

DISCOURSE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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A look at the relevance of discourse analysis to the processes of teaching and learning a foreign language, with particular focus on the teaching of English language listening and speaking skills in Japan

Introduction

It is now accepted by many linguists that the Chomskyan focus on the structure of the isolated sentence, while theoretically productive, has only limited relevance to the way in which people actually use language to communicate in real life situations. People do not communicate in the form of individual words or isolated sentences but, rather, by means of coherent series of interrelated clauses and utterances (i.e. *discourse* which is smoothly linked and meaningful). In regular communication the meaning of each word and each utterance can only be completely understood in relation to the context, both linguistic and non-linguistic, which surrounds it. Discourse analysis describes language beyond the level of the sentence and looks at the contexts and cultural influences which affect meaning.

People continually use language to “do” things which facilitate social interaction. The discourse analysis approach to spoken language seeks a description of all the factors which combine to create total meaning in a given situation, so the emphasis switches from grammatical structure to communicative competence and language function, from dissecting the individual sentence to describing the successful use of connected utterances in context. Most people, in

their daily life, will hear or take part in a range of different kinds of spoken communication: telephone calls, formal business or staff meetings, informal encounters with friends or family, face to face transactions in shops, or trains, in restaurants or pubs. Each of these encounters will have a particular set of routines and customs, with different ways of opening and closing the transaction, different locations and purposes, different relationships, etc.

It is in this area of “everyday usage” where the greatest weaknesses of Japanese students are to be found. Even today, the language teaching method most frequently employed in Japanese High Schools centres on grammar/translation, with reading and writing skills at the forefront; there is, in consequence, a neglect of the primary skills of listening and speaking. The university entrance examination format is an important factor in the perpetuation of this pattern. So, we often find that Japanese students, even at the graduate level, are quite familiar with the foreign language in its visual code (reading and writing), but are almost totally ignorant of the language in its sound code (listening and speaking). It is no longer defensible to teach modern languages in the same way as ancient languages (Latin and Greek) were taught. Language use is predominantly in the form of listening and speaking. It has been estimated that the average person spends five times more time on listening and speaking than he/she does on reading and writing. It seems logical therefore that these primary skills and how best to apply them should be at the centre of any mainstream language learning programme. This paper attempts to show that the integration of *discourse awareness* into the syllabus of foreign language teaching, especially in the area of listening and speaking skills, is essential.

Discourse and Listening

When we listen to someone speaking, we are listening to discourse. No matter whether it is a conversation with friends, a political

speech, a telephone call or a university seminar, it is always discourse. In the process of listening, the listener applies two complementary batteries of skills. First, in order to be successful, the listener has to possess a detailed 'mechanical' knowledge of the target language, i.e. a working knowledge of its sound system and intonation, its grammar and lexicon, an awareness of how coherent linguistic units are created and interpreted. These 'mechanical' skills, however, are not in themselves enough to yield total comprehension. In addition, the listener must have a range of 'background' information which will help facilitate the overall process of effective listening: the listener needs to have an awareness of the relevant cultural framework, contextual knowledge relating to the participants and their roles, the location and the purpose of the communication, and an understanding of the routines and restrictions associated with the particular topic (discourse organisation). Both kinds of knowledge, the mechanical linguistic skills and situational/cultural background awareness, are typically applied automatically by the native speaker.

SPEAKER MEANING

At the centre of effective verbal communication are speech acts; coherence results from the speaker's appropriate use of speech acts and the listener's successful interpretation of them. To a large extent, speech is "action" in particular contexts. Of course, language is sometimes used merely to describe things but usually there is a more basic purpose behind the utterance (e.g. a speech act such as complaining, accusing, apologising, etc). Let us examine a simple example:

"Her new boyfriend is very tall."

The surface 'lexical' meaning of this utterance is purely a description of the physical appearance of the new boyfriend. However, in terms of speech acts (i.e. speaker meaning), this utterance could be used in various ways, according to context, e.g.:

- WARNING (= “watch out, he may be dangerous”)
- ADMIRING (= “I like tall men”)
- COMPLAINING (= “he’s much too big for her”)

Utterances are used to do things, to carry out socially significant acts, to implement the intentions of the speaker in particular situations. Speaker meaning, as opposed to dictionary meaning, is based on the purpose and attitude of the speaker and the *total* message which he/she wishes to transmit.

In some cases, pieces of spoken discourse may have no surface grammatical or lexical linking features, i.e. they are superficially non-cohesive. In such cases the listener interprets the utterances solely in terms of appropriate speech acts:

A: “Was that the doorbell?”

B: “I’m eating an orange.”

A: “I’m on my way.”

From these apparently ‘disjointed’ utterances the native speaker will automatically interpret B’s response as an excuse for not being ready or able to meet A’s request, i.e. B cannot check on whether someone has rung the doorbell because his hands are covered with orange juice. Similarly A’s second utterance would be interpreted as an acceptance of B’s excuse (= “Don’t worry, I’ll check it myself.”). The native speaker would typically create coherence by successfully relating the three utterances as speech acts: request - excuse - acceptance.

UTTERANCES

People communicate using utterances, not sentences. An utterance is linguistic behaviour which relates to its specific surroundings, i.e. participants, location, purpose, mood, etc. Riley (1985) gives us a clear example of how the utterance ‘in use’ involves many more factors (linguistic and non-linguistic) than those involved in the construction of a well-formed sentence:

“I met the baker’s wife”

Ten actual occurrences of “I met the baker’s wife” in real-life situations could be described indentically in terms of grammar: i.e. subject - verb - object. So, in terms of sentence value, the ten occurrences would have no differences. However, describing the ten occurrences as utterances would involve a great variety of features related to the actual context; we could easily have ten widely differing descriptions in terms of use and ‘speaker meaning’. For example, the common knowledge of the participants can have an important impact in terms of utterance comprehensibility:

A: “Did you get the bus?”

B: “I met the baker’s wife.”

This piece of conversation can only be interpreted with the relevant background information, non-linguistic input which resides in the speaker and the listener. We can imagine two situations in which such discourse might occur with two completely different meanings:

1. The baker’s wife is a notorious gossip (= common knowlege)
 - ∴ B’s response indicates that she missed the bus because she was delayed by the baker’s wife.
2. The baker’s wife is a close friend of B and possesses a car (= common knowledge)
 - ∴ B’s response indicates that she did not take the bus because the baker’s wife gave her a ride home.

It is this interactive exchange of utterances which creates meaning in particular situations. The significance of the isolated, grammatically well-formed sentence is minimal in spoken communication. Since face-to-face communication dominates daily life, it is not unreasonable to place spoken discourse, the successful delivery and interpretation of utterances/speech acts, at the centre of mainstream foreign language studies.

DIALOGUE

In spontaneous dialogue, the structure can be extremely complex and can involve many non-linguistic factors. The speaker and the listener(s) typically *take turns*, cooperating in the continuation of the dialogue, topics are introduced, developed, and discarded, there are common patterns for opening and closing conversations. External factors such as the location, the participants and their purpose, impact on the dialogue in terms of its politeness or formality; the mood and flavour of the language has to be 'appropriate' for the setting and the nature of the communication. For the non-native speaker, wishing to master the foreign language, an awareness of these interlocking features is a necessity since it is their smooth and successful application which leads to the creation of effective discourse.

Of course, there are also important linguistic features which make a dialogue cohesive and coherent. We have grammatical cohesive features: 'reference, ellipsis, substitution and conjunction', and we have lexical cohesive features: 'reiteration and collocation'. These grammatical and lexical *links* help to hold the discourse smoothly together, reducing redundancy and repetition. Their application is a natural part of the native speaker linguistic repertoire. They are used instinctively, along with the non-linguistic features listed earlier, to create comprehensibility in spoken discourse.

Let us consider the complexities involved in a typical stretch of spoken discourse. The following sample conversation is taken from authentic recorded data (McCarthy, 1991):

(University lecturer (L) at a student bar where he has just ordered drinks for a group of students (S1, S2, etc.). The barman (B) is attending to the order and the group are standing at the bar.

L: Well, that should blow a hole in five pounds, shouldn't it?

S1: It's quite cheap actually.

L: (laughs)

S1: What's the um lecturers' club like, senior, senior, you know.

L: Ah it's very cosy and sedate and, er, you know, nice little armchairs and curtains ... there are some interesting characters who get there.

S2: Is that the one where they have the toilets marked with er gentlemen, no, 'ladies and members'?

L: Oh, oh
S2: Yeah

it was one of the other lecturers who pointed it out, he thought it was quite amusing.

L: Yeah, I hadn't noticed that, yeah, might well be, yeah.

B: Four sixty-seven please.

L: Is that all, God, I though it would cost more than that (pays) ... thank you ... I thought it would cost more than that.

S1: It's quite cheap.

S2: I wouldn't argue with that one.

S3: No, it 's quite good.

L: Now, how are we going to carry all these over?

Despite the informality and apparent disorganisation in this piece of discourse, we can nevertheless find structure. The discourse begins and ends with 'framing markers' ("Well" and "Now"); they mark the limits of this particular phase of the conversation. When the lecturer say "Now" in the final line, he signals that a new topic/transaction is about to begin and effectively closes the previous topic/transaction. There is a basic pattern of elicitation/response/comment or follow-up: e.g.

L: "Well, that should blow a hole in five pounds, shouldn't it?"
[elicitation]

L1: "It's quite cheap actually". [response]

L: (laughs) [comment]

However, since this is spontaneous dialogue, we find variations and

apparent irregularities. The student's question about the staff club toilet facilities brings a reply from the lecturer of "Oh, oh", which is then followed by a comment from the student which seems to accept "Oh, oh" as an adequate reply ("Yeah it was one of the other lecturers who pointed it out ..."). When the barman announces the price of the drinks, the lecturer makes a remark which is not directed to anyone in particular ; it is almost an aside or a comment made to himself ("Is that all, God, I thought it would cost more than that ..."). When he repeats to the students : "I thought it would cost more than that", all three reply at once. There are other occasions where two speakers 'overlap' and, of course, we have hesitation, interruption, and broken or incomplete sentences. (All of these features are typical of everyday conversation and yet the vast majority of language teaching materials, even today, have manufactured dialogues made up of perfectly formed question and answer, with no repetition, no hesitation, no overlap, etc.)

This piece of discourse is taken from an informal 'get-together' in the local pub : it functions as a 'socialising' period while the participants wait for their drinks at the bar. The light-hearted banter helps to build up a relaxed atmosphere and avoids the tension which a period of silence would create in this context. The status divisions between the lecturer and his students are blurred and the participants function more or less as equals, with each of them free to initiate, respond, and follow-up in the conversation ; it is, for example, a student who leads off with a question about the teaching staff club facilities. At British universities, this level of informality between teacher and student is a natural part of an academic culture characterised by the tutorial system. Non-native speakers from other cultures, including Japanese students, might well have difficulties adjusting to the mood of 'equality' which permeates this piece of discourse.

Cultural Factors**COMPLAINING**

The way in which native speakers use speech acts to successfully interact in stretches of discourse is *language specific*. There are, for example, cultural factors which impinge on the speech event. The act of complaining gives a good example of how cultural influences can affect the process of interaction. Americans will often complain in quite a direct or aggressive manner, seeking an improvement in service or an apology, perhaps. In Japanese society, stoic acceptance is usually considered the correct response, even in the face of something irritating or unsatisfactory; direct complaining would be seen as socially imprudent since it could involve a loss of face on the part of the addressee and could also cause long-term damage in terms of harmonious community relationships.

Nash (1983) illustrated this difference with a role play study. He classified Americans as belonging to a 'negative politeness' culture (i. e. the speaker's right to freely transmit his complaint takes priority over the feelings or 'face' of the addressee), and he classified Chinese as belonging to a 'positive politeness' culture (i.e. the addressee's positive self-esteem takes precedence). A group of Americans and Chinese were presented with a situation in which they were asked to complain to a visiting friend about his habit of returning late at night and disturbing everyone in the house. Here are examples of the American responses :

- "Uh ... any chance of your maybe keeping ... a little bit ... shorter hours during the week or something ... maybe just going out on the weekends."
- "Um ... just a ... we - we've kinda ... um ... well ... we go to bed kinda early around here."
- "We were wondering if ah ... if it would ... if you wouldn't mind ... and if you could manage to come home a little bit earlier."

The American complaints exhibit 'negative politeness' in the sense

that the speaker's primary concern is to transmit the complaint and negotiate an agreement or acknowledgement (the 'face' or self-image of the addressee is of secondary importance). The hesitation and 'hedging' soften the message and make it less of a personal attack : presumably this effort is made in recognition of the fact that the addressee is a friend living in the speaker's home. Another indicator of 'negative politeness' comes with the typical American way of ending the complaint speech event. Often an agreement or solution is imposed on the addressee, the 'air is cleared' and a normal atmosphere restored, e.g. :

A : "We got it all straightened out now, so ..."

B : "Ya sure."

A : "We don't have to say anything more about it ... good ... O.K."

The Chinese responses exhibit 'positive politeness' in the sense that concern for the self-esteem of the addressee appears to dominate the communication :

– "Don't ... work so hard till midnight .. the next day you go out very early ... this way it's too hard on you ... health is important."

– "I'm afraid to say that you ... will be too tired."

– "At night ah it might be inconvenient ... if something were to happen to you outside ... then it would really be a lot of trouble, in the middle of the night nobody would know".

The Chinese complaints are significantly less direct and there is a much greater onus on the addressee to 'interpret' the remarks and work out the underlying purpose of the communication.

MODESTY

Another important cultural variable which helps to differentiate the use of one language from another is the level and extent of politeness/formality – Japanese is a language where the use and significance of politeness is a dominant factor, much more so than in English. We can see a clear illustration of this in an example of

Japanese style modesty, taken from the following conversation between two Japanese women (Miller 1977):

<i>A</i>	<i>A</i>
mâ, go-rippa na o-niwa de gozâmasu wa nê. shibafu ga hirobiro to shite ite, kekkô de gozâmasu wa nê.	My, what a splendid garden you have here - the lawn is so nice and big, it's certainly wonderful, Isn't it!

<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
iie, nan desu ka, chitto mo teire ga yukitodokimasen mono de gozaimasu kara, môm, nakanaka itsumo kirei ni shite oku wake ni wa mairimasen no de gozâmasu yo.	Oh no, not at all, we don't take care of it at all any more, so it simply doesn't always look as nice as we would like it to.

<i>A</i>	<i>A</i>
â, sai de gozaimashô nê. kore dake o-hiroin de gozâmasu kara, hitotôri o-teire asobasu no ni datte taihen de gozaimashô nê. demo mâ, sore de mo, itsumo yoku o-teire ga yukitodoite iras- shaimasu wa. itsumo honto ni o- kirei de kekkô de gozâmasu wa.	Oh no, I don't think so at all - but since it's such a big garden, of course, it must be quite a tremendous task to take care of it all by yourself; but even so, you certainly do manage to make it look nice all the time: it certainly is nice and pretty any time one sees it.

<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
iie, chitto mo sonna koto gozâmasen wa.	No. I'm afraid not, not at all.

In English it would be considered more polite to accept a compliment with an expression of gratitude, but in this Japanese example, the addressee exhibits 'extreme' modesty in continuing to reject the praise. The social value given to displays of modesty can be further illustrated in the understated way in which things are given or offered to another person:

“Tsumaranai mono desu ga, dōzo ...”

(“This is a gift which will be of no use to you, but ...”)

“Nani mo meshiagaru mono wa arimasen ga, dōzo ...”

(“There is nothing to eat, but please ...”)

TURN-TAKING

In any stretch of spoken discourse, the participants cooperate in deciding who should speak and who should listen: they *take turns* at speaking. Usually these turns are smoothly divided, with only occasional *overlap or interruption*. The listener has techniques for (re)claiming the speaker's role (e.g. “Just a minute, I've got a few questions about that”). There are also ways for the listener to indicate that he/she is paying attention to the speaker's message; these devices are called “*back-channel*” responses and in English take forms such as: “ah-ha”, “umm”, “right”, “really?”, or simply a nod of the head. Also, the listener will sometimes try to help out a hesitant speaker by *completing* his/her utterance.

These turn-taking features (overlap, back-channel, hesitation, interruption, utterance completion) can make authentic conversation look extremely complex: McCarthy (1991) quotes the following conversational data in which the speakers are discussing pets:

- A: Well, of course, people who go to the vet's are
 B: Mm.
- A: interested in the cats and dogs, ain't they?
 B: Yeah, but the people that first
 have pets or don't realise what's involved, do they?
 A: care Well it sorts
 them out, you know, those that don't care that's it so ... but
 B: Mm Mm
- A: if you wanna, you know, somebody that's keen on having
 a pet Mm
 B: Mm

A: and want it in [good order.

B: [Done ... done properly, that's right, year.

Turn-taking is culture-specific. There are, for example, major variations in terms of the length of acceptable silences within conversations, the ways in which conversations are started and finished, the acceptability of interruption or personal questions, etc. In Japanese culture, long silences within a discourse are not seen as a problem, whereas Americans will often 'create' conversation in order to avoid lulls or silences. English spoken discourse is often riddled with direct question and answer. When someone does not know the answer to something, they simply ask for information or assistance. Japanese culture, on the other hand, has been labeled as having *high uncertainty avoidance* (Hofstede, 1991), which means that Japanese are not in the habit of question and answer.

Despite its complexities, turn-taking would seem to be a vital study area for students wishing to master a foreign language. It is, as it were, the 'nuts and bolts' of practical communication. A minimum awareness of the turn-taking routines of the target language would appear to be an essential asset for the learner.

TOPIC DEVELOPMENT

Topic development is another facet of discourse analysis which is vital to effective use of the target language. A knowledge of the way in which topics are introduced, developed, changed and closed is a major element in the native speaker's intuitive application of communication skills. In English, for example, there are markers which frequently signal the introduction of a new topic or sub-topic (e.g. incidentally, actually, by the way, on the other hand), or the end of a topic (right, anyway, still, that's how it goes). In the following discourse, taken from recorded data (McCarthy 1989), we can see how the speakers 'drift' smoothly from sub-topic to sub-topic; speaker A has been describing how his luggage was sent to the wrong airport:

- A: ... no bother to me, 'cos I happened to have in my side pack a spare vest and [socks you see.
- B: [Ah, I see, that was in your hand baggage
- [was it?
- A: [And I'd got my toilet equipment with me.
- B: Yeah, it's a good idea to take a few basic things in the hand baggage, isn't it, [I think in case of that.
- A: [Yeah, well it's usually the things you require first, you see, sometimes you don't have time to upack all your luggage when you arrive.
- B: Still, pretty horrendous, though.
- A: Oh, it was very unsettling, ... still, so many other unsettling factors I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels that day.
- B: Mm ...
- C: D'you do a lot of skiing then?
- A: I go each year, yes ... it's my only chance of getting my weight down, you see, and it isn't the exercise that does it, it's the fact that the meals are so far apart.
- C: (laughs)
- D: Yeah?
- A: Yes, I'm not joking ... if we eat say, right, breakfast eight, lunch one, evening meal six, perhaps a snack after that then [you're eating four times a day, but
- C: [You'd never get no skiing in would you?
- A: Well, in these places, you breakfast at eight, well, half past eight, ...

In a relatively short period of time, the topic of conversation goes from lost luggage to skiing, to losing weight, then to hotel meals, as the speakers cooperate in developing and switching sub-topics in a coherent fashion. There are often structural 'clues' which mark the change from one sub-topic to another. For example, both A and B use

the marker “still” and give a summarising evaluation of what has just been said in order to signal that the first topic has been adequately developed and has reached a natural end point. When speaker C introduces a second related topic, it is marked by a distinct jump in pitch: “D’you do a lot of skiing then?”

Once again, this ability to participate smoothly and effectively in topic development is something which the foreign language learner needs to actively study; such an ability can only flourish if it is illuminated and exercised.

Discourse Analysis And Language Teaching

Having suggested that discourse analysis can provide essential material for the mainstream language learning syllabus, we can now examine a few practical examples of how ‘discourse awareness’ can be incorporated in teaching materials.

When people communicate in their daily lives, they simultaneously employ all of the interconnected systems of discourse alongside the linguistic knowledge contained in the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the language; the most useful practice for the language student would thus aim at exercising this comprehensive package of skills ‘in concert’. An integrated approach, giving the student experience in handling stretches of spoken discourse from both the productive and receptive angles, would come closest to duplicating the nature of actual conversation. The following sample activity for intermediate or advanced level students illustrates one way of giving the learner a practical sense of discourse structure:

There were four people sitting in a train in Vietnam in the late sixties.

The four people were as follows: a young Vietnamese who loved his country, an old Vietnamese grandmother, a beautiful young girl of about eighteen, and an ugly American soldier.

Suddenly the train went into a tunnel.
 There was the sound of a kiss.
 All four people heard a slap.
 When the train came out of the tunnel, the Vietnamese could see
 that the G.I.'s face was red.
 The granny was asleep in the corner of the compartment.
 The young patriot grinned happily.
 The problem is : who kissed who and who slapped who ?

With this exercise, taken from "Towards the Creative Teaching of English" (Melville, Langenheim, Rinvoluceri, and Spaventa, 1980), each student is given one sentence from the story and they are told to decide, through discussion, the correct sequence of the sentences and the solution to the problem. The students are not allowed to write anything or show their sentence to anyone else, though they are allowed to read their sentences aloud to the group.

A problem-solving activity like this can be very effective in motivating students and can provide exercise in a wide range of discourse and language skills :

- spontaneous group interaction, including turn-taking, argument and consensus
- narrative sequence and observation of grammatical and lexical clues to that sequence (e.g. use of anaphoric reference, lexical chains)
- reading aloud and repetition of new vocabulary and structure in context
- problem solving (- suggested as the most imaginative alternative answer : the Vietnamese patriot kissed his own hand and then slapped the American soldier)

At a more elementary level, students can be made familiar with the structure of basic adjacency pairs and then drilled in their use. For example, the polite refusal of an invitation can be broken down in the

following way :

[A : "How about coming out for a drink tonight?"]

B : "Well, thank you very much. I'd like to but I'm afraid I have to work late today ... what about Saturday?" ...

appreciation —"thank you very much"

softener —"I'd like to but I'm afraid ..."

excuse —"I have to work late today"

face-saver —"what about Saturday?"

Similarly, various speech events can be analysed in terms of detailed structure and then practised as pieces of discourse. The speech act of 'complaining', for example, involves a delicate balance between being polite and, at the same time, being forceful and effective in transmitting the message ; typically a complaint contains the following elements (Schaefer, 1982) :

1. *Opener* —a greeting
2. *Orientation* —an utterance which identifies the complainer
3. *Complaint Act* —an utterance which states the problem
4. *Justification*
 - (a) of the complainer —an utterance by the complainer explaining why he/she is complaining
 - (b) of the addressee —an utterance by the complainer given an excuse for the addressee's behavior (e.g. "Maybe you were too busy")
5. *Negotiated Remedy* —an utterance which suggests a solution
6. *Closing* —an utterance by the complainer which brings the speech event to an end

There follows a sample dialogue illustrating the six phases of 'complaining' :

A : "Morning.

B: Hi, can I help you?

A: My name's Jones ... uh, I was in here last Tuesday.

B: Yes ... so ...

A: I want to return this handbag ... there's a problem ...

B: Oh, what's wrong with it?

A: There's a stain in the leather ... look ... here. Of course, I don't blame you, but, you know ... it's an expensive bag.

B: Um ... O.K. Have you got a receipt?

A: Rather than have my money back, I prefer to exchange it ... another bag, the same design, if you've got it.

B: I'll check for you ... it should be O.K.

A: Thank you very much ... that's one less headache."

Conclusion

It has been illustrated that the successful creation and interpretation of coherent discourse depends on more factors than a working knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation; coherence is also dependent on creative interaction between the speaker and the listener, based on common situational and cultural background knowledge and on mutual awareness of the routines and restrictions of discourse organisation. At the present time, much of the language teaching in Japan focuses predominantly on *form* and undersells *function*. Discourse analysis shows how the language 'functions' as a means of communication in particular contexts: within the spectrum of communication, discourse analysis highlights the impact of factors like cohesion, turn-taking and topic development. It also underlines the fact that spoken discourse always occurs within a particular setting and within a particular culture.

It would seem to be logical that the language learning syllabus of the future should take account of the central role of discourse skills. After all, people spend the vast majority of their non-sleeping lives communicating through stretches of coherent discourse. The chal-

lenge for the young language teacher (in Japan and in other countries) is to create learning programmes which encourage the student, through daily performance of speech events, to achieve the goal of discourse awareness.

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