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Variation in the Grammatical Feature of 'Voice' across the Spoken and Written Academic Registers of BS English Students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan

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Abstract

The research paper investigates variation in the prevalence and distribution of 'voice' in the spoken (presentations/interviews) and written (essays/midterm exam scripts) academic registers of BS English students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the relation of this variation to the situational circumstances of the concerned registers. The learner corpus was constructed. The data was collected from BS English students of the twelve public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. All the texts were transcribed, coded, and then analysed through the computer software AntConc (3.5.8). The present study is unique in the sense that it has conducted a comparative analysis of the various spoken and written sub-registers of English in the academic non-native environment. This study has great implications for researchers in the field of register analysis, material design, and language teaching.

Key Words: Corpus, Spoken Registers, Written Registers, Situational Context, Voice

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Title

Variation in the Grammatical Feature of 'voice' across the Spoken and Written Academic Registers of BS English Students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan.

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Abstract

The research paper investigates variation in the prevalence and distribution of 'voice' in the spoken (presentations/interviews) and written (essays/midterm exam scripts) academic registers of BS English students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the relation of this variation to the situational circumstances of the concerned registers. The learner corpus was constructed. The data was collected from BS English students of the twelve public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. All the texts were transcribed, coded, and then analysed through the computer software AntConc (3.5.8). The present study is unique in the sense that it has conducted a comparative analysis of the various spoken and written sub-registers of English in the academic non-native environment. This study has great implications for researchers in the field of register analysis, material design, and language teaching.

Keywords: [Corpus](#), [Spoken Registers](#), [Written Registers](#), [Situational Context](#), [Voice](#)

Introduction

Kachru, (1990) asserts that the English language is deemed as a tool for 'modernization' and 'internationalization' in the larger parts of the world. English language has flourished contrary to the claim made by Huntington (1996, pp. 59-61), and

many new local varieties of English have emerged (Crystal, 1997). The use of English in Pakistan has immensely increased with time, and it is used as a medium of instruction in Pakistani universities. In the past, researchers studied the local varieties of English in comparison with the



English language spoken and written by native speakers. They focused mainly on the errors committed by non-native speakers. Some studies such as Collins (1984) have compared the varieties of English spoken by the peoples of various countries. But recently the monolithic approach to English has given place to the more polycentric approach, whereby it is recognized that even the single variety of English itself has various registers and sub-registers inside it.

Register in linguistic studies refers to a particular perspective on the text varieties. There is an underlying assumption that various text varieties differ from each other linguistically due to the reason that various text varieties have different communicative purposes, and are accomplished in different situational contexts. Biber and Conrad (2009) remark that register analysis of any text variety takes into consideration the context of its situation and its communicative purpose along with the analysis of the linguistic features of the text variety (p. 2).

The research on register analysis focuses on three major aspects, firstly, the situational context; secondly, the linguistic features; and thirdly, the relationship between the situational context and the particular linguistic features. The assumption in register analysis is that a particular register has specific linguistic features and those linguistic features are functional in the sense that they are needed for the various aspects of the register such as the situational context, physical mode, the nature of flow that is whether it is interactive or uni-directional, and the purpose of communication that is whether it is the expression of feelings, stance or dissemination of information.

The characteristics of a particular register become noticeable when it is compared to another register. A register is not marked for the presence or absence of any lexico-grammatical feature, rather the pattern of distribution and pervasiveness of particular linguistic features are looked for in a register with comparison to other registers.

Various studies on register analysis have been conducted such as the study of Biber et al. (1999), but most such studies have been conducted in the native environment of English. The focus of the present research paper was to carry out the study of register analysis on English in a non-native environment. For the research, a learner corpus was constructed.

The present study had the following main objectives: firstly, to analyze the situational differences of the selected registers; secondly, to find out the differences in the use and distribution of 'voice' across the selected registers; and thirdly, to find out the functional link between the situational characteristics of the registers and the prevalence and distribution of 'voice' across the registers.

Literature Review

English language, literature, and culture took their birth in the fifth century A.D., the time when the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes tribes settled in England. Since England gained prominence in the international community, the spread of the English language has always been on the rise. Yano (2009) equates the prominence of the English language to the high political, military, and economic status of the countries that use English as a first language (p. 223). Widdowson (2003) points out that as the language spreads more and more, it, unlike a disease, changes itself (pp. 45-46). When a language is brought to a new environment, it absorbs new languages, cultures, attitudes, and values and adapts itself according to the demands of the new expressions and expectations. Various models about the spreading of English have been produced by various writers such as the three-circle model of (Kachru, 1992), and the three-dimensional cylindrical model of (Yano 2009). Kachru's model is geography specific while Yano's model is person specific.

Recently, the term "Englishes" has been used to encompass the many formal, functional, and linguistic varieties of English and various socio-linguistic contexts. Kachru (1991) remarks that

the term “World Englishes” is used in acceptance of the pluricentricity and multi-identities of the English language (p.4). Widdowson (1994) questions the authority of ‘standard English’. The fact is that non-native varieties of English do not hamper effective communication. Various varieties are developed independently of the native variety through the process of adaptation, according to the needs and uses of local contexts. English, being an international language, implies that no single nation or group has control over it. To patronize it and contain it in one single shape would stop its development and growth. English is a language spoken in various parts of the world and it surpasses all geographical and cultural boundaries. Kachru (2020) opines that English as a medium should be separated from the messages it once contained. The development of non-native varieties will liberate these “Englishes” from the messages of Judeo-Christianity and colonialism it once contained and conveyed. He elaborates that the English spoken by non-native people is creative in the sense that it has the flavour of local culture and has various influences from the local language (p. 464).

While comparing the number of people in various circles, Crystal (1997) claims that the English language in the inner circle is spoken by three hundred and twenty to three hundred and eighty million people, in the outer circle by one hundred and fifty to three hundred million people, while in the expanding circle by one hundred to one thousand million people (p.54). Kachru (1996) supports the claim and points out that the number of non-native speakers of English is four times higher than the number of native speakers of English (p.241). Widdowson (1994) is against the concept of ‘authenticity of language’. He disproves the notion of exposing non-native students to the so-called authentic, native language (p 387).

Mahboob (2009) highlights that the English language appeared in the Indo-Pak

subcontinent in the sixteenth century and was officially recognized when in 1835, Lord Macaulay presented his minutes (P. 178). When the Mughal Empire was toppled by the East India Company in 1857, India was formally included in the British Empire. Thus, the English language was introduced into the legal, educational, and other functionalities of the state. English was being used in British India by elitist institutions, like Indian civil services, armed forces, and institutions of higher education.

The possible role of English in Pakistan has spurred much debate since independence. Rahman (1997) highlights the challenges that English has faced and the reasons why English has maintained its status in Pakistan. He remarks that the decision related to the medium of instruction in educational institutions has been controversial in Pakistan due to the power struggle between different groups. The Westernized elite have been in support of English, while the ‘Urdu proto-elite’ have been struggling to replace English with Urdu so that this ‘Urdu proto-elite’ group may have a chance to rise high in the social hierarchy. The importance of English has not diminished in Pakistan although successive governments have attempted to replace English with Urdu. Some of the instances are the forming of an “Official Language Committee” in Punjab in 1949, the recommendations that secondary education should be in Urdu (ABE, 1955), the recommendation that English be replaced by Urdu, even in the universities (ABE, 1949), the creation of the “Muqtadra Qaumi Zaban” (the National Language Authority) in 1979 by General Zia, the recommendations of “Air Marshal Noor Khan committee” formed by Yahya Khan (Rahman 1997, p. 148), the recommendations of “Sharif Commission” (Shamim, 2008, p.238), “Article 251 of the 1973 constitution of Pakistan” where it was declared that within a time frame of fifteen years English will be replaced by Urdu.

Despite successive recommendations by various committees, the status of English could not be challenged due to various reasons. The English language was inherited from British rule and it was considered a symbol of power, control, and elitism (Abbas, 1993; Shamim, 2008; Rahman, 1997). Although, Urdu was considered the language to foster national unity (Shamim, 2008, p. 237; Rahman, 1997). The myth was busted after the secession of East Pakistan in 1971 (Abbas, 1993, p. 150).

Ahmad and Mahmood (2015) believe that Pakistani English fulfils all the four criteria put forward by Platt (1984). It rightfully deserves the title of a "new variety of English", called, "Pakistani English" (p. 3). Saeed et al. (2023) claim that English in Pakistan is nowadays considered more of a need than a fashion. Various studies have been conducted to ascertain the status of the Pakistani variety of English such as the studies of Baumgardner (1995) and Mahboob (2009). Mokal and Halim (2023) in their study point out various influences of the local languages, especially Urdu on Pakistani English. However, Mahboob (2003) cautions that the term Pakistani English should not be taken for one uniform variety of English. The fact is that Pakistan is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society where the variety of English used by its people is influenced by their educational background, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and the mother tongue (p. 7).

Biber et al. (1999) state that traditionally, due to a lack of enough information, various varieties of English were studied for various grammatical constructions and meanings, but after the development of corpus linguistics, languages are studied from the perspective of their real use in the real world. They state that register distinction in a particular language is based on non-linguistic situational circumstances like mode, interactiveness, purpose, and topic. Stubbs and Halbe (2012)

remark that corpus linguistics means studying large quantities of real language through the help of "computer-assisted methods" (p. 1). Conrad (2000) defines corpus linguistics as "the empirical study of language relying on computer-assisted techniques to analyze large, principled databases of naturally occurring language" (p. 584).

The studies in the field of register analysis have mostly been conducted on written academic registers while ignoring the spoken informal academic registers (see Biber et al., 2002; Rooy and Terblanche, 2006), and have focused on the registers used in the native environment of English. Further, only written academic texts have been subjected to investigations. A few studies that focus on the register analysis in the non-native environment do so only for error analysis. Of all the "Englishes" of the world, Pakistani English has attracted far less attention from researchers (Agnihotri, Khanna, & Mukherjee, 1988; Balasubramanian, 2009; Bhatt, 2000). Khan (2012) realizes the fact that very limited research has been done on the Pakistani variety of English, and the focus of much of the research has been on its comparison with the standard British English" (p. 97).

In recent times, corpus linguistics has been the dominant trend in the study of language in Pakistan. Several corpus studies have been conducted on Pakistani English such as "the construction of Pakistani News Corpus (PNC) and its comparison with British print reportage" by Ahmad and Mahmood (2015), "a multidimensional analysis of the book blurbs register of fictional and non-fictional material of Pakistani English" by Qasim and Shakir (2016), "MD analysis of ICE-PK" by Azher (2016), "a corpus-based research on Pakistani Spoken English (PSE) and Pakistan Written English (PWE)" by Ahmad, Arshad, and Ashraf (2018), "a corpus-based study on the use of modality in the editorials of the English newspapers of

Pakistan” by Sadia and Ghani (2019), “a corpus-based study on the usage of linking verbs in Pakistani written English vis-à-vis other native and non-native varieties of English” by Jameel (2014).

Speech and writing are two different registers within a language (Biber & Conrad, 2009). The interest of linguists in the relation between the spoken and the written forms of language has increased over time. Akinaso (1982) points out that the nature of the relationship between the spoken and the written forms of language has attracted much interest from linguists and researchers working in other fields (p. 97). Writing is a mode of language that is permanent, distant, planned, formal, linear, and a process while a speech takes place in real-time, is face to face, has a purpose, is interactive in case of conversation, consists of patterns and routines, and follows certain principles (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001). Spoken language is different from written language due to changed situational contexts (O'Donnell, 1974; Akinaso, 1982; Elbow, 1985; Biber, 1986; Biber, 2009; Deshors, 2015).

Studies conducted in the native environment of English reveal great differences between the spoken and written texts produced in the academic environment regarding the

distribution and prevalence of various lexicogrammatical features. The phenomenon needs to be investigated in the non-native environment of English like in Pakistan, where as per the general belief, the spoken and written varieties of English produced by students are more or less similar.

Research Methodology

The methodology of “corpus linguistics” was chosen for the present research as corpus linguistics is an empirical study of language. It uses empirical data. The generalizations made based on empirical data are supported by objective findings. This methodology minimizes the subjective bias of the researcher.

The data for the Learner Corpus was retrieved from the students of senior most classes of BS English from twelve public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The technique of stratified random sampling was used in the collection of data.

The learner corpus constructed comprised the spoken sub-registers of ‘Presentations’ and ‘Interviews’; and the written sub-registers of ‘Essays’ and ‘Midterm Exam Scripts’. Table 1 shows the registers and sub-registers of the learner Corpus.

Table 1

Registers and Sub-registers of the Learner Corpus

Register	Sub-registers	No of texts	Duration in hrs	No of tokens
The spoken Register of the undergrad English students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	The sub-register of ‘Presentations’ of the undergrad English students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	180	13.52	81749
	The sub-register of ‘Interviews’ of the undergrad English students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan	180	21.03	107497

Register	Sub-registers	No of texts	Duration in hrs	No of tokens
The written Register of the undergrad English students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	The sub-register of the 'Essays' of the undergrad English students of Khyber Pakistan	180	--	66452
	The sub-register of 'Midterm Exam Scripts' of the undergrad English students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	180	--	101794

The written data of Essays and midterm exam scripts were converted into soft form, and the spoken data of the presentations and interviews were transcribed. All the files were grouped according to their relevant sub-registers and saved in MS Word format. Four folders were created, each representing a separate sub-register, and each folder comprising one hundred and eighty files. All these four folders were placed into the main folder which was named an MS Word folder. To keep track of the files, they were coded, and every file got a unique code. Every code had three parts. The first part of the code represented the university. For the coding purpose, the researcher created two-letter abbreviations for the universities such that AU stood for Abbottabad University of Science & Technology, AW for Abdul Khan University Mardan, BB for Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University Shrengal, BK for Bacha Khan University Charsadda, BU for University of Science and Technology Bannu, GU for Gomal University, HU for Hazara University Mansehra, IC for Islamia College University Peshawar, KK for Khushal Khan Khattak University Karak, KU for Kohat University of Science & Technology, MU for University of Malakand, and SU for University of Swat

The second part of the code represented the type of sub-register such that P stood for the text belonging to the sub-register of 'Presentations', I for the text belonging to the

sub-register of 'Interviews', E for the text belonging to the sub-register of 'Essays' and M for the text belonging to the sub-register of 'Midterm Exam Scripts'

The third part of the codes represented the gender of the text producer along with the file number. For instance, fi stood for the first file produced by a female; m1 stood for the first file produced by a male student. Thus, file AU-P-f5 stood for the text of the presentation produced by the fifth female student of Abbottabad University of Science & Technology; GU-I-m3 stood for the text of the interview produced by the third male student of Gomal University. Codes were inserted in the headers of the respective files to give them their unique identity. The minor spelling errors were removed. The MS Word files were converted into plain text format. All the files of the learner corpus were tagged for parts of speech using TagAnt downloaded from Anthony (2021). The annotated sub-registers of the Learner Corpus were analysed for the grammatical feature of 'voice' through the computer software AntConc 3.5.8 using regular expressions.

Situational Circumstances of the Selected Sub-registers

The summary of the differences in the situational circumstances of the sub-registers selected for the study is given in Table 2.

Table 2

	Presentations	Interviews	Essays	Midterm exam scripts
Mode	spoken	spoken	written	written
Inter-activeness	no	yes	no	no
Online production	yes	yes	no	no
Shared immediate space	yes	yes	no	no
Main communicative purpose	information personal communication	personal communication	information evaluation argumentation	information evaluation argumentation
Audience	specific public (class)	individual	specialist	specialist
Dialect domain	local	local	local	local
Focus	informational personal interpersonal	personal interpersonal informational	personal	informational

Note: Adapted from Biber et al., 1999, p. 16

Variations in ‘voice’ across the Academic Sub-registers

‘Voice’ is a grammatical distinction of a verb phrase that shows the relationship among the participants of the action. The transitive verbs can have either active or passive voice. The choice of a particular ‘voice’ is influenced by

pragmatic considerations. Through the use of regular expression, the tagged data of the sub-registers of the learner corpus was analysed and the instances of passive ‘voice’ verb phrases were calculated. Table 3 shows the regular expressions used for picking hits of various types of tensed and non-tensed sentences with examples from the Learner Corpus.

Table 3

Examples of Passive ‘Voice’ Verb Phrases from Learner Corpus

Regex	Type of sentence	Example
is+_VBZ [a-z]+_VVN	Present indefinite 3rd person singular	Catherine is bitten by a dog (GU-P-f6)
[a-z]+_VBP [a-z]+_VVN	Present indefinite non3rd person	Different paintings are blended together (AW-P-f4)
is+_VBZ being+_VBG [a-z]+_VVN	Present continuous 3rd person singular	Non-European or black is considered inferior or nothing (IC-M-f2)
[a-z]+_VBP being+_VBG [a-z]+_VVN	Present continuous non-3rd	Rules are not being followed (GU-I-f7)
has+_VHZ been+_VBN [a-z]+_VVN	Present perfect third-person singular	The literature has been written in that time (IC-M-f2)
have+_VHP been+_VBN [a-z]+_VVN	Present Perfect non3rd	The teaching objectives have been achieved (KU-M-m3)

Regex	Type of sentence	Example
[a-z]+_VBD [a-z]+_VFN	Past indefinite	Lord Sorn was defeated in that battle (GU-I-f7)
[a-z]+_VBD being+_VBG [a-z]+_VFN	Past continuous	No instance found in Learner Corpus
had+_VHD been+_VBN [a-z]+_VFN	Past perfect	Some men who had committed some crime and had been brought to the asylum (MU-M-fi) Red rose will be produced (AU-M-f2)
[a-z]+_MD be+_VB [a-z]+_VFN	will/can/could/should/must/may/might	In the semester system, the course cannot be completed (BB-M-m4) Details should be given (AW-M-m4)
Will+_MD be+_VB being+_VBG [a-z]+_VFN	Will progressive	No instance found in Learner Corpus
Will+_MD have+_VHP [a-z]+_VFN	Will perfect	No instance found in Learner Corpus
[a-z]+_NN* be+_VBG [a-z]+_VFN	imperative	No instance found in Learner Corpus

The distribution of the passive 'voice' verb phrases for each regular expression used in the four academic sub-registers of the Learner Corpus is shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Relative Distribution of Passive 'Voice' Verb Phrases in the Academic Sub-registers

Type of Sentence	Regex	P	I	E	M
Present indefinite 3rd person singular	is+_VBZ [a-z]+_VFN	303	130	118	603
Present indefinite non3rd person	[a-z]+_VBP [a-z]+_VFN	136	187	111	259
Present continuous 3rd person singular	is+_VBZ being+_VBG [a-z]+_VFN	2	5	0	1
Present continuous non-3rd	[a-z]+_VBP being+_VBG [a-z]+_VFN	0	2	5	2
Present perfect third-person singular	has+_VHZ been+_VBN [a-z]+_VFN	3	8	7	23
Present Perfect non3rd	have+_VHP been+_VBN [a-z]+_VFN	6	7	3	24
Past indefinite	[a-z]+_VBD [a-z]+_VFN	149	55	134	120
Past continuous	[a-z]+_VBD being+_VBG [a-z]+_VFN	0	0	3	0
Past perfect	had+_VHD been+_VBN [a-z]+_VFN	2	0	1	1
will/can/could/should/must/may/might	[a-z]+_MD be+_VB [a-z]+_VFN	74	5	83	121

Type of Sentence	Regex	P	I	E	M
Will progressive	Will+_MD be+_VB being+_VBG [a-z]+_VV	0	0	0	0
Will perfect	Will+_MD have+_VHP [a- z]+_VFN	0	0	0	0
imperative	[a-z]+_NN* be+_VBG [a- z]+_VFN	0	0	0	0
	Total	705	89	465	1154

The normalized distribution of total passive ‘voice’ verb phrases per ten thousand tokens across the four academic sub-registers is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Normalized distribution of passive ‘voice’ verb phrases across the academic sub-registers per 10000 tokens

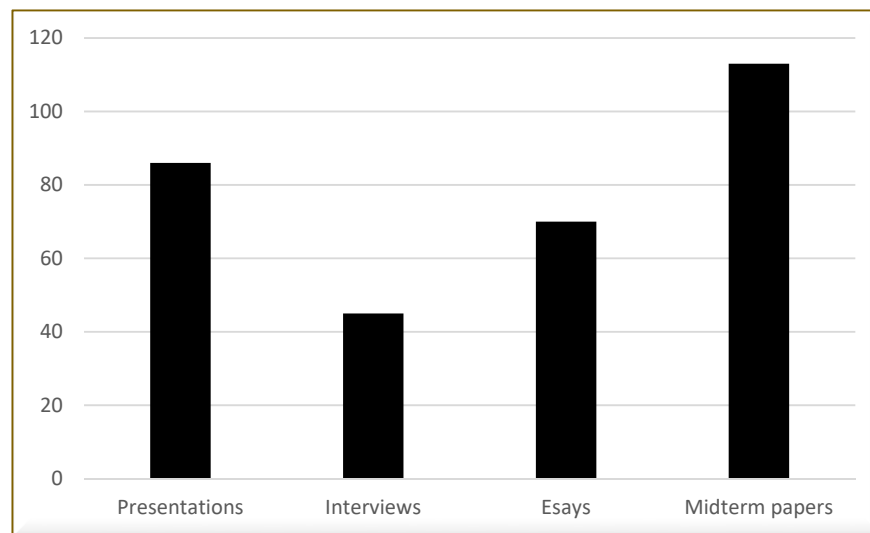


Figure 1 reveals that passive ‘voice’ verb phrases have the highest frequency in the written academic sub-register of ‘Midterm Exam Scripts’. The spoken sub-register of ‘Presentations’ stands above the written sub-register of ‘Essays’, while the spoken sub-register of ‘Interviews’ has the lowest frequency of the passive ‘voice’ verb phrases. The communicative purpose seems to have had its effect on the frequencies of passive ‘voice’ verb phrases. Midterm Exam Scripts are unidirectional, and their communicative purpose is informational, where the activities or the processes rather than the participants in the actions are important. The need for the

explanation of various ideas, concepts, and theories necessitates the frequent use of passive ‘voice’ verb phrases.

- Acquisition is acquired through formal instruction (BU-M-f6).
- These strategies are applied to fulfil the emotional related things (HU-M-f4).
- Direct election was adopted in this constitution (SU-M-f6).
- Black is being considered inferior or nothing by the white (IC-M-f2).
- Objectives have been achieved (KU-M-m3).
- The whole poem can be considered a "poetic challenge (IC-M-m7).

Presentations, although have an informational focus like Midterm Exam Scripts, their mode is spoken. They are not interactional like interviews but the presenters presented their topics in front of the whole class and were all the time aware of the audience. Unlike Midterm Exam Scripts, the receivers of the presentations were physically close. The mode and production circumstances of the presentations may have caused the lower frequencies of the passive 'voice' verb phrases as compared to midterm exam scripts. In the spoken sub-register of 'Interviews,' the respondents had to produce their personal perspectives about various issues and were interactional. That is why interviews have the lowest frequency of the passive 'voice' verb phrases. The sub-register of 'Essays' though written in mode, consisted of the personal narratives of the sample students. The topics of the essays seem to have influenced the sample students towards more use of active 'voice' verb phrases.

Conclusion

The result of the study proved that any variety of English is not a unified whole and it has many sub-varieties or registers and sub-registers inside it. This research conducted in the non-native environment of English validated the findings of the studies conducted in the native environment and proved that like other grammatical features, the feature of 'voice' is functional and its distribution and prevalence in any register of a language is affected by the situational context and communicative purpose of the register. Mode is just one aspect, and besides spoken or written mode, there are other aspects such as communicative purpose, topic, inter-activeness, focus, and online or otherwise production that greatly influence the prevalence and distribution of grammatical features in the different registers and sub-registers of the same variety of language.

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