'SPEECH COMMUNITY: A CRITIQUE OF LABOV'S DEFINITION

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Speech community is an important notion because language is both an individual possession and a social possession. Certain people have similar linguistic properties. i.e. they speak the same language or the same variety. Thus they can be said to be members of the same speech community. Since language is a social entity and it is always used in a social environment, it is crucial to define the social space in which the language or variety is taking place. Besides speech community is one of those global terms that is widely used in sociolinguistics. Other related concepts such as speech field, speech event, speech network, speech situation etc. are embraced by the larger concept, i.e. speech community. In fact, defining speech community determines, in one way another, the nature of all smaller units of study (Braithwaite 1985). Because of the importance of this unit many different definitions of speech community have been presented by various scholars working in the different branches of sociolinguistics, (Gumperz: Ethnography of Speaking. Le Page: Creole Studies, Fishman: Sociology of Language, Labov: Quantitative Approach; to name some.)

One of these definitions was presented by William Labov in the early seventies. He writes:

> "The speech communities is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt type of evaluative patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage" (1972a: 120-1).

It may come as a surprise to question and examine such a definition of speech community as Labov's since it has been in use for the past two decades and so much has been written about it.

However, the aim of this paper is to examine the definition in the light of numerous studies that have been conducted in the last twenty years, particularly those studies that were carried out on Arabic. The objective is to see how far the definition proves accurate in the light of new information and results which were not available when the definition was first introduced.

I have chosen to comment on Labov's definition because it is quite different from others in the field, and thus invites more discussion. Labov's definition concentrates on shared norms while other definitions emphasize the shared language or variety. For example, Lyons (1970) defines the speech community as "all the people who use a given language." Similar definition is also framed by Charles Hocket (1958:8) " each language defines a speech community: the whole set of people who communicate with each other... via the common language." In fact the emphasis on shared linguistic characteristics is evident in all the definitions except Labov's. One may suggest that Labov's definition is more psychological than linguistic in its orientation. This however, is not to imply that other definitions are not open to examination or criticism. but that Labov's offers more scope for discussion.

Labov's theory of speech community rests on two premises:-

a)   that the reaction/attitude to linguistic variables are the same
       throughou the community despite differences in the actual use of the
       variables by each group of speakers:

and

b)   that various social gorups in the society use the linguistic variables (or
       language variety) in the same way, although not necessarily to the
       same level.

On the basis of premise (a) Labov concludes that all New Yorkers from the highest socio-economic class to the lowest on the social hierarchy form a single speech community, because all of them view the retention of (r) positively, i.e. prestigious. In ohter words, he regards New York City as one speech community because the subjective reactions to the linguistic

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variables such as (r) reflect agreement among speakers despite the fact that each group of speaker uses the variabeles differently.

This notion of common evaluation of the linguistic variable is evident in labov's writing. In fact he insists on such evaluation as the crucial factor in designating any group of speakers as members of the same speech community. For example, he writes: (1972a:158).

> "a speech communiy cannot be conceived as a group of speakers who all use the same forms; it is best defined as a group who share norms in regard to language."

At another point he writes:

> "the linguistic variable became one of the norms which defined the speech community, and all the members of the speech community reacted in a uniform manner to its use" (Ibid: 179).

He also writes that New York City is a single speech community because it is "united by a common evaluation of the same variables" (1966:125).

A similar tone is quite clear when he writes:

> "the speech community is defined not by the presence or absence of a particular dialect or language but by the presence of a common set of normative values in regard to linguistic features" (1972b:513).

Thus Labov's concept of speech community abandons any notion of uniformity in the actual employment of language or linguistic variables but relies on shared evaluation of linguistic variables.

Considering premise (b), Labov writes:

> "that New York is a speech community and not a collection of speakers living side by side, borrowing from each others' dialects. may be demonstrated by many kinds of evidence. Native New Yorkers differ in their usage in terms of absolute values of the

variable, but the shift between contrasting styles follow the same pattern in almost every case." (1966:7).

In another words, New Yorkers form a single speech community because all group exhibit an increase in the variant (r) as the level of formality increases. Labov's study in 1966 showed that every group exhibited a regular style shifting in the same direction. The groups are different in their actual realization of (r); but they shift in the same direction. Since the highest social group is closer to the norm i.e. r-full variety than other groups, the shift towards r-full type of speech is less noticeable in the speech of the highest socio-economic class compared with the lowest social group, which shows a high increase in the realisation of (r) as the situation becomes more formal. But at every style level the highest social group has more cases of the prestigious variant (r) than the rest. In fact, at every style level, each social group shows instances of (r) comparable to its social status. Labov explains the shift toward r-ful variety as being the result of the positive evaluation of (r) by all New Yorkers.

Having presented Labov's theory of speach community I shall examine it from four different axes and the relationship of each to the notion of speech community. The four axes are:-

a)   The notion of prestige
b)   The process of style shifting
c)   The process of sound change
d)   The notion of identity.

a) Prestige and Speech Community.
One of the key notions in labov's definition of speech community is the idea of prestige. Thus New Yrok City is a single speech comunity because all the speakers regard r-full variety as prestigious. However, this notion of prestige must be scrutinized carefully. There are a host of questions which must be answered if one wants the definition to be more precise. Probably the very first question is: What do we mean by prestige? Is prestige tied to linguistic variables only or can it be extended to cover language varieties as well? Can we talk about prestige independent from context? What is the relationship between prestige and appropriateness? What happens when

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the reaction to one linguistic variable shows uniformity across the community while the attitudes to another variable exhibit split reaction? And, finally, what is the relationship between overt and covert prestige (Trudgill 1974)?

In Labov's study (1966) in New York City all the speakers reacted positively to the r-full variety i.e. they all considered retaining (r) as more prestigious than dropping it. Is it not possible that they were reacting to the variable in a particular situation, i.e. formal context, mainly interview? Would they exhibit the same reaction to the same variable in a less formal situation, i.e. everyday casual context? This point invites some thorough investgation. It also leads to the question of appropriateness.

Language takes place in a social context. We cannot assign ± prestige to a linguistic variable regardless of the context or the immediate situation of speech event. A linguistic item may be viewed positively in one situation and negatively in another. For example, to use Standard Arabic in a t.v. interview brings a certain degree of prestige to the speaker; but using the smae form in a friendly setting raises laughter. I think that the situation in the English speaking countries is not very different. It is only a matter of degree, not of principle. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the reaction of speakers to linguistic variables in as many different contexts as possible. Certainly, it would be interesting to see how New Yorkers, for example, react to the linguistic variable (r) in a less formal environment.

The other point related to the notion of prestige is the difficulty one encounters when handling more than one variable in the same community. Milroy (1980) gives an example of such cases. She writes:

> "Southern British speakers cannot be said to belong to the same speech community as New Yorkers, since they do not attach the same social meaning to, for example (r): on the contrary, the highest prestige accent in Southern England (RP) is non-rhotic, yet the Southern British speech community may be said to be united by a common evaluation of the variable (h); h-droipping is stigmatized in Southern England" (Milroy 1980:13)

In this case, do we have one speech community or two? Whichever choice

we make is arbitrary.

Scotton & Wanjin (1984) investigated the semantic change of the meaning of the Chinese world shi : fu. They found differentiated evaluation as well as differentiated usage of the word within the same speech community. Shi:fu could mean elder or master craftsman (original meaning), comrade or a neutral term of address. Each meaning is associatged with a different group of speakers in Beijing. The investigators found that there was an isomorphic relationship between the subjective evaluation and the actual usage of the word shi : fu. Informants evaluated their own usage of the word most positively, although they are part of the same speech community.

When Labov's notion of speech community is applied to Arabic, different sorts of problems are encountered. Arabic speech communities are diglossic. The language that is used in Arab countries is best described as a continuum which has High Code (H) at one end and Low Code (L) at the other; and in between there are an infinite number of varieties. Some oare close to (H) while others are closer to (L).

In Labov's theory,. the notion of prestige is always tied to the highest socio-economic class, which other speakers try to copy. Various studies on Arabic contradict such a claim. In an earlier study on variations on Qatari Arabic (al Amadidhi 1985) I examined the variable [d3] (voiced alveolar affricate). It shows three variants:-
[d3] – voiced alveolar affricate
[3] – voiced palatal fricative
[J] – voiced palatal glide.

[3] occurred equally in the language of all subgroups and thus is socially insignificant. [j] is used by the prestigious sedentary group while [d3] is employed by the Bedouin group who are socially stigmatized. Considering the dialectal level alone the prestigious form is the [j] variant. However the [d3] variant used by the Bedouin coincides with the form of the Standard Arabic, i.e. the most prestigious variety of Arabic. This is quite different from what has been found in studies on English where the most prestigious variants are used most frequently by the highest socio-economic class. Such a pattern is known as a reflection of social class stratification (Labov 1972a,

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Trudgill 1974).

Similar results re also reported in quantitative studies on the Bahraini Arabic dialect and the Palestinian dialect. Holes (1987) investigated the position of the [d3] variable in Bahrain. The variable yielded two variants: [d3] and [j]. The former is associated with the Sunni gorup who occupy a very prestigious position in the social hierarchy. The latter is linked wih the Baharana (Shi'i) group who are socially stigmatized. Shorrab (1981) examined the same variable in a Palestinian community. He separated two variants: [d3] and [3]   [3] is associated with town dwellers (Madani speakers) who are the elite of society. [d3] is mainly used by the Bedouin and Fallahin farmer groups who are socially stigmatized.
Schematically, the position of the (d3) variable in these Arabic dialects vis-a-vis the Standard Arabic, can be presented as follows;-

Arabic

Standard Arabic
(X)

Local Dialects
(Z)

Prestigious
Local Groups
(Z)
+

Stigmatized
Local Groups
(X)
−
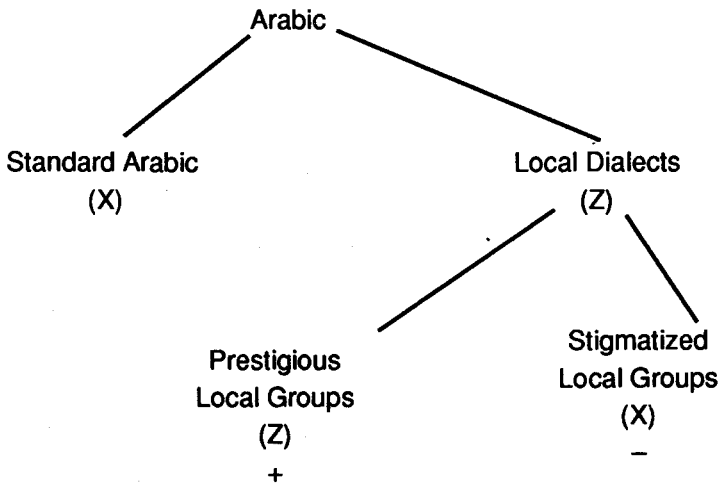
(+ = prestigious
− = stigmatized)

Thus when we compare the local dialect with Standard Arabic the [x] variant i.e. [d3] has prestige, but when various local varieties are compared with each other the [z] variant i.e. [j], [3] has prestige.

In these communities when people react to a variable it is extremely difficult to decide whether they react to it as a part of the local dialect vis-a-vis the Standard Arabic or as a part of a local variety vis-a-vis another local variety. For example, in my earlier study (1985) many Bedouin speakers reacted positively towards their usage of the [d3] variant . Did they react in that manner because [d3] is part of their dialect; thus emphasizing their identity and showing solidarity with the Bedouin group ? Or were they reacting to the variable as a part of Standard Arabic (the prestigious variety)? Or, were they doing both simultaneously?

This leads to another unresolved question in Labov's definition: do people react to a linguistic variable independently or do they react to it as a part of a complete system? In other words, does the variable alone trigger the informants' reactions, or are their reactions influenced by other features that occur in the sentence?

Reading Labov one gets the impression that linguistic variables alone trigger the reactions. However, this is doubtful and it would be interesting to see how people would evaluate a linguistic variable, for example (r), when the variable gives an indication in one direction while other linguistic clues point to the opposite direction. We want to know how speakers rate another speker when his usage of (r), for example, is in accordance with the highest socio-economic class, but other signals in his verbal message such as words, phrases, expressions, other variables etc. put him in a lower socio-economic category.

b) Style Shift and Speech Community.

Another pillar in Labov's definition is the stylistic shift across a continuum which has various style levels stretching from casual (informal) style to the most formal styles. Labov distinguished five levels:- informal speech; formal speech; reading; word list and minimal pairs. The first level is the most informal style and the last the most formal. The crucial point is that as one moves in the direction of more formal styles, there is an increase in the instances of the prestigious variant in the speech of all social classes (Labov 1966, Trudgill 1974, Schmidt 1974, Worlfram 1969). In other wrods, the standard variant increases as formality of the style level increases.

There are a couple of points which I would like to raise in relation to the process of style shift. The first is the effect of reading material on the actual realization of a linguistic variable in reading styles. Labov asserts that the instances of the prestigious (standard) variant increase in the reading styles compared with the spoken styles. The implication is that such an increase will occur regardless of the material which is read.

This, however, is erroneous, as the results of numerous studies show. In my earlier study (1985) informants were given two pieces of poetry to read, each of 12 lines. One poem belonged to Standard Arabic poetry while the other was colloquial poetry. The results showed that informants applied a different set of rules when reading the two poems. When reading the Standard Arabic poetry they increased (almost categorically) their usage of the standard variant. But when reading the vernacular (colloquial) poem there was no increase in the instances of the standard variant. This indicates that the material that is read will somehow influence the actual reading process, the strategies adopted by the informants and the realization of any specific variant.

Other studies have also produced results contrary to the accepted dogma that reading styles show a closer approximation to the standard norms. For example, Milroy & Milroy (1977) found that it is not always the case that reading styles yielded results closer to the standard norms of speech. In their investigation of Belfast speech, they found that the (a) variable did not show the expected directiuon of shift. In fact, all the speakers had a higher percentage of the localized variant in the reading list than in the formal style. This is an indication of a closer approximation to the vernacular norms in the style of reading list. Moreover, the (a) pattern was reproduced in a number of other vowel variables.

The second issue is the relationship between the spoken styles and the reading ones. Are they placed on a single linear continuum, or do they belong to different continua? In other words, are the differences between reading styles and spoken styles quantitative or qualitative? My earlier study (1985) showed that people may utilize a variant in the spoken styles but never use it when reading. This suggests that some kind of dual norm is involved. This

"has little to do with paying more attention to speech during reading... Thus the influence of the written form produces variability which is qualitative rather than quantitative" (Milroy 1980: 103-4).

These findings contradict Labov's claim that it is possible to view styles along a linear continuum from casual to formal. In fact, the reading styles and the spoken ones should be represented as different parts of informants' repertoires instead of points on the same linear continuum, since to a certain extent variation in the reading styles depends on skills in reading aloud and on the materials that are read.

c) The Process of Sound Change and Speech Community

Labov's notion of linguistic change is closely tied to the principle of the common evaluation of linguistic variables. Because all members of the speech community evaluate the variants in the same way, changes in the linguistic system of the community can take place only in one direction, which is, in most cases, towards the prestigious variety. Thus, the speech commuity is seen as a physical body which can move as a whole in a certain direction. But such an idea is far too simplistic and uncovincing. In fact:

"even fairly homogenous speech communities may display more than one direction of change and variation, and sub groups within the community can be characterized by bimodal distribution with respect to the use of the same variable; i.e. they use it in different ways" (Romaine 1980:43)

Various studies on Arabic dialects have shown that the same linguistic variable may move in two differnt directions simultaneously. Holes (1987) investigated the variable (d3) in the Bahraini dialect. The variable displayed two variants [d3] and [j]. The two variants were associated with the stigmatized Shi'i group and the prestigious Sunni group respectively. He found that the former group was moving in the direction of the socially prestigious group; and adopting the [j] variant of the Sunni group. But the latter group was moving in the direction of the superposed variety, i.e. Standard Arabic, thus adopting the [d3] variant which coincided with the variant used by the stigmatized group. Similar patterns of change in two opposite directions of the same variable were also evident in Qatari Arabic.

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however, in Qatar, bedouin speakers were moving towards the sedentary norms of speech, thus adopting [j] while the sedentary group were adopting the [d3] variant of the Standard Arabic (Al-Amadidhi 1985).

Abdul-Jawad (1981) reports a somewhat different pattern of change. In his investigation on the position of the variable (q) (voiceless uvular plosive) in the Jordanian dialect, he noticed that some speakers from rural areas showed change in two different directions with regard to the variable. They adopted more of the standard variant [q] because of the increasing influence of the formal educationsl system, and at the same time they adopted the prestigious urban variant [?].

Labov's concept of language change and its mechanism depends very much on the coherent notion of speech community and community grammar. Without such coherence it is impossible for any change to take place (Romaine 1980). Labov implies that in order to identify a specific speech community one must discover the linguistic rules concerning the co-variation between linguistic variables and non-linguistic ones. These rules are presented in the forms of variable rules. Every variable rule is constrained by linguistic as well as non-linguistic factors; and every rule identifies a specific speech community (Braithwaite 1985). Thus, New York City is said to be a single speech community because the variation in the variable (r) is captured by one variable rule which is constrained by linguistic elements, i.e. whether the following segment is a vowel or a consonant, and also constrained by non-linguistic factors, i.e. the socio-economic class of the speaker, sex, style etc. Moreover, it is implied that variable rules work for all sub -groups within the society, albeit to a different degree; and all subgroups share the same constraints and norms of use. Therefore, in the process of style shift, all speakers will shift in the same direction, but not to the same degree.

This concept of language and its relationship to variable rules came under strong attack from Suzanne Romaine. She aruges that changes, using Labov's hypothesis, would involve reordering of the constraints i.e. the reweighting of the constraints' hierarchy in the variable rule. If this is the case, then all the subgroups of the society, at one point in time, do not share the same variable rule. At this point there would be two or more variable

rules to describe the community grammar. This would mean that all speakers do not share the same variable rule, which is a pre-requsite to qualify as members of the same speech community. Thus in a community that is witnessing sound charge in progress, there is more than one variable rule; and likewise we have more than one speech community. However,

> "once we acknowledge the existence of different norms of speaking and prestige attached to them as co-existent within the same speech community, then the notion of the prototype variable rule community described in terms of its usage of a linguistic variable controlled by a single variable rule breaks down" (Romaine 1980:51)

In fact, after a little thought it becomes obvious that if all speakers always shared the same evaluation of variants, it would be difficult to see how a change could take place at all (Scotton & Wanjin 1984).

Moreover, Labov's model of language change suggests an overwhelming tendency for people to adopt the speech features of the socio-economic class above them. This is a unidirectional model of language change towards the prestigious language of the highest socio-economic class. In this model there is no mention of the role of low (negative) prestige varieties.

Many studies have found that low-class people do not adopt the prestigious variety of the higher socio-economic class; moreover, they favoured their native speech habits (see Ryan 1979, Milroy 1980, Cheyne 1970).

Thus it seems quite adequate to say that,

> "in different speech communities social and linguistic factors are linked not only in different ways but to different degrees, so that the imbrication of social and linguistic structure in a given speech community is a matter for investigation and cannot be taken as given" (Romaine 1980:42).

d) Group Identity and Speech Community.

Labov's definition of speech community fails to capture the dynamic aspect of language. According to Labov people are either part of a speech

community or they are not, depending on their reaction to a particular linguistic variable. But in practice any individual may belong to X number of different speech communties. There is simply no limit to the ways and means by which speakers identify themselves with various groups in the society. This is done for different reasons; secutiry, amusement, worship, self-identification, etc. Consequently

> "there is no limit to the number and variety of speech communities that are to be found in a society" (Bolinger 1975:333).

For instance, a Qatari university graduate student may belong to a great number of groups; Muslims, Arabs, Qataris, educated Qataris, young, etc. These are only some of the groups that this individual would be liable to associate with. But on any particular occasion he will identify himself with only one of the groups. The group which he chooses for the identification process depends on the contrastive or important factors in a particular setting. In fact, many studies have found that the relaxed peer-group usage of language is oriented towards some social target, i.e. the establishment of identity with a group; and that target varies from one occasion to another (see Le page and Tabouret-Keller 1985, Milroy 1980 and Labov 1972c).

The process of multi-level identification occurs because the concept of group is relative. Hence speech community must also be relative. The relativity in language use is nicely captured by Le Rage & Tabouret - Keller (1985 : 181) when they state that they see

> "speech acts as acts of projection: the speaker is projecting his inner universe, implicitly with the invitation to others to share it, at least insofar as they recognize his language as an accurate symoblization of the world, and to his attitude towards it. by verbalizing as he does, he is seeking to reinforce his model of the world, and hopes for acts of solidarity from those with whom he wishes to identify."

Moreover, Labov suggests that the factors which identify the speaker with a particular speech community are out of the awareness of the speaker. Thus Labov writes:-

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"without necessarily making any conscious choice, he (the member of a socio-economic class) identifies himself in every utterance by distinguishing himself from other speakers who use contrasting forms." (Braithwaite 1985:17).

This is to say that the realization of any speech community as an entity can only be from the researcher's perspective, regardless of how the speaker actually perceives the speech community.

Such acts may be quite serious for we may end up with an untrue picture of a speech community. Any definition or delimitation of speech community must, somehow, reflect the speaker(s)' perception of the community, because the individual awareness that he belongs to a given group is, for the structuring of his socio-cultural behaviour, more important than any objective ordering in different socio-economic and cultural hierarchies estabished by the researcher.

The final issue in relation to this specific point is the relationship between participating in a speech community and being a fully-fledged member of that community. Can we assume that every participant in the speech community is also a member of it? Obviously, Labov sees no difference between the two. Thus every speaker who participates in the set of shared linguistic norms is also a member of the same speech community. In other words, a recent newcomer to New York, who has the same image of the variable (r) and shares the same pattern of style shifting is a member of New York City speech community.

Many people disagree with such a concept. Common sense dictates that to participate in a speech community is not quite the same as to be a member of it. In fact, any concept of speech community in terms of knowledge alone, even knowledge of grammar as well as knowledge of patterns of speaking falls short. We may go one step further and claim that membership in a community depends upon criteria which in a given case may not even saliently involve language and speaking. (Wardhaugh 1986). For example, a foreigner may learn the language and acquire language skills but still be only a participant in a speech community and not a member, if he does not also fully master receptive skills and sociolinguistic norms that would make him

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an acceptable member of the community, because in practice people do not define the group with which they identify solely on language grounds. Other factors are equally, if not more, important. These factors include diverse elements such as history, background, customs, habits, rituals, etc.

The inadequacy of most definitions of speech community (including Labov's) is evident when we look at the interesting case of the Gaelic speaking community in Scotland. Dorain (1982) reports on Gaelic-speaking fisherfolk descendants in the Highland district of Scotland. In this community there are three linguistic groups:

> a) monolingual English;
> b) bilingual English/Gaelic;
> c) Semi-speakers and near passive bilinguals in Gaelic/English (their active language is English).

Obviously, most definitions such as Labov's, Lyons (1970); Gumperz (1968), to name a few, may accommodate groups (a) and (b), but fall short of handling the third group. But all these groups regard themselves as part of the same speech community. In fact, all three groups of speakers show similar affiliation with the Gaelic/English speech community, regardless of their actual participation and their active command of the Gaelic language. In other word,s what is important here is social affiliation rather than linguistic ability.

Perhaps what we would like to see is a definition which determines if any given speaker is a member of the speech community or merely a participant in it and whether he is a central member, a peripheral one or totally outside the speech community concerned.

It is tempting to agree with Gumperz who says that a speech community cannot be satisfactorily delimited and defined on the basis of the speaker's reactions to a linguistic variable such as (r) in New York, or [d3] in Bahrain. A competent member of the speech community must also share other things such as knowing how, when, where and what to speak. However, similarity in norms does not necessarily mean uniformity in norms. The concept of a uniform set of norms for the speech community as a whole is as unrealistic

and unattainable as the idealization of the homogenous speech community or the ideal speaker-hearer for the study of linguistic behaviour. (Dua 1981).

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