Using Rimbaud’s metaphor “Je est un autre”, we try to see how a change in the language one uses brings about a different way of relating to oneself, of understanding one’s identity.

The metaphor we are concerned with here appears in a couple of letters written in May 1877. On May 13th:

[…] C’est faux de dire : Je pense : on devrait dire : On me pense. - Pardon du jeu de mots. - Je est un autre. Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon, et nargue aux inconscients, qui ergotent sur ce qu’ils ignorent tout à fait!

And then, two days later:

Car Je est un autre. Si le cuivre s’éveille clairon, il n’y a rien de sa faute. Cela m’est évident: j’assiste à l’éclosion de ma pensée : je la regarde, je l’écoute : je lance un coup d’archet : la symphonie fait son remuement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d’un bond sur la scène.

These two letters addressed, the first to Georges Izambard and the second to Paul Demeny, were written by Rimbaud and they were put together as being the "Lettres dites ’du Voyant’", “of the Visionary". I am not going to delve here into an analysis of these letters. What I am only interested in is the metaphor itself – “Je est un autre”. From an aesthetic perspective, Rimbaud points out that the artistic, poetic production is not possible without digging into the most hidden places of one’s creative powers and give them a voice. The poet’s creativity is not to be regarded as a static although overflowing source of beauty. It needs to be challenged, to be shattered, to be shifted. These letters mark the drastic change in the way Rimbaud used language (noticeable already from 1871). From then on, Rimbaud’s poetry has a new tonality, it testifies to a sort of violence with which he charges against the vocabulary, against the syntax, etc. Language needs to be stripped down from anything that is not necessary – this is the motto of Rimbaud’s new approach.

Now, from a philosophical perspective, “Je est un autre” is invoked not only because it expresses a condition of identity as a person but also of identity as a person among and with others. “Je est un autre” signifies a subjectivity crisis and an awareness of it as well. It combines a perspective from within with a perspective from without. It embodies a thought which points to the individual, the “Je”, through the community, the “autre”. It attempts to describe the individual, the “definite”, the “familiar” through the indefinite and the foreignness of the other.

TOCCATA ET FUGUE POUR L’ÉTRANGER

For Julia Kristeva too the meaning of “Je est un autre” goes beyond the sphere of poetry and seems to play the role of a prophesy, announcing the exile, announcing the very condition of being a Foreigner, an Other.
Vivre avec l’autre, avec l’étranger, nous confronte à la possibilité ou non d’être un autre. Il ne s’agit pas simplement – humanisant – de notre aptitude à accepter l’autre; mais d’être à sa place, ce qui revient à se penser et à se faire autre à soi-même. Le “Je est un autre” de Rimbaud n’était pas seulement l’aveu du fantôme psychotique qui hante la poésie. Le mot annonçait l’exil, la possibilité ou la nécessité d’être étranger et de vivre à l’étranger, préfigurant ainsi l’art de vivre d’une ère moderne, le cosmopolitisme des écorchés. […] Identité dédoublée, kaleidoscope d’identités: pouvons-nous être reçus comme fous ou comme faux? Sans mourir de la haine de l’étranger ou pour l’étranger? (Kristeva 1988, 25)

Recognizing the other is significant not only inasmuch as the other is concerned but also inasmuch as the self is concerned because now, when one has to live with the other, one has to be ready to understand that one can become an Other oneself. Rimbaud’s metaphor gains a different perspective when applied to the way the modern world works, a world in which cultures meet and influence each other in manners until now very little possible. This is why the I is opened up to many more and deeper challenges and changes. Where does the I end and the Other begin? Is there a divided identity or a kaleidoscope of identities? Are we true to ourselves in being who we are? Are we fools or fakes? In Étrangers à nous-mêmes, Julia Kristeva takes us on a ride through the history of being a foreigner. The Greeks and the Barbarians, the Chosen People, St. Paul and St. Augustin, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, France and the European Union, these all are subjects of her inquiry. The opening chapter is titled “Toccata et Fugue pour l’Étranger” and it is, as it rightly suggests, an abrupt introductions into the subject. An introduction which mixes personal considerations, literary criticism and historical as well as political elements. Étrangeté, the “condition of being a foreigner”, Kristeva considers, is something which eludes analysis, something which somehow vanishes before it got the chance to even be acknowledged. This does not mean, however, that we deal here with a sort of efficient “melting pot” or a successful integration process. Rather, she seems to think that the evanescence of foreignness is due to an effacement of the self. She writes:

C’est dire qu’établi en soi, l’étranger n’a pas de soi. Tout juste une assurance vide, sans valeur, qui axe ses possibilités d’être constamment autre, au gré des autres et des circonstances. Je fais ce qu’on veut, mais ce n’est pas “moi” – “moi” est ailleurs, “moi” n’appartient à personne, “moi” n’appartient pas à “moi”, … “moi” existe-t-il? (Kristeva 1988, 19)

Once uprooted, the self loses its backbone; the I becomes too flexible, to the point of breaking off. With changing the space, a change in the way of perceiving time seems inevitable. In the new environment, one perceives time as a transition period and thus, one tends to live a transitory life, in which the past cannot be invoked and in which the future cannot be “designed”. But, in spite of this (or maybe because of this), the foreigner perceives herself as the only one who really is alive. Not being able to rely on the past, on their tradition, on their family and friends and, at the same time, not knowing how to cope with a shapeless future, they have to make decisions, to take risks.

[…] l’étranger a tendance à estimer qu’il est le seul à avoir une biographie, c’est-à-dire une vie faite d’épreuves – ni catastrophes ni aventures (quoi qu’elles puissent arriver les unes autant que les autres), mais simplement une vie où les actes sont des événements, parce qu’ils impliquent choix, surprises, ruptures, adaptations ou ruses, mais ni routine ni repos. Aux yeux de l’étranger, ceux qui ne le sont pas n’ont aucune vie: à peine existent-ils, superbes ou médiocres, mais hors de la course et donc presque déjà cadavérisés. (Kristeva 1988, 16-17)

The foreigner vacillates between a “loose” self and the pride of being the only one to have a biography, between an ungraspable past and a slippery future, between the weariness of freedom and solitude. As Kristeva put it, “[…] l’étranger est un rêveur qui fait l’amour avec l’absence, un déprimé exquis. Heureux?” (Kristeva 1988, 21) Happy? Perhaps. Ironical? Certainly! Critical? Doubtless! Skeptical? Maybe. But also hopeful! Coping with a new world can occur, Kristeva considers here, either as an acknowledgement of the
change as a loss which would never be refilled, or as a chance to provoke change itself, as if putting one's identity through a test and pushing it to the limit. What is stable, what we evaluate strongly, our character is what will endure these tests. And what's more, since one holds together all these changes with the help of narratives, the language in which they are made up, told and retold becomes important.

The Silence of Polyglots
The short passage titled “The Silence of the Polyglots” (Kristeva 1988, 26-29) underlines the subtle, however significant role of language change and the influence it has on one's identity. Kristeva considers that for someone living in a new linguistic community, the mother tongue, unusable, resembles a handicapped child: dear (because it is so intimately one's own) but incapable of anything. It lacks the connections with the surrounding world because the “logic” of things has been altered: my words, do not refer to the world any longer, the way they used to. She writes:

Habiter des sonorités, des logiques coupées de la mémoire nocturne du corps, du sommeil aigre-doux de l'enfance. Porter en soi comme un caveau secret, ou comme un enfant handicapé – chéri et inutile –, ce langage d'autrefois qui se fane sans jamais vous quitter.

The language adopted, on the other hand, is regarded only as an instrument, as a tool which will always remain distinct, separated from oneself. But a priceless instrument, however, as it is the sole means through which one can express oneself. It has the power to give one a different skin and even more than that, another sex.

Together with a new language comes the possibility or, better perhaps, the necessity to change. Because, Kristeva seems to say, hearing my own voice and listening to my choice of words, I do not find myself to be my usual self. There is a fault line between who I am and what I manage to convey to the others about who I am. My narrative identity suddenly seems to be the narrative of someone else, very similar to me but not exactly myself. That's where the necessity of change comes in. How should I keep my word when my word is not understood? Should I be who I say I am or should I try to say who I am with the risk of being poorly understood?

Wavering between two languages, one close but useless and one distant but necessary, it is not difficult to discover an affinity to silence. Instead of looking for the best approximation of one’s thoughts, one starts to question the importance of words altogether and then drifts away in silence. Kristeva mentions Hölderlin who, while learning Greek, writes in the first version (ältere Fassung) of Mnemosyne: “Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos / Schmerzlos sind wir und haben fast / Die Sprache in der Fremde verloren”. She interprets these lines as being symptomatic for anyone who goes through the process of learning how to live in another linguistic community. Losing one's language, in the sense of not being able to speak in the “usual” way, not being sure of using the right words in the right situations, we become immune to the world’s happenings, as if we were not a part of it any longer: an empty sign. Assuming this emptiness as the only way out, one tends to supplement the lack of words with deeds.

Coïncé dans ce mutisme polyforme, l'étranger peut essayer, au lieu de dire, de faire: de faire le ménage, du tennis, du football, de la voile, de la couture, du cheval, du jogging, des enfants... que sais-je? Le silence ne vous est pas seulement imposé, il est en vous: refus de dire, sommeil strié collé à une angoisse qui veut rester muette, propriété privée de votre discrétion orgueilleuse et mortifiée, lumière coupante que ce silence. Rien à dire, néant, personne à l'horizon. Et une complétude impénétrable: diamant froid, trésor secret, soigneusement protégé, hors d'atteinte. Ne rien dire, rien n'est à dire, rien n'est dicible. (Kristeva 1988, 26-29)

But this silence, Kristeva thinks, is not something which is only imposed from outside. It comes also from within. “Nothing to say, abyss, nobody at the horizon”, she writes. In silence, the self is hidden away, as a “cold diamond”, as a “secret treasure”. The process of bringing up the self into a new language is a long and difficult process in which we get in touch with a different form of the other. This is also what we learn from Eva Hoffman, a Polish immigrant in the U.S.. Julia Kristeva gave us the
framework; she sketched what it means to be a foreigner and pointed out the importance of language in our attempt to define ourselves in a new linguistic environment, while discovering ourselves as being somehow split: we are the other as well – “Je est un autre!” What follows is a detailed self-analysis of someone who had to go through this process and wrote about it: a first person account of the life of an immigrant, moving from one country to another and becoming oneself – a person – while changing languages.

LEAVING - EVA HOFFMAN

Eva Hoffman’s autobiographical novel *Lost in Translation* starts with her departure from Poland, together with her family (mother, father and little sister), heading to Vancouver, Canada. She grows up in Canada (where she feels exiled and disappointed) and then moves to the U.S. to study and later teach (while trying to figure out where she stands in the confusing American Melting Pot).

Lost in Translation stemmed out of her preoccupation with language and “self-translation”, as she calls it.

What I wanted to talk about was not just language but the conjunction of language and identity, and that to do that I needed a case study — and the case study I knew best was myself. It needed to be done from within a subjectivity since it was so much about subjectivity. I decided to write it as a memoir — quite reluctantly because I am not a confessional person at all... (Zournazy, 1998)

For Hoffman, language and subjectivity are tightly connected. Learning English and using this language in order to express herself, to make herself present not only to the others but also to herself, she has to undergo noticeable changes. It’s not only that she has to learn to express herself in another language, but she also has to change her looks, her way of walking, her hairdo, etc. She assists at the “emergence” of her own self. To keep a check on these changes, she begins to write. Of course, she vacillated between using English and using Polish. English, on the one hand, seemed to be far away from her intimate thoughts and feelings, unable to describe them best. Polish, on the other hand, seemed to be the echo of a vanishing world, with little reference in her own environment. Her decision to use English for her writing was a gamble and a hope.

I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self. Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self – my English self – becomes oddly objective; more than anything it perceives. It exists more easily in the abstract sphere of thoughts and observations than in the world. For a while, this impersonal self, this cultural negative capability, becomes the truest thing about me. When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing – an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. This language is beginning to invent another me.

[…] It seems that when I write in English, I am unable to use the word “I”. I do not go as far as the schizophrenic “she” – but I am driven, as by a compulsion, to the double, the Siamese-twin – “you”. (Hoffman 1997, 121)

Writing makes possible an objectification. The written text, once on paper, becomes independent of the writer. It exists in the world much the same as our actions which, once done, begin a life of their own, transforming the world. But at the same time, it gives one the chance to face oneself as another, as an alterity, to get to know oneself as another. Somewhere else, Hoffman points out again the importance of writing in her attempt to come to terms with herself and with living in her new surroundings. Through writing she attempts…

...to close the gap on the sense of being estranged from myself. In my case, this estrangement happened very much in daily perceptions and daily life. In a sense, writing is the attempt to find a language that is embedded in yourself and that somehow can express the self directly. I know that is a kind of dream and not completely attainable, but it is the attempt to find a language which sort of bubbles up directly. (Zournazi, 1998)

Writing achieves this because it happens under the mark of the self. Hoffman considers that the new
language is perceived more as a language qua system. Her first language, her mother tongue, appeared to be more attached to things, more absolute, in this perspective. However, with her arrival in Canada, she understood that Polish is not a language that "functions" in her new environment. For about a year she had to live through an acute transition period in which she could not break with Polish and in which she was not confident in her mastery of English. In any case, she could not entertain this status quo for too long and decided for English. The process she started then lasted for about twenty years, as she confesses in an interview. (Zournazy 1998) During these twenty years, she has been on a continuous search for words and phrases and for ways of improving her (almost sensuous) relationship with English, trying to bring herself in line with its peculiarities and with its numerous nuances.

I've become obsessed with words. I gather them, put them away like a squirrel saving nuts for winter, swallow them and hunger for more. If I take in enough, then maybe I can incorporate the language, make it part of my psyche and my body. I will not leave an image unworded, will not let anything cross my mind till I find the right phrase to pin the shadow down. (Hoffman 1997, 216)

She absorbs the language as if it were an essential substance without which she would not be able to subsist. Whether it is something she saw, something she read, something she thought about, something she overheard, she pours it through her ever growing net of words and sentences. A page further down she writes:

I pounce on bits of colloquial idiom, those slivers of Americana in which the cultural sensibility is most vivid, as if they could give me America itself. “Hair of the dog that bit me”, I repeat to myself with relish; “pork-barreling”; “I’m from Missouri, show me”; “He swallowed it hook, line and sinker.” When I speak, I’m awkward in using such homely familiarities; I still feel the presumption in it. But in writing, I claim every territorial prerogative. Perhaps if I cast my net wide enough, it will cover the whole continent. (Hoffman 1997, 217)

Words are one of the dominant themes in the third part (which deals with her attempt to integrate in the American culture) of Lost in Translation. Hoffman takes her time in pointing out how very important they are. Only a better grasp of the language in which she lives can give her a better picture of the world and thus a stronger sense of being here, among others like her and among the things which have names.

The thought that there are parts of the language I am missing can induce a small panic in me, as if such gaps were missing parts of the world or my mind – as if the totality of the world and mind were coeval with the totality of language. Or rather, as if language were an enormous, fine net in which reality is contained – and if there are holes in it, then a bit of reality can escape, cease to exist. (Hoffman 1997, 217)

The process of learning the new language came together with a re-discovery of her Self. Writing about her changes, she discovers how important it is to have the right word for the right thought or feeling. To find the right words, however, is a very demanding task.

I love words insofar as they correspond to the world, insofar as they give it to me in a heightened form. The more words I have, the more distinct, precise my perceptions become – and such lucidity is a form of joy. Sometimes, when I find a new expression, I roll it on the tongue, as if shaping it in my mouth gave birth to a new shape in the world. Nothing fully exists until it is articulated. (Hoffman 1997, 28)

Her Self needs to be articulated as well, put in a story, told to the others and told to herself. It is the same person who speaks English and teaches at Harvard and the Polish girl who just started to understand the world around her, although it may seem that the English Eva Hoffman is “arranged, shaped and articulated in quite another way”. It is as if one is given another opportunity to “make” one’s character anew and in tune with one’s environment. After running from one language to another, she realizes that, although Polish might come from a deeper place, with the passing of time it becomes
fossilized.

When I talk to myself now, I talk in English. English is the language in which I've become an adult, in which I've seen my favourite movies and read my favourite novels, and sung along with Janis Joplin records. In Polish, whole provinces of adult experience are missing. I don't know the Polish word for “microchips”, or “pathetic fallacy”, or The Importance of Being Earnest. If I tried talking to myself in my native tongue, it would be a stumbling conversation indeed, interlaced with English expressions. (Hoffman 1997, 272)

Immersed in the American culture, surrounded by the “American reality” she becomes more sensitive to things American. Undertaking therapy is one example. However, she discovers that for her, therapy is partly translation therapy, the talking cure a second-language cure. My going to a shrink is, among other things, a rite of initiations: initiation into the language of the subculture within which I happen to live, into a way of explaining myself to myself. But gradually, it becomes a project of translating backward. The way to jump over my Great Divide is to crawl backward over it in English. It's only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward, in one language, that I can reconcile the voices within me with each other; it is only then that the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begins to emerge. (Hoffman 1997, 271-272)

The talking-cure is her solution for “jumping over” her “Great Divide”. Slowly “translating” her Polish life into her English life she manages to go over the silence of which Kristeva talked above. This process proves to be very important. She could have chosen silence and could have attempted to live in an enclosed community, using a (petrified) language and speaking it with few people, hoping to maintain the idealized image of a paradise which only exists overseas, in her childhood Poland. Instead, she decided to come to terms with the new environment and acknowledge it as such.

No, there’s no return to the point of origin, no regaining of childhood unity. Experience creates style, and style, in turn creates a new woman. Polish is no longer the one, true language against which others live their secondary life. Polish insights cannot be regained in their purity; there’s something I know in English too. The wholeness of childhood truths is intermingled with the divisiveness of adult doubt. When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative. Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages – the language of my family and childhood, and education and friendship, and love, and the larger, changing world – though perhaps I tend to be more aware than most of the fractures between them, and of the building blocks. The fissures sometimes cause me pain, but in a way, they’re how I know that I’m alive. Suffering and conflict are the best proof that there’s something like a psyche, a soul; or else, what is it that suffers? Why would we need to suffer when fed and warm and out of the rain, where it not for that other entity within us making its odd, unreasonable, never fulfillable demands? (Hoffman 1997, 273)

“Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages”, Hoffman writes. And these languages are what we speak. We learn a language with the others around us, whether these others are our family or friends, our teachers or simply, the landscape which surrounds us, the world. In time, our experience of the world increases and with it, our Weltanschauung, our grasp of the world and of ourselves is becoming more detailed, more nuanced. We make choices, we undergo changes and we follow opportunities. As narratives do with contingent events, bringing them together in a story, so our choices and our actions become integral parts of who we are.

TAYLOR’S SOURCES OF THE SELF

In what follows we will try to explain why the language we speak and the stories we tell about ourselves are so important in shaping and maintaining the self and its relationship with the other. In his book on The Sources of the Self, Charles Taylor considers that the concept we have of ourselves (i.e., the concept of the self) depends on linguistic praxis and the interpretation of the facts in the history of our lives. When inquiring into concepts like those of self or person we are not to regard them as
objects, or as parts of our body. We should talk about being a “self” in a different way than when we talk about being an organism. Having a “self” is quite different than having a heart or a liver. Although we need these organs to be alive, they are not involved in the process of self understanding or self interpretation. What matters here is a “subject of experience” who speaks, who interacts with the world around, who is involved in relationships. This is why the question of language is addressed and becomes acute in Taylor’s conception. As Taylor writes, “A language only exists and is maintained within a language community. And this indicates another crucial feature of a self. One is a self only among other selves”. (Taylor 1989, 35)

From this perspective, persons can only be studied as beings who “only exist in, or are partly constituted by, a certain language”. (Taylor 1989, 35) One’s sense of self is acquired through a process of “growing and becoming”. It is not something instantaneous, something that occurs overnight. This process takes place in a certain language which one uses if one is to “reveal” oneself to oneself and to the others. We use our language in order to interpret ourselves, in order to define our standpoint, our Weltanschauung.

Moreover, social life is impossible without language because culture and public space are created in language, and our values are accessible only through language. Figuring out where we stand as a self is an enterprise which has to take into account where we come from, the tradition from which we stem. Traditions, or as Taylor calls them – schematic historical narratives, have a tremendous force which springs from the fact that they give substance to one’s life, a material out of which one’s life is to be tailored. We relate our story to a greater pattern of history, Taylor considers, “whether it be the traditional Heilsgeschichte of Christianity, or that of the progress of mankind, or the coming Revolution, or the building of a peaceful world, or the retrieval or continuance of our natural culture”. (Taylor 1989, 97)

Our lives are circumscribed to a set of frameworks, within a “strongly qualified horizon”. Frameworks are inescapable. As we cannot talk about language without using a language, so we cannot talk about identity without acknowledging the existence of frameworks. They come up whenever we attempt to articulate our histories and produce reasons and give meanings for/to our actions.

To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses. That is, when we try to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here “frameworks”. (Taylor 1989, 26)

A person without frameworks is not really a person, since the space circumscribed by these “distinctions of worth” is essential to human agency. While practices relate to collective norms, frameworks operate at a more “local level”, relating closely to human agency and thus having a stronger hold on human identity.

For example, being an Orthodox, or an environmentalist, or Flemish, these are all frames which determine where we stand on questions of importance for ourselves. Losing this identification or this commitment we would very likely end up spinning rudderless at sea. We would not be able to know anymore, Taylor considers, “for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was” for us. (Taylor 1989, 27) This amounts to an identity crisis, an inability to move within the moral and spiritual space. Without a framework which allows for things to have a stable significance, a marked position in relation to what is good or what has meaning or what is bad or meaningless, for that matter, comes the burden of “painful and frightening” experiences. (Taylor 1989, 28) This is how Kristeva’s silence becomes reality. This is why, in using English (her “adopted” language) as the language in which she tries to define herself, Hoffman assists at the emergence of a new self.

Narratives function more or less like a prism: they disperse light into the spectrum making it possible for us to understand our moral options, our evaluations, our life course. Through narratives we are able to interpret ourselves, to see where “we stand”: Either we want to see where we are coming from or we want to know where we should go, we always find ourselves in need of a story, of our own story by which we have the chance to interpret ourselves and realize what is important for us, what defines us as selves in a community of selves. With such a drastic change as a language change this unity is disrupted, shattered and we try to pick up the pieces and paste them all together using words we still
have to learn to trust, words we still have to bring closer to ourselves. Now, how are we to surpass this difficulty? In The Politics of Recognition, Charles Taylor points out that mainstream philosophy often overlooked an important feature of human life namely, its dialogical character. Human identity, Taylor considers, is created “dialogically”, in conjunction with the others. Because it is partly shaped by recognition, the withholding of recognition (or misrecognition) can be damaging to a person's dignity. “We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression”. (Taylor 1995, 230) Understanding that one's identity is not generated inwardly, monologically, is crucial in understanding the close connection between identity and recognition. It should be mentioned that Taylor does not take language to mean strictly the words we use when we are speaking. He broadens the view and takes into account other modes of expression such as art, gesture, love, etc., which we acquire in interaction with others and through which we not only communicate, but also define ourselves.

Thus my discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives new importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others. (Taylor 1995, 231)

My identity depends on being recognized by the others. It is only then that my identity can be regarded as authentic. The “inwardly derived, personal, original identity” is not recognized as such apriori. Rather, it achieves that through interaction and exchange. It is a fragile project which can fail at any time because it depends on both interacting parties. One brings one's story with oneself and tries to find one's place within the new culture by building up one's uniqueness in a continuous dialogue with the Other, attempting to find new ways to re-knot the threads of their own interrupted story.

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