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**INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENT ON A CHILD'S
ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND
LANGUAGE AND THE GRADUAL EXTINCTION OF
NIGERIAN LANGUAGES: A STUDY OF CHILDREN
OF SELECTED SCHOOLS IN CHOBA, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This paper investigated the influence of environment on the acquisition of English by the Nigerian child. The subjects under study were thirteen bilingual children with a native Nigerian language and English as the medium of instruction. Forty-six teachers and 26 parents form the population of the study. Out of a total population of 72 respondents, 51 were sampled using the purposive sampling method. Using survey research method, the questionnaire and interview schedule were adopted as research instruments. Questionnaire was administered on selected teachers and parents to determine the influence of the social environment and peer group on the child's acquisition of English, as well as determine the effect of English on the maintenance

of the child's mother tongue. The method adopted in analyzing the data was simple percentage. The analysis of data collected showed that parents of the children under investigation encourage their children to use English at home alongside their mother tongues, but the children prefer to use English at play because of the multilingual setting in which they find themselves. The result showed that the influence of all these environmental factors is the acquisition of English by the Nigerian child and the gradual extinction of the mother tongue.

Key words: Acquisition, child, environment, first language, second language, influence

Introduction

Language is crucial to human existence and it stands at the centre of human affairs. In fact, it is of fundamental importance as it conveys ideas, desires and emotions of man. The importance of language as a vehicle of human communication has underscored the kind of attention given to its acquisition and development in a child.

Chomsky proposed the best known and accepted theory of language acquisition termed Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Chomsky is of the opinion that a child is not born blank, rather he/she has the linguistic predisposition to acquire the language of his/her community. This linguistic endowment has been described as the language faculty or language acquisition programme. The language faculty provides the child with a set of procedures for developing an internal grammar of his language on the basis of the speech input which he receives from the adult speakers of the language. Chomsky calls this speech input which the child receives – ‘the triggering experience’.

A child does not learn the language all at once, as language development is made up of overlapping stages, while language acquisition has its critical period of between ages 0 – 4 years. Language development then starts and progresses to the stage of competence. Ndimele (1999) notes that:

The language faculty endowment is not sufficient to enable a child to speak a language, rather in addition to the innate linguistic endowment, exposure to the linguistic data is crucial to the child to pick up any language”, i.e., the child's language acquisition programme will remain ineffective unless there is sufficient exposure to linguistic data in the form of a natural language.

Ndimele's assertion goes a long way to show that language acquisition and development are dependent upon some factors such as the milieu or the type of

contacts that a child has during his linguistic puberty and that is why this study investigated language acquisition in children born in multilingual environment with a view to determining the influence environment has on a child's second language acquisition and the effect of this acquisition on Nigerian indigenous languages.

Wallwork (1985) reviewed in Okoli (1990) states that home background of the child decides more than anything the quality of his mastery of language, for this is where he/she has experienced it most day in day out, and over the years of infancy and childhood. The linguistic setting of Choba community where this study is based already favours the use of English to bridge the communication gap created by multilingualism, so the parents of a heterogeneous family have no option than to adopt English as a language of communication in the home. This keeps the parents' native languages silent for 'some time', since a dominant language has been chosen for communication. In this case, the child's first language is neither the father's nor the mother's native language. In a bilingual family, a child develops a 'first' language rather than a mother tongue. There are still cases where the child tries to pick some vocabularies from the mother's language, perhaps due to the fact that the mother is always closer to him. The child, at best, becomes a bilingual. This is also another reason for choosing bilingual children for this study.

In 2006, UNESCO predicted that minor African languages will go extinct by the year 2050 (cf. Okwor (2012), Chukwudile (2012)). As Chukwudile (2012, p. 4) notes, one factor that preserves the language of a people is the people being fond of speaking it in the homes, schools, offices, market place, in the media, churches, in traditional ceremonies, in political rallies and other business transactions. If children will be speaking them in 100 years, as Krass (2007) also emphasizes, it will thrive; but it will be endangered if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years and the language will be moribund if children are not speaking them now. UNESCO's prediction is, thus, an indication that African languages are at risk. If the child's environment does not favour the use of indigenous languages, then parents have a role to play, especially mothers in the child's formative years since the child generally acquires his/her first speech habits from his/her mother. Unfortunately, many parents forbid their children from speaking their mother tongues even at home, yet language as a living organism grows if it is being spoken, but dies if people stop speaking it. Does this imply that UNESCO's prediction will come to pass?

This research was conducted in Choba community. The social background of the people living in Choba community and the presence of the University of Port Harcourt require the use of English as a medium of communication. Therefore, a child born into this kind of environment must of necessity require a second language other than his mother tongue or first language to serve as a lingua franca. English

which is mostly spoken by the majority of the people in the area tend to serve that function. Ikwere is the language of the people of Choba, but it is not spoken by all the inhabitants, especially the non-indigenes. Igbo is also used extensively in the area. Other languages reflecting different ethnic groups are spoken, but by very few people.

Statement of the Problem

It is evident that human beings are affected by heredity in the same as way they are affected by environment. Many psychologists are unanimous in their views that the environment in which one finds himself contributes to one's acquisition of language. Language acquisition refers to the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communication situation. Although the child is naturally endowed with a language faculty that enables him acquire any language, this endowment is, however, not enough for him to attain full competence in language use. The child, as Agbedo (2003,P.74) notes, requires sustained interaction with other language users in order to bring the latent language faculty into operation within a given language. This is why a child can acquire another language (a second language) that is not the mother tongue as a result of his environment.

The problem which necessitated this study stems from the observation that the acquisition of English as a second language by children within the critical period of 0 – 5 years in Nigeria, as a multilingual society, leads to the gradual extinction of our indigenous languages and if this dangerous trend is not checked, it will in the next few years, as UNESCO predicted, start manifesting and the crises will be greater than that of economic and political problems that the country presently faces.

Purpose and Justification of Study

The main aim of carrying out this research was to investigate the influence of the environment on a child's second language acquisition in a multilingual setting such as Choba, and the gradual erosion of indigenous Nigerian languages as a result of this acquisition. Specifically, the study set out to:

- 1) ascertain the language(s) spoken in the child's environment;
- 2) find out the medium of instruction in the schools the child attends;
- 3) investigate whether environment compels the child to acquire English as a second language, and
- 4) reveal the consequences of a child's acquisition of English as a second language in Choba community.

Although this area of child language acquisition is not entirely new, this study is of relevance, considering the fact that the gradual extinction of Nigerian languages can be traced to the child's early acquisition of English and the attitude of Nigerian parents who do not encourage their children to acquire and speak their mother tongue(s) at home. This study will proffer solutions geared towards reviving our mother tongues.

From this study, parents would be made to know that they have a role to play in saving our indigenous languages from going into extinction by speaking their mother tongues to their children more often than English. Government and policy makers would benefit from this study and make haste to implement the stipulations of the National Policy on Education.

Research Questions

The following questions are designed to ensure an in-depth investigation of this study:

- 1) What languages are spoken in the child's environment?
- 2) What is the medium of instruction in the school the child attends?
- 3) Does the school environment compel the child to acquire English as a second language?
- 4) What are the consequences of a child acquiring English as a second language in Choba community?

The Scope of Study

This study covers only environmental factors such as the linguistic influence of the child's social environment, the peer group and most importantly the school environment and the future of indigenous languages. The study is also restricted to the following schools in Choba community:

- (a) Adventist Nursery/Primary School, Choba.
- (b) Brian Child Academy, Choba
- (c) Our Lady of Fatima Nursery/Primary School, Choba
- (d) Sampav Model School, Choba
- (e) University Demonstration Primary School, University of Port Harcourt, Choba.

Government-owned schools were excluded from this study because the children under study were in nursery and pre-nursery stages of education which government schools do not run as part of their educational system.

The children studied were those within the age range of 3 – 5 years. This period is a critical period for language acquisition. These children were, therefore, particularly chosen because they are in their critical years of infancy and early childhood when language acquisition takes place and because some of them already have English as a first language (e.i.they are bilingual).

Operational Definition of Terms

In the course of carrying out this research, the researcher found it necessary to operationally define some key terms to avoid ambiguity. Hence, these definitions are solely for this study. These are as follows:

Child: An infant of between 3 and 5 years in pre-nursery or nursery school.

Environment: The environment here includes the parents, the teacher, the school and the child's peer group. It also refers to the locality where the child finds himself and socializes.

First Language: This refers to the mother tongue or the language the child acquired first in a community/home.

Influence: The power to change the way someone thinks, acts or speaks.

Language Acquisition: A process whereby a child naturally masters a language without necessarily learning it in the sense of receiving instruction.

Second Language: This is the language a child learns after he has acquired his mother tongue or first language. A second language thrives in a multilingual community and it has an internal social function.

Extinction: Having no living speakers.

Theoretical Framework

The nature of this study made it necessary for the researcher to adopt Halliday's (1978) environmentalist and the Nativist theories. The environmentalist theory expresses the view that the specific properties of language are not innate in any child, but what a child does is to depend on the environment of the language it hears around him, together with the contexts in which it is uttered for the successful learning of the language. Although there are various theories of language acquisition such as Chomsky's popular and elegant theory of Language Acquisition Device which is sometimes abbreviated as LAD, Wilkins' (1974) mentalist theory, etc., which do not

relate directly to this present study in the way that Halliday's theory does, also have much bearing to this work. This study constitutes a specific case study of the provisions of the environmentalist theory which stipulates that the total environment provides the sort of stimulus for language acquisition, but it does not completely reject the innate factor, hence, Halliday's environmentalist theory and the Nativist theory were adopted as the theoretical bases of this work.

Empirical Review

According to Agbedo (2003, P.74), the earliest recorded attempt at investigating language acquisition was the study carried out by a German biologist named Tiedermann in 1787. Other similar studies include those of Darwin (1877), Taine (1877) and Preyer (1882). Preyer's study, as Agbedo, also notes, made detailed diary notes of the first three year development of the researcher's son and this falls within the period that Ingram (1989,P.7) calls the period of diary studies. This was because the preferred data collection method during this period was the parental diary in which parents followed their children's development; writing down each utterance, noting the pronunciation and apparent meaning.

Many studies have also been carried out to investigate the language abilities of children from different environments or settings. Dautsch (1963) provided evidence to show that children from a low socio-economic background have a linguistic experimental history that has restricted their language activity. A similar, but expensive research was also conducted by Rychman (1964) to establish that children from low-socio-economic background are handicapped in the general area of language ability.

Deese (1970) reviewed in Okoli (1990) notes that "the development of language in children is sensitive to the kind of environment in which they live", in that a child who lives under-institutionalized condition (such as those found in the hospitals and orphanages) during their critical years of infancy and early childhood are retarded in both linguistic and motor development.

Research Design

In this study, the descriptive survey research design was adopted as it affords the researcher the opportunity to gather reliable information on the opinion of the population under study.

Research Population

Choba is a large and old community within which the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria is situated, and occupied not only by the indigenes who speak the Ikwerre

language, but by people of diverse linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Most tribes in Nigeria are represented in Choba. This study concentrated on pre-nursery and nursery school children of within the age range of 3 – 5 who already speak a first language. A total of 72 respondents form the population of the study. This number comprises parents of children under study and selected teachers in the schools that these children attend.

Sample Size/Sampling Technique

The sampling technique adopted for this study is the purposive sampling technique. This sampling technique was adopted because the researcher had to look for certain characteristics that must be represented. Using this technique, a sample size of 51 was drawn from the population.

Procedure for Data Collection

Thirteen families dwelling in Choba community were visited for the purpose of achieving the aims and objectives of this study. These families come from varying linguistic backgrounds and have children within the age range of between 3 and 5 years who were already in nursery schools. The researcher who visited these schools twice administered the questionnaire personally, interacted and observed the child with the teachers during interview sessions.

The first interview session was held on October 12, 2011 when the researcher visited the homes of the children and observed them as they interacted with their parents and at play with their peer group. In the children's homes, the researcher also conducted interview and copies of the questionnaire earlier distributed were retrieved.

Instrumentation/Data Collection

The instruments for data collection used were two sets of questionnaire and interview schedule. Six structured/closed-ended questions and five unstructured/open-ended questions were designed for the respondents. Unstructured or open-ended questions were posed to elicit detailed information. This type of instrument is preferred in order to bring the researcher face-to-face with the interviewees or respondents. This method of data collection constituted the primary data. For the secondary data, relevant text books, unpublished project works, and journals were used to enrich the quality of the work.

Subjects used in the Study

The researcher worked with parents and teachers of thirteen children. Seven of them were boys, while six were girls, aged between 3 and 5 years. These children had started their formal education and were in pre-nursery and nursery schools respectively. They are normal language developing children and do not have any

apparent speech defect or abnormality. The children were all born in the Choba community.

Four of the Children: Ovunda, Chima, Oroma and Chubuchi are born of Ikwerre speakers. Four others are from Igbo speaking parents; Ngozi, Chijioke, Akuchi and Ogechi. Ali is born of Edo parents; two from Ibibio speaking parents: Eti and Effiong and two from Yoruba speaking parents, Kunle and Ayo.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The collected data are presented on Tables and analysed using simple percentages. Two sets of questionnaire were distributed to different respondents. One set was designed specifically for teachers, while the other set was prepared for parents of the children under investigation. A total of 51 copies were given out to respondents for the purpose of collecting data. Twenty five copies were given to teachers, while twenty-six copies were distributed to parents who served as our respondents.

Out of a total of 51 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 46 were returned, but only 34 were properly filled. Hence, this analysis was based on the 34 copies that were properly filled and retrieved.

Research Question One: What language(s) is/are spoken in the child's environment?

This question which was directed to the respondents was answered using two questions from the questionnaire, as shown on Table 1 below:

Table 1: The Languages Spoken in the child's Environment

| S/N | Question Item | No. of Respondents | Responses Language | No. | Frequency of Response |
|-----|---|--------------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 1 | What is your mother tongue or first language? | 34 | English | Nil | 0% |
| | | | Ikwerre | 8 | 24% |
| | | | Igbo | 10 | 29% |
| | | | Ibibio | 8 | 24% |
| | | | Yoruba | 6 | 17% |
| | | | Edo | 2 | 5% |
| | | | Total | 34 | 100% |
| 2 | What language(s) do you speak to the child at home? | 34 | English | 18 | 53% |
| | | | Ikwerre | 4 | 12% |
| | | | Igbo | 2 | 6% |
| | | | Ibibio | 6 | 17% |
| | | | Yoruba | 2 | 6% |
| | | | Edo | 2 | 6% |
| | | | Total | 34 | 100% |

Data collected showed that none of the children's parents has English as the mother tongue or first language. Eight of the respondents representing 24% speak Ikwerre as first language, 10 (or 29%) speak Igbo, 8 (or 24%) are Ibibio speakers, 6 (or 17%) have Yoruba as their first language, while 2 (or 6%) speak Edo.

For the second question, 18 (or 53%) of the respondents speak English to the children at home, 4 (or 12%) speak Ikwerre, 2 (or 6%) speak Igbo to their children, 6 (or 17%) speak Ibibio to their children, 2 (or 6%) speak Yoruba, while 2 (or 6%) speak Edo to the children at home.

This analysis reveals that different languages are spoken in the child's environment to reflect the multilingual nature of Choba community. The analysis by implication from the distribution when responses to question 1 are compared with those of question 2 also shows that most parents do not speak their mother tongues to their children from birth.

Research Question 2: What is the medium of instruction in the school the child attends?

In an attempt to answer this question, questions 3 and 4 of the questionnaire were used. The responses are shown on Table 2.

From the analysis of the first question on the table which is the 3rd question of the questionnaire, 29 respondents representing 85% were of the view that the child expresses his or herself in English in the class, 2 (6%) said it is Ikwerre that the child uses, while 3 (9%) claimed that it is Pidgin English that the child uses in expressing himself in the class. The second question on the Table which is question 4 on the questionnaire seek to find out the language the child uses when at play with his/her peer group, while the third question on the table sought to find out the language used as the medium of instruction in the child's school. From the table, 20 (59%) said it is English, 5 (15%) agreed that it is Ikwerre, 3 (9%) said it is Igbo, 2 (6%) answered that it is Ibibio, 3 (9%) claimed that it is Yoruba, only 1 (2%) said it is Edo, while 3 admitted that they use Pidgin English with their peer group at play.

Table 2: The Language of Instruction in the Child's School

| S/N | Question Item | No. of Respondents | Responses | | Frequency of response |
|-----|---|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| | | | Language | No | |
| 1 | In what language does the child express his/herself in class? | 34 | English | 29 | 85% |
| | | | Ikwerre | 2 | 6% |
| | | | Igbo | - | 0% |
| | | | Ibibio | - | 0% |
| | | | Yoruba | - | 0% |
| | | | Edo | - | 0% |
| | | | Others (e.g. Pidgin English) | 3 | 9% |
| | | | Total | 34 | 100% |
| 2 | What language does the child speak with his/her play mates? | 34 | English | 20 | 59% |
| | | | Ikwerre | 5 | 15% |
| | | | Igbo | 3 | 9% |
| | | | Ibibio | 2 | 6% |
| | | | Yoruba | 3 | 9% |
| | | | Edo | 1 | 2% |
| | | | Others (Pidgin) | 3 | 9% |
| 3 | In what language is the child taught in school? | 34 | English | 34 | 100% |
| | | | Total | 34 | 100% |

It is clear from this analysis that the majority of the children express themselves in English both in the class and at play and that English is the medium of instruction in the nation even though the National Policy on Education stipulates that the child's mother tongue or the language of immediate environment should be used in the child's early years in school.

Research Question 3: Does the school Environment encourage the child to acquire English as a second language?

This research question was answered using questions 5 and 6 of the questionnaire, as presented below:

Table 3: School Environment’s Influence on a child’s Acquisition of English

| S/N | Question Item | No. of Respondents | Responses | | Frequency of response |
|-----|--|--------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| | | | Language | No | |
| 1 | What language do you think the child acquired due to the influence of Environment? | 34 | English | 25 | 74% |
| | | | Ikwerre | 5 | 15% |
| | | | Igbo | - | 0% |
| | | | Ibibio | - | 0% |
| | | | Yoruba | - | 0% |
| | | | Edo | - | 0% |
| | | | Others | - | |
| | | | (Pidgin) | 4 | 11% |
| | | | Total | 34 | 100% |

Table 3 contains one of the questions meant to give answers to research question 3. Out of 34 respondents, 25 representing 74% think that it is English that the child acquired due to the influence of the environment. Five (or 15%) of the respondents agreed that Ikwerre is what influences the child’s second language acquisition, while 4 (11%) believed that other languages such as Nigeria Pidgin English has its influence on the child’s second language acquisition.

Research Question 4: What are the likely consequences of a child acquiring English as a second language in the Choba community?

To answer this research question, a number of options meant to answer the question were presented. The analysis of the responses is displayed on the Table below:

Table 4: Consequences of Acquiring English as second language

| Options | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| Negative attitude towards the indigenous languages | 8 | 24% |
| Inability to speak or express oneself in the indigenous languages. | 6 | 17% |
| Inadequate use of the indigenous language in school, especially at play | 2 | 6% |
| Gradual death of the indigenous languages. | 18 | 53% |
| Total | 34 | 100% |

From Table 4 above, the majority of the respondents, i.e., 18 representing 53% were of the view that a child's early acquisition of English can lead to gradual death of the mother tongue. Two (or 6%) feel that it will not be used adequately in schools, six (or 17%) expressed the view that the child will not be able to speak the language as a native speaker, while 8 (24%) said the child will develop negative attitude towards the mother tongue.

All these point to the fact that the consequences of acquiring English as a second language are grave and could lead to the death of our indigenous languages.

Discussion of Findings

The interview was targeted at parents and teachers of the children under study. The researcher chose this group of people because parents especially, mothers have special roles they play in a child's language acquisition. The mother is the closest to the child in the home. In the same vein, the teacher is the closest to the child in the school environment as he responds to the immediate needs of the child.

The researcher employed the use of interview schedule which contained six questions. When asked the language spoken in the child's environment, the interviewee (parents from Ikwerre) in particular, responded that Choba is not a homogenous speech community. It is for this reason that English is mostly directed to the child, in addition to the mother tongue. When asked why the choice of English at home, the interviewee pointed out that as a multilingual setting, it is necessary to introduce English as a first language in order to enable the child interact with his/her peer group that came from diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, and to also be integrated into the University community. To do this, according to the parents, they had to start as early as possible to introduce the English language at home and use the mother tongue alongside it. It was also gathered that the parents of these children speak their various mother tongues at home, but prefer to speak English to the child for the purpose of integration into the society.

On the question of which of the languages the child expresses his or herself, some of the interviewees answered that the child uses English outside the home, but in the home, he responds to the language directed to him which in most cases is English and in rare cases, the mother tongue.

From the teachers, it was gathered that the medium of instruction in the schools investigated is English since English is the language of instruction in Nigeria. They emphasized that no other language (vernacular) is allowed in school and that if any teacher for any reason uses another language, it is not official. According to the teachers, since it is only English that is permitted, the child is encouraged to acquire it

early. The teachers pointed out that it is only in very few cases that the child unconsciously uses his/her mother tongue in class or at play. The interviewees also agreed that it is the environment in which the child finds himself that influences his acquisition of English as a second language, and in this case, it is the home and school environments.

From this analysis, it is evident that Nigerian indigenous languages are at the risk of dying. Our children are not encouraged by their parents to speak their mother tongues. This finding agrees with Ohiri–Aniche’s (2004) statement that Nigerian children are no longer competent in their indigenous languages, but often reply in English when spoken to in their indigenous languages.

Observations and Summary

This study which sought to find out the influence of environment in the child’s second language acquisition and the gradual extinction of indigenous languages was based on Halliday’s theory which postulates that the environment is a strong influence in a child’s second language acquisition. Choba community which is a highly multilingual setting constituted the area of study. Many languages, as we observed, are spoken in Choba community for the reason that people from all parts of Nigeria are in Choba because the University of Port Harcourt is situated in this community. Therefore, the population of this community is such that we have people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who speak varying languages. The result of this is that English becomes the lingua franca. This is because we have a lot of educated people dwelling in Choba. In churches, for example, services are conducted in a common language which is English. The implication is that a child growing up in this community who already possesses a mother tongue or first language at home is influenced by the language spoken in the environment which is the language of communication in the community, which in this case is English.

We purposely selected the children for this study to include those who already speak a first language before entering into pre-nursery or nursery schools where English is the medium of community. From our observations, also, these children under study who have playmates belonging to different linguistic backgrounds had no option than to forcefully acquire another language in order to interact with them. This other language is English which to the children is a second language. English is also the medium of instruction in the school the child attends and it is used in other social functions and in religious activities. It was also found out that the child whose parents are not so much educated acquire English in school and from playmates both at home and in school, but their parents normally speak Nigerian Pidgin English or mother tongue to them. This group of children was very few. One of them, *Ovunda*, an

Ikwerre speaker, according to the teacher, had to take three months to start speaking Standard English in class. In the process of acquiring English as a second language, the teacher observed cases of code-mixing in *Ovunda's* speech, as can be seen from the following sentences by *Ovunda* when he was first brought to the school. But, according to the teacher, *Ovunda* after a while picked up and started speaking good English.

- (1) This is *Ochuchu* 'This is a hen'
(2) Book in *oro* 'Book in the house'

Children such as *Ovunda* endeavoured to use English with all the imperfections while in school and at play. For the other group of children whose parents are highly educated and who already speak English at home as their first language along with their mother tongues, acquiring English as a second language was with ease. English was only reinforced in the school environment where it is the medium of communication.

In the schools used for this study, it was discovered that there are regulations forbidding the use of indigenous languages. In other words, English is enforced. At home, parents are also forced to speak English to the children to enable them communicate outside the home. The result of all these is the gradual acquisition of English as a second language which is made possible by influence of the environment the child finds his/herself leading to the extinction of Nigerian languages.

This study, therefore, concluded that the child's social environment is a very significant factor in the process of language acquisition and that the child's mother tongue or language of immediate environment is threatened and at the verge of dying owing to the early acquisition of English as a second language

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