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# Internalized Orientalism or World Philology? The Case of Modern Turkish Studies

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues against some widespread beliefs concerning imperialist and orientalist influences on modern humanities in the non-Western world. Specifically, it contests the idea that modern Turkish philology in the reforming Ottoman Empire was shaped by the hegemonic categories of Western European historical-comparative linguistics, by comparing and contrasting Arthur Lumley Davids's modern Turkish grammar (1832) with Ahmed Cevdet Pasha and Fuad Pasha's *Kavâ'id-i osmaniyye* (1851) and the works derived from it. It appears that premodern local traditions of learning have played a more important role in the creation of modern Turkish philology than has hitherto been assumed. These findings raise wider questions concerning the role of particular modes of power and knowledge in the development of (quasi-)colonial humanities.

Few would care—or dare—to deny the enormous influence that imperialism and colonial rule have had on the development of the modern sciences of man. Ever since Talal Asad and others presented the first critiques of the relation between anthropology and the “colonial encounter,” and ever since Edward Said analyzed philological orientalism as a function of imperialist domination, it has been clear that the modern social sciences and humanities are not innocent scholarly activities but have been deeply involved in the workings of modern power.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, it is easy to overstate the case for such imperialist influences. Owing to their narrow focus on the Islamic world, Asad and Said, as well as their numerous followers, have been justifiably criticized for reducing the complexities of these encounters to a strict

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1. See Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca, 1973); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). Both Asad and Said show the influence of Michel Foucault's genealogical works, even though their own genealogical analyses are rather idiosyncratic. Foucault, incidentally, never presented a genealogical analysis of the modern philological language sciences or of orientalist philology.

and simple dichotomy between colonizers and oppressed, between West and non-West, and between Islamic tradition and Western modernity. In fact, the early modern Islamic world had already developed a new dynamic prior to the colonial encounter, transforming whatever “traditional” order there was in the process. Likewise, authors such as Asad and Said have been accused of overstating the pervasiveness and hegemony of Western influence and of downplaying local agency. Here, I would like to discuss the relation between modern Western philological humanities and premodern and early modern non-Western philological learning. In suggesting that there is more room for local agency and for classical and vernacular forms of non-Western knowledge, I hope to add more nuance and complexity to the theme of “colonial humanities.”

### WESTERN INFLUENCE OR INTERNAL DYNAMICS?

Obviously, we cannot simply assume any hegemony of modern Western orientalist philology but should instead ask exactly how and when, if at all, this knowledge became hegemonic; how Western actors interacted with local scholars and premodern forms of local learning; and what role state power and other modalities of power played in these exchanges. The Ottoman Empire provides a very interesting testing ground for these questions. Unlike the South Asian subcontinent, for example, it was never as such colonized, and, hence, modern forms of knowledge could generally not simply be imposed by the sovereign power of imperialist states backed by military force. This is not to deny, of course, the fact that large parts of the empire came under different degrees of imperialist influence or control for varying lengths of time; nor is it to deny the transformative role of overseas imperialist powers such as England and France, or of its most powerful neighbors, the Habsburg Empire and imperial Russia. Nevertheless, increasing attention has in recent decades been paid to the internal dynamics of the empire, to local actors, and to primarily domestic processes of change.

Yet, in some respects, the image of an overwhelming Western influence still holds sway. This holds in particular for the rise of modern nationalism in the empire and the role of the modern philological humanities in this process. In the case of the reforming Ottoman Empire, it seems to be conventional wisdom that nationalism in the empire was a foreign import product and, more importantly, was rooted in the German Romantic nationalism of authors like Johann Gottfried Herder; that national identities were alien to the Ottoman population until the late nineteenth century; and that modern orientalism played a formative role in the formation of these new identities. Yet, these confident claims seriously overstate German influence, which cannot be attested until quite late in the nineteenth century; they overlook the important local process of vernacularization that occurred in the empire during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was of decisive importance for the subsequent development of new

national identities; and they simply posit *that* Western and Central European orientalism was, or became, dominant or hegemonic, rather than exploring *how* this new learning interacted with local traditions of knowledge. I have argued for the first two claims in more detail elsewhere;<sup>2</sup> here, I want to address the third, focusing on one particular case study: that of modern Turkish philology and its links to the rise of modern Turkish nationalism.

### COSMOPOLITAN AND VERNACULAR IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

In various works, Sheldon Pollock has made a persuasive case for the existence of what he calls “cosmopolitan orders” of Latin and Sanskrit in, respectively, Western Europe and South Asia in the first millennium CE; both orders, he adds, witnessed a process of vernacularization from around 1000 CE, in which spoken varieties rose to the status of literate and literary languages.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the early Ottoman Empire similarly knew a cosmopolitan linguistic order, but it was based less on a single dominant or hegemonic language. Famously, for Muslims, the Ottoman cosmopolitan order was marked by the “three languages” (*elsine-i selâse*) of Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Persian, used for, respectively, religious learning, state bureaucracy, and poetry; for Orthodox Christians, the hegemonic cosmopolitan languages were Koine Greek and, to a lesser and geographically rather more limited extent, Old Church Slavonic; for Armenians, Grabar or classical Armenian; and, for Jews, either the “sacred language” (*lashon hakodesh*), a blend of classical Hebrew and Syriac, or Hebraeo-Spanish, a liturgical language Semitic in structure by Spanish in most of its vocabulary. Thus, this Ottoman cosmopolitan order was substantially more complex than those of Latinity and Sanskrit as discussed by Pollock.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, there was considerable contact, overlap, and sometimes contest between both these written languages and different spoken vernaculars in different parts of the empire, both closer to the imperial center and in more remote regions; but considerations of space preclude a fuller discussion. It should also be noted that this linguistic constellation was not a direct result of any Ottoman state policies. For most of its history, the Ottoman governmental apparatus appears to have

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2. Cf. Michiel Leezenberg, “Eli Teremaxî and the Vernacularization of Madrasa Learning in Kurdistan,” *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 5 (2014): 713–33; Michiel Leezenberg, “The Vernacular Revolution: Reclaiming Early Modern Grammatical Traditions in the Ottoman Empire,” *History of Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2016): 251–75. For a more detailed account, see Michiel Leezenberg, *From Coffee House to Nation State: The Rise of National Languages in the Ottoman Empire*, forthcoming.

3. See, e.g., Sheldon Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 591–625.

4. *Ibid.*

shown no concern whatsoever with the languages spoken or written by its subject population.

The Turkish language, or ethnic Turkishness, had no significant or clearly defined place in this order. Significantly, authors like Evliya Çelebi, a seventeenth-century travel writer with a keen ear for language varieties, called the language of the Ottoman court and officials *lisân-i rum*, or “the language of the Rum,” and the spoken Turkish language *lisân-i etrâk*, or “the language of the Turks,” giving little indication that he considered them branches or registers of the same language. More generally, the very term *türk*, like other present-day ethnonyms, did not yet have an unambiguously ethnic sense but was used primarily in a derogatory sense, signifying something like “uneducated country bumpkin.”

A distinct sense of language-based Turkish national identity and, more generally, different and increasingly mutually antagonistic modern national identities did not develop in the Ottoman Empire until well into the nineteenth century and, it is often claimed, were shaped decisively by Western Turcology. One source widely believed to have exerted a particularly strong influence is the Hungarian Turcologist Arminius Vambéry (1832–1913), one of the founding fathers of Pan-Turkism, or rather Pan-Turanism, intended as a counterweight to the dominant Pan-Slavism of the time. Another alleged source is Léon Cahun’s *Introduction à l’histoire d’Asie*, which was partly translated into Turkish in 1899.<sup>5</sup> Quite in line with the tendencies in historical-comparative linguistics of the time, Cahun here glorifies the role of Turkish nomads in Asian history, defining “the Turks” as a nation or people by the language they spoke and tacitly or overtly identifying linguistic reconstructions with population movements. Its year of publication, however, suggests that Cahun’s work arrived too late to contribute significantly to the development of a language-based Turkish nationalism. As I will argue in greater detail below, this development had started several decades earlier, and was informed by local learning as much as by Western orientalism.

One noteworthy aspect of Ottoman Turkish was that it was not as such taught in any educational institution. The only language whose vocabulary and grammar were a school subject was Arabic: after learning the Quran by heart and mastering the basic tenets of Islam, pupils would start learning Arabic vocabulary and grammar with the aid of simple textbooks on *sarf* and *nahw* (corresponding, very roughly, to morphology and syntax, respectively, in the Western grammatical tradition). Persian was not learned by reading grammars but rather was taught with the aid of rhymed dictionaries that pupils had to learn by heart; next, works like Saadi’s *Rosegarden (Golestan)* or Jâmi’s *Divân* were read, with the teacher orally explaining the text on a line-by-line, or word-for-word,

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5. Léon Cahun, *Introduction à l’histoire d’Asie* (Paris: Colin, 1896).

basis. Persian grammars were few and far between. In fact, it seems that the idea that any language other than Arabic actually had a grammar at all was not exactly widespread, let alone the idea that it was necessary to study this grammar in a school setting. The general belief appears to have been that it was superfluous to study a language one already spoke. By contrast, Arabic grammar appears to have been taught precisely to the extent that it was *not* a spoken language.

Thus, in a very real sense, Ottoman Turkish did not have a grammar at all: it was a variable blend of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian elements, with no fixed rules as to which constructions and borrowings were the “correct” ones. Rather, complexity of expression and the use of uncommon Arabic and Persian words were means by which Ottoman officials could distinguish themselves both from the illiterate and uneducated majority of the population and from each other. Put differently: to the extent that Ottoman Turkish was seen as a language at all, the normativity it involved was articulated in terms of social distinction rather than rules of grammatical correctness.

In this cosmopolitan Ottoman order, as had happened earlier in the Sanskrit and Latin orders, one may witness a process of vernacularization starting in the late seventeenth century. This process started well before any substantial Western European intellectual or economic influence can be attested; moreover, it occurred in virtually all parts of the empire and among Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. Thus, the early modern period witnessed the rise of modern Greek, Armenian, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Romanian as written languages among Ottoman Christians; among Jews, of Ladino (a language rather closer to colloquial Spanish than to classical Hebraeo-Spanish); and among Muslims, of vernaculars such as Albanian and Kurdish. In a sense, even Ottoman Turkish, the official language of the state bureaucracy, became vernacularized. Due to the increasing need for *küttab*, or state scribes, the hitherto strict demands for admission into this exclusive class of officialdom were relaxed, and scribes with a less developed command of the three languages were admitted into the corps. In fact, the use of simpler forms of written Turkish was discreetly encouraged, to the dismay of some officials, who felt they could no longer show off their command of rare Arabic and Persian forms of expression.<sup>6</sup>

### THE FIRST GRAMMARS OF OTTOMAN TURKISH: INTERNALIZED ORIENTALISM?

Despite the importance of Ottoman Turkish for the state bureaucracy, one should not overestimate the Ottoman state’s concern with language. What is perhaps most remarkable is precisely the fact that, for most of the nineteenth century (let alone in

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6. Cf. Şerif Mardin, “Some Notes on an Early Phase in the Modernization of Communications in Turkey.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 3 (1961): 250–71.

earlier times), the Ottoman imperial authorities had little if any language policy worth the name. It was only in 1876 that the first Ottoman constitution declared Turkish to be “the official language of the state” (*devletin lisanı resmisi olan Türkçe*; art. 18), but in practice, this meant merely that knowledge of Turkish was a precondition for eligibility for public office and that debates in parliament were to be conducted in Turkish. No similarly restrictive language policies were developed for Ottoman state education, which remained resolutely multilingual.

The nineteenth century did mark a major change, however, in that it witnessed the printing and widespread circulation of larger numbers of grammatical works on local vernaculars. Thus, the first full-fledged grammar of Ottoman Turkish was published in 1851, commissioned by the Ottoman Academy of Sciences, Ahmed Cevdet Pasha and Fuad Pasha’s *Kavâ'id-i osmaniyye* (Fundamentals of Ottoman), followed in the same year by an abbreviation by Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, the *Madhal-i kavâ'id* (Introduction to the fundamentals). One of its distinguishing features is the fact that it treats the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish elements of the Ottoman language separately, rather than describing the latter as a full-fledged and unitary language in its own right.

One may well ask why no grammar of Ottoman Turkish had been written, or at least published, earlier. The answer lies probably in part with the changing language ideologies that made the standardization of the locally dominant vernacular and its being taught in school both a possibility and a desideratum. That is, this change appears to have resulted from both practical considerations and changing language-ideological beliefs. In any case, when it did appear, this grammar clearly filled a real need. Later grammars, such as Süleyman Hüsnü Pasha’s *Ilm-i Sarf-i türki* and Şemsettin Sami’s *Nev-usûl sarf-i türki* (significantly, works from the 1870s on generally speak of *türki* ‘Turkish’ rather than *osmanî* ‘Ottoman’), are set up along exactly the same lines as Cevdet and Fuad Pasha’s work, treating the same grammatical categories in the same order as their predecessors.<sup>7</sup>

A number of Turkish grammars written by Western authors preceded this work by several decades; hence, it is tempting to think they helped shaping it. The most important of these European grammars of Turkish is undoubtedly Arthur Lumley Davids’s *Grammar of the Turkish Language*.<sup>8</sup> Written when Davids was just nineteen, just

7. This order is: Chapter 1: noun (*isim*); Chapter 2: adjective (*sifat*); Chapter 3: pronoun (*kinâyat*); Chapter 4: verb (*fi'l*); Chapter 5: propositions (*edevat*); see Şemsettin Sami, *Nev-usûl sarf-i türki* (n.p., 1896), reprinted as *Şemseddin Sami ve, Nev-usûl sarf-ı türki*, edited and transcribed by Furkan Hamit (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, 2009).

8. Arthur Lumley Davids, *A Grammar of the Turkish Language: With a Preliminary Discourse on the Language and Literature of the Turkish Nations, a Copious Vocabulary, Dialogues, a Collection of Extracts in Prose and Verse, and Lithographed Specimens of Various Ancient and Modern Manuscripts* (London: Parbury & Allen, 1832).

before his untimely death, this work appeared in both English and French versions, in 1832 and 1835, respectively. Since French was the one modern Western European language studied by, and known to, appreciable numbers of nineteenth-century Ottoman officials, it is in the latter version, if any, that Davids's work is most likely to have become known to Ottoman authors. A number of authors have indeed concluded that this work has shaped the later grammars produced by Ottoman Turkish authors. Thus, in his hugely influential *Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Bernard Lewis writes that Davids's grammar exercised "considerable influence . . . its grammatical portions helped to inspire the *Kavaid-i osmaniye* of Fuad and Cevdet Pashas, published in 1851, the first modern Turkish grammar to appear in Turkey."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, David Kushner, in his rather more detailed discussion of the changing uses and ideologies of the Turkish language equally confidently—and equally vaguely—states that Davids's grammar "inspired" Cevdet and Fuad's Ottoman Turkish grammar.<sup>10</sup>

If correct, this would provide good evidence that modern Turkish grammars by Ottoman authors reproduce the categories and ideological preconceptions of modern Western orientalist philology. To the extent that Turkish nationalism was indeed shaped in part by philological categories, it could thus legitimately be claimed to be a case of "internalized orientalism." A closer comparison between the grammars of Davids and Cevdet and Fuad Pasha, however, does not corroborate these claims. Although there are clear similarities or convergences between the two works, including the effort to separate the "purely Turkish" from Arabic and Persian lexical, morphological, and syntactic borrowings, as well as a discussion of the relations between Ottoman Turkish and Chagatay Turkish, there are also considerable differences. These differences, in fact, are so serious that they appear to rule out any major "influence" or "inspiration" exercised by Davids's work on the grammatical and philological categories employed in the Cevdet and Fuad grammar.

A first difference that immediately leaps to our attention is a divergence in case systems: unlike Davids, Cevdet and Fuad do not distinguish locative and ablative cases; rather, they appear to treat their morphological realizations (respectively, *-de/-da* and *-den/-dan*) as postpositions indicating, respectively, location and separation rather than as case endings. A second, and even more intriguing, difference is the fact that unlike Cevdet and Fuad, Davids does not recognize a distinct category of the evidential, instead treating the evidential morpheme *-miş* as a generic past-tense marker. Famously, Turkish

9. Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 346–47; Köprülü Cevdet and Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *Kavā'id-i 'Oṣmāniye* (n.p., 1851), reprinted as Köprülü Cevdet and Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *Ḳavā'id-i 'Oṣmāniye*, edited and transcribed by N. Özkan (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, 2000).

10. David Kushner, *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism, 1876–1908* (London: Cass, 1977), 57.



distinguishes past-tense forms based on whether the speaker has or has not actually witnessed the event described:

(1) *Gitti/Gitmiş*: He went (and I saw it)/He went (as I have heard)

Unlike Davids, Cevdet and Fuad do systematically distinguish between what they call *mâzî-i shuhûdî* and *mâzî-i naklî* (respectively, roughly, “witnessed past” and “reported past” tense).

These and other divergences prove that Cevdet and Fuad owe far less to the work of Western orientalist than Lewis, Kushner, and others in their wake believe. More generally, they suggest that the theoretical vocabulary of nineteenth-century Turkish grammars owes less to Western philology (whether or not orientalist), and more to *arabiyya*, or the traditional study of the Arabic language, than is often suggested.<sup>11</sup>

This is but one case among many of the importance of premodern local forms of learning in the process of vernacularization and the rise of new language ideologies that legitimated writing down, studying, and regimenting languages, or language varieties, that had formerly been spoken only. As noted above, the process of vernacularization that had initiated in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire appears to have been driven by primarily domestic factors we are only starting to grasp; it had started prior to, and independently of, any major Western European intellectual or other influence. To the extent that it involved writing the grammars of local vernaculars, these grammars were generally expressed in the categories of learning associated with premodern cosmopolitan languages such as, most importantly, Koine Greek for Orthodox Christians and Arabic for Muslims.

Another oft-claimed case of imperialist and orientalist influence is James Redhouse, the author of a famous 1890 Turkish-English dictionary that set new standards for Turkish lexicography; it remained in print in its original form for decades and remains the basis of Turkish-English dictionaries used even today.<sup>12</sup> It is tempting to see Redhouse as a representative of a hegemonic modern Western philology and of British imperialist power; but on closer inspection, his biography and intellectual formation appear to point in a rather different direction.<sup>13</sup> Born in 1811, Redhouse did not have any philological training but instead an education focusing on mathematics; he was in fact expelled from school. At age fifteen, he first went to Turkey, apparently converting

11. On *arabiyya*, cf. Johann Fück's classic study, *Arabiya: Untersuchungen zur arabischen Sprach- und Stilgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1950).

12. See James Redhouse, *A Turkish and English Lexicon: Shewing in English the Significations of the Turkish Terms* (Istanbul: Çağrı Yayınları, 1890).

13. See Carter V. Findley, “Sir James W. Redhouse (1811–1892): The Making of a Perfect Orientalist?,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99, no. 4 (1979): 573–600.

to Islam not long after, and did not return to England until eight years later. He subsequently entered Ottoman state service, without either working for or having been trained in any British governmental or educational institution. At one of the new technical schools set up for the reforming Ottoman military, he improved his knowledge of Turkish, Persian, Arabic, and several modern European languages.<sup>14</sup> In other words, he served the Ottoman rather than the British Empire for most of his working life, and his writings show hardly any influence of modern orientalist philology.

### CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE DYNAMICS OF MODERN KNOWLEDGE

In short, the case of modern Turkish philology hardly serves to support any sweeping claim concerning “orientalist hegemony” in the field of the modern sciences of language. In the first decades of its development at least, Turkish nationalism, and more specifically the rise of modern vernacular philologies in the Ottoman Empire, can only partly be called a Western (let alone German Romantic) import product. At least as important, it appears, were domestic factors, notably the virtually empire-wide wave of vernacularizations that appears to have started in the late seventeenth century and the increasing need for more *küttab* and for a simpler language of administration as a result of the rapidly expanding bureaucracy from the eighteenth century onward.

All this raises many questions that cannot be answered here. For one thing, what were the decisive formative influences in the development of Turkish and other “philological nationalisms” in the later nineteenth century, if it was not German romantic nationalism or Western philological orientalism at large? And when and how did modern categories and institutions of knowledge become hegemonic, presuming that they did at some point in time?

As to the first question, the rise of a new, modernist, and exclusivist Turkish nationalism, guided in part by poets like Namık Kemal and realized by politicians like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, appears to have been shaped at least as much by the experience of the dramatic changes in the Ottoman Balkans, in particular the 1876–78 war with Russia. In subsequent decades, this region saw the volatile and explosive situation in Macedonia, where Greek, Serbian, and Bulgarian (and, at a later stage, Macedonian) revolutionary nationalist activists competed with each other for much of the later nineteenth century. One may well argue that it was this specifically revolutionary Balkan nationalism, rather than any German Romantic authors, that helped create a modernizing Turkish nationalism; but this topic deserves a rather more detailed discussion that I can give here.

As to the second question, it was, of course, only the formation of the modern Republic of Turkey and other modern nation-states in the 1920s that led to the creation

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14. Ibid., 577.

of modern state institutions of elementary and higher education, language academies, and, last but not least, state broadcasting in the national language.<sup>15</sup>

A further related question that I have not discussed here, but that deserves much more detailed attention, is whether and to what extent these new forms of knowledge were connected to new modalities of power. It is tempting to associate modern philology with the rise and concentration of sovereign state power, but one should resist this temptation. After the formation of modern nation-states in the wake of World War I, of course, a national culture was created from the top down, with the aid of new governmental institutions such as, most importantly, schools but also through the establishment of language academies. The process I have described above, however, occurs rather earlier and can be attributed only in part to changes in state power. Thus, one should not see states as the prime movers of nationalism in the region but rather as the result, or institutionalization, of a long-term process that went back much further. To the extent that efforts at writing the grammars of vernacular languages and teaching those languages in schools were instrumental in the creating of new national identities, and subsequently of nation-states, one can safely state that these efforts were hardly the *creation* of state power but rather its *precondition*. But a fuller account of exactly what forms and modalities of power were involved in the creation of new forms of vernacular philological knowledge and the concomitant regimentation of local languages must await another occasion.

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15. For a case study on these later processes, focusing on Kurdish in Iraq, see Michiel Leezenberg, "Vernacularization as Governmentalization: The Development of Kurdish in Mandate Iraq," in *Arabic and Its Alternatives: Religious Minorities and Their Languages in the Emerging Nation States of the Middle East (1920–1950)*, ed. by Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Karène Sanchez Summerer, and Tijmen Baarda (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 50–76. In fact, the Kurdish experience in Turkey, Iraq and other Ottoman successor states (which a number of authors have described as "internal" or "international" colonization) further complicates any simple dichotomies between Western colonial rulers and non-Western dominated peoples.

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