
Social Media and Crisis Between the State and Secondary School Teachers in Cameroon: A Discourse Analysis of Telegram Messages and the Government Responses

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores teachers' discourses on Telegram during the strike launched by the movement "Enough is enough" or "On a Trop Supporté" in its French version. Secondary school teachers have been subject to the state's manipulations and procrastinations since 2000. Some of the government announcements bearing expressions such as "On the high instructions from the Head of State", "we will gradually solve the problems of teachers", "teachers are the best paid civil servants in Cameroon" just to postpone what they would have done before. Since then, the state kept feeding them with promises that are hardly fulfilled. As a matter of fact, the state continued to give them empty promises about their salary and special status. The issue resulted in the strike which began on February 21st, 2022 and is still going on. This study aims at investigating the linguistic power of some expressions used by the government in order to keep teachers in their poor working conditions. In addition, it investigates the teachers' reactions towards the government dishonesty. Fairclough (1992, 1993, and 1995) CDA model helped in the process of data analysis. Data for this study is made up of 150 Telegram messages collected from secondary school teachers nationwide. Analysis unveiled that the government's messages leaned on the slovenliness of English language to dodge the teachers' requests.*

KEYWORDS: Telegram messages, CDA, manipulative language, government, OTS, crisis

INTRODUCTION

The advent of a plethora of social media tools has changed the landscape of crisis management considerably over recent years with possibilities for social action now becoming realities. The connection between social media communication and crisis management has arose as a key issue and therefore has become the subject of many posts, publications, pilot and practical initiatives (Doan, Vo, & Collier, 2011; Johansson, Brynielsson, & Quijano, 2012; Nilsson et al., 2012; Rainer, Grubmüller, Pejic, Götsch, & Leitner, 2013). The power of influence of the online interactants would not have been substantial if there were not social media (Kaplan & Haelein, 2011, p. 107). The advancement of technology via social media platforms have decentralised public communication (Datta, Bucheggeet, Vu, Strufe, & Rzdaca, 2010; Tasente & Placentas 2016; Ngouo, 2020; Sarridis, Gkatziaki, Krasanakis, Giatsoglou, Sarris, Papadopoulos, 2022) through online communication. Communication via digital plays an increasingly important role in everyday life. It has given rise to a host of new ways for people to communicate, manage social relationships, and get things done, which are challenging how we think, speak, write and even how we interact online (Udupa, 2017; Sundberg, 2019; Udupa

& Pohjonen, 2019; Fatf, 2021; Udupa, 2021; Udupa, Gagliardone & Hervik, 2021). It paved our way to easily address ourselves without stress and fear from anyone (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Freelon, & Wells, 2020). We can definitely aver that social media has facilitated the flow of real time information (Fink, 2002; Fearn-Banks; 2011). In this light, social media is seen as a free area or milieu whereby people express their thoughts freely. Information goes faster than ever before and, inevitably has an impact on how crises develop and are perceived (Fink, 2002; Shirky, 2010; Al-Jenaibi, 2020). Ever since, people were kept speechless over the domination of the regime in power in Cameroon though there is freedom of expression. No individuals or group of individuals can dare raise the problems they encounter while carrying out their activities. Once with the advent of the new technologies, things changed and the power holders became powerless and can no longer have control over the marginalised population. Looking from that angle, social media did not only bring out the real freedom of expression but also gave power to people. Today, individuals and group of individuals have been empowered thanks to social media which seem to be uncontrollable. Many groups of people sharing the same ideas or working conditions came together to express their problems which resulted in crisis in Cameroon and elsewhere in the world. The problem is that secondary school teachers will not be heard without the help of Telegram platform. While social media has the ability to prevent a crisis from spiraling out of control, we shouldn't ignore its ability to aggravate an unfolding crisis situation; which is the case with teachers' strike in Cameroon under the movement "OTS". This study therefore sets out to investigate the lexical expressions that the government uses to disseminate frightening and deceitful messages to keep teachers in their poor working conditions. It also looks at teachers' reactions after becoming aware of their living conditions.

Historical Background

Some security issues such as the NOSO unrest preceded by the Boko Haram insurgency and the post-electoral crisis have triggered a boom in the use of social media among Cameroonians. These conflicts had not only impacted the socio- economic life of the state but also its educational systems. The national systems of education have undergone some difficulties which worsened with the outbreak of secondary school teachers' strike. The flames of the strike were fanned by social media posts which made the highlights of the struggle. Some of the reasons that sparked the outrage of the teachers include delays in the payment of arrears, non-payment of the retirement allowances, bribery surrounding the processing of their files, and the lack of basic services at regional levels. The worst is that some even die before their salary or retirement allowances come up. Surprisingly, OTS is massively supported and sustained by some teachers' trade unions and some political parties. The main flaw seen in the government response is the type of language used to address the demands. It can be therefore seen that social media can be a powerful tool in crises or communication due to the fact that it gains a lot of interactants effortlessly.

Theoretical considerations

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) of Fairclough (1992) three dimensions is at the grounding of this work. CDA studies the description and evaluation of discursive practices, ideology and power relations and abuse (Fairclough, 1993, 2003; Van Dijk, 1998). In other words, it is a kind of discourse analytical research which the point is to learn social power abuse,

domination, and inequality that formed production, and faced by texts and talks in social and political contexts. The media is an explicit domain and the public is exposed to various ideologies which influence their opinions. It looks at how discourse is shaped by power relations and the ideological, hegemonic and constructive properties of discourses on social relations, social identities, and system of knowledge and beliefs (Fairclough, 2003). VanDijk (2003) asserts that the CDA is a proposition that focuses on how abuse of power, dominance and inequality is practiced in the discursiveness of social and political contexts. Fairclough's (2003) CDA approach is at the basis of this study. Its approach shows a dialectal correlation between language and social practice. It supposes that language is used as an instrument of social change, so creating a change in our behaviours, beliefs, attitudes and value (Fairclough, 2009). Moreover, Fairclough (1992, 1995) provided his three theoretical dimensions of language as discourse texts (i.e. text analysis on a grammatical level, sentence-level, vocabulary, and cohesion), language as discursive practices (i.e. the three functions of text as the construction of the text, distribution, and usage of text), and discourse as social practice (i.e. discourse as an activity performed in a society or social context (Dremel & Matić, 2014, p. 155). This facet clarifies the description, interpretation and explanation of discourses. The CDA application to social media texts unveils fundamental ideologies, enlightens the issue of power, domination, and the roles of media discourses in the various social changes of society (McKay, 2011). The ideological facet is connected with the notion of power and dominance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars investigated on the language used in conflict situation (Boko Haram in 2014 and Anglophone Crisis in 2016) in Cameroon. They collected data on newspaper and Cameroon Tribune (Tabe & Fieze, 2018; Fieze, 2019; Tchouape, 2019; Nganji & Cockburn, 2019; Ngange & Mokondo, 2019; Nounkeu, 2020). They studied the crisis from geographical, educational and linguistic perspective. Findings reveal that the coverage of these conflicts by Cameroon Tribune and the Post Newspaper focused on the Cameroon Government's intervention in the cross border conflict (27.0%) and on the perpetrators of the conflict (21.4%) (Che-tita, Tanjong, Wantchami, Tabuwe & Bisong, 2016). This is indicative of more military focused and immediate action reporting than on the widespread and more englobing humanitarian cost of conflicts. In addition, Tabe and Fieze (2018) analysed news headlines in newspapers while Tchouape (2019) investigated on metaphorical language both on newspapers and Cameroon Tribune. Their findings are similar in the sense that metaphors were used to build in Cameroonians' minds the image of a destructive and disastrous crisis sponsored mostly by the Cameroonian diaspora (Tchouape, 2019). These metaphors were used to discredit the leadership of the elite and tarnish the images of some individual political figures (Tchouape, 2019). Their findings diverge somehow for, apart from metaphors, Tabe and Fieze's results showed much more linguistic expressions used in newspaper headlines to portray the crisis. It is therefore revealed from the findings that, the headlines of these newspapers use language which creates terror, incites violence towards the government which is accused of mishandling not only the armed conflict, but also the mismanagement of the country (Tabe & Fieze, 2018). Moreover, it could be obtained from Agborsangaya (2018) study that online activism without field action is not enough for a winning 'struggle'. The researcher argued that even though social media are very powerful tools for information sharing, their shortcomings in protest cannot be underrated as the success of online. On the other hand, Nganji and Cockburn (2019)

showed how twitter is being used in the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon by several groups, including the government, Anglophone activists, media organisations and every day citizens to spread opinions on the war. The researchers used the critical theoretical perspective to examine tweets from September 2016 to December 2018. The findings of the study showed that social media are being used by the government, Anglophone activists and non-affiliated people to sway public opinions on the crisis and solicit the attention of local diaspora and the international community.

Furthermore, Ngange and Mokondo (2019), Nounkeu, 2020 and Ngouo (2020) finding on the crisis studied from social media perspective indicated that social media activists used computer software to distort pictures that depict the messages they wanted to pass across in one way, while the social media have been awash with falsehood in the Cameroon Anglophone crisis on the other hand.

The link between social media and crises is not surprising, given the prominence that Interactive Web 2.0 services have attained within the past decade. Many studies have paid close attention to the link between social media and crisis management and their growing stages (Colleen, 2011; Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Jin & Austin, 2022) who found that the advances of social media have changed the ways people communicate via the internet and it allowed more interactivity in times of crises. Some of these researches maintained that the practitioners of public relations (Dellarocas, 2006; Wang, 2015) have adopted social media in running an organisation and this has also been extended to manage crisis. The truth is that social media has been used for public relations since its advent in 2004, and this has had an influence on both individuals and the society (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012).

Social media's role in nowadays conflicts cannot be overlooked, and can have both positive and negative effects. This made some writers to listen, speak and write on the phenomenon. Social media is known as one of the most powerful tools in the field of communication as it gains many participants all the time. It is also the most used means to in any conflict situation. There have not been many studies on language of crisis on social media. Some of the existing (Cohen, 2002; Taylor, 2014; Nganji & Cockburn, 2019; Putra & Smolak, 2020; Nyamkoh, 2022; Nouhou, 2022; Lee, Cockburn & Nganji, 2022) examined the role of language in times of crises and conflict resolutions. They found that language and communication display a greater role in shaping the way conflicts unfold and resolve. Communities must come together, creating deliberately collective space, starting with oneself, family, and the lowest social level. In addition, their findings (Nouhou, 2022) also indicated that, messages on social media in time of crisis is full of words of war, verbal bullying and tense mood in the discourses. Nevertheless, some messages advocate unity and peaceful co-existence.

Other critics and researchers investigate on the language used in conflict situations and crises on social media (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2016; Reuter, Stieglitz & Imran, 2019) and found that social media is a powerful tool that spread information in the fastest way. In addition, the language use in crisis situations is highly ideological and exhibit features of affect involving the use of flaming, labelling, and some forms of rhetoric that reflect negative evaluation of some perceived social enemies (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2016). Negative representations of the attackers are understandably influenced by the emotions of people who are directly or indirectly affected by the crises. The expressions of anger, fear, shock and frustrations in language use

occur frequently in the data. Rhetorical elements or tropes like exaggeration, metaphor and irony are also noticeable in the evaluations of the mass shooter and the Somali terrorist group (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2016).

It could be evoked from the aforementioned review that almost all the works examined and explored the Anglophones crisis in off and online media portray terror, violence, derogative expressions, verbal bullying, accusation and threats just to mention but these (Willis, McAulay, Ndeunyema & Angove, 2019). It should be noticed that OTS crisis is just the continuation of series of conflicts in Cameroon which started right from Boko Haram crisis followed by the of Anglophone's one. None of the reviewed works has, however, evoked the crisis between the State and secondary school teachers that broke out on February 21st, 2022.

Two questions guided the analysis of the data collected from the targeted platforms:

1. What are the lexical features used by government officials to disseminate frightening messages and keep teachers in their poor working conditions?
2. How did teachers react against the oppressors once they become aware of their working conditions?

DATA AND METHOD

Two types of data were collected for this research. The first ones are from secondary sources, which made up government circulars, communiqués and letters (from the ministry of secondary education or the ministry of territorial administration) while the second type of data were teachers' agony messages on Telegram platform as a reaction to the government circulars. The researcher collected 10 communiqués of the government officials and 150 Telegram messages (from May to July 2022) from teachers (90 male and 60 female) nationwide. The purposive sampling technique is used to obtain the data from those who consented with the use of their chats in the research. The majority of the participants are males. Each of the participants provided one e-message. The extracts used as examples are presented the way they appeared on the conversations or e-messages. Hence, some of the chats are presented with their errors. Besides, the informants' messages were made anonymous for ethical reasons. The qualitative analysis was applied to the data collected. This enables the presentation, the description and interpretation in statistical tables. The government circular and the Telegram messages provided the researcher with actual and complex patterns of e-messages for analysis of language that portrays peace.

Data Analysis

It should be reminded that this study sought out to examine the kind of linguistic expressions used by the members of government to disseminate frightening messages and keep teachers in their poor working conditions. It also looks at teachers' reactions after becoming aware of their living conditions. The analysis of the data revealed the use of expressions indicating manipulation, intimidation and negotiation. The findings also indicated that teachers were united and determined to bear whatsoever the government members' decision.

The lexical features found in the government officials' circulars

The failure by the state to fulfill its promises triggered the strike that shut down services in various secondary schools nationwide under the banner 'On a Trop Supporté' (OTS) known as 'Enough Is Enough' (EIE). This strike came up as a result of inaction by the powers to eradicate some difficulties linked to the teachers' profession and the insufficiency of their salary. The state, since 2000 has been feeding the angry teachers with promises that have never been fulfilled. Several government officials in some series of speeches to dilute the public opinion had the same discourse patterns as in the sample below:

(1) I have the honour to inform you that the *President of the Republic has given his Very High Agreement* for the urgent implementation of the financial and administrative measures below in order to respond to the demands made by teachers [...] *The Head of State also instructed* the government to continue the social dialogue initiated with the teachers' syndicates [...] You will kindly give a report on the implementation, for the *Very High and Complete information of the Head of Republic* [...] on Wednesday March 9th, 2022. (The Minister of State, Secretary General)

From the first sample, the government response through the Minister of the State, Secretary General, is a sort of the Head of State incarnation. The informant used adverbial phrases "*Very High Agreement*" and "*Very High and*". Both of them begin with adverbs (**Very**) of degree, followed by an adjective (**High**) and noun (**Agreement** and **Complete**). The speaker's combination and choice of words is meant for the situation so as to convince the needy OTS. He strongly assures teachers that they are being heard by the government and the government is willing to solve their problems. He speaks on behalf of the Head of State so as to let OTS know that their demands are right and the government is looking for ways for the strike not to spread. He also brings out the decision of the President of the Republic who instructed the government to continue with inclusive and social dialogue. This will enable them to dab the ideology of OTS. In addition, the use of repetition ("*Very High*") in the extract above by the government officials shows the seriousness of the issue at hand.

(2)[...] Addressing the issue, the Prime Minister, Head of Government, *has instructed me to take all disciplinary measures required*, in collaboration with other ministries involved [...] Considering the preceding points, *I request that you forward the files of indisciplined personnel* [...] Moreover, *I urge you to remind school Heads and other members of the hierarchy to systematically serve query letters to personnel who have noted for their misconduct* [...]

On Thursday April 28th, 2022 (The Minister of Secondary Education).

(3) [...] It suits to me to recall in accordance with the *Very High Instructions of the Head of State* that the government has been working tirelessly to provide appropriate responses to the problems raised by teachers triggered on February 21st, 2022. [...] The Prime Minister, Head of Government *instructed* his collaborators to negotiate with the teachers' syndicates [...] the multiplicity of meetings resulted in special and urgent measures prescribed by the Head of State [...] for teachers who are absence in their working place without any valid reason, *you should take a firm decision and apply the sanctions provided for by the texts in force* [...]

On Friday May 6th, 2022 (The Minister of Territorial Administration)

In the second and third sample unlike the first one, it is clear that the government is bringing out what was hidden in their minds. The Minister of Secondary Education and the Minister of Territorial Administration brought out weapons in collaboration with other members of the government involved to shut OTS and to procrastinate the answer to their demands. Like the

Biblical twin brothers Esau and Jacob, peace and conflict are biologically well-seated in the heart of people. Both Ministers have swords ready to stab teachers. They made use of simple sentences such as (“*has instructed me to take all disciplinary measures required*”; “*I request that you forward the files of indisciplined personnel*”) full of arrows directed towards OTS. These utterances rather provoke more wrath from teachers and incite them to rebellion. It empowers them and gives them much energy to continue the strike. The government officials also used complex sentences like (“*I urge you to remind school Heads and other members of the hierarchy to systematically serve query letters to personnel who have noted for their misconduct*”; “*you should take a firm decision and apply the sanctions provided for by the texts in force*”). Through these utterances, it can be seen that the government officials were to an extent too zealous (“*I urge you to remind [...]*”; “*[...] to systematically serve query letters to personnel [...]*” and overused their power (*I urge you, you should take a firm decision and apply the sanctions provided for by the texts in force*). Taking disciplinary measures in such time of crisis is rather inciting the oppressed to act violently. They forgot that intimidations and threats in times of crises are fuelling the issue. The network planned by the government behind this disciplinary issue is the biggest failure they should not do.

(4) As part of the implementation of the *Very High Directives of the HEAD OF STATE*, objects of correspondence number 268/CF/SG/PR of March 09, 2022, the Minister of State, Minister of Higher Education (MINESUP) and the Minister of Public Service and Administrative Reform (MINFOPRA) co-chaired [...] on Wednesday May 11th, 2022.

(The Minister of State, Minister of Higher Education and the Minister of Civil Service and Administrative Reform)

(5) In the framework of the implementation of the *Very High Directive of the Head of State* aimed at solving the concerns expressed by teachers favouring the social dialogue [...]taking into consideration the progress made at the precious meetings with the social partners under the auspicious of the Prime Minister, Head of Government[...]on Tuesday May 17th, 2022. (Minster of Labour and Social security)

(6)I have the honnour to pass on to you the *Very High Instructions of the Head of State*, prescribing to the Prime Minister, Head of Government to ensure henceforth in collaboration with other ministries of supervision involved [...] on Thursday June 16th, 2022. (The Minister of State, Secretary General)

A close look at the above messages shows that the speakers are endowed with the Head of State’s power to instruct, inform and apply the measures taken by the State. They thought that the use of verbal abuse with expressions such as: *Very High Directives of the HEAD OF STATE* and *Very High Instructions of the Head of State* can distract OTS from continuing the strike.

The linguistics features found in teachers’ reactions on Telegram platform

It should be notice that teachers were not speechless when facing the government officials notice on the OTS crisis. They had been given chance to reaction without any official influence or fear thanks to social media. As such, most of their reactions were to defend their rights and working conditions. They were united than ever to raise up their voice. The teachers’ determination to fight till satisfaction are seen in some of the stretches below:

(1) **Telegram 5, Mar 2022:** *URGENT URGENT URGENT!! *IF WE GIVE UP TODAY WE WILL NEVER BE SUPPORTED AGAIN, WE WILL NEVER BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY AGAIN BY*

ALL THOSE WE HAVE ENGAGED IN THIS FIGHT. THINK OF JOURNALISTS, POLITICIANS, PARENTS OF STUDENTS, FRIENDS, FAMILY, ETC. OTS UNTIL TOTAL SATISFACTION*

A kind look at the sample which states with conditional sentence (*If we give up today we will never be supported again...*), it is clear that this is a ringing bell to call all the teachers not to give up the strike. To them, this occasion should be the one or never to express their dissatisfaction. The condition in the sample indicates that, the teachers will never be heard, understood or supported if they miss to cease the opportunity.

(2) **Telegram 9, Mar 2022:** Conclusion: *The strike must continue till satisfaction. Dear colleagues, the fight is not over. OTS is you, OTS is me, OTS is any Cameroonian teacher.* [...] Let's put out colleagues who want to expose us or discourage us because *the fight will be very long.*[...] *OTS 🇬🇪 Together we will win 🇬🇪🇬🇪*

(3) **Telegram 33, Apr 2022:** hello dear OTS, what is the government want to show us? In my opinion, even if *the strike must continue for up to 10 years to claim for our right, we will do it. The government is even strengthening us to continue the strike* because it has programmed the catch-up but we say ZERO CATCH-UP!!!

(4) **Telegram 36, Apr 2022:** hello colleagues *we must continue this strike and get everything* we ask so as not to betray Hamidou and the journalist from equinox TV. *OTS until total satisfaction*

(5) **Telegram 42, Apr 2022:** I totally disagree with this. *The government has not even started paying the debt so why should we teach? The strike continues by the 25 of April* [...]

(6) **Telegram 159, May 2022:** *My Friend this group is for fighters, if you fade up kindly leave and allow us to continue fighting.* Stop coming in here and discourage people.

In the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth samples, the informants are campaigning for the continuation of the strike till they get their demands heard or solved. The use for modality “*must, should*” and the verb “*continue*” repetitively in the expression “*The strike must continue till satisfaction; the strike must continue for up to 10 years to claim for our right and we must continue this strike and get everything*” portray their engagement and determination to pursuit the strike. It could be also understood from these samples that, the government officials must find a way out to solve the teachers’ demands.

(7) **Telegram 38, Apr 2022:** Ladies and gentlemen, *the government has not just shown only its bad faith* [...] *after our temporary suspension of the strike* that it reacts to think about the *school year which has never been his concern in our country.* It is therefore up to us to ignore what the Minister has taken as a decision relating to catch up classes leave.

(8)

A close look at the above message shows that the government officials’ priority is not the teachers’ demands but the school year. It should be noted that at any time that OTS suspended the strike, the sole objective was for a clear negotiation with the government. It happened that the focus of the State is not teachers’ concerns but the how the school year can be saved. This openly tells us that the focus of the State is not the input (teachers) rather the output (saving the school year) though there is no output with input.

(9) **Telegram 44, Apr 2022:** In Cameroon, *if a teacher does not die of misery, they die in the hands of their students.*[...] Students nowadays *insult, threaten, beat up, stab and kill teachers.* [...] Forces of law and others have *no respect for teachers, they can beat teachers. Divisional officers can insult teachers in front of their students, slap them and insult them in public,* no one cares, *after all*

who is a teacher???[...] *Teachers are injured and intimidated from all sides*[...] your observation is pertinent. *If we don't protect ourselves, no one can defend us. OTS gave us the opportunity to do so.*

(10) **Telegram 54, Apr 2022:** While the teachers are requesting for the improvement of their working and standard living conditions, those who are supposed to help [...] *enjoy receiving and disputing vehicles in the National Assembly.* [...] *Dear OTS, the descent life and education of the lower classes is not on the political agenda of this country.* So either we take our destiny in hand for effective independence or we continue to accept this slavery treatment. The choice of each one today will judge him tomorrow

(11)

(12) **Telegram 56, Apr 2022:** *Those people are wildly laughing at us. A mockery of very high degree.* [...] *We only pray that they all get out* [...] justice should be done

The informants in samples (8), (9) and (10) clearly portrayed the treatment addressed to teachers in Cameroon which seems to be true. They averred that teachers, who are builders of the society are put behind the scene while those who came out as the fruit of their daily endeavour are jubilating and laughing at them. This is seen in expressions like “*if a teacher does not die of misery, they die in the hands of their students, Teachers are injured and intimidated from all sides, Divisional officers can insult teachers in front of their students, slap them and insult them in public, those people are wildly laughing at us*” ... It could be concluded from these samples that teachers no longer have any importance in today's society since students and divisional officials can insult, slap, stab and even kill them either verbally or physically.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored some lexical expressions used by government officials to disseminate frightening and deceitful messages to keep teachers in their poor working conditions. It also looked at teachers' replies after becoming aware of their living conditions. A total number of 10 communiqués of the government officials and 150 Telegram messages (from May to July 2022) from teachers (90 males and 60 female) nationwide were collected and analysed. Findings indicated the use of lexical expressions such as nouns (directives, instructions, query letters, president), verbs (instructed, request, urge, apply) and adverbs of degree (very) associated to adjectives (high). The strategies taken by the government officials in preventing this crisis were rather inflaming or inciting due to the choice of words or expressions used in their various speeches. The teachers' replies to the government officials' speeches were just to find a way out from their bad living conditions. The researcher concludes that, transparency and accountability concerns are the weak points of the government.

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