

# Youth, language and identity

by Joan Pujolar

## Abstract

This special issue of *Noves-sl* makes a further contribution to the well stoked tradition of studies and reflections on youth and language in Catalan Sociolinguistics. This has been partially motivated by the fact that one of the priority objectives of the 2005-2006 Action Plan of the Secretariat of Linguistic Policy was the promotion of the use of Catalan among young people and included, among other measures, conducting and publishing studies on this subject. In any case, this issue does not intend to make an exhaustive study of the "state of the art" of research on language and youth. In this introduction, I would like to analyse the progress of this research work in the Catalan sociolinguistic context from a point of view that links political and theoretic questions. Following that, the contributions made by various authors are divided into two sections: in the first, three articles show new approaches to the study of the linguistic practices of youths; and in the second there is a collection of the most recent studies carried out (and which we have been able to publish here) on language and youths in Catalonia. On the basis of these articles, I would also like to discuss the theoretical and epistemological changes taking place in sociolinguistics both on a Catalan and international level, and which directly affect the approach to research on youths and language..

## Summary

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### 1. The large number of studies on youths and language

The subject of youths has been one of the most studied in Catalan sociolinguistics. The editors of *Noves-SL* asked me to coordinate this issue on the basis of some of my studies (Pujolar 1993, Pujolar 1997). But they could also have talked to other people with the same merits; Bastardas (1985, 1986), Boix (1990, 1991, 1993), Erill et al. (1992), Calsamiglia and Tusón (1980), Tusón (1985, 1990), Ros (2000, 2001), Woolard (1989) or Woolard and Gahng (1990). It is equally important to remember that any analysis of census data or representative samples usually has its section dedicated to the "age" variable and to the corresponding analysis of the linguistic practices of youths (see, specially, that by Subirats 2003). It is also interesting to note the attention given to youths in variationist studies (Argenter et al 1998, Pradilla 1993), where questions of bilingualism are normally in the background. Apart from the more strictly academic research, there is also literature with a more performative, educative or mobilising intention such as the works by Larreula (1991), Solé (1989). And finally, we must not forget that in all public debates with the participation of what Larreula (2002) refers to as "language sufferers", the subject of the linguistic practices of youths always has prime place (see Pujolar 2007, Prats et al 1990).

This proliferation of research projects and debates focused on the segment ranging from adolescence to the mid-twenties responds -to my understanding- to both ideological and practical reasons. In the first case, there is a certain sociological common sense that sees youths as the seed of future society and, therefore, as the segment where we can best evaluate the progress of various political projects: recuperation of the use of language, equality of the sexes, presence or absence of prejudice of all kinds, attitudes to nature, cultural differences, etc. From this point of view, Catalan Sociolinguistics have basically been concerned with evaluating whether the new generations learn Catalan, whether they use it, how they use it, and the role languages play in their life. This concern is based, naturally, on the project of "modernisation" of the Catalan linguistic community, a subject to be discussed later.

The second reason that explains the abundance of studies on youths is more prosaic. Youths are, for many reasons, more accessible than other groups. Normally, they can be easily accessed through educational institutions, or through the natural contacts of the researchers (often also young people themselves). They have time and (comparatively) few impediments or obstacles when subjected to interviews and answering questionnaires. Furthermore, unlike children, youths already have a considerably articulated and incipiently politicised discourse, thus enabling more valuable data to be obtained. We cannot complain that this field of research is poor or insufficient, as occurs with linguistic uses in many other fields; for example, in companies or at work, in Public Administration, the police, the financial world, the legal environment, among better-off classes, in tourism, on the Internet, etc. In any case, this is a question where professionals (those of us who give classes, research projects and direct theses on sociolinguistics) have to make an effort to seek a balance.

## 2. Theoretical displacements in research on youths and languages

As suggested above, research on youths and language in Catalan-speaking regions also includes a wider social debate, a debate that seeks the presence or absence of signs of linguistic and cultural “catalanisation” among youths. It is a question that clearly motivates and involves sociolinguists; but which also makes them (us) uncomfortable, at least those more closely associated with the academic world. This uneasiness is due to the fact that contemporary social sciences have undergone profound transformations, especially regarding theory, which question some of the suppositions of the debate and often lead to confusion and misunderstandings between sociolinguistic professionals and the other sectors involved. These “other sectors” would be those coming from political areas, cultural activists, teachers, technicians and linguistic advisors, writers, philologists with classic training, researchers in other fields, etc. They are, in fact, the sectors that usually participate in the cyclic debates on “the future of Catalan” or “the quality of the language”, in which we academic sociolinguists play a very marginal role, probably –I dare speculate- because we prefer it that way (see Pujolar 2007, Vallverdú 1998)). In any case, one of the purposes of this issue is precisely to aid in understanding the reason behind this separation, at least in regard to theoretical and epistemological questions which have important political implications.

In reality this divergence basically affects what is known as “identity” and what is known as “language” and, as a logical consequence, the relationship between one and the other. This is where modern Catalan nationalism has a starting point that is perfectly comparable to that of all modern nationalisms, and can be described as follows: 1) language would be the expression of a collective identity which in some way already comes predefined in individuals as a result of their socialisation (generally associated with the territory) and which connects them (or not) with certain “origins”; 2) language is also a living thing that precedes and is defined irrespective of its speakers, thus constituting an internally coherent system that must be protected from external influences; and therefore, 3) the “natural” expression of identity is to speak “one’s own” language; speaking another or speaking it with “interference” from others is a sign of abnormality that requires explanations and excuses. These are the basic assumptions, in spite of the many nuances and contradictions of many types, sometimes even very flagrant, such as the fact of considering a phenomenon such as language, the object of a long educational process within the school and of elaboration and purification by various professional groups, including linguists, as “natural”. Studies on “linguistic ideologies” broached by linguistic anthropologists (Bauman and Briggs 2003, Blommaert 1999, Kroskrity 2000, Schieffelin et al 1998) have recently begun to consider this subject with the added advantage of the comparison of very different contexts and models of society and languages from all five continents.

The work of Hobsbawm (1992), Grillo (1989) and many others have shown how the inherited way of handling language and associating it with identity and citizenship comes, to a great extent, from the process of the constitution of nation states which took place at the end of the 18th century and which is, therefore, a phenomenon strictly associated with modernity. I am not so much referring here to the custom of associating language with nations, nor the tendency begun in the 17th century of linguistically unifying kingdoms (e.g. France). I am rather speaking of the process of constitution and legitimation of the state as an expression of a “nation” comprised of citizens that share a language and a culture that differentiates them. This form of politicising language is modern in character and is projected onto various fields: a) policies of linguistic and cultural uniformity, especially in school; b) the creation and maintenance of monolingual public spaces and institutions that project the idea of

nationality into all aspects of social life; c) the management and control of linguistic resources and uses on the basis of scientific criteria and through a body of experts (official or not), in conjunction with the procedures applied in other forms of population management (Foucault 1991).

a) Displacements on identities

All these assumptions are those presently questioned as a result of the consolidation of the discursive and pragmatic conceptions of language in the social sciences, where the subject is more and more looked upon as a product of the "discourse", the "action" or the performative character of language. This point of view, often also presented as "post-structuralist", conceives identity as an outcome and not as something pre-existent. This line often combines tendencies of varied origin and character. This means, within the framework of interactionist sociology of ethnomethodological inspiration (Garfinkel 1967, Goffman 1959), one speaks of identity as a product of social interaction, an idea sometimes associated with "constructivism," a term more common in theories about learning. It is also necessary to mention the enormous impact of feminism, specially after the work by Butler (1990), which has spread the notion of identity as a performance. All these ideas, often formulated and interpreted in different ways, constitute the result of a far reaching change of paradigm in the social sciences, and a change that has had a very clear impact on sociolinguistics, especially anthropologic, qualitative or ethnographic sociolinguistics (terms not strictly interchangeable; but often used without distinction). This means that the approach suggested by Gumperz (1982) and interactional sociolinguistics in general inverts the terms of the language-identity equation and interprets linguistic use (including choice and switching languages) as a series of communicative strategies that speakers develop to demonstrate their links with various social groups. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), also studying youths, speak of the choice of language or linguistic variety as "acts of identity." There are therefore dimensions that are additional to, or divergent from, "linguistic", "ethnic" or "ethnolinguistic" identities. Scotton (1988) explores how language switching may be mobilised to indicate changes in the social distance or relationship between participants in terms of dichotomies such as rural-urban or official-informal. Later, the notion of "linguistic community" was also criticised and practically abandoned and then later reconstituted with concepts such as "communities of practice" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), which enable conceiving the existence of common spaces associated with social groups as part of a conception of diverse, disperse and flexible identities, in a continuous state of situational development. It was Eckert who applied the concept to groups of youths (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995). As for studies that focus specifically on questions of identity among youths, mention must be made of the collection by Androtsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003), who present a series of recent studies showing this common ground in studies of the discourse of young people:

"It is by now a truism within discourse studies that identities are neither fixed nor categorical properties residing in people's minds; instead, they are emergent in the sequentiality of discourse, particularly in interactional sites, where they are dynamically (re)created [...]. In this way, their constructions in any speech event are marked by indeterminacy and irreducible situational contingency: e.g. certain identity aspects may be made more salient or relevant than others at different points of an interaction; in similar vein, identities can be actively reconstructed, reframed, and, even more or less consciously, transgressed and reconstituted [...] by discourse participants to suit local interactional projects. (Androtsopoulos and Georgakopoulou 2003): 1)

This deconstruction of identities, made from the perspective of discourse analysts, pragmatists, conversation analysts and language anthropologists has proved to be very productive intellectually, even though it has some important limitations as discussed below (in sub-section c). In my opinion, one of the most important ideas developed in this field is that of the "co-construction" or the "co-articulation" of identities, that is, the fact that various aspects of social identity (class, gender, ethnic origin, age, etc.) are projected in social life in a combined way, reciprocally mediated or interrelated (Ibid; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999: 185-201; Lury 1995). In the case of the identities of youths, this multidimensionality is evident, especially in view of the clear separation of gender and social class found among them (Martínez 2007), and for Catalan sociolinguistics it is an absolutely necessary reference point from the moment when the field is constituted precisely by the relations between the juvenile world and ethnolinguistic identity.

It is in this context that the hypotheses of modern Catalan nationalism regarding the definition of identity and language, as well as their interrelationship, become difficult to project into the field of research. In a certain way, this was the message transmitted by Boix (1993) with his extremely apt title, "Triar no es traïr," (Choosing is not betraying) a play on words that, had it originally been in English, would have made history. The youths that he observed define the language-identity relationship in accordance with the motivations and specific interests that give meaning to their everyday experience of bilingualism. This experience could be conditioned by discourses favouring Catalan or Spanish; but it was not determined by them. From this point of view, my own study (Pujolar 1997) did no more than delve deeper into the content of various repertoires of juvenile culture or relations between sexes which have just as much or more weight than ethnolinguistic identities and discourses.

#### b) Displacements on languages

A second line of debate that also primarily affects youths is the subject of the "quality of language". This is also a debate which, in order to understand it, must be circumscribed in a much wider context than the Catalan one alone. The subject of the quality of language is not specific to the Catalan context nor of any similar context such as Quebec (Cajolet-Laganière et al, 2002). It is also the cause of debate in countries such as England and the United States, often related to debates on the quality of the educational system. More recently there has even been a considerable resurgence in Germany, France, Denmark and other countries especially in relation to the question of immigration (Aguilar 2005, Budach 2006, Johnson 2005). In general terms, the debates are media-driven and with a very thin academic basis, with no systematic and well financed research behind them and responding, to my understanding, to "impressions", "intuitions," opportunistic political interests and identity fears of various sectors (especially teachers, linguists, reporters, editors and politicians).

This subject clearly affects the modern conception of language mentioned above and which is difficult to sustain from a sociolinguistic point of view. In this regard, interactional sociolinguistics has systematically taken apart many of the prejudices associated with contact phenomenon, such as so-called "interferences", alternating languages (or *code-switching*) or mixing languages (or *code-mixing*). In the late 1980s and early 1990s a whole field of research was generated on these subjects and even proved the intentional, productive and creative character of bilingual practices, reflected in the Catalan context in the work of Boix (1990), Nussbaum (1990), Tusón (1990), and many others. These studies have been a strong counterpoint to the more purist and isolationist concept of languages, which often led to consider some bilingual speakers as inept, "semi-lingual" or lacking in one or another linguistic or cognitive aspect (Martin-Jones 1986, Zentella 1997).

Therefore, it is also difficult to expect that professional and methodological sociolinguists would take part in the general hubbub surrounding the subject of language quality. One should rather look into processes such as learning Catalan as a second language, issues of contrastive linguistics<sup>1</sup>, the existence (or not) of structural simplifications à la Dorian (1981) or the processes of differentiation detected in other contexts (Labov 1982). It is equally important to evaluate the impact of large historical changes, such as the access of the poorer classes to education, the generalisation of university education and the role played by some changes in educational programs, especially at the level of secondary education. In any case, from my point of view, the crisis of the "quality of language" does not so much respond to a problem of certain social groups which do not learn the language, but more to a crisis of the language model enforced to date. This crisis will probably worsen with the advent of information and communication technologies, the emergence of cultural industries, and the multitude of phenomena associated with globalisation. One of the still little studied aspects of these new scenarios is the fact that they bring about a progressive privatisation and globalisation of culture, including linguistic resources and their management. This situation must forcibly not only affect linguistic minorities, but all linguistic uses of societies all over the world (Cazden et al. 1996, Pujolar 2007, Snyder 2002).

#### c) Unanswered questions

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<sup>1</sup> For example the series of studies comparing the languages of immigrants and Catalan, the result of the project "Language, immigration and teaching Catalan", coordinated by Lluïsa Gràcia, from the University of Girona.

In spite of the undoubted interest of these conceptual advances, there is still one question that remains unanswered: the political and economic dimension -or the political economy- of social practices and identities. That is to say: in what way are identities associated with the production, circulation and distribution of resources and power in the economic and symbolic fields? The question is a new way of expressing what traditional sociology referred to as the "problem of structuration," or the need to develop "dialectic" models to relate the "micro" (subjective experience) and "macro" levels (far-reaching factors and processes that determine social life). This is, to my understanding, the key question that Catalan sociolinguistics should be concerned about, and I will try to argue why.

Giddens' structuration theory (1986) is one study along these lines, and one which inspires the work by Chouliaraki on youths and nationalism when she says that:

"[...] the process of identification [is] situated in structural arrangements- that is, as an effect of discursive practices which are available in certain contexts rather than others, depending on the socio-cultural specifics of the social subjects involved. Such specifics may have to do with economic, educational, sexual or generational differences between social groups and subjects, thus configuring a particular site of positions [...]" (Chouliaraki 2003: 204) (The emphasis is mine).

This "availability" (or not) of discourses (or resources) is one of the questions eschewed by the large majority of studies mentioned to date. In fact, it is the problem that many Catalan sociolinguists and linguistic activists complain about when reading the considerable number of studies that regard bilingual linguistic practices as simply "creative" experiences without any political conditioning, implications or consequences. This means that the important question to be answered (and which is often not even asked) is: why do people choose to use one discourse/resource and not another? What leads them to choose to construct or combine certain identity models and not others?

This is really the key question, the one that affects the social value of the Catalan language and the identities that can be constructed through it. It is a question that is not only difficult to answer, but to a certain extent even difficult to ask, or even to put into operation as part of usual research procedures. Few research workers dare, probably for various reasons. For example, researchers into linguistic training do not feel comfortable approaching sociological questions that go beyond their own field of expertise. The radically empiricist orientation of the science in English-speaking countries also probably explains why many researchers hesitate to pose and analyse processes that are not directly observable, such as the conditions that influence people in a very implicit and subtle way.

With this in mind, it is not by chance that one of the best articulated proposals for approaching the social, political and economic imperatives that determine practices come from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991). This is not the time or place to summarise and evaluate the proposals made by Bourdieu; but it is important to stress that his theoretical model presents two basic questions that open the door to a better understanding of the problems that Catalan sociolinguistics are traditionally concerned about. The first is the question of the availability of different economic and symbolic resources within the different "markets" which constitute identities and society at the same time (linguistic, educational, economic, cultural, symbolic markets etc.). The second is the question of the processes of legitimation of the various forms of capital that are active in these various markets. Because the basic problem for Catalan language and culture is brought about by a) the processes for the production and distribution of its linguistic and cultural resources, b) the way in which these processes are associated with the production, distribution and access to economic resources and symbolic power and c) the struggles to make the value of the resources associated with Catalan language and culture legitimate, illegitimate or compatible with other spaces or "markets" such as Spanish, French or English in different contexts.

There are very few studies of language and youths that explicitly dare venture in this direction (Heller 1999, Pujolar 2001), even though in a certain way it is possible to argue that elements of it are often implicit in the majority of studies in the Catalan field as, when all is said and done, the main concern is effectively the range and legitimacy of the use of this language. What happens is that without a clearly articulated theoretical basis, the result ends up being simply a verification of the gap between reality and ideality, an ideal

articulated through a modernising nationalism that is in evident crisis in a globalised world (Appadurai 1996, Pujolar 2007:71-95), through a paradigm that does not allow us to explore and understand the complexity of the interrelationship between language and identity, one that does not enable us to understand what we need to understand to defend the legitimacy of the Catalan language and culture among young people.

### 3. About the contributions to this issue

The articles included in this monographic issue show some of the aspects of contemporary sociolinguistic research that connect with these theoretical displacements in the field of language and youths.

The article by Ben Rampton contains a small sample of his studies of adolescent youths in the United Kingdom in settings characterised by large linguistic and cultural diversity. For more details, refer to his study entitled "Crossing: Language and Ethnicity Among Adolescents" (Rampton 1995), which has had enormous impact among sociolinguists and students of interracial relationships (in the sense given to the term "*race*" in Anglo-Saxon sociology). The idea of "*crossing*" is an attempt to draw attention to the existence of a multitude of linguistic practices which, in one way or another, defy the concept of identities as monolithic, monolingual and monocultural phenomena. His detailed and millimetrical analysis of small meetings between youths, or between youths and adults, shows the multiplicity of ways of incorporating resources of various varieties of English, of Afro-Caribbean modes or the languages of India and Pakistan (especially, Hindi, Punjabi) by youths who are not native speakers of these languages. These special uses of various languages are not limited to their potential for metaphor, style or discursive organisation; but they also represent the various positions that can be adopted by youths in relation to cultural stereotypes, relations of inequality and questions of political and historic order; even though these meanings are often ambivalent and contradictory when applied to the communicative and relational strategies that each person can develop in any specific context or moment in time.

There are two interesting aspects of the article by Mary Bucholtz. In the first place, the incorporation of questions of gender identities, key to understanding the juvenile world. In the second place, for the effort made to connect, on the one hand, the linguistic and cultural practices of youths and, on the other, the policies and strategies of large companies operating on a global level constructing and distributing consumer products and identity models specifically aimed at youths. It is clearly one of the ways of revealing the political economy of identities, in line with the hypothesis suggested by Bourdieu. Bucholtz also documents the well-known phenomenon of white youths using linguistic traits belonging to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) a phenomenon which in some aspects could be related to the "crossing" of Ben Rampton and the work of Dirim and Auer (Dirim and Auer 2004) on German youths who learn and use Turkish.

The article by Joe Grixti presents an obvious element of interest by providing information on the Maltese context, which has interesting points of connection with (and at the same time divergence from) the Catalan situation. All in all, what makes his work especially interesting is that it analyses the encounter of tiny, territorialised cultural spaces with what Appadurai (1996) refers to as the global "flow" that generates "disruptions" within the imagination of the nation state. Among these flows, there are (among others) the so-called "*mediascapes*", trans-national media landscapes, articulated through cyberspace and companies that dominate the cultural and media markets on a planetary level. Grixti shows how Maltese youths of diverse social origin manage their relationships between the global and local pull in such a way that they create new discourses on local territorial identities accompanied by locally specific forms of appropriation of cultural traits and global discourses. He goes on to illustrate how these processes can materialise themselves, with their inherent contradictions and ambivalences, in the framework of groups of youths from a relatively reduced Maltese linguistic and cultural community.

Moving onto the Catalan context, the article by Anna Torrijos shows, in a general way, the situation of the use of Catalan among youths on the basis of two recent studies sponsored by the Autonomous Government of Catalonia: that of Discussion groups for the evaluation of the campaign "Dóna corda al Català" (Give Catalan a Boost) and the 2002 Survey among

young people in Catalonia. Torrijos presents a systematic analysis of the way and degree how various variables (language initially spoken in the family, social or geographic origin of the parents, place of residence) determine the regular use of language among Catalan youths, as well as the various discourses on languages and the rules for linguistic use that came up in the discussion groups.

The article by Isaac González explores an interesting and innovative question, the relationship between political participation and linguistic use among youths. The study is based on the analysis of a survey, in which the author participated, of "participation, politics and youths" commissioned by the General Directorate of Youth. In this article the author discusses and examines the implications of the results of this study with regard to the processes of construction of Catalan identity and the use of languages. The subject is of special interest because, traditionally, positions or attitudes more favourable to the use of the Catalan language among youths are often seen as "political" positions. From this point of view, it is first necessary to clarify what is understood by political participation or activism. González shows how, in a general sense, the practices of youths in relation to politics have abandoned the traditional patterns of militancy in organisations to be expressed through symbolic acts or attitudes, which may be more sporadic or less organic in character than before; but this does not mean they are experienced as less important by the youths themselves. From this, it is possible to conclude that the levels of political participation are usually associated with indicators of social status, that is, they normally increase as the educational level of the youths' parents increases. As speaking Catalan and identifying oneself as a Catalan in the traditional sense of these terms also involves similar associations, González argues that this has the effect that the spaces of political participation are perceived as more Catalan-speaking and also that the sectors that most use Catalan are generally those that show more interest in politics and more identification with the structures of Catalan public institutions. The argument presented by González is varied and complex; but it is important to give it some attention and think about its implications. On the one hand, he presents the question of whether specific actions are required to promote the necessary political participation among certain social groups. On the other hand, he also shows one of the spaces in which the Catalan language may act as a positive factor (or added value) for integration in a generic sense, that is, of participation in society and identification with institutions.

Finally, the article by Roger Martínez advances a specific aspect of his research among Catalan youths, a project that we hope will not take too long to come to light in a more complete version. Martínez explores the use, divulgation and circulation of various identity categories among youths of differing profiles; categories that obviously have a linguistic component but which relate in complex, contradictory and changing ways with other loyalty criteria adopted by youths, such as musical trends and their associated components of fashion, patterns of consumption, attitudes to institutions, etc. This study is also a good example of new analytical models that examine identities in terms of the co-construction mentioned above, in terms of their articulation with other identity dimensions, as is done by Bucholz (in this issue). He also shows one of the specific forms of re-articulation of local identities in relation to the global flow of discourses and cultural products, thus linking his work with that of Grixti (in this issue). The most interesting contribution is that linguistic uses are inserted in what would be the more global processes of identity construction in youth culture, in other words, the role of language in the construction of "juvenile geographies", that is: "the series of social distances and proximities youths find themselves immersed in." Martínez shows how it is not possible to prevent languages from becoming a factor of polarisation, not only in relation to sentiments of national belonging or political ideologies, but also in relation to the discourses that constitute juvenile culture especially in relation to authenticity, what is "cool", transgression, alternative commercial channels, etc.

All these studies are no more than a small sample of the multitude of different research works being carried out in Catalan-speaking regions on youth related matters. The majority of these studies, promoted by the departments of sociology and anthropology, do not explore linguistic questions or, in the best of cases, only touch on them briefly and in passing. In fact, this does not only occur here, but everywhere else as well. I suppose that this is due to the fact that sociologists and anthropologists consider that linguistic subjects do not fall within their legitimate research objects, as "language" has in theory its own field of specialists. But the truth is that sociolinguists with more linguistic training must often exert themselves to include sociological knowledge in their research. And the results, as I believe to have shown in this article, are open to improvement. This is why, one of the most interesting aspects of this special issue of *Noves-SL* is precisely that the Catalan

contributions come from people trained in the field of sociology. I believe that the main idea they transmit is precisely that sociolinguistic questions are important for understanding more far-reaching social questions. We hope, then, that these studies mark a new tendency towards deeper interdisciplinary studies and much closer collaboration between sociolinguists and sociologists. Perhaps this would help us to better understand our society and the role languages play in it.

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