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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Between Text and Texture: An Exploration of the Socio-Stylistic Imports in Selected Songs of Ololade Asake <b>Mariam Titilope Olugbodi and Olanike Olaleru</b>	<b>1-10</b>
Home language Dynamics: A Study of Cross – Lingual Households in Jos <b>Anthonia Eleojo Dugga</b>	<b>11-20</b>
Analysis of the Realization of Hausa Sounds <b>Maimuna Muhammad Kabir</b>	<b>21-30</b>
An Overview of Language Acquisition Processes: A Review Approach <b>Fauziyya Muhammad Hassan</b>	<b>31-39</b>
Metaphorical Representation of Ideologies in Media Reportage on <i>Japa</i> Discourses <b>Dorcas Omaojo Idakwo<sup>1</sup>, Ezekiel Olajimbiti Opeyemi<sup>2</sup>, Peter Ochefu Okpeh<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>40-56</b>
Integrating Hausa Words and Phrases in French Language Instruction Enhances Learning Among Northern Nigerian Students <b>Seini Bello, Jibrilla Garba and Obidah Daniel</b>	<b>57-66</b>
Language, Literature and the Proverbial Tones of Cultural History in Ola Rotimi's <i>Kurunmi</i> <b>Atteh, Femi Yinka</b>	<b>67-77</b>
Evaluation of The State of French Language Teaching and Learning in Public Schools in Adamawa State <b>Yaouba Ousmanou, Abubakar Muhammad Baba and Seini Bello</b>	<b>78-88</b>
Language and Identity in Nigeria's Nollywood Dialogues <b>Shema'u Abubakar Umar</b>	<b>89-102</b>
The Role of Forensic Linguistics in Detecting and Curbing Plagiarism Among University Undergraduate in Katsina State <b>Muntari Babangida, Bamidele Ibiyemi Lydia, Esther Nuhu Samuel and Kwasau Blessing Shiyin</b>	<b>103-113</b>
Influence of L1 on Spoken English in Nigeria: An Assessment of Obolo Vowels <b>Ngor, Cornelius Iko-awaji</b>	<b>114-123</b>
A Pragma-Craft Analysis of Shehu Sani's Selected Tweets/Headlines <b>Dorcas Chide Abdulsalam</b>	<b>124-142</b>



Intertextuality in Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Press Releases on X  
**Oladele John Toluhi and Peter Ochefu Okpeh** 143-165

Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Lassa Fever Reportage in Selected Nigerian Newspapers  
**Muhammad Muhammad** 166-178

A Stylo-Linguistic Analysis of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu "Emi Lokan" Speech  
**TELLA Samson Adekunle, Ridwan Akinkunmi RABIU and Nafisat Bolanle AIYELABEGAN** 179-197

Morphological Analysis of Lexicons in Hausa Dialects  
**Mustapha Ibrahim Garba, Abubakar Isa Abubakar and Abdullahi Usman Garko** 198-207

A Comparative Multimodal Discourse Analysis of MTN and Airtel's Instagram Advertising Strategies  
**Suku Hyellamada Kenan, Ph.D and Juilet Aluke** 208-224

Protest and Politics of Idealization: a Rhetorical Analysis of *òKéDìjì's RẹRẹ Rún* and *QlÁTẹ́jú's Iná Ràn*  
**SAKA, Idayat Oyenike and FARINDE, Muibat Abiola** 225-237

Cohesion in Student's Academic Writing: A Linguistic Exploration of Language Organization and Meaning-Making  
**Emoruwa, Oluwatoyin Titilayo** 238-246

## **SECTION B: LITERATURE**

A Stylistic Exploration of Tanure Ojaides' *Narrow Escapes*, A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic  
**Taiwo Mary Akanmu, Olanike Olaleru and Mariam Titilope Olugbodi** 247-259

Writing and The Voice of Difference: Despondent and Repressed Archetypes in Commonwealth Literature  
**Aliyu Haruna Muhammad** 260-272

Ecopoetic Language And Symbolism In Selected Tomas Transtromer's Poems *The Deleted World*  
**Felix Oluwabukola Oladeji** 273-284



- Social Equality in Hausa Oral Songs: An Overview of [Anmaraya's Song 'Mai Akwai Da Mai Babu' (The Rich and The Poor)  
**Rabiu Bashir, Ph.D** 285-295
- Reimagining Power and Technology in African Science Fiction: Techno-Hybridity and The Aesthetics of Governance in Dilman Dila's *Yat Madit*  
**Dr. David Mikailu** 296-310
- Traumatic Embodiment and Resistance among Persons with Disabilities in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*  
**Asana Kehinde Alemede, Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo and Oluwatoyin Barnabas** 311-323
- Science, Myth, and Reality: Deconstructing Nigerian Women's Roles in Traditional and Modern Scientific Discourses through a Literary Lens  
**Idowu, Stephen Olufemi and Azeez, Abimbola** 324-347
- Variations in the Representations of the Igbo Belief in Chi in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*  
**Vivian Chukwu, Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo and Abba Abba** 348-359
- Human Trafficking, Organ Harvesting and the Politics of the Body in Ifeanyi Ajaegbo's *Sarah House*  
**Okache C. Odey** 360-370
- Gendered Silence in Igbo Funeral and Marriage Rites: Reclaiming Female Agency Through Cultural Reformation  
**Peace Chinenye Chidolue** 371-386
- Changing Roles of Male And Female Characters in The Twenty First Century Women Writings: An Example of Zaynab Alkali's *The Initiates*  
**Suwaiba Mohammed, Ph.D** 387-403
- The Language of African Literature in the Era of Globalisation  
**Fatima Muhammad** 404-418
- Deconstructing The Narrative of Helon Habila's *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Niger*  
**YOHANNA, Gilamdo Kwem and SAMUEL, Joy** 419-430
- Migration, Modern Slavery And Sexual Objectification Of Women In Nigerian Fiction: A Study Of Unigwe Chika's *On Black Sisters' Street*  
**Joshua, Josephine, Dathini Yinasimma Brigh, and Ali Baba Dada** 431-446



Widowhood Challenges and Expectations: an Analysis of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Seasons of Crimson Blossom*  
**Prof. Nesther Nachafia Alu and Sani, Sylvia** 447-459

Otherring in The Genre of Life Writing: a Literary Critique of Awolowo's *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*  
**Aliyu Sambo Alhassan and Professor Nesther Nachafiya Alu** 460-471

## SECTION C: COMMUNICATION

Influence of Instagram Celebrities' Fashion Lifestyle on Nile University Female Mass Communication Students  
**Ben Ita Odeba, Jummai Mbuzi Waziri and Desmond Onyemечи Okocha, Ph.D** 472-487

Influence of Japanese Animation on Indigenous Nigerian Cultures Among Youths in Abuja Municipal Area Council  
**Akuta Michelle Idialu and Farouk Umar Mohammed** 488-503

Perception of the Undergraduate Mass Communication Students of Bingham University towards Teaching as a Career  
**Ben Odeba, Ruth Barnabas and Bridget Azenda** 504-521

Assessing Brand Awareness of ULesson among Bingham University Undergraduate Students in the Digital Era  
**Ben Odeba; Ruth Barnabas, Bridget Azenda, and Melchizedec James Onobe, Ph.D** 522-545

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Digital Public Relations Strategies for Brand Awareness and Reputation Management by Andela in Abuja  
**Melchizedec James Onobe, PhD; Richard Okujeni, PhD and Ben Odeba** 546-575

Between Heritage and Reform: Traditional Education and Nigeria's Quest for Transformation  
**Fasehun Mercy Ayò and Òjó Ìlúfóyè Fáwọ̀lé** 576-592

## SECTION D: REVIEW

Udenta's Revolutionary Aesthetics and The African Literary Process: A Review  
**Christopher Anyokwu, Ph.D** 593-602

## SECTION E: CREATIVE WRITING

Humanity is Dead and other Poems  
**Ibrahim Fatima Usman** 603-605

# Home language Dynamics: A Study of Cross – Lingual Households in Jos

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the dynamics of language use within cross-lingual households in Jos, Nigeria, focusing on how these dynamics impact the acquisition, preservation, and transmission of indigenous minority languages. Drawing from sociolinguistic theories and language acquisition frameworks, this research examines the linguistic environment of ten mixed – marriage families through interviews, questionnaires, and audio recordings. Findings reveal that English has overwhelmingly become the primary language of communication in these households, with occasional support of Hausa (RL) for interaction, while the indigenous mother tongues are minimally used or entirely absent in daily interactions. This trend signifies a critical disruption in intergenerational language transmission, pointing to a broader phenomenon of language attrition among minority groups. In addition, this paper concludes by underscoring the role of the home unit as a pivotal domain for language preservation and calls attention to the socio-cultural and linguistic consequences of shifting language practices in urban multilingual societies.*

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## Introduction

Language is a vital aspect of human identity and culture, playing a crucial role in shaping our experiences, interactions, and relationships. In multilingual settings, language dynamics can be complex, like in multilingual households where family members speak different languages. Research has shown that language use at home can be influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic status, education level, and cultural background. By understanding the complexities of language use in households, insights can be gained into the role of language in shaping family relationships, cultural identity,

and social mobility. This subsequently helps to shed light on ways in which language is used to negotiate identity, culture, and power within families.

## The Cross-Lingual Family Unit

There are many communicative domains for language use, but as far as language acquisition is concerned, there is no better place for a child to acquire and learn his own language than within the family unit. The home is the first place where the child learns the basic elements and context of the usage of his language. The family is therefore the unit that can ensure the survival of any indigenous language and its

relevance tends to be preserved by the personal environment in which it is tended. Edwards, in highlighting the importance of the family unit, observes that:

Language may remain in religious and family rituals than in regular communicative use. The more private an ethnic marker is, the more it is exempt from external pressure and more likely to survive (1985:96).

Krauss confirms this as he explains that:

Home is the essential domain, and as long as home use remains stable, though another language may be used increasingly in school, work, religion, etc., the language remains stable, however threatened it may be by factors external to the home (2007:4).

The parents within the family unit dictate more than anyone else, what language is to be used as a means of communication in the early stages of a child's life. The home has the additional advantage of being a relaxed atmosphere, that provides both parents and other 'teachers' (aunties, uncles, grandparents, relatives) the opportunities for efficient language learning in the family set-up as the wider society makes provision for the learning of the official language Kutnabb-Kangas (1999:48).

The family unit is the natural habitat for all languages. By habitat, it is assumed that the home is a natural environment for language; that is a place where the natural conditions are favourable for language to thrive. The family unit is a place where the vitality of this language is assured and ensured. However, in the case of a child growing up in a cross-lingual household, the scenario before us may be one of great concern. When two organisms fight over a habitat, it is often a battle for limited resources and this competition can manifest in aggressive behaviour or fight for territory. Additionally, when organisms compete for the same resources, the dominant entity may end up outcompeting the other. It is against this backdrop that this study tries to suggest solutions that can assuage at least, the resultant effects on languages from these cross-lingual homes that are further combated by other forces capable of disintegrating them if drastic measures are not taken to save these languages.

### **Language as a Group Identity**

Determinants of personality are universal; every person is born, then learns to use his body for movement, and learns to explore his environment. He learns to protect himself. Every human being experiences hunger and sexual tensions, every human being must therefore adjust to the condition of being a social animal. If he must do this, he must understand them. He must therefore learn and speak their language. Language therefore



becomes a socialization process or tool for human existence and organization.

Safran quotes Brass' declaration, that 'language is useful in mobilizing large numbers of people around symbols and values with high emotional potentials' (1999:83). Language is therefore not just an individual matter, but also that which involves a group. It is therefore, the 'belonging of a group.' Our interest concerning the subject matter goes beyond the individual acquiring a language to a group identifying with a language. Language is the collective memory of the history of mankind". It is the collective memory par excellence of its owners and users. This is why language is so crucial to development." He further notes the functions of culture through its 'assemblage of ideals, values, and patterns of institutionalized behavior, socialized symbols and shared meanings underscore the centrality of language' (Prah, 2009:18). It is therefore to be presumed that anything that can affect a group, can have far-reaching effects on their future, and consequently on the development of language. With far-reaching effects of this nature, it becomes obvious that it should be assessed appropriately.

It can also be assumed that the loss of language for the child is not merely a linguistic loss but the loss of a cultural system as well. Based on the linguistic theories of language acquisition, at a tender age, the child

is expected to acquire the language(s) he /she is exposed to and if the mother tongue is intended, the child then is exposed to the target language/mother-tongue particularly in the home, which is a domain free from the encroachment of other languages. However, as Bamgbose notices:

The effects of the continued dominance can be seen in the alienation resulting in unfavorable attitudes to African languages. The attitudes may seem illustrated in the preference for early acquisition of these languages. (1998: 9)

The focus of this study is the social contexts in which language acquisition/learning and development take place. It is to be safely assumed that it is almost impossible to separate the impact of the changing contexts within society on the development of language. Therefore, variables that are involved in the transmission, growth and development of minority languages as it concerns children from various cross lingual homes are examined and analyzed.. Language death theories give us insights into factors that lead to language death. These theories argue that languages have died or gone into extinction in this century.

It is predicted that more languages are likely to die due to many factors, one of which is cross-cultural/cross-

lingual marriages (Fishman, 1997; Hinton, 1997; Crystal, 2002; Dalby, 2002; Brenzinger, 1992; Batibo, 2005). This approach focuses on the social context in which acquiring a mother tongue or first language takes place and the role that this context or contexts play in the construction of linguistic knowledge and identity' Myles, (2013: 60). This is so since it is now widely accepted by most researchers that both the nature and the nurture input play significant roles in the development of language in a child during the language acquisition process (Chomsky, 1975; Vygotsky, 2002; Crystal, 2002).

The premise of this study is that inter-ethnic marriage can bring about language endangerment with minority languages involved through the inability of offspring from these homes to acquire their mother tongues as the case may be (Haruna, 2007:53). The chances of this threat in Nigeria are greater still if not well managed, especially if two minority languages are involved or if one minority language comes in contact with any dominant language like English, the official language, or regional languages like Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba.

It is generally agreed that change is inevitable, however it is important to evaluate the possible impacts of change and decide if it is favorable or not. Not all forms of change lead to negative impact(s). If the perceived or apparent change is positive, it should be encouraged. The question can be asked as to what can be done

about the consequences of whatever change is being experienced. Some changes from an old pattern of practice might not necessarily mean it is less important. As De Oliveria notes, the fact 'that a practice is changed does not render it less important, but simply means it has been defined by circumstances and situations (1992: 225). In other words, she contends that one must specify the dimension of change one is referring to, as it is possible that radical change in one direction might not lead to major changes in others, while in some cases, this is quite possible.

The contemporary cross-lingual homes in Nigeria, (Jos) are the focus in this study of language transmission as they bring together couples from different minority groups. The modes of transmission of languages in these homes are particularly important to the study in view of the difficulty of children to learn their Mother tongue easily. The language 'disconnect' seems more obvious in children from mixed-marriage homes. The social context for language transmission, therefore, becomes a significant focus of study in this research as it might be expected that children from monolingual backgrounds are constantly and consistently exposed to their own indigenous language in their homes. This one language can therefore find an atmosphere that is more conducive to thrive in. This is usually not the case for children from cross-lingual homes.

### **The Context for Language Transmission**

The home is highlighted as the primary place to acquire a language, as the 'primary communication partners' are the parents or caregivers. For the child from the cross-lingual home – this arrangement, even though ideal, is not always feasible for several reasons that will be explained and elicited from the data. A child from a multilingual nation like Nigeria grows up amid at least three (3) languages. The child from this 'mixed' linguistic household is first of all, mostly removed from what ideally should be his/her native language environment, and then has to acquire/learn one of the three major languages in Nigeria and English the official language of Nigeria in addition to at least two indigenous languages.

For the child from the cross-lingual home, this arrangement even though ideal, is not always feasible for several reasons that will be explained and elicited from the data. The children in this study, from these 'mixed' marriage homes are first of all removed from their native language environment, and therefore have to learn in most cases, only one of the three major languages in Nigeria and English, the official language. From research, it is discovered that in most cases the parents do not speak their mother tongues to the children, hence the problem of a break in language transmission.

It would seem these days that a common phenomenon is to find children, especially from mixed marriage households, unable to speak their indigenous minority mother tongues or find that these children are not very fluent in their mother tongues. At first glance, it would seem apparent that these children are usually very fluent in their first languages (L1), whether it is English or Hausa or possibly any regional language of the region they live in which is different from their indigenous mother tongues (as three major languages are divided across Nigeria as regional languages i.e. Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo). It is also interesting to note that especially children with mixed language heritage, who are considered to be exposed to a richness of linguistic and cultural diversities, simply seem to opt for the regional language or the official language instead of any of the parents' mother tongue.

The home environment becomes a very crucial unit in this study as the home environment is one in which the child is not just a passive participant but is very active in the process of language acquisition. Cross-lingual marriages are present realities of change in social trends. These social changes have come at a price to language development and language preservation in children from cross-lingual homes. Most children from cross-lingual have difficulty learning and speaking their mother tongue languages. This points directly to a break in transmission from the parents to

children. By all indication, biologically healthy children who are raised in cross-lingual households are quite capable of acquiring their indigenous languages in addition to any other languages as they grow.

All things being equal, acquiring any language is simply a natural phenomenon with children, as they simply acquire a language spoken in their environment. They learn as they are exposed to language, without any formal teaching. They begin to 'notice' that language has structured forms and rules and they learn intuitively. Such is the power of the innate abilities of children in their early years. It is therefore assumed that if the children are to acquire their mother tongues, they must be exposed to the languages. Whether the 'language environment' is friendly or hostile will determine the growth and development of a language.

Rather, as in most cases in Nigeria, they acquire English as the official language first and then a regional language or vice versa while some are able to learn their indigenous language, even though the number recorded was few. The language right of a child to acquire his/her mother tongue seems to be violated at this point. The changes that have brought radical changes to the minority languages in contact within the cross-cultural marriage set-up are what this study attempts to address.

It has become important to look at the changing roles of homes in cross-

lingual households and analyze the effect it has on language development. Specific interest is placed on the nature of the relationship and interaction between a major language and a minor language or one minority language and any other language in cross-lingual households. The study of the language environment sees how the interaction plays out on the fate of minority languages that have other factors working against their growth and development.

The multilingual settings of languages in Nigeria play very important roles in the transmission/acquisition / preservation of languages that take place among the various cross-lingual homes. The Nigerian society is therefore a very interesting one as one considers it as a context within which languages are transmitted. Officially, the English language is used as the lingua franca, while the major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are used unofficially as regional languages for administration along with Pidgin. The occurrences of multiple languages indicate the possibility of choice.

For there to be the possibility of a choice though, the language has to be first of all be acquired or learnt as the case may be. For that to happen there must be some form of language input. It is noted that there are a lot of controversies concerning what level or amount of linguistic input is necessary for the acquisition of any language. The need for linguistic

input is however not argued by any linguist or language teacher as it is clear that without language input there will be no language output of any sort. As Adebija rightly observes 'choice in a multilingual situation is an important principle of societal and individual growth. Choice implies the existence of an alternative' (2004:1) and when this is possible, people invariably reach out to a language for many reasons. Some language choices might therefore be obvious while some not so obvious while considering why people pick a language at the time they do. The options of language choice for use, as far as languages are concerned, have been linked to various factors. What is clear though is that people make their choice based on many factors ranging from personal to social reasons. Crystal (1997:5) asserts that 'without political, military or economic power, no language can progress' as it seems that people make their language choices based on the political, economic and social power of a language. It is possible therefore, to say that languages are viewed in terms of what they can do. The more economically or politically viable language continually gains more 'power' while the 'neglected' one can be seen, and as Adebija sees it, as 'a small group language, language mostly in decline' (2004:13). While the dynamics of choice is examined, the frequency or lack of use of a language is also examined within these homes, as we ask ourselves:

1. What language is easily reached out to for communicative interactions mostly in each home and why?
2. What is the frequency of use within these chosen households?

For these, we might apply a general principle of automaticity which will cause us to explore why a language is preferred over another and is used consistently and continually in the face of a language loss threat to their mother tongue.

### **Methodology**

The research area covered is Jos, an urban area in north-central Nigeria. Being an urban centre, Jos readily presents the kind of language complexity identified as appropriate for this study. The researcher used the random Snowball Sampling method to obtain useful information from subjects who were appropriate for the study because they were parents and children from cross-lingual families. A total of ten (10) families were selected and interviewed and responses to the questionnaires allowed the researcher to make inferences concerning linguistic attitudes and language learning habits in cross-lingual families with minority language backgrounds. Further to this, recordings of actual conversations within the households were carried out.

The data collected were analysed in line with the theoretical framework. The analytical procedure for this

study was first to understand the issues of the general characteristics of the sampled population, their perception of the importance of language and their current actual disposition to their languages. These linguistic issues are itemized:

- i. Mother tongues are identified.
- ii. Language attitudes to the mother tongue within the various households are projected.
- iii. Language(s) of interaction within the homes, both from responses in the questionnaire and audio recordings are identified.
- iv. The habitual linguistic patterns identified within the homes of participants.

These are quantitatively analysed using simple percentages to establish trends and dispositions of language learning and usage among parents and children of cross-lingual homes.

### **Apparent Linguistic Situation in Cross-Lingual Households**

The typical linguistic pattern visible within most families in cross-lingual language contexts is that in which one or both of the parents in the family speak a different language of their own. This apparent linguistic situation prompted a study of this nature and this assumption has been proven by this study to be accurate. Having studied the linguistic activities and linguistic patterns within these families in line with the

objective of this study, a few projections can be made. By assessing the linguistic habits in the transmission of mother tongues to their children as revealed by data, if the linguistic input in these households remain at the same level, the children's exposure to MTs remain unchanged or unaltered and the pattern within the home continues to be same pattern observed now.

### **Results**

The data showed that both parents and children considered the acquisition of their Mother Tongue (L1) to be desirable. Self-administered recordings from ten cross-lingual households randomly selected from among the sample population constituted group-type interviews to test and validate the process of linguistic interaction among households of various minority languages. The analysis revealed both for responses by questionnaires (parents /youth) and audio recordings from selected families that:

1. The dominant language identified in all families is English. This is a consistent pattern generally from responses and also the identified pattern of language interaction within the selected homes. The uses of indigenous languages evidenced in the sequence of conversational events are words, phrases and /or interjections. These elements for substantial language

acquisition would be inadequate for the vitality and preservation of language if the target is language competence and intergeneration transfer.

2. In accordance to the theories adopted by this study, linguistic input from parent to children and the issue of consistency of language input within these families is considered insufficient or inadequate for language competence with regards to language output that ensures language preservation and growth.
3. In this study, the English language appears to have assumed the role and status of the first language (L1) in these homes and consequently, can be said to play the role of mother tongues (MTs) in the homes interviewed. Sometimes, English is sparsely supported by Hausa as a majority regional language. This is true of both parents as observed by data. This pattern of linguistic habit in families studied portend to language attrition of indigenous languages in the cross lingual homes.
4. In this study, the English language appears to have assumed the role and status of the first language (L1) and mother tongues (MTs) in all homes interviewed. Sometimes, English is

sparsely supported by Hausa as a majority regional language. This is true of both parents as observed by data. This pattern of linguistic habit in families studied portend to language attrition of indigenous languages in the cross lingual homes.

### **Conclusion**

In examining the communicative languages used routinely in the cross-lingual households in Jos, the study found that the language of communication in these households do not show the use of MTs. As elicited from the questionnaires, English is basically the language of use and is closely followed by Hausa the RL. The home unit that is supposed to be the safest place for protection from encroachment from other languages is not the case in these households. In the 10 households studied, the Endangered Languages (Els) or languages that tend towards being lost for lack of use within these households are all minority languages represented within the selected households and it is also noted that 'major' languages identified are also not used for communicative interactions. However, Hausa is used by a few of the families. The major languages identified in these homes apart from Hausa are also threatened.

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