

METAPHOR, LANGUAGE AND REALITY

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the position and role of metaphor vis-à-vis language and reality as it has been visualized and interpreted differently by the anthropologists, literary critics and linguists from classical era to the modern age. The classical tradition proclaims metaphor as an added extra to the language of poetry. The Mediaeval and Elizabethan eras upheld the classical notion and emphasized on didactic function of metaphor. The Cartesian and Empirical traditions of the 17th century found metaphor as disruptive of univocal discourse which threatened logical argumentation. It was German philosopher Hegel who first revolutionized the notion of metaphor by dividing the whole language into 'Dead metaphor' and 'Live metaphor'. Inspired by Vico, English Romantics proclaimed metaphor as imagination in action. They asserted that language was an organic whole which was a means of experiencing reality, not imitating it. In twentieth century, Structuralists, Post-structuralists and Cognitivists have upheld and extended romantic notion of language and metaphor. They assert that metaphor is an omniscient principle of language rather than a marginal construct. So Language being essentially metaphorical, fashions our thinking and reality.

Speech is a unique human faculty. It is through speech that we express and communicate our internalized experiences and feelings to the people around us. The function of metaphor in human language has been a much debated issue among philosophers, literary critics and linguists since classical age. Metaphor is a Greek word meaning Temper. Greek etymology is "from meta, implying a change and *pherein* meaning to bear, or carry".¹ In Modern Greek, the word metaphor retains its historical meanings of 'transport'. As a rhetorical device, metaphor is defined as a direct comparison between two or more seemingly unrelated objects. However, for the transference to occur there must exist certain analogies between the objects to be compared. For Richards, a metaphor contains two constituents which are the Tenor and the Vehicle. The Tenor refers to the subject to which attributes are ascribed whereas the Vehicle is the one from which the attributes are borrowed. The corresponding terms for the tenor and the vehicle, among Cognitivists, are the target and the source domain respectively.

The study of metaphor dates back to the Greeks. Aristotle is now considered as "originator of the comparative theory of metaphor, holding that a metaphor is a comparison between the two terms that is made in

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order to explore the nature of one”.² Furthermore Aristotle acknowledges the potential of metaphor to signify what is not named. He also touches upon the ability of metaphor to serve “human urge to articulate what is as yet unarticulated”.³ Classical rhetoricians approved of metaphor as a device that moves the audience. Randal Holme in his *‘Mind, Metaphor and Language Teaching’* states that “In the western rhetorical tradition, metaphor was also seen as able to help a speaker to remember the order of their subject-matter”.⁴ The attributes that classical tradition has assigned to metaphor establish it as a literary device. Quite significantly, Aristotle classifies the arts of language into three categories which are logic, rhetoric and the poetic. The logic and rhetoric promote wisdom and clarity and so are carried through prose and the real speech patterns. Poetry provides for unusual expression which is achieved mainly through metaphor. The notion of metaphor as distinguished from the real speech is persistent in Aristotle’s writings. For him, metaphor is a kind of ‘added extra to language’. “For in a metaphor alone there is perspicuity, novelty and sweetness”.⁵ Aristotle’s view of metaphor affirms that metaphor being lively contains decorative and educative value. Unlike Plato whose philosophy resides in his doctrine of essences, Aristotle revels in the material world and opts for its detailed investigation to discover truth. In the *Poetics*, he states that all arts are imitations. For him, “In particular, the art of poetry exists because people are imitative creatures who enjoy such imitation”.⁶ It also enjoins that art and reality are separate entities and the mode of expression cannot alter reality. Art is only a presentational mode of discovering truth. Subsequent classical writers like Cicero, Horace and Longinus substantiated Aristotelian notion of metaphor as a decorative device which enhances sensational and emotional effect of the style. Cicero conceives of decorum as a principle of life transferred to the domain of art. For him, “A metaphor is a short form of simile, contracted into one word; this word is put in a position not belonging to it as if it were its own place, and if it is recognizable it gives pleasure”.⁷ Horace in the *‘Art of Poetry’* declares that the ultimate aim of literature is to be sweet and useful. Best writings are meant for teaching and delight. “The poets must understand their audience: the learned reader may wish to be instructed while others may simply read to be amused”.⁸ Longinus in his *‘On the Sublime’* advocates for the need of decorum and sublimity of style to intensify sensation and acknowledge

figures of speech as the most important source to achieve the desired artistic effect.

The Medieval and Elizabethan societies extended the classical view of metaphor. Dante, the most renowned literary critic and writer of medieval age, utilized multiple levels of interpretation of meanings in '*The Divine Comedy*'. Throughout the medieval era, the church figures followed a tradition of symbolic (metaphorical) reading of Bible and interpreted many of the Biblical stories as allegories of Christ's actions. Dante was the first writer to employ the principles of symbolic interpretation to his secular work. Medieval age is not famous for the growth and progression of literary pursuits yet it helped formalize Greek approach towards metaphor. Medieval society being wholly Christian affirmed theological significance of metaphor. Medieval poets did not use figures of speech to realize their personal experiences; they used metaphors to relate to the collective experience. Medieval Christian society believed in a fundamental metaphor of the world as a book written by the Lord. For them, world was teemed with metaphors, structured by God to communicate meanings and wisdom of the creation. In Medieval era, classical rhetoricians were applauded as representatives of a sublime wisdom. As Perry Miller puts it, "It was agreed on all sides that rhetoric was derived from God, that Aristotle and Quintilian, like the great prophets of Judea, had been essentially scribes merely setting down a revelation from on high".⁹

Elizabethan and Metaphysical figures of speech reflect a continuation of classical and medieval notion of metaphor and reality. Sir Philip Sidney, a representative critic and scholar of Renaissance era, upholds Aristotelian view of art as an imitation. In his '*An Apology for Poetry*', he declares poetry as "a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth" whose chief aim is "to teach and delight".¹⁰ He prefers poetry to history, law and philosophy for its representation of truth. Sidney's approval of Classical notion of imitation and poetry reaffirms decorative and educative value of metaphor. It also affirms that truth resides in material world and the poet only discovers it. Elizabethan writers (poets) secularized medieval Christian ethics and promoted collectivism. Their use of metaphor is wholly didactic. They manifested truths and values which carried social approval. For Elizabethans, art which was an imitation, did not mean a mindless copy of the material world rather it

was an improvement upon nature. George Puttenham takes the poet for the gardener whose art helps nature. For him, “he (poet) furthers her (nature’s) conclusions and many times makes her effects more absolute and strange”.¹¹ So, the function of the metaphor, in Renaissance poetry was to substantiate shared reality, not to question it. In order to promote the sense of shared reality, Elizabethan poet did not require to invent metaphors which could impose his subjective responses to the world on the reader. His metaphors required the reader to respond to the poetic experience of the reality in order to complete it. His metaphor did not aim, in words of T. E. Hulme, “at handing over sensations bodily in order to make the reader continuously see a physical thing”.¹² The researcher also deems it essential to acknowledge the influence of Elizabethan philosopher Peter Ramus in extending logical support to the role of metaphor. *Ramus* restructured Aristotelian rhetoric. He simplified five parts of rhetoric into two categories: Logic and Rhetoric. *Ramist* reconstructing of rhetoric provided logical base to the metaphors which were hitherto considered as only decorative devices. The Elizabethan and Metaphysical poets now made conscious efforts to relate metaphorical inventions and comparisons in poetry to logic. Commenting on the logical basis of the metaphorical comparisons in Marlowe’s ‘Hero and Leander I’ in which women are compared with musical strings, vessels of brass and richest mine etc, Miss Tuve says “a woman is a musical string, a brass vessel, rich mine, base mould, in quick succession, and she is all of them with reference to but one characteristic which all share – of no worth unused”.¹³ So while maintaining the central assumptions of Aristotelian notion of metaphors, Renaissance era extended logical support to the metaphoric form in addition to its decorative and educative value.

In seventeenth century, western philosophy came under the influence of Cartesian principle of deductive method. The deductive theory which was based upon the principle of cause and effect validated any argument if it was deduced from the one before in chronological sequence. This deductive method discarded metaphorical expression as illogical. Metaphors assign attributes to the objects which are unconventional and unrelated to them. Elaborating Cartesian reservations regarding metaphor Randal Holme states “it (metaphor) raises the possibility that words can suddenly acquire new meanings, calling into

question an argument which is founded on meanings that were thought to be fixed".¹⁴ Similarly, the 18th century Empirical tradition in England did not approve the role of metaphors in language. Empirical tradition verifies human argument and wisdom in the light of natural happenings in the outer physical world. Empiricism supported mimetic theory of language. The language was the replica of the external world and had no structure of its own. This hypothesis asserts that "Words are symbols for things in the world, each word having its own referent – the object, concept or idea that represents and/or symbolize a word".¹⁵ For Empiricists, metaphor disrupts the possibility of unidirectional discourse which conforms to the natural world. Dr. Johnson's biased notion of metaphor is reflected in his comments on the wit of the metaphysical poets. Commenting on the metaphorical language of the metaphysical poetry, he says, "The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions".¹⁶

The notion of metaphor was first revolutionized by the German philosopher Hegel in 19th century. He proclaimed metaphor as inevitable. He categorized the whole language into two types of metaphors: dead metaphor and live metaphor. Dead metaphor referred to the words whose meanings were Fixed and Live metaphor referred to the words which could disrupt univocal discourse. In words of Cooper, "A dead metaphor has its meanings secured by the passage of history".¹⁷ The metaphors, which lost their strangeness; came to be recognized as part of normal conversation, are called lexicalized metaphors.

Romantic age is known for its radical departure from Aristotelian notion of metaphors. Romantics rejected classical notion of division of arts of language into different categories. They uphold Platonic view of organic unity of art. Romantics also repudiate the theory that metaphor is an added extra and admit metaphor as central to human discourse. They also discard the classical assumption about the function of metaphor as a decorative device. For Romantics, the function of metaphor is the expression of imagination. The major exponents of romantic notion of metaphor and language are Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. Before analyzing the contribution of these romantic writers and theorists towards the notion of metaphor, it seems pertinent to acknowledge the influence of 18th century Italian jurist and rhetorician Vico on romantics

regarding the role of metaphors in forming human mind. Vico proclaimed in his *'New Science'* that the primitive societies evolved wisdom through metaphors, fables and myths which enjoy powerful influence on modern analytical modes of thought. Vico conceived of language as shaping reality. He says, "We live in a world of words, made for us by our language, where minds are formed by the character of language, not language by the minds of those who speak it".¹⁸ It was this Vico's view of language and society which provided the basis for the modern principle of what we call 'cultural relativism' and discursive reality. His notion of language and society finds its excellent illustration in the *'Savage Mind'* of French anthropologist Levi-Strauss.

To return to the romantics, Wordsworth was the first to affirm his faith in the organic unity of language. Expressing his commitment with the language of rustic people, Wordsworth in his 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballad' asserts that "such a language arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets".¹⁹ Wordsworth rejects dignified and variegated poetic diction. He establishes autonomy of the reader. While there is no special language for poetry, so there is nothing like special figures of speech. Wordsworth's chief interest in poetry is to locate the primary laws of human nature by focusing on the moments of genuine excitement in the daily life of his rustic individuals who live in the company of Mother Nature and have hourly communication with the natural objects around them. Describing the state of genuine excitement in his rustic characters arising out of his interaction with nature, Wordsworth says:

...observation of affinities
 In objects where no brotherhood exists
 to passive minds.

(The Prelude, 1850, II, 384-6)

The English writer and critic who is acknowledged as the pioneer of modern notion of metaphor is S. T. Coleridge. It is with Coleridge that interest renewed in the work of Vico. He revolutionized the notion of mind. For Coleridge, mind is not the passive receiver of reality imposed from it from the external world. It is "an active, self-forming, self-realizing system".²⁰ At the centre of Coleridge's theory of metaphor is his notion of imagination. It is through imagination that we perceive

'Similitude in dissimilitude'. Our imagination imposes order on the external world which is unpatterned. It creates unity in diversity. And finally the harmony generated through imagination is linguistically realized through imagery (metaphor). Elaborating the inner unifying process of imagination, Coleridge says: "The poet brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of imagination".²¹ For Coleridge, metaphor is 'imagination in action'. Highlighting the interplay between mind and metaphor, he goes on to say:

Images, however, beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity.²²

Rejecting Aristotelian view of metaphor, Coleridge claims that language is that weapon of mind which conquers the world beyond sensuous perception. "The power of poetry is, by a single word perhaps, to instill that energy into the mind which compels the imagination to produce the picture".²³ Furthermore, for Coleridge, language is not only a representation of the external reality but also of reality as it is perceived by the poet. So language and reality are interrelated.

Shelley's chief contribution towards the notion of metaphor lies in his emphasis on the connective ability of the faculty of imagination which creates similitude out of dissimilitude. If Reason discerns differences, Imagination perceives harmony between different objects. Distinguishing between Reason and Imagination, Shelley says, "Reason respects the differences and imagination the similitudes of things". He further adds that poetry may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination".²⁴

Twentieth century theories of metaphor and language are highly indebted to the Romantic notion of metaphor. Modern philosophers, anthropologists, literary critics and linguists have repudiated the

Victorian sense of shared reality and have come to believe in relativism and variety of experience. For them, truth is subjective and varies with the change in frame of reference. This belief in relativism and variety of experience not only validates the central role of metaphor in human language but also strengthens the common ground between the poetic and the ordinary language. Contributing to the notion of metaphor, twentieth century linguists have mainly focused on the similarities between the poetic language and the real speech. Chief among those who explore common grounds between the poetic diction and the ordinary language are Mukarovsky, Henry Lee Smith and Mrs. Nowothy. They claim that the oral language is basic to all literary compositions because both the poet and the hearer have internalized the same principles of their native language. The poet being a native speaker cannot violate the systems of his language. For them, metaphor is a linguistic device which utilizes the language by stretching it beyond its literal usage. Elaborating the literary use of the real speech, Mrs. Nowothy states:

A verbal structure is literary if it presents its topic at more than one level of presentation at the same time - or, alternatively, if one and the same utterance has more than one function in the structure of meaning in which it occurs.²⁵

So metaphorical use of language is, in reality, greater utilization of the potentialities of real speech. To add to it, twentieth century anthropologists have established close relationship between language and culture. They assert that our sense of reality is mainly built through the linguistic choices we make to interpret our experiences. Twentieth century anthropologists like B.L. Whorf, Sapir, Emily Durkheim and Franz Boas are agreed that language is guide to cultural and social reality. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary which is the outcome of social agreement.

In terms of literary criticism, one of the major literary contributions of 20th century critics is I. A. Richards' view of metaphor. He views metaphor as "an omniscient principle of language rather a marginal construct that threatened the integrity of logical argument".²⁶ Richards discards Cartesian and empirical tradition that language is a univocal discourse and that metaphor disrupts logical argumentation. The emphasis on context and frame of reference establishes the view that

reality is discursive. Richards' classification of metaphor into 'Tenor' and 'Vehicle' later on extended by Black came to be known as "interactional theory of metaphor".²⁷ According to interactional theory, metaphor acquires more varied and multi-dimensional meanings as it is created out of tension between the tenor and the vehicle. So metaphor is not only essential for the perception of reality; rather it expands reality by extending the scope of language. Evaluating the role of metaphor in language, Philip Wheelwright finds metaphor at the center of language and reinforces the transference of meanings. In 'Metaphor and Reality', he says:

In this broadest possible sense of the word 'language' I mean to designate any element in human experience which is not merely contemplated for its own sake alone, but is employed to mean, to intend, to stand proxy for something beyond itself.²⁸

Post-structuralist theory of language and reality is the latest argument in favour of metaphor. Derrida, the founder of Post-structuralist school of thought contributed towards the notion of metaphor by analyzing the role of metaphor as a mechanism of meaning-construction in language. Post-structuralists argue that meanings do not depend on reference to the world. If the objects, to which language refers, already existed in the outside world, then words would have similar equivalents from one language to another. They reject structuralists' view of stable relationship between the signifier and the signified and assert that language is a much less stable affair. Highlighting instability of meanings, Eagleton explains:

Nothing is ever fully present in signs. It is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails my meaning being always somehow dispersed, divided, and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, instead, but I myself: since language is something I am made out of, rather than a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction.²⁹

Language through its analogies (metaphors) controls our social relations, our thinking and our understanding of the world and ourselves. Establishing metaphor as central to discourse, Derrida says, "foundation

is a metaphor, concept is a metaphor, theory is a metaphor and there is no metaphor for them".³⁰

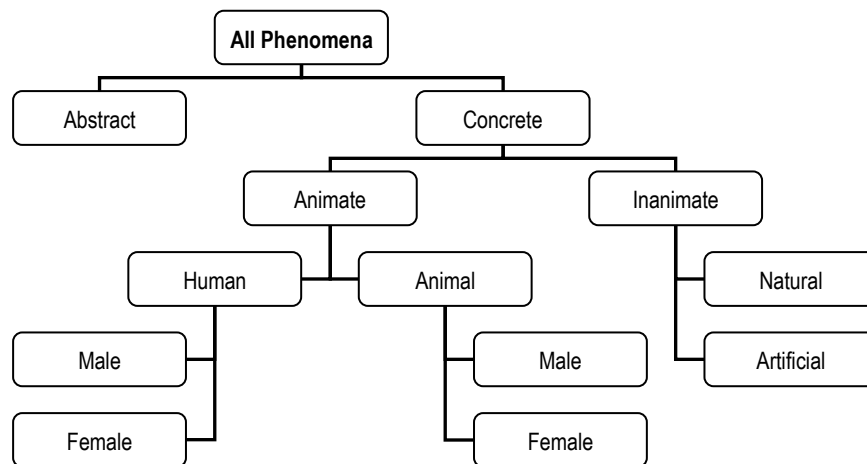
Despite the fact that overwhelming concern of the philosophers, anthropologists and the linguists in 20th century was to establish metaphor as central to language, the formalists continued to treat metaphor as a suspect topic. The mistrust of the formalists about the disruptive role of metaphor was so pervasive that it even influenced those who took interest in metaphor as a means of experiencing reality. Even Black emphasized that "Metaphor was central to human self-expression but that it was nonetheless a departure from normal language use".³¹ Formalistic and empirical approach has been manifested most vehemently in Tarski's theory of Truth-condition. According to the concept of truth-condition, a statement is validated if and only if it is in accordance with the world it refers to. A metaphorical expression is always a departure from literal meanings of the language and does not qualify the parameters of truth-condition. "Metaphorical meaning is a violation of a term's truth-conditions and metaphor suggests a language of semantic flux where a statement cannot be validated by the world to which it refers".³² However truth-conditional analysis frequently fails to rationalize the gap between the sentence meaning and the utterance meaning as it surfaces in practical conversation. Contextual knowledge always plays central role in abridging the gap between the sentence meaning and utterance meaning. Furthermore, formalists assume that the listener understands the meanings of the statement because he applies the same rules to interpret it which were applied by the speaker to produce the statement. For formalists, these rules of language do not permit incomprehensible sentences which metaphorical expressions are likely to create. Chomsky's theory of 'competence' and 'performance' is one of those linguistic concepts which have helped reduce the gap between literal utterances and metaphorical expressions. Chomsky's competence refers to "the knowledge possessed by the native users of a language" and performance refers to "the actual use of language in concrete situations".³³ In this way, Chomsky moves metaphor into the region of performance where meanings are determined by the context. But, he does not subscribe the rules which determine the usage of language. However, the linguist Grice claims to have formulated the rules that govern the use of language. He claims that interlocutors cooperate with each other to

make their conversation meaningful. Grice describes his view of cooperation between the interlocutors as ‘Maxims of Cooperation’. Elaborating Grice’s theory, George Yule states:

It is important to recognize maxims as unstated assumptions we have in conversation. We assume that people are normally going to provide an appropriate amount of information; we assume that they are telling the truth, being relevant and trying to be as clear as they can.³⁴

This view of unstated assumptions affirms the notion that language is a contextual phenomenon and hence is no longer a univocal discourse. Since metaphor apparently threatens the maxims of truthfulness, the maxim of relevance helps locate the cooperative intention behind the metaphorical expression. In words of Sadock, “We seek a figurative, cooperative intent behind the utterance”.³⁵ The maxim of relevance does not only help the meaningful communication to take place but also governs our mind to bring the utterance in accord with the unstated assumptions. Before we make an utterance, we ensure that it conforms to the principle of relevance. “In forming or interpreting an utterance, we first try to make the utterance concur with the assumption that we hold about it”.³⁶

As metaphor is an integral part of language, it is the only source of conceptualizing abstractions. For Cognitivists, we cannot really think which is void or formless. As the role of conceptual metaphors regarding abstractions is based on the view that natural and social universe is an organic whole grasped through binarities; this phenomenon is best illustrated in Bickerton’s bidimensional tree modal:



(Adapted from Bickerton, 1980, p. 53)³⁷

Bickerton's view in *'Prolegomena to a Linguistic Theory of Metaphor'* (1980) is among the latest arguments which acknowledge multiplicity of meanings in discourse. His view of tripartite nature of meanings is based on the relationship between speaker, language and hearer. This notion also furthers the scope of metaphor as the basic foundation of language.

Elaborating pervasive role of metaphor in language, it is affirmed that metaphors structure our use of language in everyday life. Reddy has contributed significantly in evaluating the role of metaphors in structuring the use of real speech patterns. In his analysis of 'Communication', Reddy showed how it is conceived in various ways. "Communication is often conceived as a 'conduct'. We discuss communication as 'opening or using a channel as in 'getting through, coming across, putting across or transfer as in 'language transfer'".³⁸ Lakoff and Johnson extended the analysis of conceptual metaphors by exploring a number of metaphors which help contextualize abstract experiences of our daily life. For instance, time is talked about in terms of space. Business is talked about as "warfare". "Conceptual metaphors represent how we grasp and structure our reality. They establish the principles that guide our metaphor-making in language or in some other medium".³⁹ We also use synaesthetic metaphors to describe the opposite. Synaesthetic metaphors are those metaphors which take into account sense experiences of one type to conceptualize the opposite. Post-modern philosopher Derrida referred to a number of sense experiences which cannot be conceptualized without synaesthetic metaphor. For instance, sense of smell cannot be visualized unless it is described as bitter, sweet, oppressive or sharp. Metaphors fashion our attitude towards society, politics and economics. We talk and think through metaphors and hence they affect our angle of seeing at issues of life and the process of decision-making. Lakoff (1992) in his 'Metaphor and War' describes how the rhetoric of metaphors in Western politics manipulated the issue of Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Saddam Hussain was projected as demon. This metaphor facilitated western politicians to influence public opinion in favour of military action against Iraq.

As it is established that we talk and think through metaphors, so to return to Hegelian notion, it infers that whole language consists of dead and live metaphors. It further enjoins that bulk of our real speech pattern

was once metaphorical extension which was gradually lexicalized as it lost its strangeness due to its repeated use. The question whether a metaphor is live or dead is determined mainly by the response of the listener/reader. Response is automatized in case of dead metaphor whereas live metaphor achieves deautomatization. Analyzing the nature of the metaphorical expression “I smell a red herring” meaning “distraction from the real topic”, Goatly says that “the metaphor is opaque because it refers to a long forgotten practice, that of using rotten fish to distract bloodhounds from a scent”.⁴⁰ So metaphor is the product of a central thought process which is generated through the language that is strewn with metaphors.

To conclude, after the thorough investigation of various philosophical, literary and linguistic theories of metaphor, from classical to the modern age, it is affirmed that metaphor is no longer an added extra to the domain of poetry. It is central to human discourse which is an organic whole. Language being essentially metaphorical does not verify the happenings in the outer material world, rather it fashions our view of reality and society.

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