

Translator education: for a praxeological approach

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ABSTRACT

In an economy in which the private sector and academia increasingly consider cooperation in research and training as the logical choice in the name of efficiency, it is puzzling to note that translation, a field of research and study aimed at building bridges over cultural differences, has been failing so miserably at creating the type of rapprochement and mutual understanding that is so desperately required to ensure that the needs of a growing industry and field of research are met. This paper is an attempt to understand why translation scholars and translator employers have such strong views about each other and how these views are the symptom, not the cause, of such mutual misunderstanding. It will be argued that the reason why this gap exists is that the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of each party are not clearly defined, and that the success of the (life-long) pedagogical endeavour rests in the establishment of a climate of trust and cooperation between academia and the translation industry. In conclusion, we will suggest a number of initiatives that might help alleviate the situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the social role of translators has been to act as *communication engineers*, that is to build the necessary bridges over cultural and language chasms, thus enabling groups and individuals to communicate. In fact, one can presume that, without translators, the world would be a much different place. How can

we ignore the fundamental contribution of translators as creators of writing systems and national languages, writers, disseminators of knowledge and faith?¹ Indeed, one cannot overemphasize the role of translation as agent of change in the course of world history.²

However, precisely because translators have this well-deserved reputation of bridge builders, it is the more disconcerting to see how difficult it seems for translation scholars, including translator educators and translator employers, to find the necessary common ground to come together and define their particular roles, responsibilities and expectations with respect to the education and training³ of translators. On the one hand, many translator educators feel that translation curricula must comprise a significant portion of theoretical content, and on the other translator employers feel that new translation graduates are ill-prepared for the labour market and translation schools should make more room for real-life translation knowledge (Canadian Translation Industry Sectoral Committee 1999: 19). However, it would not be fair to assume that all translator educators and translator employers are polar opposites; in the past years, some attempts have been made by translation scholars to develop didactical and pedagogical tools aimed at recreating workplace situations in the classroom, while many translation employers have developed continuing education programs, recognizing the fact that translation graduates are not trained once and for all upon graduating. Nevertheless, a feeling of mutual dissatisfaction persists and a high level of suspicion continues to divide these two groups (for further examples, see Pym 2001). In the following pages, we will attempt to explore the sources of this mutual mistrust, or misunderstanding, in order to understand it and propose ways to alleviate it. We are arguing for a praxeological approach to translation pedagogy and practice.

The points that we will touch upon in the following pages include whether theory and practice are mutually exclusive in translation; the usefulness of translation theories and other theoretical contributions to translation pedagogy and practice; the source of mutual dissatisfaction between translator educators and translator employers; the reasons why theory has such a bad reputation in

1 For a more detailed list, see Delisle & Woodsworth (1995).

2 Take the following example: "On July 28, 1945, two days after the Potsdam Declaration, the Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki declared at a press conference that the Potsdam Declaration was 'a thing of no great value,' and added: 'We will simply *mokusatsu* it.' In Japanese *mokusatsu* is a rather ambiguous word, rather untranslatable into English, and 'certainly not by a single word, for there is no English equivalent. Regrettably [...] the junior State Department official in charge of translating the Japanese reply lacked the necessary linguistic sophistication, and missed the subtle subtext of the reply altogether. Instead, he reached for a Japanese-English dictionary and translated *mokusatsu* by the closest single-word English equivalent, which happens to be 'ignore': 'We ignore the Potsdam Declaration.'" Which was also interpreted by the press in the United States and the United Kingdom as 'We reject it.'" (Santoyo 2006: 37).

3 We make a distinction between education and training. Education refers to the acquisition of basic practical skills and conceptual knowledge, while training refers to the acquisition of advanced, on-the-job practical and behavioural skills. Other authors (including Bernardini 2000) have made similar, but slightly different, distinctions before us. Pym (2002; 2004), for example, makes the distinction between training (learning the skills of translation) and others forms of learning *about* translation.

the translation industry, and why practice is such a bad word in academic circles; what implications these firm positions have for translation and translation studies; whether universities are the best place to teach professional translation; and finally what can be done to solve this impasse.

2. PRACTICE AND THEORY: ARE THEY MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE?

One is tempted to agree with van de Snepcheut's aphorism, stating that in theory, there is no difference between practice and theory. But in practice, there is. Indeed, one could argue that theory and practice are inseparable and that sound practice and grounded theory inform each other. In translation programmes, the main objective is to educate students who, eventually, will be able to work as professional translators able to apply the knowledge they will have acquired in translation schools to the resolution of translation problems on a daily basis. Translation scholars argue that, in order for translators to accomplish their tasks effectively and efficiently, the latter must be able to apply a certain practical knowledge, but also to call upon cognitive skills in order to make the appropriate pragmatic choices in the accomplishment of their tasks. These cognitive skills can be acquired over time and through the rigorous practice of translation under the supervision of professional translators. In other words, they are likely acquired in the "doing", in the "translating". Therefore, one could argue that, if these cognitive skills are acquired in the practice of translation, why do translation schools not focus on the practice of translation? Pushed to the extreme, why are there translation schools? These questions raise the issue not only of the relevance of formal translator education, but they often place translation scholars on the defensive vis-à-vis the role of theory in translation curricula.

First, no one will deny that translation curricula have but one main goal, and that is to impart cognitive and practical skills to students, in order to prepare them for the practice of professional translation. However, it provides but one approach to a learning endeavour. Indeed, there are other ways to learn: one can learn on one's own, or learn by imitation. Arguably, university curricula provide a methodical approach to learning about translation and translating, and to acquire in as efficient a manner as possible a broad scope of skills and a depth of knowledge that can only be acquired over a very long period of time by the self-taught translator, as translation knowledge goes far beyond linguistic knowledge. Based on research in educational psychology, it is possible to classify knowledge into three different, yet interdependent, categories: declarative ; procedural and conditional knowledge.

Table 1 details the three categories of knowledge associated with any type of activity, for example professional translation. Specifically, it explains what each category of knowledge entails, how it is acquired, and which kind of activities promotes the development of such skills. When applied to translation, Declarative Knowledge involves the ability to reflect on and to discuss translation, as well as justifying translation choices. This kind of knowledge is not easy to demonstrate, therefore it may be considered "theoretical", but it is nevertheless a crucial part of translation competence, and translation teaching, as translation

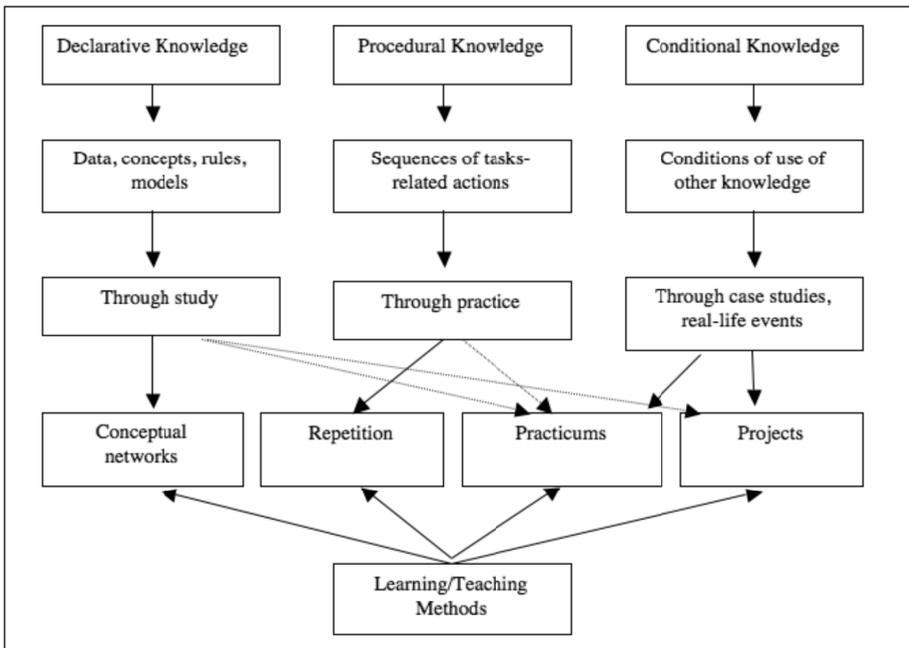


TABLE 1. Knowledge Categories (adapted from Schraw 2006: 247)

involves the application of conceptual knowledge that goes far beyond linguistic knowledge.

Procedural knowledge involves the ability to perform a task, and to perform it consistently well. It is the ability to “do” something, that is to say to do it well, quickly, consistently, professionally, ethically, rapidly, etc. It is related to performing a given task, sometimes so effortlessly that it seems automatic, and because it is almost automatic, it becomes virtually unconscious.

Conditional knowledge is related to making choices and strategizing, that is the ability to choose the appropriate procedure given a set of circumstances. It is the ability to discern the factors that will determine which approach, process, solution, macro- and microstrategy is most appropriate to a given translation problem or to a specific communication goal.

To those three categories of knowledge, a fourth can be added. It is what Kiraly (2000: 13, 49; see also Musacchio 2004 for a similar description) calls “translating competence”, that is the social skill which is essential to the professional practice of translation. Whereas the first three categories make up the “know-how” of the translator, this social skill involves behavioural competence, or how translators should interact with other agents in order to accomplish their tasks successfully in a social context.

These are the categories into which falls all that translators must know, as one is not more important than another, and they continually evolve over time:

translation competence does not involve a static set of skills. It is instead a dynamic multicompetence, and translation curricula involve teaching all four of these skills. Aiming at imparting all of these skills in a comprehensive manner, in a relatively short period of time, would be utopian. One cannot expect translation curricula to prepare translation students to meet all the needs of the translation industry, no more than hospitals can expect newly graduated medical students to know all that there is to know about every medical condition. In the day-to-day practice of translation, hardly a day goes by that translators do not hone their skills: one never stops learning how to be a better translator. However, universities have a crucial role in teaching the fundamental knowledge based on which all other skills will be acquired throughout the translator's life, and this also includes the ability to conceptualize and to analyze, two skills that are clearly not strictly concrete by nature but are acquired through practice and through theorizing that practice. In translation, theory and practice do, and must, coexist.

3. THEORY FOR THEORY?

One of the factors leading to theory being so decried by translator employers may be the fact that the industry misunderstands the purpose of theoretical content in translator education, or that it feels that there is simply too much theory and not enough practice. Translation is not a matter of replicating behaviours, but a highly demanding cognitive process. Nevertheless, it may be argued that the role of *fundamental theory courses* is not fully justified, or is at the very least misunderstood by the industry. It may be true of other professions, but it certainly is the case in highly professionalizing curricula such as those aimed at training professional translators. If one were to play the devil's advocate for a second, one would posit that, while these fundamental courses are an absolute necessity in the preparation of future translation scholars (i.e. those students who intend to continue on and become future translation scholars who will be responsible for training the translators of tomorrow), one could also argue that the type of theoretical knowledge imparted in fundamental theory courses may not be of much use to those whose goal it is to become professional translators. Hence, the negative attitude that the industry might have toward what is perceived as *theory for the sake of theory*.

However, because future translators and future translation scholars study side by side in the same classes, their distinct aspirations may cause one "stream" to overlap over the other, and lead some aspiring scholars to say that there is too much "practical" content in translation curricula, and some aspiring translators – and translator employers – that there is too much "theoretical" content in translation curricula. Ideally, undergraduate programmes would train the future translators of tomorrow, while graduate programmes would train the future scholars of tomorrow. This is not as simple as it may seem, especially in the paradigm of the Bologna Protocol, where professional translator training occurs mainly at the graduate level. In Canada, where professional translators are trained mainly at the undergraduate level, one might think that there is no

debate on the role of theory in translation programmes. In fact, as we indicated previously, industry representatives felt that recent translation programme graduates were ill-prepared because of course content that was too theoretical (Canadian Translation Industry Sectoral Committee 1999: 27). Such statements, however, are so vague that translator educators are left wondering how much theory is enough, or rather how practical can translation programmes be while remaining university programmes. One more crucial question for translation programme managers would be: “What *must* we teach?” and not “What *can* we teach?” Finding the answer to this question requires a thorough examination of the goals of translation programmes, more specifically what translation programmes are supposed to teach in order to prepare the future translators of tomorrow. In other words, what is to be defined is the didactics of translation (cf. Fiola 2003). It may be useful at this point to make the distinction between didactics and pedagogy: didactics being the “theory of teaching”, or the study of what happens in preparation for teaching, while pedagogy is the “art or science of teaching”, or the study of what happens inside the classroom. For example, curriculum design relates to didactics, while the delivery of classroom activities relates to pedagogy. Both are equally important as the former is the direct application of the latter, and the latter is informed by the former.

The didactics of translation is related to translation theory in the sense that, since translation is an activity, translation teaching flows from the observation of that activity (*translating*) or of the end result of that activity (*the target text*); therefore, Descriptive Translation Studies and Applied Translation Studies, as demonstrated eloquently by researchers such as Scarpa, Musacchio and Palumbo (2009), are crucial parts of the reflection on, and the application of, translator education. It is through *in situ* analysis that the translation process can be broken down descriptively and turned into a number of learning objectives, which in turn become translation programmes that meet the needs of students and of the industry. This descriptive analysis of the translation process can be achieved in a variety of ways, as there are several ways to theorize and to build knowledge. Here are a few examples, each with one case in point. Because of the limited space allowed in this paper, we are providing these cases as mere illustrations.

First, hindsight or *a posteriori* observations have long been used to develop knowledge and theories. The works of Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) are a good example of *a posteriori* observations that were then hypothesized as translation processes. Their so-called “processes” (*procédés* in French) are based on the analysis and description of linguistic features that the authors had noted in their analysis of samples of good and bad translations. Their work, often presented as a translation method, reads more like a set of principles, not rules, based on their observation of stylistic differences between English and French in a bilingual translation context.

Second, it is also possible to learn by doing, basically through trial and error. When used in the translation classroom, this approach is fairly innocuous. However, it may be far more problematic when used by naïve dilettantes who decide that, because they know two languages, they can translate. Those would-be translators, in reality, do not know yet how complex translation is. Psychologist Maslow (1972) would posit that these people have not yet realized what

they do not know, but have only reached the first of four levels of competence (unconscious incompetence-conscious incompetence-conscious competence-unconscious competence) (see *conscious competence theory* by Maslow). It is also the kind of translation knowledge that one acquires over the years, working under the supervision of a seasoned translator.

Third, we learn by speculating using either a deductive or inductive approach, from evidence to theory, or from theory to evidence. Conceivably, this form of knowledge acquisition method is better suited to research in translation studies than the practice of translation, although it mirrors almost identically the two main approaches to terminological research: semasiological (going from the term to the concept) and onomasiological (going from the concept to the term).

In the end, we theorize to understand, and in translation, the reasons why we try to understand stem from our desire to explain phenomena, to replicate processes and to prepare students to do both.

4. INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA: MUTUAL DISSATISFACTION?

Because the translation industry is calling for radically practical translation curricula, and because translation schools are advocating for sound curricula including practice and theory, the time may have come for both sides to look at striking a balance between theory and practice and look for *practical principles* anchored in *theory* and *theoretical principles* founded on *practice*. Thus far, a majority of theoretical principles and models have been flowing directly from descriptive translation studies based on literary studies, which translator educators have tried in turn to apply in the classroom, with relative success. But, literary translation can only tell part of the story. Fortunately, a handful of translation scholars in Europe have demonstrated an interest for, and the relevance of, research on translation pedagogy based on descriptive approaches focusing on professional (non-literary) translation, and they are beginning to be heard in other countries with a rich translation tradition, such as Canada. These researchers are part of, but are not limited to, those new poles of research centered in Barcelona, Granada, and Trieste. Researchers involved in these movements are not trying to discredit theoretical research based on literary translation, but are instead dedicating much of their work to (re)claiming the fair share of attention that must be paid to sound empirical research in translation studies. It is hoped that their efforts will help bridge the gap between the industry and academia, a gap that is due, at least in our opinion, to mutual misunderstanding.

We believe that part of the misunderstanding between academia and the industry is that each side has its own view on quality, i.e. how the quality of work is assessed and what specific features are taken into consideration in quality assessment by educators and by employers respectively. For example, a “good” translation student is someone who will meet the learning objectives adequately and consistently. These objectives have to do with the quality of translation as we conceive it in translation classes: a methodologically sound approach, pragmatically founded and justifiable choices, high quality of the language used, and academic integrity. Consciously or not, educators teach in a way

that leads students to aim not only for quality, but for perfection, a view that sometimes contradicts the objectives set by translator employers. In fact, translation employers seek translators who will be able to provide a satisfactory translation in as short a period of time as possible, for as low a price as possible. Their view of quality has to do both with performance and risk management (i.e. produce the best translation possible in the shortest amount of time and at the lowest cost possible). Hence, if this is true, translations by translation students and professional translators are assessed based on very different schemes. It is likely the case, as it is not uncommon for a very good translation student to perform poorly initially in their first place of employment, and it is also possible for average students to be highly appreciated by employers. These views on quality are not diametrically opposed, but there appears to be a conceptual gap that needs bridging when it comes to defining the idea of “quality”.

Part of the problem may also stem from the fact that today’s translation graduates are hired to replace seasoned professionals, regardless of the fact that it takes time to achieve quality, and that quality (especially that relating to human resources) improves over time. In Canada, those who were hired upon the adoption of the *Official Languages Act of 1969*, also known as the beginning of the Golden Age of translation in Canada, are now retiring *en masse* and need to be replaced. Because it hasn’t hired very many translators over the past decade or so, the industry is now looking for translators who can readily replace seasoned translators and can translate thousands of words day after day. They also want translators who can translate as part of a team and can use all that technology has to offer to make the translation process more efficient. Ultimately, they want translators who can provide them with translations that meet their standard of quality, that is to translate quickly and efficiently. They need these translators right now, and expect academia to fill the role both of educators and trainers (providers of translators with fundamental knowledge *and* the equivalent of on-the-job experience acquired over many years).

But, just as all translation scholars do not see translator education in the same eye, translator employers may espouse a variety of views when it comes to translation quality. In fact, we posit that the translation industry is comprised of three main groups: translation services providers (TSPs), translation services purchasers, and in-house translation services. TSPs know what translation is, and their main goal is to provide the best translation services at the most competitive prices. Their concept of quality translator will be based on efficiency, with profitability in mind. Translation services purchasers, for the most part, are not well versed in the requirements associated with translation, but they want translators to help them achieve their goals, which can be varied. Some might want to meet a legal requirement, while others might want to promote a product in a certain market from which they are separated by a language barrier, etc. Finally, in-house translation services will expect high-quality translations and the issue of cost may not be as prominent for them as it is for TSPs. Therefore, the notion of efficiency will be different for these three categories of employers, and it is this context that translator educators must take into consideration when they prepare future translators.

In summary, for translator educators, good translators have an extensive knowledge of both working languages and a variety of text types, demonstrate academic integrity (i.e., do not seek to pass someone else's work for his or her own), and have an ability to translate well (i.e. with style, as style is rewarded for it distinguishes the very good from the good, and the good from the merely good enough). Also, in some cases, translator educators will value students who demonstrate abilities for graduate studies.

As for translator employers, a good translator uses the appropriate level of language, produces translations that are appropriate (i.e. trigger no complaint by translation users, although their level of tolerance for language errors might be higher than translator educators), fulfill any legal requirements, and are produced just-in-time (delivered in a timely fashion). The idea of quality in this case requires striking a balance between the projected use, resources available and time versus output, in other words to provide the best quality translation possible, for the intended purpose, using the resources available, as quickly as possible, for the best price possible, involving the lowest factor of risk possible for the user.

5. PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATION AS A UNIVERSITY SUBJECT

About half a century or so ago, professional translation was elevated from a course topic to full-fledged programmes in universities around the world. These programmes were, at the beginning, located for the most part in linguistics or language studies departments. As translation was elevated to a distinct focus of education and field of research, it has been distancing itself from its professional roots and, some would argue, from its core purpose. The debate surrounding the so-called over-theorization of translation curricula begs the following question: should translation be taught at the university level?

Most would argue that only a university education can provide translators with the breadth and depth of knowledge required to bridge the communication gap sometimes between very high-level experts. There is little doubt, if any, that that kind of translation skill can best be learned in university, as students are not only taught procedural knowledge, but also declarative and, perhaps most importantly, conditional knowledge. However, because of a different understanding of what translation entails, some in Canada, including the Government of Canada's Translation Bureau, are wondering if there shouldn't be levels of competencies in translation, and are advocating for the creation of programmes for "para-translators" on the model of *paralegals*. This implies that there are several levels of translation, or at least translation quality, based not only on quality of transfer and language, but rather based on the use of the translation (Scarpa 2008: 213-215). While it is easy to agree with Scarpa's view, a case can also be made that only professional translators have the required pragmatic skills and conceptual knowledge to discern what type of translation is required of a given text, based on the purpose of the translation, including the needs of the clients. The reason many rely on on-line software to translate their

texts is that they believe that translation is a simple matter of language, involving a change in “code,” and not a communication process that cannot be carried out appropriately by mere bilinguals. What distinguishes professional translators from bilinguals who translate is the ability to analyze a situation of communication, to separate the two language-cultures at stake, to design a macro-strategy aimed at producing a translation that meets the communication needs, then to apply a series of microstrategies aimed at achieving that goal (see Scarpa 2008). Translators are professional communication problem solvers, and this requires extensive multidisciplinary knowledge that can best be obtained through a sound humanistic education, as translation is part science, as it involves knowledge, but it is also, at least partly, art, as it involves the application of choices, although these choices are less conditioned by the will to express one’s style than by the communication needs. In sum, the artistic part involved in professional translation does not equate to artistic licence.

One cannot make the argument in favour of teaching translation at the university level without insisting on the crucial importance of graduate programmes in translation. Without graduate translation programmes, future translator educators would have to get their education somewhere else, therefore not in areas of studies that are primarily concerned with translation and translation quality, let alone professional translation. Certainly one can argue that some excellent translation professors come from such fields of studies as linguistics, literature, philosophy, etc. But translation studies is no longer considered as a field of interest somewhat related to other ones: it is its own *bona fide* field of research, and it now has its own graduate programmes that focus on fundamental and applied research, which have direct implications for the market and on the way we think about translation. All of this attests to the maturity of translation studies as a discipline and of translation as a profession.

6. WHAT NOW, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHAT NEXT?

The role of translation schools is crucial, as they are responsible for educating future translators and, through their graduate programmes, future translator educators. When translation employers make the argument that new recent school graduates are ill-prepared for the real world, they imply that the industry would be better served if translators received a more practical education. Translation schools cannot, however, replace the crucial role of the industry in the ongoing training of recent graduates, as the significance and extent of what recent graduates have yet to learn upon graduation is considerable. And although translation schools have tried, with some success, to emulate real-life situations in the classroom, nothing will replace real-life experience gained on a daily basis. To the same extent, fundamental education is best provided by that translation schools as part of a comprehensive learning endeavour. Although translation schools can indeed be more effective in developing curricula that weave together theory and practice into a praxeological philosophy, the industry must also recognize that translation curricula cannot ever replicate the workplace environment in which one is able to gain valuable procedural and conditional

knowledge. Translator employers should also acknowledge that translators are highly qualified, interlinguistic and intercultural communication specialists, and that part of the translators' competence lies in their ability to use all three categories of knowledge to solve communication problems.

In addition, translation schools can argue that they are best positioned to use a variety of sound pedagogical approaches aimed at meeting each student's learning style, and at providing students with the ability to think critically. The social role of the translator must also be well understood, and one way of reaching that objective is to stop looking at them as simple operators, but instead as real agents of change whose aim it is to bring members of society closer together. In addition, they must be allowed to participate in the development of their profession, also through research aimed at finding new working methods and new technological tools that could make translation easier to perform and more reliable. It must be clear that the role of translation schools is not only to train translators who can meet today's needs, but translators who will still be competent to face the challenges of the translation industry 40 or even 50 years from now.

Unfortunately, the value of a good theoretical foundation in translation curricula remains largely invisible to the translation industry. But translation scholars can certainly make a sound case for the place of theory in translator education, as it is closely linked to the quality of learning and, ultimately, to the quality of translation that graduates and seasoned translators alike can produce in a variety of circumstances.

One question remains for translation scholars: is the theoretical base of this multicompetence that is translation best provided solely by translation scholars, or would it benefit from an interdisciplinary approach between a diversity of fields, such as sociology, linguistics, computer science, anthropology, business, etc.? That is a crucial issue that graduate programme administrators must reflect on carefully.

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