English use as an identity marker among Malaysian undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

The English language, a legacy of the British colonialists, has been indelibly woven into the history of Malaysia, and because of its pervasive influence through its role in the education system, it is an important part of the identity construction of those who have gone through the system. This paper reports on the qualitative findings of a study investigating the impact of English on the sociocultural identity construction of young adult Malaysians. The data were obtained from interviews conducted with 20 Malaysian undergraduates from both public and private universities. English is one of the languages in their linguistic repertoire. The demographic composition of the respondents reflects in general the cultural and linguistic diversity of Malaysia. The paper will focus on how the use of English among these university students is perceived as an identity marker that enhances the perception of their personal and social status, and how its use may sometimes be used as the basis by members of the same ethnic community for "othering" them. The paper concludes by suggesting that since competence in the use of English is basically perceived as a form of cultural capital, a move towards enhancing English use among students within a policy that strongly advocates multilingualism is the way towards developing a more inclusive moderate sociocultural identity.

Keywords: language and identity; use of English; Malaysian undergraduates; multilingualism, identity construction

INTRODUCTION

According to the 15th edition of Gordon's (2005) *Ethnologue,* there are 140 languages spoken in Malaysia. Of these, one which is not indigenous to the country has had a significant impact on its

history and its sociocultural landscape. As a former British colony, Malaysia has had the English language indelibly woven into its history, and the language has been a constant significant factor in shaping national policies, particularly educational policies. While its role in education has been affected to some extent by changing political sentiments, its dominance as an international and now global language continues to influence the socio-cultural fabric of Malaysia. This paper presents the qualitative findings of a study that looks at two contentious issues in the local context: the use of English and identity. It investigates how speaking in English impacts on the identity construction of young adult Malaysians. In order to understand some of the complexities involved in the relationship between these two issues, this paper will begin by examining the role of English in the Malaysian education system from the British colonial times to the present.

THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The British administered Malaya (now commonly known as Peninsular or West Malaysia) from the eighteenth century till its independence in 1957. During this period of over 200 years, religious missions and independent groups were allowed to set up schools to educate the local population which consisted of three main ethnic groups, the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The Christian missions started the English medium schools which were open to everyone regardless of ethnicity. Despite its egalitarian policy, the English schools could be seen as principally elitist as they were mostly located in the bigger towns and hence had mainly Chinese and Indian pupils. The Malays were "under-represented" in these schools, as not many Malays lived in the towns (Asmah 1982, 1992). These schools were popular among the non-Malays as an English education not only afforded access to a good job in the government or a position in the private sector but also provided upward social mobility (Gill 2009).

Alongside the English medium schools were the vernacular Malay, Chinese and Tamil schools. Their respective medium of instruction was the mother tongue of each ethnic group. The Malay vernacular schools were set up by the British in the villages to keep the Malays happy and to confine them to the rural areas since most of them were farmers and fishermen. The British were not interested in providing schools for the then mainly migrant Chinese and Indian communities. They had to set up and finance their own schools, and even developed their own curriculum. The Chinese modeled their schools after China. They used Mandarin, the Chinese lingua franca, as the medium of instruction despite the linguistic diversity of the local Chinese community. The curriculum and teachers were from China. The Tamil schools, on the other hand, were set up in the rubber estates, which were run mainly by Indian migrant workers. This essentially compartmentalized system of education consisting of 4 distinctly diverse systems at the primary level was in line with the British colonialist policy of keeping the various races separate. This policy is commonly referred to as "divide and rule" (Philip1975, cited in Gill 2009). At the secondary level, however, there were only two types of schools available – English and Chinese. Most chose to continue their studies in an English secondary school. At the tertiary level, the medium of instruction was solely English.

Unsurprisingly, this education system succeeded in producing very proficient English users. In fact, it was said that one of the best legacies of the British was the high level of English proficiency among the people (Bhatt 2010). After Malaya gained its independence in 1957, this education system continued until 1970.

In 1970, Malay replaced English as the medium of instruction. This move to convert all English-medium schools into Malay-medium ones was made after the racial riots in 1969, as an effort to foster a common national identity and a nationalistic spirit among its multiracial citizenry. The status of

English was relegated to that of a second language albeit an important one. Till today it continues to be taught as a compulsory language in schools. However, it is as yet not a compulsory subject to pass in the secondary school national public exam. This means that it was not necessary for a student to obtain a pass in English to be awarded a first grade pass for the entire examination. Many educators and educationists feel that this ambivalent "compulsory to take but not compulsory to pass" status has in fact trivialised the importance of English.

In the vernacular schools, Mandarin and Tamil continued to be used as the media of instruction as the non-Malays' right to preserve, maintain and develop their languages and cultures is guaranteed under the Constitution. Enrolment in Chinese schools increased, as more Chinese parents reckoned that their children would have the best of both worlds in that they would be able to speak Mandarin as well as being reasonably conversant in Malay and English. If they sent their children to a national school, they would learn only two languages, Malay and English. The rising stature of China as a global power also fuelled the increase in enrolment in these Chinese schools. Official statistics on this is surprisingly scarce although the issue is widely discussed on the Internet and in the local papers. Husna Yusop (2005) in her news report, "Making national school the first choice" states that over 90 per cent of Chinese students are enrolled in Chinese primary schools while Masami Mustafa (2010) reports that only 6 per cent of Chinese students are in national schools.

The change in the medium of instruction from English to Malay inevitably precipitated deterioration in the level of mastery of English among students. News regarding the deterioration in the standard of English has been featured and discussed in the local English dailies since the1990's. This decline has raised concerns as English has become a global language - the language of diplomacy, international commerce, science, ICT, and entertainment. Without a strong workforce that is competent in English, Malaysia would lose its competitive edge and Malaysians would not be able to compete in the international arena. Realising this, the Ministry of Education initiated a few measures to arrest the decline. Among them was the introduction of MUET (Malaysia University English Test) in 1999. This English test is compulsory for students wishing to apply to any of the public universities and is used as one of the selection criteria for more prestigious courses such as Medicine, Pharmacy and Law.

A more drastic move was made in 2003 to arrest the decline of English proficiency among students. The government decided to revert to using English as the medium of instruction for the teaching of Science and Mathematics. The main reason was that at the tertiary level, most reference materials particularly on science and technology are mainly in the English language. The ruling government at that time felt that this move was necessary to prepare a technologically advanced workforce able to access the latest knowledge and research in English. (Refer to Gill (2005) for a more comprehensive overview of the reasons for the policy reversal).

The policy was quickly implemented despite the fact that most of the teachers were ill-equipped to teach the two subjects in English as they had been schooled completely in Malay. Retraining programmes were conducted to enhance not only their English proficiency but also their teaching skills. A buddy support system which paired English language teachers with their Mathematics and Science counterparts was set up in schools to provide them with continuous support. They were also given a book containing guidelines for teaching in English as well as a language CD for self-learning. (Noraini Idris, Loh Sau Cheong, Norjoharuddeen Mohd. Nor, Ahmad Zabidi Abdul Razak and Rahimi Md. Saad 2007)

In 2011, after 8 years, the policy was rescinded because of complaints from the ultra-nationalists who see the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English as disadvantageous to rural children, and especially to Malay children. To them, English is a threat to the national language, and promoting English in education means relegating the national language, *Bahasa Malaysia*, to a lower status. They also link language to loyalty and patriotism (Nadeswaran 2009). Such perceptions belie

an overly simplistic belief that language use is a large and very strong determinant of identity, to the exclusion of a myriad of other factors.

It can be said that the major changes in the education system in the country were marked particularly by changes in the role of English. The impact of the language changes in the education system is that the present Malaysian population can be differentiated according to the education policy that affected them as students. There is now a whole generation of Malaysians below 50 years of age who have been taught mainly in Malay throughout their school years. They are generally more competent and comfortable in Malay than in English. There is also a generation of Chinese who have gone through a Chinese education who speak mainly Mandarin, and who are not so conversant in Malay and English. Then, there is an older generation (aged 50 and above) who have been English-educated. This group is now in the minority. English is practically their first language and their children would have been brought up using the language, either as a first language or an important second language. Indeed, the pluri-lingual background of Malaysians is very much tied up with the historical and education background of the country. As the history of English language education in Malaysia has shown, the role of English has been affected to some extent by changing political sentiments. Nevertheless, its dominance as a global language continues to influence the socio-cultural fabric of Malaysia. Because of the prevalent use of English among the urbanites, English speakers are generally perceived as being progressive, modern, and having high status and power.

In our study, we are interested to investigate the impact of English on the identity construction of young Malaysian undergraduates. Our interest in the current generation is that they are likely to be offspring of parents who have undergone quite a different educational experience in that they would have been educated in English, or , if they attended vernacular schools, it was in an era when English was a strong second language. Those parents who might be a little younger would have experienced the transition from a totally English medium education to a Malay medium education. These young undergraduates in our study, however, have been educated entirely in Malay, and if their parents are educated ESL speakers, they are likely to have been brought up speaking English as their L1.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Identity is a tremendously complex concept. As a theoretical term, it has been studied and defined in numerous academic disciplines from philosophy, psychology, sociology and cultural studies, but there is as yet no unified theory or definition that wholly describes all that it entails. The postmodern sociological definitions present identity as a fluid, fragmented, and fractured phenomenon (Hall 1996; Norton 1997; Norton and Toohey 2002). Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004:35) view identity as "a dynamic and shifting nexus of multiple subject positions, or identity options, such as mother, accountant, heterosexual, or Latina". Such perspectives capture the significance of interactions with social groups in identity formation. Previous research has shown that speakers, especially in post colonial communities, switch identities each time they switch languages.

Young (2008) argues that many languages are not necessarily linked to ethnic or national identities, for example, English as a lingua franca among non-native speakers. But in postcolonial multilingual countries like Malaysia, language is very much linked to ethnic and national identity. However, as Young points out, identifying only language with identity is to grossly simplify the relationship. For example, David's doctoral study (1996) on the Sindhi community shows that language alone does not fix their identity : third generation Sindhis, more proficient in English than in their ethnic language, expressly did not feel any less Sindhi as there were several aspects of their cultural identity (such as food, clothing and social practices) that remained unaffected by language.

Lee Su Kim (2001) studied the impact of English on the identities of a group of selected Malaysian postgraduate students who were very fluent speakers of English, found resentment in certain localized contexts amongst the Malays towards English. Using English was perceived as an attempt to "show off", being "boastful", a relic of colonialism, as being elitist, and a betrayal of the Malay cultural identity and the Malay language. This resentment was also prevalent amongst the non-Malay students (Lee Su Kim 2003a, 2003b, 2005). The Chinese participants reported that they were regarded as "too westernized" because they could only speak in English and were not fluent in Mandarin. However, the findings of Lee Su Kim (2001)'s study found that the English language also had significant positive outcomes on identity. Mastering English was an empowering experience. It was claimed to possess a quality of directness and neutrality, enabling access to alternative views, and reducing ethnocentrism. It was also seen to facilitate a more reflective and critical attitude towards one's own culture. Multiple identities seemed to be fostered through ownership of multiple languages, allowing participants to switch and "mask' (Lee Su Kim 2006, 2008) their identities depending on the changing contexts.

We need to consider the notion of language as a marker of identity. In heterogeneous communities, groups of people need to build boundaries around themselves in an attempt to define what makes them peculiar. Language is one of these markers of identity. According to the renowned sociologist, Andree Tabouret-Keller (1998), "the language spoken by somebody and his or her identity are inseparable". The boundaries serve to shut out those who, for example, do not speak the language of the group, but by the same token it can also be used by others to exclude them. Hence, language as identity marker can serve as a tool of inclusion as well as a tool of disdain.

Because it is so common for Malaysians to be bilingual and even multilingual, in our study, we need to consider the idea of linguistic hybridity. In the natural sciences, hybridity refers to a new variety created out of a fusion of existing varieties. Hence, the term, hydridity refers to the merging or mixing of cultures, languages and identities particularly among multicultural and multilingual communities. The concept of linguistic hydridity is used by Pennycook (1998) to argue against the linguistic imperialism of English. Hydridity is said to deny the spread of English that threatens to wipe out minority languages and cultures. Instead, Pennycook(1998) provides evidence that show that how adaptive languages and cultures are to intermingling with English. For this study, Anchimbe (2007)'s definition of linguistic hybridity as concerning bilinguals or multilinguals in whom two or more languages and cultures are fused (the language(s) and culture that one inherited from one's parents and the languages that one learned in school) is most relevant. There are, however, bilinguals who do not necessarily embrace the cultures along with the languages.

Next is the idea of social and cultural capital. This is a concept from Bourdieu (1986) and refers to language use, skills, competencies, and orientations of perceptions (or habitus) that a child is endowed with by virtue of socialization in his or her family and community. Thus, children of the socioeconomic elite are bestowed by their familial socialization with both more and the right kind of cultural capital for success in school and in society. Briefly, cultural capital would refer to knowledge, skills, dispositions of the bodily habitus, while social capital would refer to access to cultural and subcultural institutions, social relations and practices.

Finally, the notion of othering refers to the ways in which the discourse of a particular group defines other groups in opposition to itself. It is an "Us and Them" view that constructs an identity for the Other, and implicitly for the Self (Woodward 1997). Othering is manifested in various ways: by maintaining social distance, or by making value judgments (often negative) based on stereotyped opinions about the group as a whole.

THE STUDY

This study investigates multilingual Malaysian undergraduates' construction of their identity. The respondents were 20 undergraduates in the 2nd or 3rd year of studies who, it was felt, would be more mature that the first year students. This is because we believe that students who have undergone one year of tertiary instruction would have a better world view and would be slightly more conscious of the factors that impact their way of seeing. In terms of ethnicity, seven were Malay, eight were Chinese, four were Indian and one was Sinhalese. All were between 20 to 24 years of age. Two respondents were male and 16 female. They were enrolled in a diverse range of courses: Psychology, Social Science, English Language Studies, English Literature, TESL, Linguistics, Biotechnology and Genetics. The L1 speakers were all non- Malays except for one Malay respondent. They were not all from urban areas. Our main selection criterion was that the undergraduates must use English as part of their language repertoire in line with the aim of our study to investigate how the use of English has impacted their identity. All the respondents were either bilingual or multilingual and their participation in the study was voluntary.

While identity construction can be explored through various approaches, for this paper, we will be limiting our discussion to the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews we conducted. Six topic domains were identified namely language repertoire, experience of learning English, social interaction, experience of culture, literary exposure and identity. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The length of each interview was between 30 – 45 minutes. The case study of each respondent was written up and common themes were identified after scrutinising all the case-studies. The tapescripts were then coded using the themes identified with the aid of NVivo7. For this paper, we will present some preliminary findings into the identity construction of young Malaysians. The discussion will focus on themes that we feel merit closer and more extensive investigation.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

AWARENESS OF ENGLISH AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Most of those for whom English is an L2 (mainly Malay respondents) commented on English as a marker of social class , associating English use with social prestige. There is an implicit acceptance of the value of knowing English, which recalls Bourdieu's (1992) concept of language as social and cultural capital.

Some of the Malay respondents have the perception that people who speak good English have higher social status, are well-educated, and respected. Below are a few extracts from interviews with Malay undergraduates which illustrate this point.

> *…I see people who very successful, professional , executives, they speak very fluent English…*
>
> *…when I hear people speak English, I know that their level of education is higher than people who speak Malay…*
> *…. The teenagers who speak English we know that they all from rich people or then high standard class rather than speak Malay….*

Shila, a female Malay undergraduate studying in a public university, also recounts her experience of teaching in a primary school and observes that the "*first class … all Chinese, Indian, Malay can speak English, but … last class cannot speak English at all. You know, they don't understand, they*

cannot speak. Um … so it shows how their level of education … can show their social class".
Likewise, Raj, an Indian Malaysian undergraduate in a private university, has this to say about speaking in English, "… *I feel as I speak English I feel I'm a little up you know … I feel English has some sort of high standard and high class …".* He too feels that it is prestigious to speak English.

Thus, when these students use English, they tend to affirm the positive aspects of the identity that they attribute to English speakers, that is they also seem to enjoy the social respect and being regarded as more educated. The respondents reported feeling confident, more respected, getting more attention when they speak English. For example, Zati, a Malay undergraduate who has a reasonably good command of English, gives an account of being ignored by a shop salesgirl because of her casual dressing (track bottoms and t-shirt) but immediately got attention when she was heard speaking English to her friends Similarly, Intan, a Malay undergraduate says the difference between using English and Malay is that using English makes her feel like "… *uh … standard person*" (that is, a person of quality and status).

Cherry, a Chinese Malaysian to whom English is L1 (first language acquired at home), sees her knowledge of English as empowering in another way. To her, her grasp of the language has afforded her privileged access to information and knowledge. Like the other students for whom English is an L1, Jaz, another Chinese Malaysian undergraduate, considers it very normal for her to speak in English but concedes, "… *when I go out, it does feel good to speak… You know, it makes you feel … not superior to others, but…it makes you feel like, you know, um, you are somebody that people should pay attention to. That ... that sort of thing. It makes you feel like , um, it makes you feel worthy of people's attention".*

That English is indeed a form of social capital is conveyed clearly by Yana, a Malay student, who reported that her cousins advised her that " … *it doesn't matter what you learn in university, when you go to the … job, then, then, all you need is English".* Shila feels that knowing only Malay gives her a limited view of the world, and English broadens her mind. There is an implicit acknowledgement that knowing English is useful and valuable.

LINGUISTIC HYBRIDITY

Some of the subjects for whom English is an L1 may be considered linguistic hybrids because of three main factors. First, their linguistic repertoire is different from their parents'. Second, they do not identify with only one particular culture. And lastly, the different languages in their repertoire are used in a variety of situations.

The following three cases are good examples of linguistic hybrids.

i) Cherry's parents speak at least two Chinese dialects between them, and received their education entirely in English. She was brought up speaking English as her L1 and communicates with family and friends in English. She practises Chinese culture, enjoys other cultures in Malaysia, and would like to master Mandarin, not because of identity issues, but simply as a way of enriching her linguistic repertoire and enabling communication with speakers of Mandarin.

ii) Devi, the most multilingual of all the respondents, enjoys using all of the languages in her repertoire. She particularly delights in speaking Tamil and Hindi simply because there are not many people she knows who speak these languages. She wholly embraces different cultures also because of the intercultural marriages among her relatives and because her extended family believe in sharing their cultural festivities together. She has friends of all races and celebrates their festivals with them.

iii) Ain is the one Malay respondent for whom English is an L1. Her parents reportedly encouraged their children to speak English from young, even though her mother is actually a Malay language

teacher. Unlike the other Malay respondents, she does not consider speaking English a big deal. However, she actively encourages her Malay friends to speak English but sometimes she is shunned for speaking a foreign tongue.

These three cases are not atypical of any particular ethnic group but unique to the individual.

BEING OTHERED BECAUSE OF ENGLISH USE

Regarding the sense of being othered, there appears to be a difference between the Malay and non-Malay respondents. This concurs with Lee Su Kim's (2003) findings. The Malays seem to perceive that using English is what causes them to be othered, while among the non-Malays it is their relative low proficiency in their ethnic language vis a vis English that marks them out from their non-English speaking community members.

Ain declares that she does not like the attitude of the Malays because she dislikes the way they are not open about their feelings, and how they tend to be judgmental. She feels that she has never thought of herself as "less Malay" just because she speaks more English, but feels that she is perceived as being less Malay *"because of my strong command of English"* . They do this (othering) by not being friendly with her, or by giving her the cold shoulder and by labeling her as "*lupa diri*" (having forgotten her origins) or "*bukan Melayu*" (un-Malay). Another Malay subject, Tani, too reports that when she speaks English she is looked upon as an alien.

The non-Malay respondents generally do not describe their own ethnic language or Malay in any unfavorable way, even though they are aware of the advantages of their competence in English. They do not express any sense of superiority just because of their command of English. On the contrary, it is the members of their community who set them apart for being not proficient in the ethnic language.

Tene, for example, finds it difficult to get along with the Tamil speaking members of the Indian community (her own ethnic group) because of her poor pronunciation of Tamil words. She reports that she was labeled "*mat salleh celup*" ('white' on the inside). She feels that " *… there is like a stigma attached to it , if you're Indian and you don't speak Tamil, it's kind of prejudice actually, they start thinking you're perasan…*" (showing off).

In the same way, Dyla (an Indian Malaysian) feels that in a group where members of her ethnic community dominate, they would respect her more if she could speak her own language – she believes it is because the Indian communal spirit is strong. She feels they consider her an outcast as they think feel that she has embraced another culture and abandoned her own by not being able to speak her mother tongue, though she does not feel that way.

As for the Chinese, Cherry observes that English-speaking ethnic Chinese who do not speak Mandarin are viewed by Chinese-educated Chinese Malaysians as separate from those who can speak Mandarin. She says:

> " …. *when they see Chinese they expect us to speak in Mandarin as well, so when we don't, there's immediately a sort of boundary there…a barrier there. And also, I tend to notice that they don't see us as Chinese as they are just because we don't speak their Mandarin.*"

CONCLUSION

The interview data shows that the English-speaking identity of the undergraduates do not conflict with their individual ethnic identity. There is both a strong awareness of maintaining one's own cultural

and communal identity even while embracing English as L1 or L2, and at the same time, a merging of one's cultural identity with the Malaysian identity (Lee Su Kim, Lee King Siong, Wong Fook Fei and Azizah Yaakob 2010). This differs somewhat from Lee Su Kim's (2001) findings on the impact of English on the cultural identities of a group of Malaysian ESL speakers. In her earlier study, she found that many of her respondents, who were postgraduate students, experienced identity conflicts within themselves. She reported that her subjects had a strong yearning to reconnect with their cultural heritage. In this study, we find that our respondents, while expressing a desire to have a better command of the language of their ethnicity, are nevertheless comfortable with their hybrid identity. This could be attributed to the fact that our respondents are younger (in fact a whole generation apart from Lee Su Kim's (2001) study and therefore more forward looking and less nostalgic about their roots.

The respondents in this study clearly indicate that while they are fully aware of the cultural value of knowing English, they do not ignore the importance of maintaining Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, nor of learning the mother tongue of their own ethnic community. The respondents report an ease of code-switching among the languages they use in the appropriate contexts, and clearly maintain a strong sense of being Malaysian regardless of how competent they are in English *vis a vis* Bahasa Malaysia or their ethnic tongue. Like the student cited by Samuel (2005: 10) who views English as a language to be mastered to gain access to 'new worlds', rather than as a language to be submitted to, these undergraduate respondents clearly have appropriated the English language as their own , and their personal identity is quite naturally constructed by its use.

Clearly this is a postmodern generation that does not waste its energy agonizing over how the English they speak will affect other people's perceptions and attitudes to them. The articulate confident young adults in our study evidently espouse multilingualism as the way to go in today's borderless and highly interconnected world. Hence, actively implementing a language policy that promotes multilingualism and multiculturalism seems to be the way for Malaysians to grow as a nation. Malay is the main medium of instruction in public schools but the mastery of English needs to be promoted too, and the learning of Mandarin and Tamil should be encouraged as third languages. It is indisputable that "the world of today is pluralistic, diverse and multi-faceted" (Ouane 2003) and the fact that about 5000 languages are used in about 200 countries indicate that multilingualism is a global reality (Ouane 2003). However the larger structural forces of globalization are antithetical to multilingualism (Ouane 2003). Ruiz (1984) has articulated a way of viewing language from three theoretical positions: language as a problem, language as a right and language as resource. The position of language as resource includes the notion of language as a right, and is "consistent with the principle of interdependence where different communities/languages are seen to coexist in an interdependent manner" (Ouane 2003: 452) . In such a view, each language and its community of speakers are validated as part of the whole. Perhaps we should look to South Africa , recognized as a country "at the cutting edge of international language-policy development" (Heugh 2002: 450) whose new constitution (1996) together with the Pan South African Language Board Act (1995), impel, in principle, the promotion of multilingualism and the development of languages. It is the only country in the world that recognises 11 official languages, more than any other country.

Understandably, the results of a case study such as this are not to be taken as generalizable to the whole population; however, we are of the view that these respondents are not an isolated or unusual group. A more extensive study of young Malaysian adults in different settings (other than educational settings) and from different geographical regions in Malaysia would definitely provide a clearer picture of this current generation of linguistic hybrids in Malaysia.

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