Language Mixing and its Discontents in Sixteenth-Century France:

The Case of Henri Estienne

Any review of the competing discourses on plurilingualism – understood here as the ability of a given individual to use, with varying degrees of mastery, more than one language in the course of their everyday activities – reveals that the practice has remained, despite its ubiquity and longevity across the world's speech communities, highly charged politically and socially.[1] This is particularly true at times of political upheaval and contestation, such as the French Wars of Religion of the second half of the sixteenth century, during which plurilingual individuals – especially courtiers in the entourage of successive French kings – were viewed with suspicion both by their Huguenot political enemies and, increasingly, the Catholic population as a whole.[2] Such individuals were criticised for a number of transgressions, depending on the perspective of the critic, ranging from a lack of linguistic loyalty – or, indeed, patriotism – to the insincere and self-serving desire to curry favour with an influential foreign – specifically Italian – faction at court associated with the Queen Mother Caterina de' Medici. Such political and pragmatic considerations were supplemented, in writers such as Henri Estienne, with criticism that was anchored in a more fundamental and philologically underpinned objection to the activity of language mixing *per se*; an aesthetically and semantically motivated antipathy to what is now celebrated – in English-speaking contexts at least – under the term 'translanguaging', itself understood as the transgressing of the socially and politically defined boundaries of named

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[1] *Plurilingualism* is understood here as the ability of an individual speaker to use more than one language, in contradistinction to *multilingualism*, understood as the coexistence of more than one language in a given community.

[2] Smith 1966 provides a number of examples of attacks by French writers on Italian courtiers in the retinue of Caterina de' Medici and the mixing of a range of languages at court (p. 16-17, 120, 144, 207); Heller 2003 provides a broader overview of the development of anti-Italianism in sixteenth-century France; Balsamo 1992 traces rivalries between French and Italian authors of the period and their repercussions in the literary field.

languages in an individual speaker's linguistic practice.[3] In what follows, the longevity of such attitudes will be explored through a review of their prevalence in late medieval and early modern French writing, which itself foregrounds the duality of positive and negative representations of this commonplace human activity that persists to this day.

Before turning to the sixteenth-century French evidence, then, it will be instructive to review the contemporary UK and European debate on this historically contested activity. On February 1, 2020, the Huffington Post web site reported what was, in the estimation of the investigating police force, 'a racially aggravated public order incident' involving the posting of notices on each floor of a municipal council-owned tower block for over 55s in the English city of Norwich.[4] The posters, entitled 'Happy Brexit Day', had gone up promptly in the hours following the UK's departure from the European Union to inform residents that the use of languages other than 'the Queens English' (*sic*) would no longer be tolerated as 'we are now our own country again'.[5] Those not wishing to comply with this new 'rule' were invited to return to their country of origin and give back their flat to the council so that 'British people' could once again live there and 'normality' be restored. Using a metaphorical frame that would have been very familiar to a sixteenth-century readership, the anonymous author of the poster

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[3] For an overview of recent research on plurilingualism and translanguaging in pedagogical contexts, see Vallejo – Dooly 2020. For early modern critiques of language mixing, see Burke 2004, p. 111-140.

[4] Turnnidge 2020.

[5] The full text of the poster reads as follows (orthographical, grammatical and punctuation errors remain uncorrected): 'Happy Brexit Day. As we finally have our great country back we feel there is one rule to that needs to be made clear to Winchester Tower residents. We do not tolerate people speaking other languages than English in the flats. We are now our own country again and the the Queens English is the spoken tongue here. If you do want to speak whatever is the mother tongue of the country you came from then we suggest you return to that place and return your flat to the council so they can let British people live here and we can return to what was normality before you infected this once great island. It's a simple choice obey the rule of the majority or leave. You won't have long till our government will implement rules that will put British first. So, best evolve or leave. God Save the Queen, her government and all true patriots.'

went on to equate immigration with a form of 'infection' from which, such was the hope, the country would soon be freed;[6] a further, more modern, frame, that of evolution, was then deployed to encourage residents to modify their behaviour and forestall what was strongly implied to be a UK government-sanctioned mass deportation, which, thankfully, has proven to be an unfounded threat to date. While clearly an example of hate speech and chilling for what it tells the reader about attitudes towards linguistic diversity in a part of the UK population, this text betrays a powerful and long-lived suspicion of plurilingualism in a predominantly monolingual society. It also gives an indication of just how far post-Brexit Britain risks diverging from the aims of the Council of Europe *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (first set out in 2001), which, by contrast, places the plurilingual individual at the heart of its vision for an inclusive pan-European school curriculum.

In section 1.3 of the 2001 *Framework*, plurilingualism is distinguished from multilingualism as an individual, as opposed to a societal practice.[7] Its role in educational settings is validated through an understanding of it as a form of communicative competence that develops over time as the individual's experience of language in its different cultural contexts expands. Crucially, for the authors of the *Framework*, this competence does not entail the compartmentalisation of linguistic and cultural knowledge, but rather the interrelation and interaction of languages, permitting the plurilingual individual to call flexibly on different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor. Recognising that communication between interlocutors not sharing a common language may draw on the speakers' full linguistic and, indeed, paralinguistic repertoire, including mime, gestures and facial expressions, or on a radical simplification of language, the *Framework*'s understanding

[6] For early modern discussions of linguistic contamination and infection, see Burke 2004, p. 147, 157.
[7] Council of Europe, 2001. Plurilingualism is defined and discussed in section 1.3 (p. 4-5).

of plurilingual competence poses a radical challenge to the very notions of linguistic authority that were elaborated across a range of European cultures in the early modern period, according to which idealised (i.e. learned or socially elevated) native speakers became the point of reference for linguistic accuracy, and the mixing of languages was, as a rule, strongly deprecated.[8] The nature of this challenge is acknowledged by the authors of the *Framework* when they state that:

> the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve 'mastery' of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the 'ideal native speaker' as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place.[9]

In a companion volume to the *Framework*, published in 2018 and updated in 2020, plurilingual competence is characterised as 'the ability to call flexibly upon an interrelated, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire' to achieve and perform the following aspects of communication:

- switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another;
- express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another;
- call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text;
- recognise words from a common international store in a new guise;
- mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even if possessing only a slight knowledge oneself;

[8] Burke 2004; Milroy – Milroy 2012.
[9] Council of Europe 2001, p. 5.

• bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression;

• exploit paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial ex- pression, etc.).[10]

What is interesting about these criteria, keeping in mind the sixteenth-century preoccupation, across a wide range of European cultures, with language loyalty and the attempted prohibition of language mixing on aesthetic as well as ideological grounds, is the acceptance of differential levels of competence across the languages used (the 'uneven' repertoire of the plurilingual speaker) and the promotion of translinguistic play and creativity as a means of enhancing expression.[11] Indeed, the encouragement to experiment and to draw on a range of linguistic knowledge without necessarily respecting traditional distinctions between languages runs directly counter to the attempts, in the French sixteenth-century texts which will now be considered, to police the boundaries of national languages and to stigmatise and ridicule those who, wittingly or otherwise, are seen to transgress them. It is, of course, clear that linguistic science has moved on a good deal since the sixteenth century, and that the EU guidelines just quoted reflect profoundly different ways of thinking about language use and linguistic politics, motivated, in large measure, by the desire to resist the inexorable rise of a single hegemonic international language in the form of International English. And yet the evidence from the block of flats in Norwich suggests strongly that popular ideas about language use and its political implications have remained remarkably stable since the initial development of ideas about national languages in the early modern period.

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[10] Council of Europe 2020. Plurilingual competence is discussed in section 2.3 (p. 30-31).

[11] Weinreich 1970 defines language loyalty as 'a principle […] in the name of which people will rally themselves and their fellow speakers consciously and explicitly to resist changes in either the functions of their language (as a result of a language shift) or in the structure or vocabulary (as a consequence of interference)' (p. 99).

Perhaps the most sustained example of plurilingual practice in sixteenth-century French writing can be found in a fictional and polemical text: the *Deux Dialogues du nouveau langage François italianizé et autrement desguizé, principalement entre les courtisans de ce temps* of the Huguenot scholar printer Henri Estienne, who had been brought up in Paris in the multilingual household of his printer father Robert and later voluntarily exiled himself to Calvinist Geneva. The dialogues, whose Italian ancestry and inspiration are of course evident (if ironic, given their subject-matter), were written in Geneva in the wake of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre and published anonymously in 1578; they present the figure of the courtier Philausone, whose name points to his cultural bias towards all things Italian, as the epitome of the social climber, willing to compromise his principles and betray the purity of his mother tongue in order to ingratiate himself with the Italian entourage of Caterina de' Medici at the court of the French king Henri III. His celebrated letter 'aux lecteurs *tutti quanti*', which prefaces the text proper, takes the form of a sustained and, indeed, bravura passage of language mixing:[12]

> Messieurs, il n'y a pas long temps qu'ayant quelque *martel in teste* (ce qui m'advient souvent pendant que je fay ma *stanse* en la cour), et, à cause de ce, estant sorti apres le *past* pour aller un peu *spaceger*, je trouvay par la *strade* un mien ami nommé Celtophile. Or, voyant qu'il se monstr*et* estre tout *sbigotit* de mon langage (qui est toutesfois le langage courtisan*esque*, dont usent aujourd'huy les gentilshommes franc*és* qui ont quelque *garbe*, et aussi desirent ne parler point *sgarbatement*), je me mis à *ragionner* avec luy touchant iceluy en le soustenant le mieux qu'il m'est*et* possible. Et voyant que, nonobstant tout ce que je luy pouv*es* alleguer, ce langage italianizé luy semblet fort

[12] For the role of language mixing in this text, which in all probability reflects the oral bilingualism of the contemporary courtly *milieu*, see Cowling 2007; Scharinger 2018, p. 142, 148, 178, 308, 317, 319-320.

strane, voire avoir de la *gc̃ferie* et *balorderie*, je pris beaucoup de *fatigue* pour luy *caver* cela de la fantasie. Mais (pour vous dire la verité), je ne trouv*es* point de raisons *bastantes* pour ce faire.[13]

The intended effect on the readership of this form of plurilingual creativity is dramatised in the dialogues themselves through the reactions of Philausone's fellow courtier and interlocutor Celtophile (a lover of Celtic Gaul, as his name suggests), an authorial surrogate whose role is to express irritation and amusement at his colleague's linguistic excesses while promoting the use of a carefully policed 'pure' form of French. Philausone is both criticised for the lack of clarity of his utterances, which are seen to do violence to the philological and etymological integrity of the French and Italian languages, and mocked for the unintentionally comic nature of his speech. While the criticism betrays Estienne's own standpoint as a humanistic philologist and editor of Greek and Latin texts, for whom linguistic error was a form of moral fault,[14] the mockery is reminiscent of earlier depictions of plurilingual individuals in French literary texts of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance. Characters such as *Maître Mimin étudiant* of the late 15th-century farce of the same name or, indeed (and more famously), Rabelais' *écolier limousin* are ridiculed for their inappropriate mixing of Latin with the vernacular.[15] In both texts, the use of Latin words is presented as an affectation that afflicts the (semi-) learned and interferes with communication with French speakers, who are mistrustful of a form of language that they do not readily understand, and which seems to convey obscene or obscurely sexual content. In both cases, an interlocutor suspects that something morally or theologically dubious is lurking beneath the surface of the largely unintelligible discourse: for Maître Mimin's future father-in-law, the student's language is suited only for the making of spells and incantations (a

[13] Estienne 1980, p. 35; italics have been added to indicate lexemes and morphemes derived from Italian.
[14] Kecskeméti – Boudou – Cazes 2003, p. xv; Cowling 2012.
[15] For a detailed comparison between these texts, see Hayes 2004. The text of the farce can be found in Tissier 1988, p. 229-272.

popular medieval suspicion directed at the learned language and those who spoke it), whereas Pantagruel accuses the *écolier* of being 'quelque heretique', who is forging 'quelque langaige diabolique' and seeking to bewitch his interlocutors like an enchanter.[16] Once the student has abandoned his language mixing and reverted to his *limousin* dialect in the face of the threat of physical violence, Pantagruel declares himself satisfied that 'à ceste heure parle tu naturellement'.[17]

It would, however, be inaccurate to assume that this reaction by Rabelais' protagonist betrays a fundamental hostility to plurilingualism on the part of the author.[18] If language mixing is inherently comic and, on a certain level, threatening to the natural order, then an approach that respects the specificity of distinct linguistic varieties can be celebrated, even within the context of a humorous scene. Three chapters after the encounter with the *écolier limousin*, Pantagruel meets Panurge, 'lequel il ayma toute sa vie' (Rabelais 1997, p. 113-118). Panurge famously formulates his urgent request for a good meal in a series of real and invented languages (German, Italian, Scots English, Basque, Dutch, Spanish, Danish, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and two invented tongues) before he finally comes to French, his 'langue naturelle, et maternelle' (Rabelais 1997, p. 118). Terence Cave has drawn attention to the pragmatic nature of Panurge's plurilingual practice, which he has linked to the circulation of practical language guides for merchants and other contemporary travellers, along with the primacy given by Panurge to

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[16] Hayes remarks that 'Mimin's corrupted language is viewed as an indication of a greater perversion; linguistic *démesure* is a symptom or manifestation of a diabolical condition' and notes Pantagruel's 'seemingly archaic suspicion' of heresy and enchantment, identifying the former as an attack on the Sorbonne, where the student has learned his Latin (Hayes 2004, p. 64, 67, 68).

[17] Rabelais 1997, p. 89-92. Further references will be incorporated into the text. Smith 1966 (p. 206) remarks on the similarity between Philausone's linguistic practice in the *Deux Dialogues* and that of the *écolier limousin*.

[18] Demerson 1981 provides an overview of Rabelais' own plurilingual practice.

vernacular languages and his use of demotic, as opposed to classical Greek.[19] What is striking about this repertoire when viewed in the light of the conception of plurilingualism discussed above, however, is that Panurge distinguishes clearly between the languages he uses and is careful to avoid mixing them, with the sole (overtly humorous) exception of his inclusion of place names from Chinon and the surrounding area – Rabelais' own home turf – in the invented passages. When asked by Pantagruel if he can in fact speak French, his answer is disarmingly straightforward:

> Si faictz très bien, seigneur, respondit le compaignon, Dieu mercy: c'est ma langue naturelle, et maternelle, car je suis né et ay esté nourry jeune au jardin de France, c'est Touraine. (Rabelais 1997, p. 118)

Both Rabelaisian scenes thus reach the same end point, namely the recognition of French as the 'natural' form of speech of the character in question, 'naturalness' being one of the most pervasive metaphors used by metalinguistic commentators throughout the 16th century to reinforce what would now be seen as puristic attitudes towards the national language and its 'correct' use.[20] It could be argued that, by relegating French to the final position in his repertoire of spoken varieties, Rabelais is subtly mocking such attitudes and arguing for a more open approach to linguistic diversity that would not be out of place in a modern European language classroom. Where Rabelais is firmly of his age, however, is in his respect for the boundaries of national languages and unwillingness to make his character transgress them in the way that Philausone was later to do.

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[19] Cave 2001, p. 27-28.

[20] A famous use of the frame of linguistic naturalness can be found in Joachim Du Bellay's distinction, in his *Dɛ̨fence, et illustration de la langue françoyse* of 1549, between 'natural' and 'adopted' words (Du Bellay 2003, p. 23-24).

It will now be instructive to turn to the specific criticisms levelled at courtiers such as Philausone by Henri Estienne and his Huguenot contemporaries. First of all, these provide further – albeit indirect – evidence that the learning of Italian was widespread among the higher social classes in France and was not restricted exclusively to those travelling to or studying in Italy.[21] Indeed, the motivations ascribed to these learners are focused on social or economic advancement at home, rather than travel or trade abroad. Henri Estienne's contemporary, the Huguenot polemicist Innocent Gentillet, author of the notorious *Anti-Machiavel* published in Geneva in 1576, ascribes the claimed widespread use of Italian at the French royal court to the ignorance and laziness of the prominent Italian families occupying leading positions in the fiscal, judicial and ecclesiastical administration of the kingdom and to the desire of French courtiers to obtain advantage for themselves:

> Et mesmes si l'on veut aujourdhuy obtenir quelque chose en cour, et avoir bonne et soudaine despeche, il faut savoir parler le langage messeresque parce que ces messers oyent volentiers ceux qui savent parler leur gergon, et n'entendent pas bien le françois, mesmes les termes de justice et des ordonnances royaux.[22]

Elsewhere, he claims that even the tradespeople in Lyon – allegedly an Italian 'colony'[23] – are motivated to learn and use Italian – however imperfectly – in order to cater for their Italian expatriate customers:

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[21] While there is little direct evidence of the formal teaching and learning of Italian in sixteenth-century France, the existence of a large contemporary readership for material published in Italian is attested by the bibliographical list found in Bingen 1994.

[22] Gentillet 1968, p. 38; further references will be incorporated into the text. *Langage messeresque* is Gentillet's mocking term for the Italian language, derived from *Messer(ϵ)*, whose use across a range of French sixteenth-century writers is recorded by Huguet 1925-73 with the meaning 'Italien', with the addition of the (still productive) suffix *-esque*.

[23] Heller reports the nickname 'French Tuscany' applied to Lyon by Gentillet's contemporaries (Heller 2003, p. 40).

> Et, de fait, combien s'en faut il que la ville de Lyon ne soit colonie italienne? Car outre ce que bonne partie des habitans sont Italiens, les autres du pays se conforment peu à peu à leurs mœurs, façons de faire, maniere de vivre, et langage. Et à grand' peine trouveriez vous dans icelle ville un malotru artisan qui ne s'adonne à parler le messeresque: parce que ces messers ont cela, qu'ils ne font bon visage et n'oyent volontiers, sinon ceux qui gazouillent avec eux leur ramage, taschans par ce moyen d'acquerir vogue et credit à eux et à leur langage. Et les villes de Paris, Marseille, Grenoble, et plusieurs autres de France, ne sont elles pas ja plaines de messers? (Gentillet 1968, p. 315)

Even allowing for a degree of polemical hyperbole – is it really plausible to claim that the Italians who administer the French legal system do not understand its key terms? – these passages suggest that plurilingual practice, motivated by pragmatic considerations, was not restricted to those having to interact with courtiers and was a fact of everyday life in those urban centres housing higher concentrations of wealthy Italian immigrants. Given the context in which these remarks occur – what is intended to be a systematic denunciation of those ideas of Machiavelli that have been imported into France by his Italian, and specifically Florentine adherents – it comes as no surprise that those French speakers who make the effort to accommodate their Italian interlocutors linguistically are taxed with a lack of patriotism, as well as a form of moral degeneracy that results inevitably – or so Gentillet would have it – from their adoption of Italian customs and habits, a phenomenon that might now be celebrated as an example of 'pluricultural competence', as set out in the Council of Europe's *Framework*. Like earlier plurilingual characters, such as the student Mimin, who finds himself caged like a bird while he relearns his mother tongue, those affecting to speak Italian are dehumanised and denied the rationality that would, in normal circumstances, allow them to make better linguistic judgements:

> nous voyons aujourdhuy la France du tout façonnee aux mœurs, conditions et vices des estrangers qui la gouvernent, et qui y ont les principales charges et estats. Et non seulement plusieurs François sont si bestes que de se conformer aux complexions estrangeres mais aussi se meslent desja de gazouiller leur langage, et desdaigner la langue françoise, comme chose trop commune et vulgaire. (Gentillet 1968, p. 322)

Here again, the avian metaphor of birdsong ('gazouiller leur langage') suggests a lack of rational judgement on the part of the speaker and presents language use as a form of undesirable social practice that privileges the linguistic surface over propositional content. This metaphor finds fuller expression in one of the poems that preface Henri Estienne's *Deux Dialogues*, in which italianising French courtiers are likened to caged parrots:

> CELTOPHILE AU LECTEUR:
> Maint courtisan use de mots nouveaux,
> Qu'il n'entend point, et si les trouve beaux.
> Luy, bigarré, bigarre son langage.
> Mais pardonnons au perroquet en cage. (Estienne 1980, p. 34)

It is typical of Estienne's polemical technique – and, it could be argued, of sixteenth-century writing more generally – that he develops a commonly found metaphor by extending its semantic coverage and, by so doing, inserts it into a wider network of figurative associations. Here, the linguistic habits of the parrot-courtier complement his brightly coloured dress, which itself becomes a metaphor for (inappropriate) linguistic mixing. Other metaphors were, of course, available to stigmatise this practice, drawn from the medical and culinary domains, or from the bestiary; what all these images have in common is the implication that, in mixing elements from two languages, the speaker is compensating for a lack of adequate linguistic

knowledge and, by so doing, creates something that is displeasing on both the aesthetic and the philological level, since it fails to respect the integrity and 'natural' specificity of the constituent languages.

It is, of course, important to resist the temptation to extrapolate from evidence such as this and conclude that sixteenth-century metalinguistic commentators such as Henri Estienne deprecated all plurilingual practice. The complementary functional distribution of Latin and the vernacular made use of the former indispensable for the learned classes, and Estienne himself harked back to the Latin-speaking environment of his father Robert's Parisian printing house when recalling, in the preface to his edition of Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*, his own decision to learn Greek at an early age in order to distinguish himself from other family members, who all spoke Latin.[24] Estienne and his French humanist compatriots also recognised the canonical status of the three learned languages Greek, Latin and Hebrew, which underpinned initiatives such as Guillaume Budé's *Collège de France* in Paris and Hieronymus van Busleyden's *Collegium Trilingue* in Leuven, and thereby acknowledged the importance, for the scholar, of a trilingual competence (albeit one that carefully respected and strictly policed the boundaries between the learned languages).

What is most interesting, in this context of learned plurilingualism, is Estienne's pride in his own mastery of Italian, notwithstanding his consistent (albeit unsuccessful) efforts to demonstrate that language's inferiority to French. In a text written in 1565, he argued for a demonstrable linguistic 'conformity' (as he put it) between French and ancient Greek, in an attempt to elevate the vernacular to a status analogous to that of the learned languages and thereby to deprecate Italian and those that sought to borrow linguistic material from it. In the

[24] Feugère 1853, p. 23-24, 45-46.

preface to this work, Estienne shares with the reader an anecdote concerning an espionage mission that he undertook at the behest of the French ambassador during his travels across Italy in the course of the year 1555. Apprehended by the forces of the King of Naples in the vicinity of that city, Estienne reports that he had need to 'parler italien correct' to avoid being unmasked as a French agent.[25] This anecdote makes clear the double force of the phenomenon discussed here – a philologically grounded respect for linguistic accuracy, and a clear demarcation of one national language from another. It also exemplifies the historically anchored and enduringly popular attitude from which from the language classroom of current EU policy seeks to diverge, with its emphasis on linguistic experimentation and creativity, and on finding practical solutions to problems of communication that mobilise a speaker's entire plurilingual repertoire, however 'uneven' and inchoate.[26]

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[25] Estienne 1970, p. 45; Clément 1967, p. 222, 468.

[26] That popular resistance to language mixing is far from being overcome has recently been recognised by one of the leading proponents of the 'translanguaging' approach promoted within the EU *Framework*: 'Whilst there has been significant progress in many parts of the world where multilingualism, in the sense of having different languages co-existing alongside each other, is beginning to be acceptable, what remains hugely problematic is the mixing of languages. The myth of a pure form of a language is so deep-rooted that there are many people who, while accepting the existence of different languages, cannot accept the 'contamination' of their language by others', Li Wei 2017, p. 14.

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