

Language use and the Spread of COVID-19 pandemic in Igbo Culture Area

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Abstract

During the time of COVID-19, indigenous people and speakers in the Igbo region often use inappropriate and obstinate language – *koro adighi n'ala* Igbo (Coronavirus is not in Igboland) and its various forms to assert that 'Igbo people are not vulnerable to COVID-19'. In consequence, their misuse of language and the linguistic perception about the COVID-19 are seriously influencing the peoples' behaviours negatively in terms of observing the COVID-19 protocols. This study explores inappropriate language use about COVID-19 in Igbo culture area and the impacts in the area. The researcher drew data from the Igbo culture area especially the rural communities which enough light of scholarship has not been shed. Data through open ended questions, semi-structured oral interview, casual conversations, and participant observation are analysed descriptively. The study employs Sapir-Whorfian (1921) and Wardhaugh's (2006) theory of language use – how language use/structures influences social behaviours in a given society. The research shows that Igbo speakers create diverse obstinate language use and frames about COVID-19 pandemic in different contexts during the COVID-19 era, and how they functioned to influence the people's behavior negatively during the pandemic. The study has potentials for important source of information for language use and coronavirus research.

Keywords: COVID-19, inappropriate language use, Igbo region, speakers, southeast Nigeria

Background

In 2019, the overwhelming COVID-19 pandemic has stricken the worldwide population, and although virtually all nations have language problem about COVID-19, Igbo southeast Nigeria's problem is significantly different. In Igbo culture area, the pandemic gave rise to speculations and inappropriate language use - 'Koro is not in our place', and its various forms to assert that 'Igbo people are not vulnerable to COVID-19'. Obstinate language in this study, is viewed as a stubborn and unreasonable persistence language. During COVID-19 era, indigenous people of Igboland often use inappropriate language to trivialise the coronavirus, adhering to that opinion, in spite of reason, arguments or persuasion. In consequence, their language use and the linguistic perception about COVID are seriously influenced the peoples' behaviours negatively and many people in the area failed to observe the COVID-19 protocols. Such attitude in many ways exposed the people to contact the disease in the area and also led to other multifaceted implications as we shall observe in this study. Regrettably, scholars have not paid adequate attention to the inappropriate language problems. This negative impacts are what excited my curiosity about the region group's obstinate language uses in the context of COVID-19. Besides, studies that recorded issues about the language interface and COVID-19 elsewhere, did not analyse how language use can serve as a tool for the spread of the pandemic and its other multifaceted impacts. This study will step further from the critique of the COVID from its impacts on language and individual as has been more commonly advanced by other scholars, to investigate how obstinate language use increases the spread of

the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on the livelihood of the people. Considering the enormous socioeconomic, religious, political and health problems which this obstinate language use- 'Koro is not in our palace (Igboland)' have caused, this study becomes necessary and timely.

Introduction

That language matters in virtually all situations especially during pandemic is beyond dispute: During the COVID-19 pandemic rising in 2020, in southeast Nigeria, indigenous speakers of Igbo language often use inappropriate and obstinate language *koro adighi n'ala Igbo* (Coronavirus is not in Igboland), and its various forms to assert that 'Igbo people are not vulnerable to COVID-19'. In consequence, their language use and the linguistic perception about COVID are seriously influencing the peoples' behaviours negatively towards observing COVID protocols in the area. Since the early 2020 when COVID-19 started in Igbo land, through their obstinate language use especially, there has been resistance to accept that the virus can affect black people especially the Igbos. In pandemic situations, there remains a set of simple measures that each of us can embrace in our daily lives to help control the infection rates (www.nature.com/naturemicrobiology, 2020) such as social distancing, social isolation for the vulnerable, mask wearing and hand washing. Progressively, these simple actions have been distorted by obstinate language use in the Igbo culture areas as they ignored the preventive measures. The impacts of the inappropriate language use about COVID-19 on the livelihoods, socioeconomic, health, and the spread of the virus in Igbo culture areas during COVID-19 seem to be adverse. The dreadful impacts are what excited my curiosity about the culture group's inappropriate language uses about COVID-19, the impacts, and the preventive measures. The misuse of language has recently escalated (www.nature.com/naturemicrobiology, 2020) to the extent that the language and imagery that some speakers and global leaders are using especially during this pandemic is boding ill for global efforts to control it. Ugwuona also pointed out that misuse of language often influences people's opinion to adhere fixedly to a particular opinion, attitude, course and action (Ugwuona 2018). In Igbo culture area for instance, since COVID-19 started, speakers in the Igbo regions often use inappropriate and obstinate language - 'Koro is not in Igboland', and its various forms to assert that 'Igbo is not vulnerable to COVID-19'. Often, such contentious language and defiant behaviour serve to promote the view that the COVID-19 pandemic can be readily overcome and such analogies can influence negative attitude and behaviours during any pandemic. In consequence, their language use and the linguistic perception about COVID are seriously influencing the peoples' behaviours negatively and most people in the area are not observing the COVID-19 protocols. Qi Shen (2020) laments that COVID-19 crisis has touched all of us deeply. One way to take stock as Qi Shen (2020) notes, is to consider what has been the worst of the crisis from a language point of view. Besides, studies (e.g., Jefwa Mweri 2021, Oluwateniola Kupolati, Adebola Adebileje & Akinniyi Adeleke 2021, www.nature.com/nature 2020, Mike Thelwall and Saheeda Thelwall 2020) that recorded issues about the language interface and COVID-19 elsewhere did not analyse how (inappropriate) language use can serve as a tool for the spread of the pandemic and its other multifaceted impacts. This study will step further from the critique of the COVID from its impacts on language and individual as has been more commonly advanced by other scholars, to investigate how language use increases the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts on the attitude of the people. In this, we aim to investigate: the forms of the inappropriate language use and the linguistic features that depict the obstinate language use. The study further examines the cultural contexts through which the language use is communicated; how social structures such as family, age, religion, education, politics, and socio-economic status of speakers in the area connect to the language use. Finally, it answers the following research questions: What are the various forms of the inappropriate language use in Igbo culture area? ii. What are the linguistic features that depict the inappropriate language use in the area? iii. How do the social structures such as family, age, religion, education, and socioeconomic status of speakers in the area connect to the language use? iv. What are the impacts of the language use within contemporary Igbo, southeast Nigeria? v. What are the preventive measures in averting the inappropriate language use about COVID-19 in the area?

Significance

The result of this study will not just contribute to a view of sociolinguistic study of language use; it will also lead to new insights into the interface of language use and COVID-19. It will contribute also to the knowledge of the relationship between language and society through engaging with local people in rural communities, a group on which enough light of scholarship has not been shed. The conclusions will provide insights for general language use scholarship.

Obstinate

According to English dictionary, obstinate is a situation where people refuse to change their mind or be persuaded to do something else. When someone is beyond stubborn, refusing to change his or her opinions, way of behaving, etc. in other words, it implies a kind of hard-headed determination not to change your mind even when it might be best to rethink your position.

Literature Review

This section is arranged into three sections: the theoretical studies, the empirical studies, and the theoretical framework. Under theoretical studies, related theories and concepts about language use in the context of pandemics will be reviewed. The empirical studies section handles research works that have been carried out in relation to the topic. In this, the gap identified will be filled. The theoretical framework will highlight the theories relevant to the study and the one that will be adopted for the analysis.

Theoretical Studies

There are several theoretical approaches to the issue of language use. For instances, the sociolinguistic approach considers language use as context based, having an inseparable relationship with the society, and where society influences the language and language in turn influences the society. This view is supported by Dell Hymes (1972), Sapir-Whorf (1929), Wardhaugh (2006), Austin (1956), Holmes (2013), among others. In all these, communicative competence is often used to describe the knowledge of how to use language in culturally appropriate ways.

The coronavirus pandemic highlighted many social and economic issues, such as social inequality of various forms. Individuals with lower income are more likely to contract the disease and die from it (Jung et al., 2021, Paton et al. (2020). This is hardly astonishing, as lower socioeconomic status people especially those in Igborural communities often live in crowded housing, rely on shared transportation services, using absurd language and messaging about COVID-19 pandemic as the pandemic progressed. All these can increase their risk of contracting the disease. Marco (2020) rightly observed that susceptibility to the coronavirus (as well as to other diseases) is further exacerbated by other issues that are not strictly related to socioeconomic status but to other factors such as ineffective communication and language barriers. In Igbo culture area, the impact of misuse of language seem to be at least twofold: on the one side, it can encourage negative attitude towards observing COVID protocols such as social distancing, wearing of nose masks, and a lot more; on the other, it can increase their risk to contract the disease which will likely lead to the increase in the spread of the pandemic and the subsequent health, socioeconomic, religion, education and political crisis in the culture area as we shall observe in this study.

Empirical Studies

Many scholars have critiqued the impact of COVID-19 on language and revealed the impacts to include: neologisms (Jefwa Mweri 2021); new words for coronavirus and the reasons for creating them (Christine, 2020); new acronyms and words to express the societal imperatives (Paton 2020); linguistic change (Asif et al 2021); lexical innovation (Oluwateniola et al, 2021); languages that use /p/ more frequently might spread the coronavirus more easily (Georgius et al 2021); language challenges in multilingual context during COVID-19 periods in China (Qi Shen 2020). These scholarly works did not capture how language use impact on the spread of the COVID-19 especially in rural areas. Contrariwise, how language use impacts on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in local settings is a new area that this study seeks to contribute. Stephanie Rudwick et al (2021), and Aggarwal et al (2020) critiqued the interface of COVID-19 and language from social-media perspective, but this work will step further from the social-media perspective to investigate local encounters of the language interface and the COVID. Qi Shen (2020) identified a number of language challenges and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic from Chinese background. However, other language challenges were spotty, and Africa was largely absent. Public Health Editorial (2020) observes that having eschewed mask use and repeatedly used language to play down the pandemic during a pivotal re-election year, President Trump became infected with SARS-CoV-2. He was whisked off to receive the best care available but chose to leave hospital after just three days, and returned to the White House under the gaze of the world's media. He said, "Don't let it dominate you, don't be afraid of it, you're going to beat it,". "I know there's a risk, there's a danger, but that's OK... I stood out front. I led". The above obstinate language by Trump, as the Public Health Editorial observed, largely influenced his negative attitude to eschewed the preventive measures thereby contracting the virus. Other scholarly works on the emerging communications and the impacts of the COVID-19 on language in Western parts of the world are fast expanding (see Maula 2021; Mike Thelwall and Saheeda Thelwall 2020; Massimo Stella; Valerio Restocchi and Simon De Deyne 2020; Alaa Abd-Alrazaq et al 2020; May Oo Lwin et al 2020; Olimat 2020; Ella and Stevenson 2020; Aolymat 2020a). However, there is little or no information on how certain language use function to influence the spread of COVID-19 in local communities of developing countries especially in southeast Nigeria. Georgius et al (2021) study on 'the transmission of COVID-19' is an important one, however, there is little insight on how social structures can connect to the language use, and the subsequent implications. In his study of the interface of COVID-19 and language. The language as challenge in the COVID-19 pandemic posits a threat to public health communication in need of identification and resolution through language service at the national level (Li et al. 2020). Similarly, obstinate language (Ugwuona and Okey-Agbo 2020) use is one of the major language challenges prevalent in culture areas of Igbo southeast Nigeria, but scholars have not paid much attention to it. Nwaubani's (2020) reports about COVID-19 and language in Nigeria is an important one, but coverage was spotty with blurring implications, and very little insight exists on the various forms of the problem such as the obstinate language use and the linguistic features that depict the language use, the contexts from which such language is communicated, among others. This research explores forms of inappropriate and obstinate language use about COVID-19 and how they serve as a tool in the spread of the COVID-19.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs Sapir-Whorfian (1921) and Wardhaugh (2006) theory of language use. Sapir (1921) claims that the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world. In Whorf's view, the relationship between language and culture was a deterministic one. For him, the social categories we create and how we perceive events and actions are constrained by the language we speak. Wardhaugh (2006) posits that one possible relationships between language and society is that linguistic structures influence or determine our worldview. This is also the view that is behind the Whorfian hypothesis. Wardhaugh further notes that such a view is behind certain proposed language reforms, that is, if we change the language, we

can change social behaviour. In his example, Wardhaugh states that a deliberate reduction in sexist language will lead to a reduction in sexist attitudes. The assertions above points to the fact that language influences people's thought, behaviour and attitudes in many forms. The above theoretical approaches have relevance to this study. The choice is informed by the fact that the approaches can handle not just the way language influences the society, but why certain language use in cultural contexts influences people's behaviour and attitudes negatively in the context of COVID-19. The theories can also handle how inappropriate language use about COVID-19 in Igbo culture area can influence the people's views about the COVID-19 pandemic, their negative and stubborn attitude/behaviours towards the observance of COVID-19 protocols.

Methodology

The study will be conducted in line with the objectives outlined above.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Igbo southeast Nigeria with special focus on the rural areas, where studies of this type is insufficient as far as we know. Through purposive sampling, we selected two representative communities from each of the five major States (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo) in Southeast Nigeria for adequate representation. As such, we selected Ohafia and Isuochi in Abia State; Nando and Aguata in Anambra; Izzi and Ikwo in Ebonyi, Obollo-Eke and Iheaka in Enugu; Mbaise and Orlu in Imo State, all in Igbo, southeast Nigeria. The choice of the above communities was to ensure that opinions from different parts of the Igbo culture area were reflected. The study concentrated majorly on the rural communities of the selected towns in the belief that the rural dwellers are more likely to use inappropriate language about COVID-19, slow to welcome changes, have limited education and contacts and are better placed to respond on issues of COVID-19 pandemic.

Subjects/Participants

The participants comprised 150 people from the indigenous people of the ten selected rural culture areas of Igbo. That is, 15 respondents (7 males and 8 females) from each of the selected community. In all, 70 Males and 80 females between the ages of 18 and 72 who have limited education, travels, and contacts were purposively selected from different social groups and regions of the Igbo culture area for interview where necessary.

Data collection and Sources

Semi-structured interviews, and group discussions was utilised for the data collection method. These were done with the help of the recruited ten research assistants (one from each of the representative community) where necessary. As a member of the Igbo culture area where I still reside, is an advantage in this regard. The insight needed to identify and elicit talks and phrases, and the linguistic features that depict forms of inappropriate language uses about COVID-19 is furnished also by my training in sociolinguistics.

Design and Data analysis

The research adopts qualitative research design and descriptive method of data analysis. The qualitative data in the form of written words is observed and analysed. The process enables us to relate ideas, perceptions, opinions that cannot be measured by numbers but are represented in words. The choice of descriptive analysis is informed by the fact that it helps describe, show and/or summarize data points in constructive way and justify every condition of the data. Beyond that, descriptive analysis can provide basic information about variables in a database, and highlight possible relationships between variables and insightful information about the provided data.

4.0 Data presentation and analysis

In this section, data are presented and analysed in search of answers to the research questions and objectives set out for this study. The various forms of inappropriate language use about COVID-19 as we got from our respondents are discussed below in tables and figures thus:

Table 1. Obstinate Language use about COVID-19

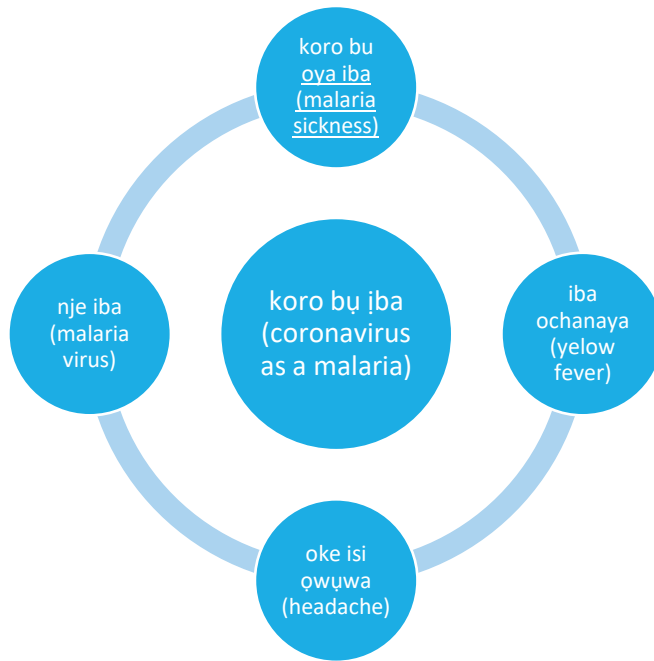
One form of inappropriate language use about COVID-19 is obstinate language use which depicts COVID-19 as a foreign sickness not meant for the people in Igbo culture are. Examples are shown below:

	Obstinate language	Gloss	Social structures/ contexts
i.	Korona adighi n'ala anyi	Coronavirus is not in our land	Family
ii.	koro bu oya ndi ocha	Coronavirus is white man's sickness	Educated
iii.	koro Chajna	Coronavirus is Chinese virus/disease	Educated
iv.	Korona abughi maka anyi	Coronavirus is not for us	Market
v.	koro abughi maka ndi be anyi	Coronavirus is not for our people	Family
vi.	koro anoghi n'uloaka ndi Igbo.	Coronavirus is not in the Church	Church/worshiping grounds
vii.	Korona abughi maka okorobia.	Coronavirus is not for youth.	Youth in social gatherings.
viii	Koro bu nke ha.	Coronavirus is theirs.	Family

From the responses above, it can be observed that indigenous speakers in various contexts in Igbo culture area have identified COVID-19 as a foreign and weak enemy that doesn't exist in Igbo culture area through their obstinate language use as can be observed from the responses (i, iv, v, vii, viii) in table (i) above. Educated youth believe that coronavirus is a foreign sickness from China and elsewhere. Market women believe that the virus is not for them. Those in the church believe that COVID-19 is not in the church, and so forth. Such stubborn language use can undermine COVID-19 treatment and deter those without COVID-19 from adopting health behaviours that could reduce their risk of contracting the virus. Such language use can also function to reduce actions in terms of observing the COVID-19 protocols in the area under study.

Figure 1. Trifling language use about COVID-19

Another form of inappropriate language use about COVID-19 in Igbo culture area is trifling language. Trifling language in this context means linguistic expressions that trivialises COVID-19. Below are instances of trivial language uses that depict COVID-19 as ordinary malaria (sickness).



- i. oya koro bu **ịba**(COVID-19 sickness is **malaria**)
- ii. koro bu **ịba**ochanaya,(COVID is **yellow fever**)
- iii. o bu **nje ịba**(It is a **malaria virus**).
- iv. Koro bu **oke isi ọwụwa** (coronavirus is a severe **headache**).
- v. Koro erujughi afo (coronavirus is not a serious sickness)

The examples in the figure above (i-iv) show the trifling language use which our respondents liken coronavirus to. In Igbo land, malaria is taken as a mere illness. Such believe in many regards made our respondents to use trifling language(i-iv) in the figure above to depict coronavirus as a mere malaria virus signaling that the virus is not a serious one but a common sickness that they can beat.

Table 2. Political language use that depicts COVID-19 as a political virus

One other form of language use about COVID-19 is political language use. The examples below show inappropriate language uses that depict COVID-19 as a political virus:

	Language of politics	Gloss	Contexts	Social structure
I	koro bu maka ndi ndorodoro	Coronavirus is for politicians .	Social gathering	Youth
Ii	koro bu oya ndi ochichi ji-eri ego anyi	coronavirus is a sickness those in power use to enrich themselves .	Group discussion	Youth
Iii	koro bu azumahia .	Coronavirus is business .	Group discussion	Young men
Iv	koro bu oya ndi ochichi ji anata ihe enyemaka di ka akpa raji	coronavirus is a sickness that those in power use to attract palliative such as bags of rice .	Family	Old men and women

The political language (i-iv) serve to promote the view that COVID-19 pandemic is politics designed to extract money and palliatives from the government. Hence, the people believe that coronavirus is just designed by politicians to attract money and palliatives from the government and foreign nations.

Table 3. Language use that depicts COVID-19 as Unreal

	Obstinate language	Gloss	Social structure
i	Anyi amaghị ihe bụ koro	We don't know coronavirus.	Old men and women
ii	Anyị ahughị koro	We don't see coronavirus.	Aged ones
iii	Anyị amaghị maka koro	We don't know about coro	Youth
	O nweghi ihe dị ka koro	There is nothing like coronavirus	Youth
Iv	O nweghi ihe dị ka koro	Coronavirus is unreal.	Aged ones

The assertions above (i-iv) depict that coronavirus is a mere speculation, and that it is not real at all. Hence, they believe that there is nothing like Coronavirus,

Table 4. Language use that depicts COVID-19 as a foreign and wealthy men's sickness

	Language use	Gloss	Social structure
I	ọya ndị ọgaranya	wealthy man's sickness	Old men and women
ii	Ọya ndị n'efepu efepu	Travellers' sickness.	Aged ones
iii	ọya ndị mba Ofesi	Foreigners' sickness	Youth
iv	Ọya ndị ukwu	Big men's sickness	Youth
V	Ọya ndị nka	Aged one's sickness	Youth

It can be observed from the responses in the table above (i-v) that the COVID-19 is a foreign sickness meant for certain people especially the wealthy ones, travellers, foreigners, big men and the aged ones.

Figure 2. Language use that mocks COVID-19 and the protocols Mockery language used to mock those that are wearing nose masks include those written in figure 2. Below. They describe coronavirus *mkpukpu ékwà ọnú* (nose mask) as a mockery



The language use in the figure 2. above (i-iv) serve to mock those that wear nose mask and promote the view that COVID-19 pandemic can be readily overcome with available malaria drug. The image of masquerade seems designed to undermine the virus, and suggests also that those wearing nose mask or any preventive measures look like masquerade (something for entertainment). They mock those observing COVID-19 protocols such as wearing masks, social distancing, washing of hands and so forth as though they are fools.

Discussions

The linguistic features that depict the misuse of language about COVID-19 in the culture area are shown in the tables and figures above. Specifically, the linguistic features that depict the misuse of language about COVID-19 in the culture area are written in Igbo language and translated to English language in each of the tables and figures.

From the responses we gathered and shown in the tables (1-4) above, it is glaring that social structures and contexts such as family, age, religion, education, and socioeconomic status of speakers in the area connect to the language use as can be observed in the tables (1-4) above. Such misuse of language conceivably increases their negative attitude towards observing the COVID-19 protocols.

The impacts of the language use within contemporary Igbo, southeast Nigeria are many. For instance, the misuse of language about COVID-19 conceivably serves as a tool for increasing the risk of contracting the disease and the subsequent spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the culture area. Further, it influenced their attitude and behavior negatively towards observing COVID-19 protocols during the pandemic era. Trivializing COVID-19 through language often undermines COVID-19 protocols and treatment and also deter those without the virus from adopting health behaviours that could have reduced their risk of contracting the virus. Beyond that, the misuse of language tended to produce obstinate responses which resulted in stubborn behaviours and attitudes.

Playing down the pandemic through language use made the people to eschew the use of mask and other COVID-19 protocols which is disruptive and wrong in a pandemic situation. Misinformation such as claims that the coronavirus disease is not in Igboland could have a profound negative consequence on the effectiveness of preventing the spread of COVID-19, particularly in local communities. The inappropriate language use can trigger negative behaviour and attitude among the people in the rural area and so factor to spread the virus in the era of COVID-19. Beyond that, it can also hamper efforts of public health practitioners in containing the spread of COVID-19 and result in the general public's misgiving about science. The findings of this study show that during COVID-19 pandemic, most Igbo people in the rural communities of Igboland believe that COVID-19 is not their place through the use of certain forms of language about COVID-19 such as obstinate language, mockery language, trifling language, political language among others to portray their view that coronavirus is not for them. This type of language uses conceivably led to their negative attitude towards observing COVID-19 protocols during the pandemic. This is most certainly not what is required in a pandemic situation, when the actions of individuals are of paramount importance to infection control. The study also aligns with Wardhaugh and Warfian Sapir's claim about language use which posit that the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world; and that the social categories we create, and how we perceive events and actions are constrained by the language we speak.

Preventive measures in averting the misuse of language about COVID-19 Effective communication is vital for the success of public health measures to tackle COVID-19. People and influencers who play down on the COVID-19 pandemic for one reason or the other should be made to understand that they are impeding preventive measures against COVID-19. The government, health workers, influencers and well-meaning individuals should sensitise the people in the communities through seminars, workshops, grassroots awareness through appropriate information about COVID-19 pandemic and the proper measures to take.

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