**7 UK Language Policy Quo vadis? Language Learning in the UK post Brexit**

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<A>**Introduction**

As the popularity of English as global lingua franca is increasing steadily, the disinterest, in Anglophone countries, in learning any foreign languages is rising, both in formal school education and beyond (Lanvers, 2017a). Consequently, in many Anglophone countries, we observe students leaving education with poor language competencies, developed via formal study. The UK exemplifies the ‘linguaphobia’ we find in Anglophone countries, in the sense that the combination of liberal language education policies, poor learner motivation at school and little interest among the general public in developing language skills all contribute to poor language proficiency, among both school students and the general public.

Enter Brexit into this scenario, and we observe that discussions around language learning have been politicised to unprecedented levels (Lanvers *et al*., 2018). Brexit heightens the danger of the UK becoming an increasingly monoglot country, in terms of formally acquired language skills (HEPI Report 123, 2019). Simultaneously, among promoters of language learning, Brexit has triggered a range of – often uncorroborated – predictions and hypotheses regarding the UK’s future language needs.

This chapter analyses discussions around language education in the UK in the politically volatile context, addressing the following questions:

* How is UK language education policy and practice discussed, in all four UK nations, within the current contexts of Brexit and global English?
* How are the risks and opportunities of following different language policies positioned within this context?

Thus, this chapter offers a meta-review of the – by now, quite considerable – published literature on the above issues: no systematic review exists to date. Both the global English and Brexit agendas have been linked to a range of claims regarding language learning in the UK: these rationales will be scrutinised here.

The next section presents facts about the UK’s language learning crisis, the language education policies in the four nations in relation to Brexit and the UK’s economic needs for language skills. The subsequent section scrutinises a range of claims regarding links between Brexit and language learning in particular, asking if the above-described ‘linguaphobia’ could, in itself, be described as a sign of Europhobia. This section will also consider claims made regarding the future of English in the EU, post Brexit. The conclusion returns to the issue of politicisation of language policy since Brexit, and asks what dangers and vulnerabilities on the one hand, and opportunities on the other, Brexit offers. By common consent, UK language learning is in crisis (HEPI Report 123, 2019), so might a Brexit-induced shape-up of language learning provide an opportunity to revitalise the dire situation?

<A>**Language Learning in the UK**

<B>Languages among the general population

Foreign language proficiencies among the UK adult population are reported as either the worst or, on some measures, second-worst (after Ireland) in the EU (British Council, 2013; Eurobarometer, 2012b). Furthermore, 4% of UK citizens were of the opinion that no language learning is useful, compared with an EU average of 2% (Eurobarometer, 2012b). In sum, we see both a greater reluctance to learn languages among the general UK population than in other EU countries and much poorer second language proficiencies resulting from formal education. The UK also has the lowest percentage of tertiary students studying abroad in another EU country (Eurostat, 2015). These facts seem to support the notion that the British are indeed ‘linguaphobes’ but tell us little about why this might be so. One argument relates English ‘linguaphobia’ to the global ‘ideology of (English) monolingualism’ (Wiley, 2000), found across Anglophone countries. After all, the global status of English has led to a decreased interest in learning languages other than English (LOTE; Busse, 2017), potentially leading to foreign language monolingualism. The decrease in the study of languages other than English is matched by an increase in the learning of English: 94% of secondary and 83% of primary school students in the EU are learning English (Eurobarometer, 2012b). Viewed in this light, learners in Anglophone countries might simply be following the global trend for a disinterest in LOTE, with the unfortunate consequence that Anglophone countries end up with monolingualism pure and simple (at least, developed via formal learning). A brief glance at language education policies and practices in other Anglophone countries, such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand, confirms that education systems in these countries equally demand very little by way of formal compulsory language learning or proficiency outcomes (Lanvers, 2017a).

In sum, the phenomenon of global English may be responsible for ‘linguaphobe’ or ‘English is enough’ attitudes, which can arguably be found among the UK population. Thus, care should be taken not to confound this phenomenon with current political agendas such as Brexit or purported ‘intrinsic’ national characteristics such as xenophobia or Europhobia. We shall return to this issue.

<B>Language policies in the four UK nations

Education policies are devolved to the four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) which make up the UK. Before discussing the different nations’ stances on language learning post-Brexit, we procide a brief reminder of the voting outcomes of the 2016 Referendum: both England and Wales voted to leave with a c. 52% majority, while Northern Ireland and Scotland strongly voted to remain in the EU. For those seeking to explain UK ‘linguaphobic’ attitudes with reference to Brexit, it may be a surprise that two nations have committed – in principle, at least – to the European aim of 1 + 2 (mother tongue plus competency in two other languages), but these are not the same two who voted to remain: they are Scotland and Wales.

Scotland is committed to the EU’s ‘1 + 2 model’ (Scottish Government, 2012). The plan is to introduce a first language in the first year of primary school and continue this language up to age 15. A second additional language is to be introduced no later than age 9. There was a rise in post-16 language examinations between 2014 and 2017, but owing to funding cuts, it is not clear whether this trend can be sustained. Scotland’s ‘mother tongue plus two’ policy is supported by – to date – £18 million in investment (Gorrara, 2018); however, funding for the policy is not guaranteed beyond 2021. Currently, Scotland has a higher success rate regarding participation in language education after the age of 14, with nearly 90% of 16 year olds learning a language, but this does not translate into increased uptake of languages (compared with other nations) beyond this, for instance in higher education or adult education (Doughtly & Spöring, 2018). Doughtly and Spöring remind us that language learning outcomes to date have not exceeded those in the rest of the UK, despite more EU- friendly policies overall (Bieri, 2014). The ultimate success of Scotland’s ambitious multilingual policy depends much more on continual funding than any Brexit-related developments. Thus, care must be taken not to over-interpret the fact that, in this nation, the Brexit vote and an ambitious language policy both seem to support a ‘more Europhile’ outlook. This link is nonetheless made frequently in the Scottish press (Lanvers *et al*., 2018). Other political agendas, such as the long-standing debate around devolution or independence from the rest of the UK, might equally explain Scotland’s desire to set themselves apart.

In Wales, there is no requirement to teach a language at primary school. However, Welsh is compulsory in the first three years of secondary school, and a further language is ‘encouraged’. The aim of the Welsh Government is to achieve ‘Bilingualism plus 1’ by 2020 (Global Futures, 2020). Wales has a long tradition of poor language learning results. In response, the Global Futures initiative of ‘Bilingualism + 1’ was announced in 2015 but is not a compulsory policy to date (Donaldson, 2015). A specific Welsh problem is that, while Wales promotes Welsh–English bilingualism relatively well, other languages are squeezed out of the curriculum timetable by Welsh (Gorrara, 2018). Monolingual mindsets also contribute to particularly low learner motivation. Ultimately, the success of both the Scottish and Welsh ambitious policy initiatives will depend on continuous funding and support for schools to implement the policies. Ultimately, the risk of these ambitious policies failing resides mainly with national policy and is not directly related to Brexit. Notwithstanding, the Welsh media praise their policy, with references to anti-Brexit stances (Lanvers *et al*., 2018).

Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. Nonetheless, their current language education policy, as well as Northern Ireland’s learning outcomes, might be described as weakest among the four nations. A short-lived initiative for Primary Languages was scrapped in 2015, so that currently, only three years of language learning are compulsory for all. Language proficiencies among the general population are also poor (Carruthers & Ó Mainnín, 2018), hampering economic success (Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, 2014). Similarly to Wales – but to a lesser extent – the teaching of the heritage language Irish ‘eats into’ the time available for the teaching of other languages. One positive trend is that language continuation beyond the compulsory phase at school level has not declined in recent years, whilst it did in England. The provision for Irish remains a strongly politicised and contentious issue and is implicated in the ‘Irish question’ of Brexit: this is indeed a language problem exacerbated by Brexit. The overall progress (or otherwise) in the learning of any language, however, will depend on the nation’s success in implementing and supporting stronger language policies (such as Primary Languages; see Collen et al, 2017). Thus, a particular Northern Irish risk is that the Brexit-induced stalemate over the Irish language will hamper progress in the learning of other languages.

Some 85% of all UK school students reside in England. Here, schools must teach a language to pupils aged 7–11 in primary school and aged 11–14 in secondary school. The discontinuation of compulsory languages for all up to the age of 16 (in 2004) has led to a continual drop in those learning languages beyond the compulsory phase. The last three years have seen the percentage of students aged 16 with a language qualification stagnating around 42% (Tinsley, 2018), with little sign of improvement. There is also a stark social divide between those who learn languages beyond the compulsory phase and those who do not (Lanvers, 2017b): this fact is significant in that incentivisations and initiatives to increase language learning uptake should focus on those students currently disenfranchised from language study and likely to come from comparatively disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there are no indications of initiatives or policy directions focusing on this Widening Participation goal: thus, the risk is that well-intended policy initiatives will not impact on language uptake. One such example is the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) in 2011. The Ebacc is a qualification which students aged 16 receive automatically if they score good grades in five subjects, including a foreign language. It was hoped that the promise of obtaining the Ebacc would increase language uptake. However, the Ebacc did not lead to the expected increase, mainly because the educational benefit of receiving this qualification remains unclear, both to individual students and to schools. Language learning beyond the age of 16 continues to fall year on year, as does uptake of language degrees at higher education levels. Furthermore, governmental focus to improve language learning is currently not changing to increase uptake, but to invest in a new national centre of excellence for language pedagogy. Thus, the focus is set on improving pedagogy, in the hope that these improvements ultimately filter though into greater uptake. There are no specific aims for future uptake, nor are there strategies to incentivise those learners from less advantaged backgrounds (see Introduction), in order to increase uptake.

<B>*Quo vadis*: Brexit-related risk in UK language learning?

To sum up, all four nations currently make language learning compulsory for the ages 11–14. UK provision for language education is particularly poor compared with European countries (second lowest; Eurostat, 2016), with only 4.2% of students studying two or more languages, compared with the EU average of 51%. Each UK nation has their own agenda and policy for improving language provision and uptake: some focus more on fostering early plurilingualism, such as the Scottish initiative; others, such as England, rely on improving pedagogy for the secondary sector. The initiatives have in common that: (a) they either do not set clear targets for the percentage of students with language qualifications at age 16 or 18, or, if clear targets are set, do not specify how they are to be achieved; and (b) long-term funding, needed to support a school year’s cohort progress in language learning, from one year to the next, is not guaranteed. In these policy developments, no clear links to the Brexit agenda emerge. However, Brexit might impact negatively on UK language learning and teaching for reasons unrelated to education policies: schools might find future travel to the EU more difficult (Tinsley, 2018), for instance, because students lose the right to European Health insurance when travelling abroad (both UK students visiting the EU and vice versa). Rules and regulations, e.g. regarding safeguarding rules of minors, are likely to increase the efforts and costs of school exchanges. Current political Brexit decisions make it likely that students might lose access to the Erasmus exchange. Such disincentives might encourage European students and exchange partners to visit Ireland rather than UK partner schools. The language teacher shortages across the UK is a further worry in that a third of language teachers currently are from the EU (Tinsley, 2018): the teaching sector relies on EU nationals. It is difficult to foresee how the UK will manage to retain, let alone attract, future EU nationals to teach in UK schools.

The future of the above-described ambitious policies of Scotland and Wales remains uncertain, as it depends on sustained funding. The next section addresses the UK’s future needs for languages, and critically asks if the current policy plans are fit to address these needs.

<B>The UK’s economic needs for languages

Currently, the UK already loses about 3.5% of its GDP annually owing to its language deficit (Foreman-Peck, 2007). The largest contributor to this loss is the lack of export activities in medium-sized and small businesses, because they lack language skills (Hogan-Brun, 2018). The continuing and future importance of small and medium-sized enterprises for the UK (Rhodes, 2016) makes the UK especially vulnerable to further disbenefit from the lack of language skills. The problem is confounded by the fact that larger companies are better situated to invest and prepare for new language skills than smaller and medium-sized ones.

International business is, of course, also often conducted in English. However, in this respect, the importance of the US, as both the largest English-speaking country and the largest economic power, cannot be understated. The UK is susceptible to suffering the consequences of any changes that the US might implement in their international trade activities. For instance, the ‘America first’ policy favoured by the last US administration might lead to a decrease in English used in international trade (Hogan-Brun, 2018). This would negatively affect countries such as the UK, which rely strongly on using English as an international trading language.

Economists have turned to the question of whether Brexit will change the UK’s future language needs, or if the UK might want to continue to rely largely on the English language for their exporting activities. The languages most frequently used in exporting businesses are German, French Italian and Spanish, reflecting the currently largest trading partners of the UK. In addition, Foreman-Peck and Wang (2014: 34) predict that the UK’s future language demands will be more diverse, and include, on the one hand, Japanese and Arabic, and on the other, the languages of the fast emerging economies of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China).

Given that the UK currently offers very little formal language provision in these languages, and that developing language skills in a cohort of young learners takes a minimum of 5–7 years, the UK is unlikely to meet such language skills demands from ‘homegrown’ sources. However, to date, no economic linguist has been able to predict with any certainty if, for instance, the languages of the BRICS countries will be prioritised, or other world languages, or indeed languages of the UK’s European neighbours. After all, the UK’s most important trading partners, France, Germany Spain and Italy, are likely to remain in this position post-Brexit for some time, and the UK is already severely disadvantaged by language skills shortages in European languages (see above). A further dimension influencing the UK’s post-Brexit language needs concerns the current trade agreements that the EU has with 164 different countries: will the UK somehow be able to build upon, or retain, these relations, or will it need to start its own trade negotiations?

In sum, whatever the precise language needs post-Brexit might be, the UK’s linguistic skills are likely to be stretched to their limits, or indeed beyond (Holmes, 2018). In the light of (a) the current economic loss owing to a language skill shortage, (b) increased need for skillful negotiations with a host of both EU and non-EU countries and (c) uncertainty as to which languages a post-Brexit UK might need most desperately, this chapter will not add to speculation regarding the ‘most wanted’ languages. Instead, this section will conclude with the observation that the national policy plans outlined in the previous sections cannot, even under most felicitous conditions, provide the UK with language needs post-Brexit, for the following reasons:

* There is a considerable lead-in phase in any new language teaching phase to equip a new cohort with new sets of language skills. Newly trained generations would not be ready for any immediate needs resulting from the UK’s departure from the EU.
* The existing strong policy initiatives in some of the UK’s four nations are not secured by long-term funding.
* The initiatives and policies do not address the need to increase competencies at higher levels (age 16 and beyond).
* Current policies do not address diversification of the languages that schools currently offer to meet the likely post-Brexit demands for more diverse language skills (regardless of which languages exactly they might diversify to).
* There are no detailed strategies for incentivising students from lower socio-economic background: to increase overall uptake, this group must be targeted, as students from more advantaged backgrounds already study languages post-14.

<A>**Europhobia and Linguaphobia – Two Sides of the Same Coin?**

The long-standing concerns over the UK’s poor language learning record span three decades and predate any Brexit discussions. Even before the referendum, academics had hypothesised that Britons’ reluctance to learn languages is due to their mentality of Euroscepticism, insularism and xenophobia (Coleman, 1997). Understandably, this rationale has received heightened attention since the Brexit vote, with pedagogues expressing concern that Euroscepticism will reinforce the nation’s general disinterest in languages. Prognostications and opinions on the issue are by no means unanimous: among school learners and their parents, Brexit has led to a further ‘entrenchment of monolingualism’ (Tinsley, 2018: 129), and further deterioration of motivation among learners and their parents (Tinsley & Board, 2018; Tinsley, 2018). Some linguists take such attitudes as evidence that the UK’s disinterest in language learning does indeed stem from the same mentality of insularity, xenophobia and heightened nationalism (Lanvers *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, this rationale, purporting a link between Euroscepticism and poor language learning, gained in popularity very soon after the referendum. In this rationale, the British are variously essentialised as having ‘a national mentality’, insularity, xenophobia and/or Europhobia (Lanvers *et al*., 2018), resulting in either an incapability or an unwillingness to learn languages. In this rationale, other, for instance educational, factors or the negative effect of Global English on UK language learning are ignored.

Rationales linking anti-Europeanness to unwillingness to learn languages have little relation to actual language needs: the above section has discussed how Brexit, if anything, will increase Britain’s needs for language skills (Hogan-Brun, 2018), both in the diversity of languages to be mastered and in fluency levels. The questions, at this (late) stage in the Brexit process, is thus not if the UK could indeed afford to learn even fewer European languages post-Brexit than currently is the case (it cannot), but (a) how this rationale holds up to scrutiny and (b) if it is beneficial to the agenda of promoting languages. In order to scrutinise the rationale in these respects, we must consider several factors, namely (a) Europhobia in the EU generally, (b) language policy and practice in the UK and (c) global English.

Concerning the first, Europhobia does, of course, exist in the UK, as it does in other EU countries, and is reported as being higher in some countries (strongest among the newest and smaller EU member states) than in the UK (Eurobarometer, 2012a). Concerning the second, poor language learning policies and practices might explain the UK’s disappointing learner outcomes, compared with other EU nations (Milton & Meara, 1998; Mitchell, 2010). Thirdly, the language crisis is shared by many Anglophone countries (see Introduction). A disinterest in language learning has been observed elsewhere, such as in the US and other Anglophone countries: the spread of English has led native speakers to lose motivation to learn other languages. The ‘English is enough’ fallacy has been described widely among learners with English as (one of) their first language(s) (e.g. Graham, 2004; Lo Bianco, 2014). Thus, the ‘English is enough’ or ‘monolingual mindset’ rationale to explain the UK’s reluctance to learn languages is supported by evidence. However, care must be taken not to confound this phenomenon with purported ‘intrinsic’ or ‘inherent’ national characteristics such as an essential inability to learn languages. The UK’s disinterest in learn languages needs to be understood as a parallel phenomenon to the European (and global) trend of English as the dominant Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) supressing the learning of other languages (e.g. Busse, 2017), i.e. ‘foreign language monolingualism’.

One danger of essentialising the British as ‘inherently incapable’ or ‘too lazy to learn’ is that all of those who are currently demotivated, and living in ‘English monolingual bubbles’, are further discouraged. In this manner, such rationales may – unwittingly – reproduce the social segregation in language learning that we currently witness. Such arguments might undermine poor learner self-efficacy further (Graham & Santos, 2015) and provide reasons for the current motivational crisis among learners, fuelled by the ‘English is enough’ attitude. For these reasons, such negative framing, although often started with the best intentions to address the language crisis, might do more harm than good to the future of language learning in the UK.

Other views on language needs post-Brexit are very different in tone. Commercial language providers, for instance, speculate about the UK’s future language needs in a very proactive manner (Lanvers *et al*., 2018). In their interest to attract future clients (i.e. language learners), commercial language learning providers frame Brexit as an opportunity rather than a threat, linking the political change to their vested interest (‘Get your Brexit negotiation language skills with us’). Such opportunistic stances offer empowering messages to those currently not engaged with languages and offer avenues to foster self-efficacy in language learners, in particular among those currently lacking this most, i.e. those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, commercial provisions for language learning, for example for the adult professional market, need not be expensive and/or addressed to privileged students: the ubiquity and low cost of language learning apps in particular has made language learning accessible for many. Thus, opportunistic stances are one example of a positive avenue to address the crisis of demotivation.

Of course, UK citizens may well harbour Europhobe, linguaphobe and ‘English is enough’ rationales concurrently. The rationales are not contradictory: they can complement each other. Nonetheless, as discussed above, the current UK context dictates that we should tackle ‘English is enough’ mindsets first and foremost to enthuse learners across the whole socio-economic spectrum for languages.

<A>**Is English in Europe vulnerable post-Brexit?**

A further element to mix into the debate of languages post-Brexit is the concern over the future of English as a working language within the EU economy, as well as within EU institutions. A continuing dominance of English within the EU would be in the UK’s interest but the Brexit process has given rise not only to speculation regarding the future of English in the EU but also what forms of English (if any) might emerge and what effects there may be on the future of other European languages.

Economic linguists as well as policy researchers (e.g. Chriost & Bonotti, 2018; Gazzoli, 2016; Ginsburgh *et al*., 2016) argue that English is very likely to remain the most spoken language in EU after Brexit, and that a continuation of a wide use of English would ensure greatest fairness and least linguistic disenfranchisement of the EU population. Different ranking methods to predict the position of English in the EU post-Brexit lead to similar conclusions, namely that English will continue to be of high ranking, as it is the most spoken language in the EU, combining first and second language proficiencies (Gazzoli, 2016; Ginsburgh *et al*., 2016).

However, much disagreement exists concerning (purported) future varieties of English in Europe, as well as the likelihood of the EU further diversifying their plurilingual practices (e.g. more translations from/into smaller languages). Some (Modiano, 2017) predict that the departure of the UK leaves a ‘linguistic vacuum’, in the EU, which will (should?) be appropriated by the continental Europeans, creating an English ‘European variant’ form. Modiano postulates that, although the position of English remains central, a new EU variant, different from UK English, will emerge. Others (e.g. Phillipson, 2017) contest the notion of a ‘European English’, pointing out the continuing plurilingual practices of all EU communications, as well as the global hegemony of the English language. Others still predict a diminishing importance of English, in line with a rise in other languages in the EU. The French nationalist party Front National, for instance, has been vying for some time to use Brexit as launchpad for their long-standing ambition to increase the use of French in the EU (Bolton & Davis, 2017).

However, much of the above remains based on wishes and assumptions, not facts. The ‘no great change for English in the EU’ thesis can be said to stand on firmer empirical – both economic and linguistic – evidence than the two competing predictions, that of increased use of other big European languages and that of increased plurilingual practices (Gazzoli, 2016). Evidence supporting the ‘no great change’ view stems from the fact that Europeans have developed their (mostly formally acquired) English language competencies at a fast rate. Continuing to use English across the EU at its current rate would result in lower percentages of linguistic disenfranchisement (relative to other solutions). Furthermore, ideological stances for the prediction that UK varieties will continue to be more attractive than any (purposive) EU varieties align with notions of linguistic imperialism and hegemony (Phillipson, 2017).

We conclude with Seargeant (2017) that, currently, there is little certainty about the future of the English language in the EU, but we note with interest how politicians utilise symbolic functions in political debates. Just as the National Front has seized the Brexit moment to boost the EU position of French in a post-Brexit EU (Bolton & Davis, 2017), others position the future of English in line with their ideological stances towards both English and/or languages in general.

<A>**Conclusion**

Just as Ennser-Kananen and Saarinen (Chapter 6) describe for the Swiss language-learning context, the challenges the UK language-learning crisis faces reach beyond language education policy.Brexit has politicised the debate around the UK language crisis to unprecedented levels. This chapter scrutinised this politicisation, addressing topics as diverse as language education policy in the four UK nations, explanations for the UK population’s reluctance to learn languages and languages in the UK post-Brexit. Within each of these debates, we find examples of political appropriation of the language debate, for parochial interests (similar to Ennser-Kananen & Saarinen, Chapter 6). For instance, looking at policies in the for UK nations, the framing of the Scottish policy initiative as ‘pro-European’ exemplifies a politicisation that is not supported by evidence (as far as the Scottish record of language learning is concerned). The ‘essentialising’ of the British as both bad language learners and anti-Europeans unduly confounds political and linguistic agendas. Commercial providers of language learning, for their part, interpret the UK’s language needs to suit their agenda, and finally, the efforts of the French to increase the use of their language post-Brexit constitutes an example of appropriating language for patriotic and nationalistic agendas.

Such appropriations of languages and language policy are not new (Rampton, 1999). However, the risk of ‘essentialising’ the British as lazy learners shows how political appropriation can – in this case, unwittingly – do harm rather than good to incentivisations to learn. Other stances, such as the opportunistic one exemplified by language providers, offer novel avenues to tackle the current demise of language learning. Regardless of the (yet unspecified) precise Brexit-related language needs for the UK, the main future challenge is to seize the opportunity that Brexit might offer to rejuvenate language learning, tackle monolingual mindsets and engage all citizens in language learning. At the time of writing (March 2020), policy initiatives across all nations, and especially in England, are vulnerable to not tackling the crisis at its core, most often because of a lack of sustained funding and long-term planning. In addition, as in the case of England, the planned changes do not tackle all challenges and aspects of the language crisis. To increase learner uptake we mainly need to engage those groups currently most underrepresented in language uptake; in the UK, that means those from the lower socio-economic spectrum – no policy initiative yet has addressed this challenge.

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