

Exploring Cross-Linguistic Grammatically Errors in French Learners' Written Production: A Case of Tamil-speaking Students

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Abstract

The present trend of globalization and increased international mobility has motivated many people to become multilingual global citizens. However, many learners of foreign languages face challenges resulting from cross-linguistic influences, which hinder their learning process largely. The learner of a foreign language has a system of linguistic repertoire, which acts as a reference, and this could positively or negatively influence his learning process. This current study aims to investigate grammar errors in the written production of French learners with Tamil (L1), and English (L2) and to explore the origin and source of these errors. 30 Tamil-speaking learners of French were asked to write essays on two topics. These essays were closely verified for errors, which were later categorized and analyzed. The study indicated that most errors were because of incorrect ordering of elements. The analysis shows that the learners' L2, English has influenced the written production of French learners more than L1 Tamil.

Keywords: Cross-linguistic; French language-learning; Grammatical errors; Influence; Linguistic repertoire; Multilingualism.

Introduction

The current trend of globalization and increased international mobility has led more and more people to become multilingual global citizens. Hence, many students aspire to equip themselves with foreign language proficiency to meet the growing demands of the job market and to enhance their career perspectives. By learning a foreign language, they enrich their linguistic repertoire of naturally acquired first language (L1) and

additional language (L2). However, many learners of foreign languages face challenges, which hinder their learning process to a great extent and stop them from acquiring an advanced level. From our experience in teaching the French language for several years, we have noticed instances of cross-linguistic errors that appear frequently in the productions of the learner. The context of our study is multilingual as we deal with three languages: Tamil (L1), English (L2), and French (L3).

Tamil

Tamil is one of the world's oldest and longest-surviving classical languages, belonging to the Dravidian family of languages. Tamil is the official language of the union territory of Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu, a state in South India. In India, Tamil is the official language of the state of Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Puducherry. Today, Tamil is spoken by around 80 million people worldwide in countries such as Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia making it a vibrant and living language with a rich cultural heritage.

English

English language belongs to the Germanic branch of Indo-European language family. In India, foreign traders and Christian missionaries introduced the English language which following India's Independence, achieved the status of associate official language alongside Hindi. Today, English has gained more relevance, as it is the primary language used in science, technology, medicine, internet, media, finance, international business and education. In India, English is taught as a second language in educational institutions, aiming to foster national integration and interstate communication.

French

The French language, which evolved from Latin and Gaulish languages is categorised as a Romance language belonging to the Indo-European language family. Today, French is a widely spoken language with more than 300 million speakers spread over five continents, making it one of the most learned foreign languages. The French language was introduced in India during the 19th century in the French colonies such as Pondicherry and Chandannagar. In Tamil Nadu, French is frequently chosen as the additional language in schools and colleges as students perceive it easy to learn and to score good marks.

Though third language acquisition (TLA) in a multilingual context is an area of investigation that has gained much attention in recent years, not many studies have been carried out about the acquisition of French language by Tamil-speaking learners with English as L2.

The research objectives are:

- To identify the grammar errors in the written production of French learners.
- To explore the origin and source of these errors

To attain these objectives, this study intends to address the following research questions:

- What are the grammar errors in the written productions of French learners?
- What is the origin and source of these errors?

The article is further sectioned into theoretical background, methodology, results and conclusion.

Theoretical Background

In Third Language Acquisition (TLA) studies, challenges that learners face in the language learning process are investigated through research on cross-linguistic influence, Interlanguage, and error analysis. Several theories and frameworks are developed to explore the intricate process of third language learning and how a multilingual mind operates. No topic in TLA gained more attention than the phenomenon of cross-linguistic transfers between languages while acquiring a new language.

Cross-linguistic Influence

Cross-linguistic influence has been a significant area of research since 1950's in the field of applied linguistics and second language acquisition. The influence which emerged from the contact between languages is described using terms like interference, transfer, interlanguage, etc. In TLA, cross-linguistic influence refers to influences of learners' already acquired languages on the learning of the new language. Multiple research-works on this topic have been carried out to highlight its role in L2/ L3 learning. Lado (1957) states: "Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings,

and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture". The interference from one language to another can manifest itself at phonological, morphological, syntactical, lexical, or even pragmatic levels. Studies by Odlin (1989) and Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) observe that there could be positive or negative transfers and that the transfer could facilitate or hinder the learning process. Odlin (1989) proposes: "transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired".

Studies indicate that numerous factors can lead to transfer from one language to another: typological distance between the languages, psychotypology, L2 status, learner's age, learning environment, recency, proficiency, etc.

Eric Kellerman and Michael Sharwood Smith (1986) explored how learners transferred linguistic elements from their L1 to L2, and they suggested that learners are likely to transfer elements that they perceive as similar. Odlin (1989) affirms: "cross-linguistic influence varies significantly depending on the structural and typological differences between the languages in question". De Angelis (2007) states, "age of acquisition significantly impacts the degree and nature of cross-linguistic influence, with early bilinguals displaying different patterns compared to late bilinguals". Studies have indicated that in multilingual contexts, there exist more complex patterns of cross-linguistic influences, which are not just between L1 and L2 but between all the languages in the speaker's repertoire. Furthermore, De Angelis (2007) states, "Multilinguals often navigate a complex web of linguistic influences, resulting in unique patterns of cross-linguistic transfer".

Interlanguage

Larry Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of interlanguage while learning a new language. He defines interlanguage as "a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learners' attempted production of a Target Language (TL) norm". Interlanguage is the learner's dynamic linguistic system which has elements from both L1 and L2. McLaughlin (1987) states, "the term refers to interim grammars constructed by second language learners on their way to achieving proficiency in the target language". Interlingual errors are usually because of linguistic interferences, and they change as the learner becomes more proficient in the language. These cross-linguistic transfers often result in

errors which are valuable sources of information regarding their competence and language development. In our present study, we try to focus on the learning development of Tamil-speaking students with English L2, learning French, to identify the type of repeated grammar errors committed by them.

Error-analysis

Errors are systematic deviations from target language's norms, influenced by the learner's L1 or L2. Ellis (2008) affirms: "These are errors in learner language that can be accounted for in terms of differences between the structures of the L1 and the L2". Error analysis is a method that is used to understand language interferences in language learning. Corder (1981) provided a systematic framework to study learner errors in which he listed the five successive steps in error-analysis:

- i. Identification of errors, which is meant to recognize the errors concerning the rules of standard language
- ii. Description of errors, wherein the errors are compared to the correct forms in standard French, emphasizing the differences
- iii. Explanation to describe why and how errors were committed
- iv. Evaluation of errors
Correction of errors

Methodology

A descriptive study, involving both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods was carried out in order to get answers for the research questions. Through this method, it is feasible to collect diverse and significant information on lexical and grammar errors. This section discusses the methodology, the presentation of field of study, the participants, the research tool and the procedure used.

The Field of Study

This research was done in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and involved the undergraduate students of Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore who were learning French as a foreign language. The institution offers French as one of the optional courses under part I language, alongside Tamil and Hindi.

Participants

In total 30 students studying in II year of undergraduate and who have already completed at least 120 hours of French learning participated in the study. They were specifically selected based on their first language, Tamil and second language English. The students are pursuing DELF A2 level of CEFR. They have already studied French as an additional language in school for two years and complete beginners were excluded from the study. The students have an intermediate level in the English language (L2) and English has been their medium of instruction for at least 12 years since their schooling.

Before the data collection process, all ethical questions were taken into account including obtaining clear consent from the participants. All the research objectives were clearly explained to the participants, and the task was carried out.

Data-collection Tool

In order to gather necessary data to understand errors committed by learners and to examine the cross-linguistic influences, an essay-writing task was carried out as the data collection tool. This task aimed to make learners write compositions on two selected topics.

Essay-writing Task

As a part of learning a foreign language, essay writing plays an important role in understanding the linguistic competencies acquired by learners. The essay writing task is a part of the French course III in which the learners are enrolled. The learners are expected to attain the competencies needed to express themselves through a written form. The study is based on a corpus and to obtain a representative corpus, the learners were invited to write an essay. The essay can reveal the learners' linguistic competencies notably in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and knowledge of grammatical formations. It can also provide evidence on the errors committed because of cross-linguistic influences. Since the essays were written without the professor's intervention, they constitute solid proof of the competencies and the errors of the learner.

Procedure

To carry out this study, each participant had to write two essays of at

least 150 words on two different topics: 1. *Ma famille* (My family) and 2. *Mes vacances* (My vacation). The topics were descriptive and as the participants were already initiated to the topics during their course of study, they possessed sufficient vocabulary and grammar to draft the essays. The students were given one hour for completing this task during the regular French class hour. The essays were collected from the participants and error analysis was done to identify the grammar errors due to cross-linguistic influences in the written expression. The errors observed are analyzed based on Corder's (1981) systematic method of error analysis.

Results

This section discusses the errors found in the essay writing task given to French learners. Grammar errors are identified and analysed to find out the types and frequency of errors, as well as the possible origin and sources for the errors. This helps in understanding learners' interlanguage. The research findings are given below.

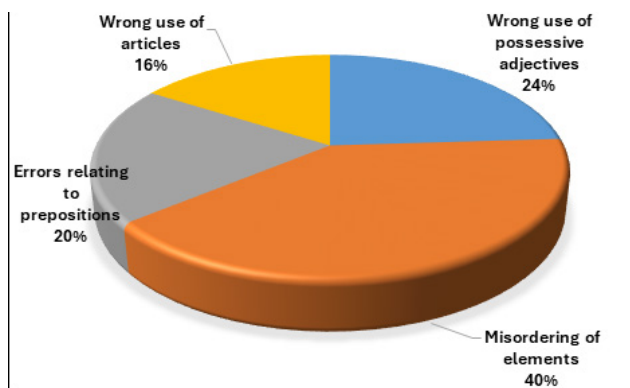


Fig 1: Types of Grammatical Errors

Analysis and Discussion

Figure 1 provides an overview of the types of grammar errors and their frequencies. The grammatical errors are further categorized into errors due to incorrect ordering of elements, wrong use of possessive adjectives, errors relating to prepositions, and wrong use of determinants. The most frequent error in written production is incorrect ordering of elements with 20 instances accounting for 40% of total errors. There were 12 instances of errors from wrong use of possessive adjectives which composed 24% of total errors. Errors relating to prepositions accounted for 20% of total

errors with 10 instances and the least frequent errors are those relating to wrong use of determinants accounted for 16% with 8 instances. In the following section, some examples are provided to represent the categories of errors observed in the data.

Incorrect Ordering of Elements

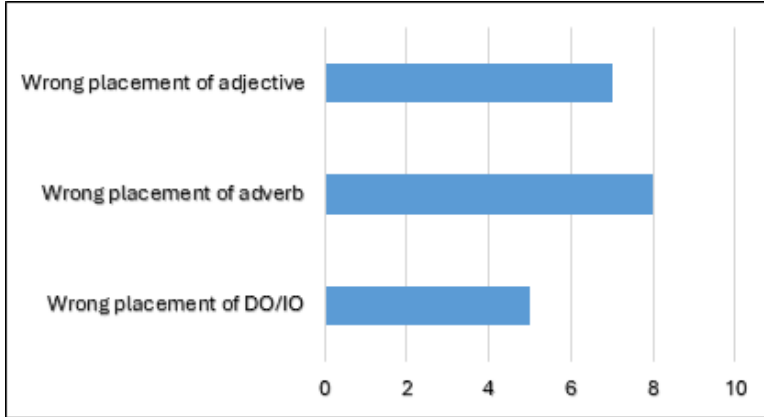


Fig 2: Errors from Incorrect Ordering of Elements

The above Figure indicates that the most prevalent error under incorrect ordering of elements, is the wrong placement of adverbs making 40% of such errors. Errors due to wrong placement of adjectives show notable occurrence accounting for 35% of errors. The last error involves the misplacement of direct and indirect object pronouns is less common but significant constituting 25% of total errors under this category.

Examples:

- i. *Je parle a lui* instead of *Je lui parle*.
English: 'I speak to him.'
- ii. *Nous regardons le* instead of *Nous le regardons*.
English: 'We watch it.'
- iii. *J'aime le film beaucoup* instead of *J'aime beaucoup le film*
English: 'I like the film a lot.'
- iv. *Je toujours fais du sports* instead of *Je fais toujours du sports*.

English: I always do sports.

- v. *Je lis un intéressant livre* instead of *Je lis un livre intéressant.*

English: 'I read an interesting book.'

- vi. *J'ai acheté un bleu stylo* instead of *J'ai acheté un stylo bleu.*

English: 'I bought a blue pen.'

In the above sentences, certain elements are structurally of incorrect order. This error concerning the incorrect ordering of elements in the sentences occurred frequently in the written expression of the learners. Examples (i) and (ii) indicate that the learner wrongly placed direct and indirect object pronouns in the sentence. In French, in an affirmative phrase, the direct and indirect object pronouns are placed between the subject pronoun and the conjugated verb. The appropriate positioning of object pronouns in French is a challenge for a multilingual learner because in English they are placed after the verbs.

In the above examples (iii) and (iv), we can see that the adverbs are placed wrongly in the sentences. French adverbs that modify verbs are generally placed after the conjugated verb that is being described. These examples demonstrate that the errors arise because the learners tend to transfer the English sentence structure about the position of adverbs. Examples (v) and (vi) are situations where French learners position adjectives incorrectly in phrases. In English, the adjectives always come before the noun it describes. However, in French, adjectives are generally placed after the noun they qualify. Only some short and frequent adjectives are placed before the noun, notably those expressing a moral quality, those qualifying a proper noun, as well as cardinal and ordinal numbers (Thacker & d'Angelo, 2013).

Like in English, adjectives normally come before the word they describe, in Tamil. In Tamil, "interesting book" is *suvarasyamana putthagam* and "blue pen" is *neela pena*. The adjectives (*suvarasyamana*, *neela*) appear before the nouns (*putthagam*, *pena*) in both situations. Because of this pattern in both Tamil (L1) and English (L2), learners tend to adopt the same structure when writing in French, which lead to errors like *intéressant livre* instead of *livre intéressant* or *bleu stylo* instead of *stylo bleu*. The chances of transfer errors increase because of this shared feature in both L1 and L2.

Learners tend to do word-for-word transliteration from the English language to the French language. The learners demonstrate these errors

because they tend to rely on their already acquired English language structure while writing the French phrases. The sentence structure SVO is similar in both languages but the position of direct object pronouns, adverbs, and adjectives in the French language follow a different pattern.

Wrong Use of Possessive Adjectives

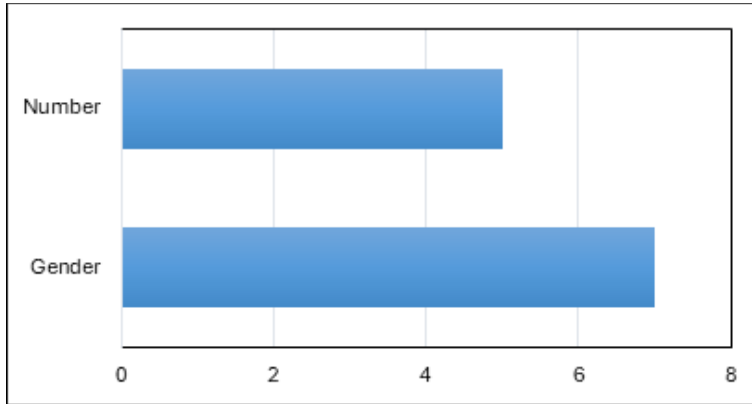


Fig 3: Errors from Wrong Use of Possessive Adjectives

The above Figure portrays two types of errors concerning the wrong use of possessive adjectives. Gender-related errors which included a selection of inappropriate possessive adjectives without considering the gender of the noun they modify, accounted for 58%. Number-related errors concerning the wrong selection of possessive adjectives overlooking the number of nouns they modify constituted 42% of total errors in this category. Learners have committed following errors related to the use of possessive pronouns.

Examples:

- i. *Mon mère* instead of *ma mère*. (My mother)
- ii. *Sa père* instead of *son père*. (Her father)
- iii. *Leur amis* instead of *leurs amis*. (Their friends)

By analysing the errors in possessive adjectives, we see that participants have wrongly used them, and they do not often differentiate between the masculine, feminine, and plural forms. Unlike in English, there are

different possessive adjectives in French, which change according to the possessor and the number and gender of the possession. In English, the possessive adjectives depend only on the possessor. The following table gives an overview of French possessive adjectives.

Table 1: Possessive Adjectives in French

English	Masculine singular	Feminine singular	Plural
My	mon	ma	mes
Your	ton	ta	tes
His, her, its	son	sa	ses
Our	notre	notre	nos
Your	votre	votre	vos
Their	leur	leur	leurs

The students who consider English as a language of reference could use the incorrect possessive adjective because in English only one form exists.

Wrong Use of Prepositions

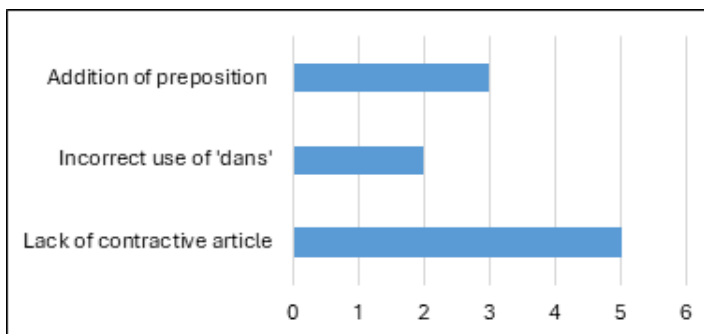


Fig 4: Wrong Use of Prepositions

The above Figure shows that the most common error concerning the preposition is the lack of contractive articles constituting 50% of errors. The unnecessary addition of prepositions and incorrect use of 'dans' add up to 30% and 20% respectively.

Examples:

- i. *Je vais à le parc.* instead of *Je vais au parc.*
English: I go to the park.
- ii. *Je parle à les enfants.* instead of *Je parle aux enfants.*
English: I speak to the children.
- iii. *Dans le soir, je regarde la télé* instead of *Le soir, je regarde la télé.*
English: In the evening I watch television.
- iv. *J'habite dans Coimatore* instead of *J'habite à Coimbatore.*
English: I live in Coimbatore.
- v. *J'aime à voyager* instead of *J'aime voyager.*
English: I love to travel.
- vi. *Elle attend pour son amie* instead of *Elle attend son amie.*
English: She is waiting for her friend.

Prepositions are words used to indicate the relationship between two elements in a phrase. It often connects elements in a sentence and are generally placed before nouns and pronouns to indicate location, time, manner, direction, etc.

It is observed that the participants make errors relating to the use of prepositions in the written productions. Examples (i) and (ii) show that the learner has not done contraction of prepositions with definite articles but has written in the same way as in English.

Examples (iii) and (iv) indicate the wrong use of '*dans*' to mean 'in'. Though '*dans*' signifies 'in', for indicating 'in the evening', the learner must write *le soir*. Similarly, '*dans Coimbatore*' is an incorrect usage as the preposition to be used before cities in French is *à*. Learners have already learned these contractive articles, and prepositions of place in their French class, and hence this type of error gives evidence of the literal translation method from English to French that the learner employed.

Examples (v) and (vi) indicate two errors by the addition of an element, a preposition that is not needed in the French phrase. *J'aime voyager* is the correct usage while *J'aime à voyager* is an incorrect formation. The verb '*aimer*' must be followed by an infinitive verb and it is incorrect to add the preposition '*à*' to connect '*aimer*' and *voyager*. In English, the sentence says 'I love to travel' and the learner could have included '*à*' to substitute

'to'. Similarly, example (vi) has the preposition 'pour' which means for. In English the phrase 'She waits for her friend' when transposed into French becomes an incorrect construction, '*Elle attend pour son amie*'. In these examples of errors by addition, we can observe that a preposition is added like in English but in French, such a preposition does not appear.

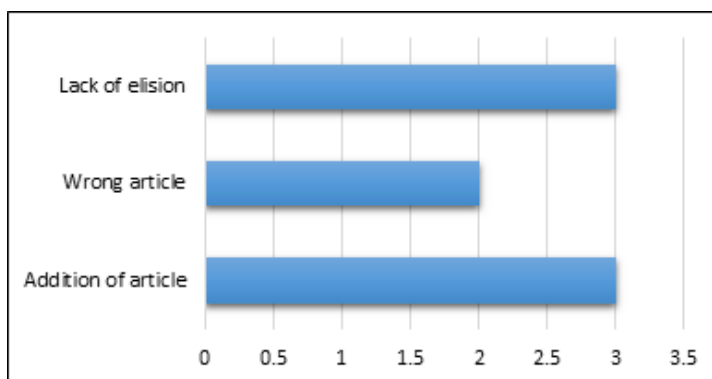


Fig 5: Wrong Use of Articles

WUA

Figure 5 provides a picture of errors due to the wrong use of articles. The addition of unnecessary articles and lack of elision account for 37.5% of each of the total errors. The remaining 25% of errors arise from the wrong use of articles.

Examples :

- i. *Il est un professeur* instead of *Il est professeur*.
English: He is a professor.
- ii. *J'aime le voiture* instead of *J'aime la voiture*.
English: I like the car.
- iii. *Elle danse avec le ami* instead of *Elle danse avec l'ami*.
English: She dances with her friend.

Participants have made errors due to incorrect use of definite and indefinite articles. The following table gives a picture of French articles.

Table 2: Definite and Indefinite Articles in French

		Definite article	Indefinite article
French	Masculine	Le	Un
	Feminine	La	Une
	In front of a vowel or 'h' mute	L'	Un/Une
	Plural	Les	Des
English		The	a/an /some

Example (i) shows a case where the participant has added an article that should have been avoided in French. In English, this article is required, and this error could be the result of English influence. Example (ii) demonstrates the use of an incorrect article. The participants have wrongly employed the articles without considering the gender / number agreement. The definite article in the example must agree with '*voiture*'. In French, the article should agree in gender and in number with the noun it precedes. But in English, this rule does not exist.

The French definite article in singular form, regardless of gender, becomes *l'* in front of a vowel or h mute. This is called the elision rule. Example (iii) shows that the participant has used '*le*' instead of '*l'*'. In English, definite articles do not agree in gender or number with the noun, and there is no elision rule. Hence, the error could be the result of interference from the English language.

According to this study, English (L2) emerges as the primary source of most cross-linguistic grammatical errors in this multilingual context involving Tamil (L1), English (L2), and French (L3). The considerable influence of English on learning French can be explained by the typological similarities between the two languages, belonging to the same language family. Because of this perceived closeness, learners of French tend to use English as a reference point.

Conclusion

Many reasons make the acquisition of third language different from second language acquisition. Research-work in this field indicate that the already learned languages influence greatly the newly acquired language. The learner of a foreign language has a system of linguistic repertoire,

which acts as a reference, and this could positively or negatively influence his learning process.

In the above study, we could see that many errors identified in the written essays of the learners originated from the cross-linguistic influences. Though the learner possesses two language systems prior to learning French language, it is observed that she tends to draw parallels with her second language, English. This could be because the learner perceives that the English language is typologically closer to the French language than her L1 Tamil. The present research indicates that the typological similarity between the languages resulted in more cross linguistic influence from English to French.

The results thus agree with previous studies of Singleton (1989), Möh-
le (1989), and Cenoz (1998) which proved that in multilingual contexts,
more cross-linguistic transfers occur especially when the languages in in-
teraction are similar. However, this typological similarity can be used as
a positive teaching/ learning strategy in French classrooms. Comparisons
of aspects such as vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of both languages
can create better awareness among learners about the intricacies of each
language. Since the interlingual errors originated from transferring gram-
matical elements from English (L2) to French (L3), teachers can explicitly
instruct the learners on the differences and similarities among all the lan-
guages in discussion. The awareness about transfers and related errors
can help learners employ better learning strategies to progress rapidly.
More practice and remedial classes can be offered to learners to improve
their writing skills.

Identifying the various cross-linguistic errors in the written productions
of French learners has helped to explore the different types of interference
errors frequently observed among French learners in the multilingual con-
text in Coimbatore. More investigations can be carried out to explore the
cross-linguistic phonologic influences of French learners speaking Tamil
and who have English as a second language.

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