sometimes encounter difficult interactions with native English speakers. From these experiences, the author has gained a perspective that others may not share.

As researchers, the authors feel that their perspectives allow them to examine the difficulties between non-native and native speakers as they negotiate their identities. Additionally, the authors' social identities, research perspectives, and personal experiences inform them on how they interpret data concerning conflict and misunderstandings between natives and non-natives. The authors' a priori positions are that patience, empathy, and reflexivity represent competent intercultural communication skills and basic tenets for grounded research. The two authors recognize the differences between empirical measurement and qualitative interpretations and descriptions. The quantitative results found that both ineffective and inappropriate communication predicted misunderstandings between native and non-native speakers (Faux & Young, in press). However, a qualitative approach was needed to illustrate context and how misunderstandings unfold.

Participants and Methods

This study is part of a larger research project exploring natives' and non-natives' reactions to difficult conversations. Previously, the authors empirically explored perspectives of communication competency and feelings of misunderstanding (Faux & Young, in press). In the present study, the authors adopted a qualitative approach to gain further understanding of the natives' perspective. In this regard, a grounded, thematic analysis was adopted to let the data speak for itself with minimal interference from author biases since grounded theory identifies "categories and concepts that emerge from text" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 278).

Before collecting the data, the study was reviewed and approved by the Valdosta State University's Institutional Review Board. The participants of this study were native English speakers enrolled in undergraduate communication courses at Valdosta State University located in south-central Georgia. Several participants were enrolled in classes taught by the researchers. Other participants were in classes taught by other communication faculty. A majority of the participants have been advised by the researchers or have taken their classes. This relationship with the students may have influenced their eagerness to participate in this research but we feel that this relationship did not affect the genuine nature of their responses. In general, communication students are trained in gauging communicative competencies in several areas of communication including interpersonal and intercultural communication. Additionally, the skills they have developed may have influenced their responses to questions and behaviors when encountering others—especially with those they may perceive to be different. A total of 114 students participated, 46 men and 68 women ranging in age from 18 to 39 with a median age of 21. Most of the students (87.7%) were traditional students between the ages of 18-22. Sixty-six of these respondents (57.9%) could not speak another language, the remaining 48 students could speak another language but only half (24) of them rated their ability to speak this second language as fair or above.

The participants answered a questionnaire about a recent difficult face-to-face conversation they had with a non-native English speaker including demographic information, closed-ended questions about communication competence and feelings of misunderstanding, and an open-ended question soliciting the participants to "briefly describe a difficult face-to-face conversation with a non-native speaker of English that you recently experienced (e.g., retail and sales, giving or getting directions, discussions about school or work). Include details about the situation, time, the person, the difficulties you experienced, and the results of the conversation." Demographic items and the open-ended question are shown in Appendix A. The present study only addresses responses to this open-ended question. The quantitative component of closed-ended questions concerning communication competence and feelings of misunderstanding are not included in the present study (see Faux & Young, in press) for the quantitative results and analysis).

The details provided from the respondents' answers to the open-ended question appeared to show that they were taking the project seriously. In fact, the richness of their responses provided details that illustrated depth beyond simple contextual factors such as business and non-business settings. Only one respondent left the open-ended question blank. The remaining respondents provided enough details to determine the context and the use of communicative strategies. Regarding the themes of out-grouping/in-grouping and helping/not helping, 78% of the respondents provided enough details to code the descriptions. The descriptions appeared plausible and truthful because their details and vividness resonated within the range of everyday experiences (Fisher, 1987).

From the responses, details about the situation, interlocutors, difficulties, and outcomes were provided forming a corpus upon which an interpretive, thematic analysis could be conducted. Such accounts expressed knowledge and understanding of situated contexts (Brown, 1985; Crawford, 1986; Ochberg, 1994; Riessman, 1993). The authors adopted an interpretive paradigm in which researchers can develop an understanding of events as they are experienced by individuals (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Hence, the interpretive goal for this study was to illustrate behavioral and contextual factors contributing to helping behavior and group identity, as perceived by native English speakers emergent in and through descriptions of conversations with non-native English speakers in everyday situations. Helping behavior was characterized by actions that fostered understanding between the interactants, demonstrated the native speaker's empathy for the non-native's difficulties, and aided the non-native speaker in completion of a task or goal. After the surveys were collected, the authors met face-to-face to code the responses based upon repetition and recurrence (Owen, 1984). Frequency counts were noted. For context and conversational strategies, a third coder was used to demonstrate inter-coder reliability. These results are consistent with this study's findings and are also reported in Faux and Young (in press). For the themes of helping and in-grouping, a third coder was not used. A theme emerged only when both authors came to agreement about how themes were explicitly or implicitly repeated across the descriptions provided by the native respondents (Owen; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; van Manen, 1990).

Themes emerged from an interpretive process involving: (a) identifying the conversational contexts, (b) determining sustainment of verbal and nonverbal strategies used in those contexts, (c) recognizing helping or non-helping behaviors, and (d)

illustrating how the native speakers placed the non-native speakers into in-group or out-group membership. Two examples are presented below to illustrate how the themes emerged from the descriptions provided by the respondents.

> Respondent # 14: I called for computer tech help about a year and a half ago. The man that helped me, "Roger," had a thick accent. I asked where lived because I saw a show about replacing American jobs and giving them to people in other countries because they worked for much less. It was very hard to understand his direction, "what" and 'huh" were said a lot by me. The result, he could not fix the problem and I had to get someone to come to my home and fix it.

First, the context of a business transaction becomes identifiable through the respondent's disclosure that he has placed a call to a computer tech center for help. This is noted as a business context. Second, from the respondent's description of how the conversation unfolds, details emerge illustrating the features and functions of the communication. Because the interaction takes place over the telephone, there are no visual nonverbal forms of communication available to the interlocutors. Therefore, vocal strategies are employed. Thirdly, repeatedly asking questions such as "what?" and "huh?" do not appear to seek clarification but rather become identifiers illustrating a withdrawal form the active listening process. Lastly, the respondent mentally withdraws from the conversation and actually seeks another to assist them at their residence. In this example, the native English speaker uses limited verbal strategies and ultimately withdraws or quits the interaction. The non-native English speaker is ascribed into out-group categories by not being understandable due to a "thick" accent. Also, the computer tech is perceived as a foreigner that is taking American jobs.

> Respondent # 9: I was responsible for helping a Bulgarian exchange student understand test questions about three weeks ago in a class which I assist. She asked questions about some words that are very fundamental (i.e., what is "respond" and "ambush"). To explain ambush I crouched behind a desk and leapt up. I was concerned she might not continue to ask if she still didn't understand. She did well on the test.

In this example, two students are interacting during a test. This is noted as a non-business context. Next, both verbal and nonverbal strategies are detailed by the native English speaker to foster understanding of difficult words for the non-native speaker. Notably, nonverbal body movement, such as in the game charades, are used by this respondent to embody meaning of words like "ambush." The strategies adopted by this respondent indicate a sustained effort to help the non-native English speaker be successful in an examination of course material. In this regard, the respondent appears to identify the non-native into group of fellow "classmate."

Findings

In conversational contexts, 79 reported a business context, 34 reported a non-business context, and one participant did not report. Business contexts were identified as conversations that took place in the workplace and the topic concerned a business transaction. Examples of these transactions include ordering food, asking for help with service, and repairs of a product. Conversations about non-business included tasks such as asking for directions at a gas station and conversations about academic or religious topics.

Conversational strategies, or attempts at understanding, also were noted from the respondents' descriptions: Of the 113 participants reporting, 82 (72.6%) used strategies to gain understanding. Of those using strategies, 58 participants (51.3%) reported that they used verbal messages, 16 participants (14.2%) used non-verbal messages, and eight participants (7.1%) used both verbal and non-verbal messages. From the reports of the conversations, 31 participants (27.4%) did not seek to gain understanding. One participant did not report. Lastly, 98 participants (86.7%) reported that they sustained the conversation, and 15 (13.3%) reported that they quit the conversation, and one did not report. In sustained interactions the native speakers continued the conversation by using different verbal and nonverbal strategies including asking questions, saying things differently, using nonverbals, or patiently being involved in the interaction. Despite misunderstandings, the native speaker did not give up and stayed actively involved in the interaction. Conversations that were not sustained included limited verbal and nonverbal strategies such as asking one question or repeating a statement only once. Non-sustained interactions were noted when the native speakers just left, got another to help, avoided the non-native speaker, or mentally withdrew from the interaction.

As stated earlier, helping behavior was characterized by actions that fostered understanding between the interactants, demonstrated the native speaker's empathy for the non-native's difficulties, and aided the non-native speaker in completion of a task or goal. Frequency counts indicated that 53 respondents (46.9%) engaged in helping behaviors, 37 (32.7%) non-helping, and 23 (20.4%) could not be categorized as helpful or non-helpful due to a lack of detail or ambiguity in the description. There was one missing response.

In-grouping occurred when the native speaker treated the non-native speaker as belonging to the same group such as Christian, friend, or fellow human being. Also, in-grouping was evident when the non-native conformed to contextual role expectations and norms. In contrast, out-grouping occurred when the native considered the non-native to be a member of a different group who violated contextual role expectations and norms. Frequency counts of in-group/out-grouping indicated 53 respondents (46.9%) placed the non-native English speaker as an in-group member, 35 (31%) into out-group membership, and 25 (22.1%) could not be categorized as being placed into in-group or out-group membership due to a lack of detail or ambiguity in the description.

The conversational contexts and the strategies formed the descriptors from which the themes of non-helping/helping and concomitant ingrouping/outgrouping of the non-native speakers emerged as illustrated in the findings below.

Non-Helping Behaviors

The decision to participate or not to participate in helping behaviors was informed by the native speakers' ascription of the non-native speaker into in-group or out-group membership categories. This categorization was based in part by context and the associated activities expected within such membership roles. The native speakers identified the expected normative conversational practices required within a given context. Native speakers had an expectation that non-native speakers would perform in an appropriate and competent manner dependent upon contextual influences (such as business settings) and role salience (such as food server). When there are perceived violations, the non-native speaker was situated into an out-group membership status.

Violations of the expected norms often caused frustration for native speakers. Specifically, when native speakers critiqued performance quality, they quit, withdrew, or made no attempt to continue with difficult conversations if the non-native speaker was perceived as an out-group member—one who violated conventional role norms. This trend emerged in both business and non-business contexts. For example, within business contexts, native speakers had an expectation that non-native speakers would perform competently based on the understanding that the role of the "worker" is to help the "customer." The following descriptions illustrated perceived violations of appropriate activity, criticisms of quality, and non-sustained outcomes:

> Respondent# 26: When checking into a hotel in Miami, the front desk person spoke very little English. It was hard to communicate and took 30 minutes to get a room.

> Respondent # 86: I was trying to order food from a restaurant and my server did not speak English. It was very hard and frustrating getting what I wanted and asking questions. The server seemed equally frustrated with my questions. Finally, I gave up and just pointed to something on the menu.

> Respondent #112: One particular event I was trying to exchange a ticket. The worker was foreign and did not understand me, and I didn't understand her. I got so frustrated that I hung up and called back until I got a worker I could understand.

In the examples above, the native speaker perceived the non-natives' language skills as incompetent and their ability to follow the scripts associated with the social roles of customer service worker as inadequate. As a result, the native speaker experienced frustration and quit the interaction. Similar criticisms and negative outcomes continue in non-business settings. In the following examples, language skills, critiques of script enactments and violations, and non-sustained outcomes were identified by the native speakers:

> Respondent #6: There is this Asian girl in one of my classes and she speaks fairly well, but there are times we are doing school assignments

and the whole class is put on hold due to her lack of skill when she is speaking.

Respondent #69: My friend's mom is Korean. She only knows enough English to get by. She took us out to eat on Saturday. At the table I tried to thank her for dinner; she just smiles and nods. I was unable to tell if she understands me, so it kind of leaves you feeling awkward. We refrained from much conversation.

In the first example, respondent #6 rated a fellow classmate's English skills as poor due to the extended length of time needed by the non-native speaker during class activities—a violation of the script that placed the class "on hold" and as a result also placed the classmate within out-group member status.

In the second example, respondent #69 identified conventional nonverbal behaviors often associated with illustrating understanding during conversation such as head nods (Sidnell, 2005). Such displays of recognition often included verbalized responses (Lerner, 1992). In this example, a micro-violation of a conversational script harbored "awkward" feelings and raised the perception of being misunderstood. Also, increased uncertainty did not lead to more conversation to reduce the uncertainty. Rather, such uncertainty led to a critique of language ability ("enough to get by"), out-group status (norm violator), and non-sustained interaction ("refrained").

The only time English speakers were considered members of an out-group was when they were sojourners, or travelers outside the US. Although most of the respondents chose to describe difficult interactions in the US, six of the 113 interactions took place abroad. Only one of these six reported being out-grouped with the following description: "One man in Paris wouldn't serve me in a restaurant. He said 'no ice' and pointed to the door." In fact, even when traveling abroad one respondent reporting " I caught myself talking to the person louder like they were stupid when I was in fact in their country." In this case the sojourner treated the native residents as an out-group member.

Helping Behaviors

Sustained interaction and the adoption of helping behaviors occurred when the native speakers performed the duties of specific social roles, associated the non-native speakers with in-group membership status, or adopted a macro perspective that placed interlocutors into the status of "being human" which overrode the non-native's out-group membership status. Within business settings a primary duty performed by customer service workers is to help customers. The native speakers enacted helping behaviors by assisting their non-native speaking customers. Moreover, the native speakers sustained their helping behavior through a variety of ways including verbal and nonverbal forms of communication and other complex strategies to help the non-native speaker understand. Some strategies included attempts using non-native's language, getting others to assist as a translator, asking for repetition or clarification, or descriptive gesturing such as pointing. The following example illustrated a sustained helping effort:

Respondent #16: At a retail auto shop, [I had] difficulty understanding…the parts needed. A predominantly Spanish speaking person was having problems naming what he needed. We ended up walking out to the car and pointing at the part.

In this example, a particularly complex, sustained interaction was enacted by both native and non-native speaker as they collaboratively followed a business script. In the following example, both the native and non-native speaker followed a "banking" script, accomplishing a successful business transaction while not actively engaging in the listening or understanding process. Both interlocutors relied on the social roles and knowledge of the incumbent activities expected within such norms. Both had group membership; one as the native worker and one as the non-native customer:

Respondent #13: So the interaction between us is as follows:

Smile→Greeting→Customer hands me the transaction→I perform→
Thank You→and Smile from the customer (usually a head nod) to show
their gratitude, or an attempt to say "thank you."

The following example further indicated that within non-business settings the impact of in-group membership status also was a salient feature which influences whether helping behaviors were sustained or not sustained. In-group membership categories such as friend, guest of the family, fellow Christian, fellow student, and the overriding category of fellow human being were described by the respondents as leading toward sustained helping behaviors. The following example illustrated a difficult conversation with native and non-native English speaking members with the same group status of "Christian"; the conversation was sustained through the helping behaviors adopted by the native speaker to collaboratively construct understanding:

Respondent #74: There is this guy that goes to that same Bible study I go
to who is Japanese…Sometimes he didn't know the English word right off
hand that described what he was saying. So we would reason. I would
give him possible words; he would agree or disagree until we understood
each other.

Several respondents identified non-native speakers as fellow human beings. In this example, a customer helped a fellow customer in need. The "customer" role, being served, was trumped by the larger macro role of human being. Thus, in-group status as human being was achieved and helping behaviors sustained the interaction. The native speaker in the following example was a customer at a gas station.

Respondent #44: When in Miami for spring break I had to instruct a man
how to use a gas pump. He was from Germany and couldn't read or speak
English at all.

Additionally, through such a macro level perspective of shared group membership, several of the respondents demonstrated empathic thinking, sustained collaborative and dialogic interaction, and sharing blame for misunderstandings. The following examples illustrate such empathic perspective taking:

> Respondent # 51: I recently talked to a Spanish person. We greeted each other. The conversation was rewarding. I really enjoyed talking to the other student. The student told me a little of her home life. It was sad.

> Respondent # 58: The experience was not bad at all because I was able to get him what he wanted and neither one of us got frustrated since we both understood the situation we were in.

> Respondent # 98: She understands and speaks English well; *my* Japanese is sub-par.

Discussion and Conclusions

As exemplified through responses provided by the participants, there is often little tolerance for violations of scripts, or variations from expected behaviors or outcomes. Such variances often result in feelings of frustration from native English speakers. International travelers in general may share these unpleasant feelings as Ward (2004) reports that sojourners "experience a crisis characterized by feeling of inadequacy, frustration, and anxiety" (p. 187). This frustration is lessened as the sojourner learns about and adapts to the host culture, demonstrating intercultural competency. Competency is the general impression that arises from communicative behavior (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). Hymes (1971) suggests communication competence entails knowledge of what behaviors are appropriate within the context in which we are interacting and the demonstration or use of that knowledge. Not only must an individual know what to do in a given context, but also must behave accordingly to be perceived as competent (Barbour, 1981). These behaviors also include nonverbal communication (Burgoon, Birk, & Pfau, 1990), avoidance strategies (or not sustaining; Canary & Spitzberg), and role performances (Stamp, 1994).

Violations of perceived competency are pinpointed by respondents and acted upon through out-group identification leading to non-helping behaviors indicating that most native speakers do not employ mindfulness. Mindfulness entails empathy and an ability to engage in reflexivity (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Being mindful requires an awareness of multiple perspectives and identities within contexts of intercultural communication and pertains to all individuals on the personal and cultural levels of interaction (Chen, 1989). When native speakers exhibit mindfulness, they recognize that the success or failure of the interaction depends on the interplay between the interlocutors. This mindfulness gives native speakers the ability to manage language differences. On an encouraging note, some native speakers enact helping behaviors by adopting mindfulness and empathy, sharing blame for misunderstandings, and perceiving others as in-group members or fellow human beings so they can participate in sustained collaborative and dialogic interaction.

Limitations

This study is limited to an analysis of native English speakers' descriptions of difficult conversation with non-native speakers. Future research could triangulate the findings of this study by examining non-native perceptions and actual conversations between the two groups. The fact that students could only respond in writing may have limited their responses. In-depth interviews or focus groups could possibly provide richer descriptions of misunderstandings in intercultural conversations. Another limitation of this study concerns the population. The population is comprised of students from Valdosta State University in the southern United States that has an international student population of three percent. This university is located in a small metropolitan area in south central Georgia with less diversity than major metropolitan areas. In order to generalize these findings future research could examine communities outside of academia.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire about a Recent Conversation with a Non-Native English Speaker

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire. Your completion of this questionnaire will be accepted as your consent to participate in this research project. Should you decline to participate or decide not to complete the questionnaire, you are free to do so without penalty. Any questions about this survey may be directed to the VSU IRB administrator Dr. Green Waggener at 229-242-4921. Thank you again for your assistance. Dr. William Faux and Dr. Ray Young, Communication Arts, 229-333-5820.

1. What is your gender?   Male____ Female____
2. What is your age? ____
3. What other language(s) in addition to English do you speak?

   Spanish____ French____ German____ Other_____

   None, English is the only language I speak. ____

4. (If applicable) How long have you been able to speak this second language? ____

5. (If applicable) How did you learn this language? (Check all that apply)

   School____   Travel____   Family___   Training   Program____
   Friends____ Other___

6. (If applicable) How well do you think you speak this second language?

   Extremely well___ Well ___ Fair ___ Not so well___ Very poorly___

7. In the space provided below briefly describe a difficult face-to-face conversation with a non native speaker of English that you recently experienced (for example: retail and sales, giving or getting directions, discussion about school or work). Include details about the situation, time, the person, the difficulties you experienced, and the results of this conversation.

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