Critical Language Awareness in the United States: Revisiting Issues and Revising Pedagogies in a Resegregated Society

by H. Samy Alim

As scholars examine the successes and failures of more than 50 years of court-ordered desegregation since Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, and 25 years of language education of Black youth since Martin Luther King Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board, this article revisits the key issues involved in those cases and urges educators and sociolinguists to work together to revise pedagogies. After reviewing what scholars have contributed, the author suggests the need for critical language awareness programs in the United States as one important way in which we can revise our pedagogies, not only to take the students’ language into account but also to account for the interconnectedness of language with the larger sociopolitical and sociohistorical phenomena that help to maintain unequal power relations in a still-segregated society.

entered the language and literacy battlefield in the thick of the Oakland “Ebonics controversy,” which eerily revisited many of the same racial and cultural stereotypes raised by “The Black English Case” in Ann Arbor (Martin Luther King Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board) nearly two decades earlier. While the media and public dis...

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for quantitative sociolinguists) chose *King* as its primary conference theme. *King* was a federal Court case on behalf of fifteen Black, economically oppressed children residing in a low-income housing project on Green Road in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The plaintiffs argued that the school board had not taken the social, economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the students into account in the effort to teach them how to read in "standard English" (Smitherman, 1981). Thus, they argued, the students did not have access to equal educational opportunities, also a primary concern for *Brown*. While school desegregation rulings have sometimes mentioned the effects of "language," and while language education rulings have sometimes mentioned the effects of "desegregation," both types of case lie right at the nexus of language and racial politics in U.S. education. As Judge Joiner ruled:

This case is a judicial investigation of a school’s response to language, a language used in informal and casual oral communication among many blacks but a language that is not accepted as an appropriate means of communication among people in their professional roles in society. . . . The problem posed by this case is one which the evidence indicates has been compounded by efforts on the part of society to fully integrate blacks into the mainstream of society by relying solely on simplistic devices such as scatter housing and busing of students. . . . Some evidence suggests that the teachers in the schools which are "ideally" integrated such as King do not succeed as well with minority black students in teaching language arts as did many of the teachers of black children before integration. The problem, of course, is multidimensional, but the language of the home environment may be one of the dimensions. It is a problem that every thoughtful citizen has pondered, and that school boards, school administrators and teachers are trying to solve. (Judge Charles W. Joiner’s "Memorandum Opinion and Order" in *Martin Luther King Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board*, decided July 12, 1979)

These two cases (*Brown* and *King*) have often been discussed separately in the scholarly literature, but a joint discussion of the cases should prove useful in improving access to equal educational opportunities for linguistically profiled and marginalized students.

This article seizes the current moment in U.S. educational history to call for a critical interdisciplinary dialogue between educators and sociolinguists. Given the its timely nature (in commemoration of *Brown* and *King*), I focus on how language and literacy scholars have attempted to address the linguistic consequences of the African slave trade (Baugh, 2000a). These linguistic consequences, as we most recently witnessed in the heated Ebonics controversy of Oakland, California (where the Oakland School Board called for teachers to respect the legitimacy and richness of BL while teaching "standard English"), remain causes of concern in American public discourse. By revisiting the central issues facing scholars who study the language and literacy practices of Black Americans, we can review what has been tried and call for what needs to be done. I conclude by urging educators and sociolinguists to revise pedagogies in what has become a resegregated society (Orfield & Yun 1999).

**Desegregation and Divergence: Brown and King in a Resegregated America**

Seven months after the *King* decision, linguist Geneva Smitherman, with the institutional support of the Center for Black Studies at Wayne State University, hosted a national invitational symposium to discuss the effects of the case on the future education of Black youth. Speaking before an audience of more than “300 high powered professionals” from educational, linguistic, psychological, and legal backgrounds (Smitherman, 1981, p. 23), Dr. Annamarie Gillespie-Hayes of the Training Institute for Desegregated Education captured the urgency that Black Americans felt about obtaining equal access to educational opportunities: “Twenty-five years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the desegregation of schools ‘with all deliberate speed’ has resulted in more deliberation than speed in the dismantling of dual school systems. The crucial word for Black people in the *Brown* mandate was "speed," while the Southern school boards accented ‘deliberation.’” (Gillespie-Hayes, 1981, p. 259). Witnessing the massive White American resistance to court-ordered desegregation, Gillespie-Hayes and others chose to focus on an educational program that privileged content over configuration. Whether they knew it or not, the greatest irony of the *Brown* decision would be that students at the turn of the century would once again be separated by race in U.S. schools, only this time the segregation would be due to a complex array of social, economic, and legal issues (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002).

The resegregation of American society—not just of Blacks and Whites, but of all communities from each other, particularly Blacks and Latinos—has resulted in a situation where most Black and Brown children in the United States attend racially segregated schools (de facto segregation is in full effect in almost every major urban area). As noted by Balkin (2001), the increasing resegregation of U.S. cities is strongly correlated with poverty levels: “Although only 5 percent of segregated white schools are in areas of concentrated poverty, over 80 percent of black and Latino schools are” (p. 6). Turner Middle School in Southwest Philadelphia was 99.4% Black, with the majority of students living below the poverty line in the late 1990s when I worked there. I have also taught in California schools where not a single White student attended. Teachers throughout the United States can testify to the presence of de facto segregation, as there has been a gradual relaxing of the need to comply with court-ordered desegregation since the 1970s (Prince, forthcoming; also see Balkin’s discussion of Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell, 1991; Freeman v. Pitts, 1992; and Missouri v. Jenkins, 1995).

What might (re)segregation have to do with language education? In the context of a resegregated society, sociolinguists (Labov & Harris, 1986) argued that Black and White speakers of English were not participating in the same processes of linguistic change. If true, this meant that rather than Black and White dialects of English converging, they were actually diverging. In the press, this had immediate and “news-worthy” social implications, as Americans in the post–Civil Rights Era had come to see themselves as a nation of citizens devoted to equal opportunity for all. So, whereas the Kerner Commission (the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder) feared the development of “two separate societies, one Black, the other White,” some sociolinguists feared the development of two separate languages, one Black, the other White (see the debate

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among top sociolinguists in Fasold’s 1987 special issue of *American Speech*). This would mean that the language of some Blacks in resegregated America would be growing farther and farther away from the “language of schooling,” possibly halting Black American educational progress.

In the *King* decision, Judge Joiner explicitly makes the connection between language barriers and segregation. *King* represents the first test of applicability of 1703(f), the language provision of the 1974 Equal Educational Opportunity Act, to speakers of BL (Smitherman, 1981, 2000). The critical clause reads:

No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, by—

.........

( f) the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs. (20 U.S.C. 1703(f))

In his “Memorandum Opinion and Order” (1979), Judge Joiner sought to go beyond *Brown’s* use of social science research: “The court believes that research results . . . are better received as evidence in the case, on the record and subject to cross-examination, than simply by reading the reports and giving consideration to what appears in those reports as was done in *Brown v. Board of Education.*” It is clear from the ruling that Judge Joiner relied heavily on the research results of educational psychologists and linguists. He ruled:

The evidence clearly suggests that no matter how well intentioned the teachers are, they are not likely to be successful in overcoming the language barrier caused by their failure to take into account the home language system, unless they are helped by the defendant to recognize the existence of the language system used by the children in their home community and to use that knowledge as a way of helping the children to read standard English.

The failure of the defendant Board to provide leadership and help for its teachers in learning about the existence of “black English” as a home and community language for many black students and to suggest to those same teachers ways and means of using that knowledge in teaching the black children code switching skills in connection with reading standard English is not rational in light of existing knowledge on the subject [emphasis added].

Sociolinguistic testimony that dually attributed the continued existence of BL to external, social factors (such as the historical and enduring isolation of Blacks from “mainstream” America and its institutions) and internal, community factors (such as the recognition of BL as an important cultural symbol of Black ethnic identity and group solidarity) influenced Judge Joiner’s decision, which is critical to my arguments in this article.

Before *King,* several desegregation cases mentioned the distinctiveness of BL (Bailey, 1981). The year that attorneys Gabe Kaimowitz and Kenneth Lewis filed the federal *King* case in Ann Arbor (on July 28, 1977), the famous Detroit desegregation case was decided not too far away. That case, *Bradley v. Milliken,* recognized the external, social factors that help to maintain BL: “Children who have been thus educationally and culturally set apart from the larger community will inevitably acquire habits of speech, conduct, and attitudes reflecting their cultural isolation. They are likely to acquire speech habits, for example, which vary from the environment in which they must ultimately function and compete, if they are to enter and be a part of that community.” Recognizing a longstanding truism about speech—that language is the property of the community, not solely the individual—the Judge continued: “This is not peculiar to race; in this setting, it can affect children who, as a group, are isolated by force of law from the mainstream” (433 U.S. 287). Not only was the court recognizing these factors in the maintenance of BL, they also suggested that any such isolated linguistic group—be they Spanish-dominant Mexicans in some Los Angeles communities or Arabic-dominant Palestinians in some northern New Jersey communities—“must be treated directly by special training at the hands of teachers prepared for the task” (433 U.S. 287; see also Bailey, 1981 for a thorough legal analysis).

In the aftermath of the *King* decision, in which Judge Joiner deemed as irrational the failure of the school board to use existing knowledge to teach language arts, and the Oakland Ebonics controversy (Baugh 2000a; J. Rickford & R. Rickford 2000), in which the majority of the American public deemed statements like the judge’s to be irrational, it seems like “what go around come around”—and around and around. The cycle of hysteria that surrounds the right of Black students to their own language begs two important questions for scholars: “What are the rational ways by which teachers can take BL into account when teaching Black students?” and “What is the state of ‘existing knowledge’ on the subject?” After we revisit what scholars have contributed, I suggest an important way in which we can revise our pedagogies, not only to take the students’ language into account but also to account for the interconnectedness of language with the larger sociopolitical and sociohistorical phenomena that help to maintain unequal power relations in a still-segregated society.

**Respect da Dialect: Sociolinguistic Approaches to Language and Literacy Development**

Some sociolinguists have been concerned with the educational implications of language research for quite some time, even becoming vocal advocates in times of educational “crisis” for students who speak languages other than the dominant norm. Before considering the studies that address BL and literacy development, it is important to note that linguists have been heavily involved in the vast array of language issues in schools since the 1960s. Their involvement includes early attempts to use linguistic knowledge to teach reading (Fries, 1962) and more recent efforts to produce research in support of bilingual education and policy, which has come under increasingly vehement attack in the last decade, coinciding with the dramatic rise of the Latino population in many areas of the United States (Crawford, 1992; Krashen, 1996; Stanford Working Group, 1993; Valdes, 2001; Zentella, 1997). Sociolinguists have also supported bidialectal programs for native Hawaiians and speakers of “Hawaiian Creole English” (Benham & Heck, 1998) and called for the support and development of academic language and biliteracy in social contexts (Enright-Villalva, 2003; Hornberger, 1989). More directly, some have provided evidence, legal
testimonies, and policy recommendations in the firestorms surrounding BL in schools (Baugh, 1998, 2000a; J. Rickford & R. Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1981, 2000). Since the Oakland Ebonics controversy, John Rickford has continually revised and made available to the public (see www.stanford.edu/~rickford) his synthesis of sociolinguistic approaches to “working with vernacular varieties of English in schools” (see J. Rickford, 2000). In trying to answer the question that was on the mind of concerned teachers of Black students—How might the vernacular of African American children be taken into account in efforts to help them do better in schools?—John Rickford (2003) outlined four major sociolinguistic efforts towards that end: (a) the linguistically informed approach, (b) contrastive analysis, (c) dialect readers, and (d) dialect awareness programs.

The “linguistically informed approach” is characterized primarily by William Labov's work on reading failure, from his early explorations of the topic (1967) to his current, expansive research agenda to develop “Individualized Reading Programs” (2001; Labov & Baker, 2003) in elementary schools in Philadelphia and California (with Bettina Baker, John and Angela Rickford, John Baugh, and others). Labov begins with one fundamental premise: Teachers should distinguish between mistakes in reading and differences in pronunciation. For instance, if a Black child reads, “I missed my chance” as “I miss my chance,” teachers should not view this as a decoding error, but rather as an utterance that is consistent with the pronunciation patterns of BL. It is not clear whether teachers are, in fact, failing Black students for these types of “errors.” Nor is it clear how such awareness on the part of teachers will help develop a more responsive reading pedagogy, particularly in areas of comprehension (see A. Rickford, 1999). However, a thorough analysis of the kinds of possible decoding errors that Black students do make, and efforts to produce Individualized Reading Programs can only be helpful. We now know more about Black children's decoding skills than we have in the past, and that is certainly promising.

The “contrastive analysis” approach can be used to distinguish the differences between “standard English” and BL. John Rickford (2003) reports that this approach has been used successfully by Taylor (1989) in Chicago, by Parker and Crist (1995) in Tennessee and Chicago, and by Harris-Wright (1999) in Dekalb County, Georgia. A vivid example of the potential success of this approach in teaching “standard English” writing skills is noted in the work of Taylor (1989), who showed that students taught by this method had a 91.7% decrease in their use of third-person singular without the final s (a well-studied feature of BL), while those taught by more traditional means only had an 11% decrease. Contrastive analysis, along with other strategies from second language acquisition methodology, has also been used in the comprehensive Academic English Mastery Program in the Los Angeles Unified School District, which serves more than fifty schools, thousands of teachers, and tens of thousands of students (LeMoine & Hollie, forthcoming).

“Dialect readers” introduce reading in the home and community language of the students and then later make the switch to “standard English.” This approach has sparked heated debate here in the United States. Despite research that demonstrated that the well-known dialect reader program, “Bridge” (Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981), advanced the reading abilities of Black students, the publishers of the program discontinued the product because of community outrage against the use of BL in schools. This incident underscores the need for community education on BL. More reading gains like these could be lost as a result of misunderstandings between school administrators and local communities. Black students achieved 6.2 months of reading gain in a 4-month period, while a control group taught by traditional methods actually lost ground in that same period.

The final approach is the “dialect awareness” approach spearheaded by Walt Wolfram and his colleagues at North Carolina State University (Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999). Dialect awareness programs seek to infuse the fundamental principles of linguistic variation into school curricula. The program excites students about the inherent variability of language and meets standards proposed by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, indicating that students should “develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles” (National Council of Teachers of English & International Reading Association, p. 3). One of the most exciting aspects of dialect awareness programs is that they encourage students to become ethnographers and collect their own speech data from their local communities. Although the educational effectiveness of these programs is not truly tried and tested (most attempts are short-term, making it difficult to measure student progress), teachers interested in developing language and other skills (e.g., data analysis, oral history projects) view this approach positively. Dialect awareness programs represent one potential way to reduce dialect discrimination in schools and society.

**Disrupting the “Natural” Sociolinguistic Order of Things: The New Literacy Studies and Critical Language Awareness**

The sociolinguistic approaches described above have one fundamental similarity with the New Literacy Studies (see Hull & Schulz, 2002)—both groups of scholars are working to provide evidence that will disprove the notion that the language and literacy practices of students from linguistically marginalized groups are “deficient.” Labov (1972) made this statement early on:

> The view of the black speech community which we obtain from our work in the ghetto areas is precisely the opposite from that reported by Deutsch or by Bereiter and Engelmann. We see a child bathed in verbal stimulation from morning to night. We see many speech events which depend upon the competitive exhibition of verbal skills—sounding, singing, toasting, rifting, loading—a whole range of activities in which the individual gains status through his use of language. . . . We see no connection between verbal skill in the speech events characteristic of the street culture and success in the schoolroom. (pp. 212–213)

Many scholars have used another sociolinguistic framework, the ethnography of communication, to drive home the main message that students on the margins of school success often possess “different, not deficient” language and literacy practices.
in their home communities. This “mismatch,” they argue, is one cause of schools’ failure to reach these pupils. Most notable in this area is Heath’s (1983) classic, decade-long study of how families from Black and White working-class communities socialized their children into different “ways with words,” or varying language and literacy practices, some of which were closer to school norms than others. Subsequently, scholars have taken on research agendas that aim to “bridge” the out-of-school language and literacy practices of Black students with classroom practice (Ball, 2000; Dyson, 2003; Foster, 2001; Lee, 1993), while others have examined the inventive and innovative language and literacy events of Black youth involved in Hip Hop culture (Alim, 2004a, 2004b), spoken word poetry (Fisher, 2003), and other verbal activities (Mahiri & Sutton, 1996; Richardson, 2003).

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) scholars, such as Gee (1996) and Street (1993), position themselves at the crossroads of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and critical linguistics. Like linguistic anthropologists, the NLS view literacy—in fact, literacies—as situated within the social and cultural practices that are constitutive of everyday life (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Exploring what Ball and Freedman (2004) refer to as “new literacies for new times,” the NLS pull away from the generally noncritical American sociolinguistic tradition by drawing from contemporary social and cultural theorists, such as Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, and Gramsci, among others and thus more closely align with the British tradition of Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 1995). Critical Language Awareness views educational institutions as designed to teach citizens about the current sociolinguistic order of things, without challenging that order, which is based largely on the ideology of the dominating group and their desire to maintain social control. This view of education interrogates the dominating discourse on language and literacy and foregrounds, as in the NLS, the examination and interconnectedness of identities, ideologies, histories/herstories, and the hierarchical nature of power relations between groups. Research in this area attempts to make the invisible visible by examining the ways in which well-meaning educators attempt to silence diverse languages in White public space by inculcating speakers of heterogeneous language varieties into what are, at their core, White ways of speaking and seeing the world/world, that is, the norms of White, middle-class, heterosexist males (Alim, 2004c).

Importantly, a critical approach is not concerned with the study of decontextualized language but rather with the analysis of “opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak, 1995).

Although American sociolinguistic research certainly has been helpful in providing detailed descriptions of language variation and change, this is where it stops (Lippi-Green, 1997). By viewing the role of language in society through a noncritical lens, the tradition can actually harm linguistically profiled and marginalized students. Most American suggestions about pedagogy on language attitudes and awareness tend to discuss linguistic stigmatization in terms of individual prejudices rather than discrimination that is part and parcel of the sociostructural fabric of society and serves the needs of those who currently benefit the most from what is portrayed as the “natural” sociolinguistic order of things. Fairclough (1989, pp. 7–8) argues that the job of sociologists should be to do more than ask, “What language varieties are stigmatized?” Rather, we should be asking, “How—in terms of the development of social relationships to power—was the existing sociolinguistic order brought into being? How is it sustained? And how might it be changed to the advantage of those who are dominated by it?”

Research conducted by the Linguistic Profiling Project (LPP) at Stanford University (Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999; Baugh, 2000b, 2003) attempts to apply findings of studies on language-based discrimination to educational practice by working with Black, Chicano, and Pacific Islander youth in a diverse working-class city in northern California to develop a Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) on language. That pedagogy aims to educate linguistically profiled and marginalized students about how language is used and, importantly, how language can be used against them (Alim, 2004d). Questions central to the project are: “How can language be used to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations?” And, conversely, “How can language be used to resist, redefine and possibly reverse these relations?” This approach engages in the process of consciousness-raising, that is, the process of actively becoming aware of one’s own position in the world and what to do about it (as in the Women’s Liberation movement or the Black and Chicano Liberation struggles). By learning about the full scope of their language use (through conducting ethnographic and sociolinguistic analyses of their own communicative behavior) and how language can actually be used against them (through linguistic profiling and other means; see Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003), students become more conscious of their communicative behavior and the ways by which they can transform the conditions under which they live. The LPP moves far beyond the traditional sociolinguistic and educational approaches that bear the slogans “respect for diversity,” “certain language varieties are appropriate in certain situations and not others,” and “all languages are equal;” that continually default in the elevation of the “standard language” over all other varieties—or, as Smitherman observed (1977) in a play on the Orwellian notion of inequality—that give students the message that “all languages are equal, but some are more equal than others.”

“It’s Not a Game No Mo!”: Arming Linguistically Profiled and Marginalized Students

LPP students know what’s up. Check out what one seventh-grade Black female said about her own language use in an interview:

Student: People think I talk too ghetto. They be like, “Yo English is toe [tore] up!”
Interviewer: Why do they say that, though?!
Student: Cuz I say things like, “I ain’t gon. . . .” like, “I ain’t gon do it,” or I won’t say “eating.” I’ll say “ea’in.”

The student is well aware of the fact that she uses a variable feature of BL that has yet to be fully described in the literature: the reduced (glottalized) consonant in “ea’in.” She is also keenly aware of this variable’s social standing—“too ghetto”—as a marker of BL. Results such as these
show that this agenda cannot be too narrowly defined by struggle between racial or ethnic groups, but must also be prepared to deal with the many class contradictions that exist within groups. We can frame our discussions in terms of “discrimination,” “racism,” and “stereotyping,” which most schools are now discussing openly.

As we continue our critical interdisciplinary dialogue on education on the anniversaries of Brown and King, rather than harming linguistically profiled and marginalized students, our goal should be arm- ing them with the silent weapons needed for the quiet, discursive wars that are waged daily against their language and person. We must revise our pedagogies to confront what Sledd (1996) referred to as “the harsh ways of the world we live in.” Our pedagogies should not pretend that racism does not exist in the form of linguistic discrimination. Nor should they pretend that linguistic profiling does not directly affect the personal and family lives of our students who speak marginalized languages (be they Whites from remote regions in North Kakala [Carolina], Puerto Ricans from the Bronx barrios, or Blacks from the 504 in New Aw’lins). As one of my eighth-grade Chicana students wrote: “My dad felt that he lost his job because he could not speak English good. He was always on time and always worked hard, but his boss never paid attention to him. He would get angry at him when he couldn’t say what he wanted to say.”

We must confront these matters of language discrimination in schools and society. Like Judge Joiner’s ruling 25 years ago, these matters point to contradictions that lie at the nexus of language and racial politics in the United States today:

The plaintiffs have attempted to put before this court one of the most important and pervasive problems facing modern urban America—the problem of why “Johnnie Can’t Read” when Johnnie is Black and comes from a scatter, low-income housing unit, set down in an upper-middle class area of one of America’s most liberal and forward-looking cities.

Critical language awareness programs are now being tried in the United States context in an effort to help students read not just the word but also the world. These efforts are being made because we can’t keep frontin in times like these. Like the Bad Boy who stormed the stage at a Vibe Magazine Hip Hop industry seminar once put it, “It’s not a game no mo!” Educators, sociolinguists, all “thoughtful citizens,” me and you, we gon work it out.

NOTE
1 The author was invited to write this article in honor of the 50th anniversary of the landmark civil rights decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), and the 25th anniversary of Martin Luther King Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board (1979), popularly known as the Black English case.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR**

H. SAMY ALIM is a visiting scholar in Anthropology and African American Studies (2005–2006) at the University of California, Los Angeles, and an Assistant Professor at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Education. He can be contacted at UCLA, Department of Anthropology, 341 Haines Hall, Box 951553, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1553; h.samy.alim@gmail.com. His areas of specialization include Black language, literacy and literature, ethnographic and sociolinguistic studies of Hip Hop Culture and Hip Hop Nation Language, and the street language and verbal art of Egyptian youth in Cairo.

Manuscript received February 22, 2004
First revision received September 28, 2004
Second revision received May 31, 2005
Accepted July 30, 2005

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