

Original Research

English and Malay language policy and planning in Malaysia

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The Malay-English relationship in Malaysia has witnessed a pendulum shift and ignited critical debates. The Malay nationalist discourse on language policy is evident. Nonetheless, the concurrent significance of English in the era of globalisation is undeniable. This article highlights English (and Malay) language policy and planning (LPP) in Malaysia in relation to other languages together with their societal and educational impact by synthesising research studies and published documents by the Malaysian government and their agencies. The article, firstly, includes the ethnic, linguistic, and religious profile of Malaysia. Secondly, the role of Malay and English in pre-independence Malaysia, the post-independence LPP of Malay and English with reference to the corpus and status planning of multi-ethnic-lingual-cultural Malaysia. Lastly, the shifting status of English in LPP of Malaysia to address globalisation in the 21st century and the economic interest of the nation have been discussed. The recent change in LPP to uphold Malay and emphasising English learning has also been discussed together with the language acquisition planning status. The study reveals that policymakers have tried to maintain the dominance of Malays in Malaysia, uplifting the status of Malay through status and corpus planning. Although such planning negatively impacted the acquisition of English, the prestige of English in Malaysia was never lost, especially in education and other important domains.

KEYWORDS: English, Malay, Malaysia, multilingualism, language policy, language planning, LPP



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1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a unique case for language policy and planning (LPP) research in a multilingual context where English is used widely. Malay and English have co-existed in the country since its independence. However, their status in Malaysia has witnessed a pendulum shift. As a result, Malay has frequently been considered as having to play a vital role in promoting national identity by connecting various ethnicities. Malaysia became one of

the countries that effectively minimised the use of English and developed a local language after obtaining independence from the British (Hashim, 2014; Ismail et al., 2018). Following that, Malaysia's linguistic calculation is largely based on the interaction of English with Malay and, in passing, other languages such as Chinese and Tamil. The recent rise of English as the global language, as well as 'the ubiquitous process of economic globalisation and transnational activities of popula-

tion mobility' (Lo Bianco & Bal, 2016, p. 4-5), have contributed to the current unplanned multilingualism (Albury, 2020) in Malaysia, which was originally intended to be a Malay-based monolingual society.

Language planning, according to Cooper (1989, p. 45), is a '*deliberate effort to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocations of their language codes*'. However, the critical language policy concept implies that a deeper understanding of the underlying motives of language policy discourses is essential. Although initially considered under language planning, critical language policy researchers challenged the idea that a community's way of speaking could be planned and changed by authoritative agencies and language users mostly depend on the beliefs, practices, and even regulations.

Language policy (LP) recognises the multiple forces that influence behaviour toward language (Spolsky, 2009). From the language policy perspective, it is important 'to capture the complex social and political context' of these policy shifts before accepting 'the claims of state authorities' regarding a language policy (Tollefson, 2002, p. 4). Sociolinguistic analysis of language policy and planning is needed to capture the past to understand the present and future co-existence of English and Malay in Malaysia. From a historical-structural standpoint, LPP, in which '*historical processes are linked with language policies that contribute to (or undermine) language-related hierarchies*' (Tollefson, 2015, p. 141) in the society and education of Malaysia, a critical discussion is important to look at language policy adoption and language planning.

This article aims to look at language policy adoption and language planning as it has been carried out by the Malaysian government and its agencies by synthesising LPP and educational documents together with available published research studies on Malay and English education and LPP in Malaysia. Based on this conceptual analysis, the three elements in a language policy – corpus planning, status planning, and acquisition planning –

are units of the analysis in this article to find out how Malay and English have been planned. The article, firstly, studies the ethnic, linguistic, and religious profile of Malaysia. Secondly, the role of Malay and English in the pre-independence era of Malaysia, the post-independence LPP of Malay and English with reference to corpus and status planning of multi-ethnic-lingual-cultural Malaysia has been discussed. Lastly, the shifting status of English in the LPP of Malaysia to address globalisation in the 21st century and economic interests of the nation has been discussed, and the recent change in LPP to uphold Malay and emphasise English learning has also been discussed together with language acquisition planning status.

2. ETHNOLINGUISTIC AND RELIGIOUS REPERTOIRE OF MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

Malaysia had a total population of 30,374,472 as of December 2014. Malays are the country's dominant political group, accounting for 67.4% of the population, followed by Chinese (24.6%) and Indians (7.3%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Malay is Malaysia's official language. The former colonial language, English, is now a de facto second language (Coluzzi, 2017; Ismail et al., 2018). Since Malaysia has many ethnic and racial groups, other languages also hold prestige and utility in those ethnic groups (see Table 1). In terms of language, religion, and culture, Malays are generally homogeneous, and despite the fact that distinct dialects are spoken in different states, they all speak Malay (Hashim, 2009). Almost the entire population is Muslim and follows the Malay way of life. The second largest population is made up of Chinese, who are homogeneous as a race but are divided into different Chinese dialect groups (Hashim, 2009), and are not religiously homogeneous either. The majority of Chinese religious adherents are Buddhists, but others are Christians and Muslims. On the other hand, Indians, the third largest ethnic group, are divided into various subgroups and castes (Hashim, 2009). They speak a number of languages, including Tamil and Malayalam, and are primarily Hindus, Christians, or Muslims.

Table 1
Spoken languages in Malaysia and their functions

SPOKEN LANGUAGE	FUNCTION OF THE LANGUAGE
Malay	Symbol of nationalism; governmental jobs; medium of instruction (MOI) in schools and higher education; inter-community communication
English	Opportunity of private sector jobs; used as a <i>lingua franca</i> in higher education and internationalisation; prestigious language; economic and technological benefit, inter-community communication
Chinese	Chinese identity; Chinese community language; economic benefits associated with Chinese in private sectors (Chinese are a major economic force in Malaysia)
Tamil	Language and identity of Tamils
Arabic	Associated with the major religion of Malaysia, Islam; used as a major language in several states such as Kelantan, Kedah, Johor
Other minority languages such as Bangla and Panjabi; other Chinese and Malay dialects	These are mainly the immigrants' languages used for intra-community communication

3. ROLE OF ENGLISH AND MALAY IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE ERA OF MULTILINGUAL MALAYSIA

English in the Malaysian society and education has its roots in the country's colonial past. As a former British colony with close contemporary diplomatic connection with the United Kingdom and the role of English in today's world, English has high prestige and utility in Malaysia, necessitating the need to maintain the country's standard of English language teaching and learning (Rashid et al., 2017). During the colonial period, English proficiency 'brought privileges, esteem, and wealth' (Hanewald, 2016, p. 183) in Malaysia for those who could speak it. The British established Malay medium schools to cater to the needs of local Malays besides the madrasahs and other Islamic schools (Chan & Abdullah, 2015). However, they did not establish a uniformed educational system and medium of instruction (MOI) policy in the multilingual educational system. The Barnes Report, published in 1951, favoured Malay-English

bilingualism stating: 'We have given prolonged thought to the language question. It has been clear throughout those two languages, and only two languages, should be taught in the national schools, and that these two must be official languages of the country, namely, Melayu (Malay) and English' (Article 7 of Barnes Report as cited in Hashim, 2009, p. 38). In contrast, the Fenn-Wu report, also published in 1951, stated that English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil needed to be strengthened in order to strengthen the construction of a multilingual national education system (Hashim, 2009). The proposal of The Razak Report of 1956 was to establish two types of primary schools – national schools that would use Malay as the MOI and the other as a national-type school. They can employ English, Chinese, or Tamil as their MOI. At the secondary level, a unified national school system was advocated. However, the report also mentioned that Chinese schools might continue to use the common syllabus and tests. Such policy initiation has not only impacted national schools

alone but also impacted the language policy in vernacular schools and communities (Gill, 2007) and the overall use of the language(s) in Malaysia.

4. SUCCESSFUL CORPUS PLANNING OF MALAY

In the beginning of the 1970s, corpus planning of Malay was initiated. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature, Malaysia) was established as a statutory body to develop and improve Malay as the national language and plan Malay corpus and uplift the status of Malay in society. Two aspects of corpus planning were the

main targets, which are known as graphisation and modernisation (Cooper, 1989). To pursue the goal, the government set up a transnational committee of Malaysian and Indonesian language planners and academicians. With regard to graphisation, *Jawi*, which is a modified Arabic script that was used to write Malay, was replaced by the establishment of a common graphic system based on the Latin script for Malaysia and Indonesia in 1972. Regarding the modernisation of Malay, one of the most notable measures was the coining of scientific and technological terms in Malay (Table 2).

Table 2

English terminologies in Malay

ENGLISH	MALAY
Airport	Lapangan terbang
Toilet	Tandas
Library	Perpustakaan
Student	Pelajar
University	Universiti
School	Sekolah

According to Gill (2004), Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka spent RM 38 million between 1991 and 2000 on modernisation and strengthening of Malay roles and status in Malaysia. The corpus planning of Malay was one of the most significant post-colonial era language planning achievements in the region, when governments successfully updated their desired mother tongue and boosted its status through policy adoption (Gill, 2005).

5. STATUS PLANNING OF MALAY AND ENGLISH: A PENDULUM SHIFT

5.1. Malay dominance over English through status planning after independence

Historically, Malay and English have been used to serve political aspirations in Malaysia (Badiozaman, 2019). Furthermore, the status of lan-

guage in education policy and planning is lost in the tensions between nationalistic sentiments and internationalisation demands and the aspiration of becoming a member of an advanced economy by 2020. The status of Malay and English has been revisited several times. These events are discussed below.

After nearly two centuries of existence as a British colony, the Federation of Malaya attained independence in 1957. Post-liberation countries typically have a high level of nationalistic characteristics in their outlook, whether social, political, linguistic, or educational. The timeframe was referred to as the Linguistic Nationalism Phase in Malaysia (Gill, 2003, p. 12). Such a hyper-nationalistic language policy instigated reaction against English and made Malay the national language of

the country since it was the language of indigenous people, which was and is the largest ethnic group at that time and now.

Managing a new-born state's language policy, status planning was important. Status planning refers to the attempt undertaken to promote a language's status and expand the domains in which it will be adopted. English, therefore, had to let go its earlier status as the official language to smoothen the way for Malay to become the official language of the state. Through the officialising of Malay, English also lost its status in education. From being the MOI of education, it has become a mere foreign language to be taught in schools. It was a key decision in the context of a newly born nation's aspiration for the future. Political considerations manifested in the post-independence period when feelings of hyper-nationalism were reflected in the language policy because policymakers regarded the strong need to establish a common language as a unifying force to draw multi-ethnic groups together, which outweighed the economic and linguistic considerations of English in the decision-making process of language policy. As a result, Malaysia, like many other post-colonial countries (see Rahman & Pandian, 2018), strove to develop its own national identity through its language policy after independence and the Malay language was believed to be a quick solution to unite the nation.

The language beliefs of policymakers played an important role in the adoption of Malay in all domains of Malaysian society. As Spolsky (2009) explains, language beliefs are the deep-held attitude regarding a language that would be used in a society. Malaysia's language policy adoption was aspired by two reasons. Firstly, the Malay-dominated government perceived non-Malays as biased to English and preferring English over Malay. This Malay domination in language policy brought a radical migration to abroad for study and settlement of a section of non-Malays who thought that Malaysia would lose its global competitiveness due to the adoption of Malay as the MOI in education and the official language of the country (Gill, 2003). Secondly, among the colonial languages,

English was the most powerful language of that time due to its economic, political, and scientific relevance. Thus, a powerful language like English would have side-lined Malay if the status of English was not relocated to a less dominant place (Gill, 2000). However, in contrast, after gaining self-rule from Britain in 1959, Singapore chose to become officially a multilingual state, selecting four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil (Dixon, 2005). However, among these, English is promoted as the 'working language' of Singapore for inter-ethnic communication and as the 'neutral' language to avoid giving any ethnic group an advantage in primary and later education.

Further, an initiative was taken to reduce the role of English through the education act of 1961, where the change in MOI from English to Bahasa Malaysia (BM) affected the use of English as well as the standard of the language. According to Mohamed et al. (2008), Malaysian students' proficiency in English has decreased as a result of the change of MOI. This change in MOI was reflected in the language conversion of the University of Malaya. The conversion began in 1965. Given the difficulty of switching the MOI from English to Malay all at once, a bilingual system was implemented as a stopgap remedy. Malays were employed to teach art topics, whereas English were used for teaching science and technology.

Despite the motivation and policy adoption as specified in the Razak Report of 1956 towards a unified system of national education with BM as the MOI, it was not implemented in education until the riot of May 13, 1969 (Ali et al., 2011). This went down as a black day in Malaysia's history – the one and only time when racial riots took place there (Gill, 2005). One of the outcomes of this outburst was the establishment of a Malay-medium university – Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) – to uphold the status of the language and send a message to the commons. *'There was a strict and rapid implementation of a national language policy, based on the belief that, if the status of the Malay language was not upgraded, the political and economic status of*

Malays would never improve and national cohesion would not be achieved' (Baldauf, 1997, p. 197). In 1970, Malay officially substituted English as the MOI in primary education in several phases. Beginning in 1983, all topics, including the sciences, were taught in Malay in all public universities, in accordance with the objective (Gill, 2004). This change in the status of English negatively impacted the acquisition planning of English as well as the learning outcomes (Ali et al., 2011).

Evidently, the decisions made about English and Malay were 'top-down' in nature and the policy came '*from people of power and authority to make decisions for a certain group, without consulting the end-users of the language*' (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p. 196). The access policy to English did not face disapproval from non-Malays explicitly; however, it was not an inclusive community policy either, which, according to Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), is key in adopting any language in education policy. The change in MOI from English to BM affected the use of the language as well as the standard of English. It has reduced the use of English in all public domains, and education has suffered most.

5.2. Rise of English as global language in Malaysia: Shifting status of English

In 1991, the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Bin Mohammad, proposed the goal Vision 2020 with the aim of getting Malaysia recognised as an advanced world country. Mahathir realised the negative impact of Malay as the sole MOI in education in a global era and understood that Malaysians would not be able to meet the challenges of globalisation if they were not proficient in English, especially in science and mathematics. He said: '*Education is for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. If you have to use a language which makes the knowledge more easily accessible, you should use that language. Historically, the Europeans learnt Arabic in order to access the knowledge of the Arabs [...] but because of their work they also learnt Greek in order to access the language and knowledge [...] so if you want knowledge, you have to acquire the language in which the knowl-*

edge is available' (Gill, 2007, p. 109). The administration announced new initiatives, such as the intention to teach mathematics and science in English in all Malaysian state schools beginning in 2003 (the ETeMS project, or English for Teaching Mathematics and Science). It was a change in the MOI to teach science and mathematics, which would allow students '*to acquire proficiency in English while learning the content*' (Hall, 2015, p. 154) of science and mathematics, without altering the official statuses of Malay and English. However, the programme was politically contentious, drawing criticism from both Malay activists concerned about the loss of Malay importance in the society and Chinese educational groups concerned about the threat to the use of Chinese in Chinese schools (Hanewald, 2016). People's educational concern about the change was that due to their difficulties understanding the MOI, less skilled pupils would perform poorly in Mathematics and Science (Norfaizah & Marzilah, 2010). The other concern was the teachers' capability of teaching English and teaching those subjects in English. Even though the policy's goal was not exclusively focused on English as a subject (Rashid et al., 2017), it exacerbated the problem for English language teachers by requiring them to uplift the level of English proficiency of the students to use the language in Mathematics and Science classes. Mathematics and Science teachers, on the other hand, who were not skilled in English, as was clear after nearly 40 years of de-Englishisation, and who had not been educated in teaching subjects such as Mathematics and Science in English, found it difficult to use English in classrooms.

5.3. A backward language policy: A lose to English is a gain for Malay

After four years of implementation of ETeMS, the policy shifted once more under the leadership of the new Prime Minister Najib Razzak in 2012, reversing the MOI of Science and Mathematics back to BM. As the Ministry of Education (MOE) stated, '*studies conducted by various parties found that the implementation of ETeMS was not carried out as desired. Studies also disclosed that pupils*

‘However, while the new policy shift reflects the ideology of Malay dominance once again and has established Malay as the country’s official language, these policy shifts in the new millennium have also failed in their attempts in language acquisition plans for both languages’

found it difficult to learn Mathematics and Science in English as they were not proficient in the English Language’ (as cited in Rashid et al., 2017, p. 111).

Such policy alteration has popularised Najib among politicians who are conservative regarding Malay superiority. However, despite previous disagreements regarding implementing ETeMS when it was initiated, the parents did not take the decision to change back to Malay as MOI positively (Hall, 2015). They were more concerned about the English proficiency of their children and believed that ETeMS will play a crucial role in the future of their children through keeping pace with science and technology in an increasingly globalised world (Nor et al., 2011).

After the historical development and shift of language policies on several occasions, the latest English-related policy adoption in education is known as MBMMBI (Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris or Malay for Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language). The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 placed English accordingly. It is an attempt to overcome the problems of the past. This new approach, on the other hand, somehow was reminiscent of the country’s post-1961 educational system, in which the Malay language was utilised as the MOI for all disciplines and English was given a special focus. It takes into account previous answers to global difficulties as well as new ones and envisions changes in the secondary education that will result in a better English proficiency and a wider basis of knowledge. Although the use of English as a MOI has been phased out, English is still taught as a strong

and mandatory subject at the secondary schools and is used as a second language in multilingual Malaysia (Hashim & Leitner, 2014). The new shift reflects the ideology of Malay dominance once again over English in Malaysia.

6. OUTCOMES OF ACQUISITION PLANNING OF MALAY AND ENGLISH

Acquisition planning of Malay and English has not played out as intended, and both languages have been affected. Even though English is no longer used as a MOI, it is still taught as a strong and mandatory subject at the end of secondary school (Hashim & Leitner, 2014), which has proven to be less effective from the perspective of English language acquisition in the country. However, while the new policy shift reflects the ideology of Malay dominance once again and has established Malay as the country’s official language, these policy shifts in the new millennium have also failed in their attempts in language acquisition plans for both languages.

In terms of acquisition planning (see Tollefson, 2015), seeing the picture of language ecology in Malaysia, Malay is the most widely spoken language, almost all Malaysians have the minimum proficiency, and thus, it apparently seems to be a success of the policy makers. However, despite all efforts to improve the status of Malay in the society, *‘it has not helped Malay students to improve their linguistic and cultural knowledge of their fellow citizens’* (Coluzzi, 2017, p. 29) and the formation of Malay identity (Hashim, 2009). It is partly because of the lack of opportunities to use the language everywhere. However, primarily it is because of the perceived low prestige and utility of Malay in different language domains despite the overall effort made to elevate its status. Although Malay remains as the language for official purposes and MOI in schools and universities, it is evident that acquisition of Malay by Chinese and Indians has not been as the policymakers expected. The elite status of English in other social domains, particularly in the job sector, is increasing the demand for English proficient graduates (Pillai & Ong, 2018). Additionally, more than 50% of the

students currently enrolled at international schools in Malaysia, where the primary MOI is English, are Malaysians (Nasa & Pilay, 2017). Thus, a parallel MOI is in practice, which was not planned in the macro-level policymaking, driven by the meso-level actors. Several instances can be found of parallel language policy in other non-native English-speaking countries in the post-colonial era (see Rahman et al., 2020). Both Mathematics and Science are expected to be taught in Malay; however, despite successful corpus planning, the question remains whether Malay has the linguistic resources that it needs to possess to deal with these two subjects. This is because, despite a corpus change to modernise the language, STEM books and content still remain in English.

English acquisition planning has also been in a turmoil. Although English has always been learned and taught as an important second language alongside Malay, and learning and teaching of the English language has been ensured for Malaysian children from the age of six, competent acquisition of the language has not occurred (Azman, 2016). In the current situation of English in Malaysia, the proficiency among students and teachers is low, and teaching of English in schools remains a key concern (Rashid et al., 2017). The acquisition planning of language is directly related to the problem. Almost all of the current schoolteachers learned English in the post-independence era. Therefore, Malaysia is experiencing a generation of English teachers who are not proficient in English. However, English has recently received significant importance in the Malaysian Educational Blueprint (MEB) (2013-2025), and the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) was recently formed to plan for the adoption of the CEFR and to benchmark Malaysian students' English language learning with the global standard.

7. CONCLUSION

This article highlighted the issues related to LPP in multilingual and multicultural Malaysia chronologically. It also discussed the three dimensions of language planning together with the underlying ideology and reality of language policy

moves. Although Malay adoption of the Latin script and modernisation of Malay terminologies were examples of a successful corpus planning, the status planning and acquisition planning did not produce results as intended. Although the global influence of English undeniably influences recent policy shifts, particularly the utility of English, political motives also are at work since Malay dominance in language policy was maintained in the previous language policy. This is despite the fact that the utility of Malays within communities is low and has been declining among Malays themselves (Hashim, 2009). Rather, it is associated with the democratic rights of all races and social justice. According to Lo Bianco (2015, p. 9), *'governments, especially but not only through education, can influence whether language issues contribute to social cohesion or continue as causes of social conflict'*. However, in the case of Malaysia, it has not been attained at all until now (David & Yee, 2010).

In LPP adoption and implementation, it is important to understand the choice of language. In an ideal language planning context, there would be a single national education system that embraced the diversified interests of all ethnic groups. However, as Tsui and Tollefson (2004, p. 2) explained, *'behind the educational agenda are political, social, and economic agendas that serve to protect the interests of particular political and social groups'*.

The decision to uplift Malay while side-lining the major second language, English, and other languages, might also be explained as a need for the time being for a newly born nation to unite its multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multireligious population. However, in the context of Malaysia, it could be agreed that language policy in Malaysia has served the interest of Malays, the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, through the choice of language and institutionalised the educational agenda to establish and empower Malay (race, language, and culture) in the first place.

The significance of the Malay and English language debate in Malaysia is critical and beyond linguistic issues. English could also be a solution

to the ongoing social divisions in Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multilingual society, which is currently at crossroads in its history (David & Yee, 2010). Keeping aside the advantages of English as the international language, it also has the advantage of potentially weakening the politics of social separation in pluralistic societies such as Malaysia (Campbell, 2018), by neutralising the linguistic superiority of a certain group. The choice of Malay as the official language of Malaysia, rather than English, as it was the case in many other former British colonies, was made because of its prestige and position of English in the context.

Furthermore, English has the potential to serve as a neutral language in a multi-ethnic and multilingual setting. For example, English is one of Singapore's four official languages, along with Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay, and it is one of the most widely spoken. When it comes to building a shared national identity in Singapore, however, English is the only language of inter-ethnic contact, and this appears to have produced better outcomes there than in Malaysia (Coluzzi, 2017). The development of a genuine Malaysian identity, rather than a Malay identity for everyone, is critical, as is the reversal of the traditional roles of religion and ethnicity, which are contentious social categories of social identity. English, which is a religiously and racially neutral language in Malaysia,

could have been a solution because it would have allowed Malay, the country's primary historical language, to remain an official language together with English. This could have aided in the intermingling of one ethnic group into another.

However, as the current scenario clearly demonstrates, imposing one's will onto others is not the best approach. It is essential that the approach to language planning is constantly flexible and that it is founded on the premise that people should not be coerced but persuaded to speak a foreign language.

Lastly, in order for a policy to remain relevant, it must be updated. A careful planning of the English language will bring great economic utility in the era of globalisation. Thus, the following recommendations may be considered. First, economic agenda is key for Malaysia. As discussed above, the private job sector is booming in Malaysia and demanding knowledge of English. Therefore, English is a pragmatic need for the nation. Secondly, it is understandable that resistance will be there to secure the ethnical, lingual, and cultural identity of these communities. Thus, learning of English (even that of Malay) should be carefully put forward and rationalised and must be used to bridge the urban and rural divide by presenting English in a way that makes its teaching and learning accessible and relevant to all sections.

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