

Untranslatability Caused by Cultural Differences and Approaches to It

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ABSTRACT

Cultural differences between China and the west have always been a pervasive topic in translation. This thesis discusses the effect that cultural differences have on translation, focusing on the untranslatability that is caused by cultural differences, in which the untranslatability on cultural level is explored in more details. Furthermore, to reach the purpose of effective communication, several approaches to untranslatability are explored by the author. By adopting these approaches, translators and interpreters try their best to convey original information to the receptors.

Keywords: *Translation, Untranslatability, Culture, Cultural differences.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In practical translating process, to translate all meanings of a source language text into the target language is sometimes difficult, often causing loss and change of meanings. This phenomenon is called untranslatability.

Untranslatability is caused by linguistic and cultural differences. In this thesis, the author tries to analyze the differences on cultural level in particular. Six aspects of cultural differences between China and the West are introduced, including different cultural backgrounds, different customs, different associations, different beliefs, different social etiquette and cultural blanks. Then, how cultural differences cause untranslatability is discussed.

Besides, the thesis introduces four approaches to untranslatability in the light of some successful examples of translation. In short, there have not been perfect approaches to untranslatability. Most translators believe that through more communications and understandings among people of different countries, untranslatability on cultural level will be reduced.

2. DEFINITION AND CAUSE OF UNTRANSLATABILITY

2.1 Definition of Untranslatability

During practical translating process, to translate all meanings of a source language text to the target language is sometimes difficult. Usually only one or two of these meanings are translated, and sometimes not a single meaning is translatable. On these occasions, loss and change of meanings are caused in spite of the use of translating methods such as literal translation, transliteration and interpretation. This phenomenon is called untranslatability.[4]

2.2 Cause of Untranslatability

There are mainly two causes of untranslatability during practical translating activities: linguistic and cultural.

2.2.1 Linguistic Cause of Untranslatability

Considerable differences exist between different language systems, and are reflected in the process of translation. Therefore, untranslatability on linguistic level is a common problem that often happens in translation. Mainly the untranslatability happens on vocabularies, and there are also

untranslatable sentences and passages. Here are some examples. "I noticed that you used 'studied' instead of 'study' just now, but it cannot be true."

It is not a problem at all for an English native speaker to understand the above sentence, for he knows that the different tenses of a verb in English are often used to express different meanings. However, it becomes difficult when we need to translate the sentence into Chinese. There has been an approach like this: "我注意到你刚才用了过去时而不是现在时,但这根本不可能", which is obviously strange to Chinese, and besides this, it has lost the meaning of the word "study". Here is another approach: "我注意到你刚才说昨天学习了而不是今天,但这根本不可能". This translator has added words like "昨天" or "今天" to the original sentence to make it more smooth, but it cannot be accepted either, for the notion of detailed time of actions is not mentioned in the original sentence.

We can now say that the "studied" and "study" here in this sentence are not translatable on the linguistic level. Because there is not any tense in Chinese as in English, no corresponding words exist in Chinese to express different "study"s that happen at different times. The differences between Chinese and English determine the untranslatability on linguistic level. [2]

We can explain the situations in which intrinsic features of different languages cause untranslatability in this way: the source language's way of expression includes both content and form, in other words, the meaning of the source language is expressed through a special form. The form cannot be changed; otherwise expression of the meaning will be affected. Usually, untranslatability occurs in pun, homonym, palindrome in English and 歇后语 (a two part allegorical saying, of which the first part, always stated, is descriptive, while the second part, sometimes unstated, carries the message) in Chinese.

Example 1:

Professor of Physics: What is matter?

Student: Never mind.

Professor: Then what is mind?

Student: It doesn't matter.

This dialogue makes use of pun of two words: "matter" and "mind". "Matter" means both "substance" and "thing". "What is matter?" can be taken either as "Can you define 'matter'?" or as

"What is wrong with you?" "Mind" means both "psychology" and "care about". "Never mind" can be taken either as "have nothing to do with mind" or as "it doesn't matter". We can see here the student is playing word games with the teacher to avoid answering the teacher's question. In situations likewise, English cannot be translated to Chinese. If we try to translate the above dialogue in this way:

"什么是物质?"

"决不是心理."

"那什么是心理?"

"决不是物质."

It is literarily correct, but the readers can not feel any sense of humor. If we translate it in another way:

"什么是物质?"

"没关系."

"那什么是心理?"

"没关系."

It sounds ridiculous, and the readers could be totally confused, let alone it has disobeyed a linguistic principle of being relevant.

Example 2:

—It's a long, sad tale."

—Of course the tail is long, but why sad?

This dialogue makes use of two homonyms "tale" and "tail", which is untranslatable either.

Example 3:'

—Madam, I'm Adam.

This is special form of expression which is called palindrome, namely, a sentence sounds exactly the same whether being read from the left to the right or from the right to the left. Palindrome does exist in Chinese. Nevertheless, it is totally different from that in English. Consequently, this sort of sentence is not translatable, either.

2.2.2 Cultural Cause of Untranslatability

The untranslatability caused by cultural elements is more difficult to deal with. Language is not only an outcome of culture, but a carrier of it. Then untranslatability on cultural level is finally expressed on linguistic level. Nevertheless, the reason why cultural untranslatability happens is not

the absence of corresponding words as the situation in linguistic untranslatability, but the incomparable contents of different cultures which are carried by different languages. We can call this difference incommensurability of cultures.

For example, in China, we have such forms of address as "二哥" and "三叔", which are very common among family members. In English, no such address exists. If we translate "二哥" into "Brother Two", English-speaking people will be confused, and it does not accord with English custom either. We have to add the name of the brother, for example "Shangwen" to "Brother", and make it more acceptable to English people, and that is "Brother Shangwen". Nevertheless, "Brother Shangwen" sounds much worse than "二哥" in Chinese.

Here, the absence of corresponding words is far from enough to explain the untranslatability. Chinese used to have many brothers and sisters in their families, and they have been used to addressing their sisters "二姐" or "三妹", and their brothers "大哥" or "五弟". This addressing is both convenient and heartfelt. In English-speaking countries, people usually address their brothers and sisters by first names, or nick names. Therefore, it is regarded disrespectful to call one's elder brother by his first name in China, and it is strange to westerners if one calls his brother "Brother Two".

This sort of untranslatability is caused by different cultures that have been formed through hundreds and even thousands of years' histories of different countries.

In summary, the above chapter discusses the definition and causes of untranslatability, and concludes that cultural cause is more complicated and more difficult for translators to deal with.

3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WESTERN WORLD

3.1 Definition of Culture

"Culture is the totality of the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic attitudes shared by a group, including its tradition, habits, social customs, morals, laws, and social relations. Sociologically, every society, on every level, has its culture; the term has no implications of high development." [6]

Every country has its own culture, and it is formed under specific natural environment and historical conditions, in certain geographic position and social reality. Therefore, the culture of a certain country has its own particularity.

The famous American theorist of translation Nida divides the specific properties of language culture into five categories[5]:

- Ecology
- Material culture
- Social culture
- Religious culture
- Linguistic culture

3.2 Cultural Differences Between China and Western Countries

It is said that once an American, a German, a Japanese and a Chinese went to an aquarium together. The American said "Terrific" to praise the beautiful shape of the fish; the German asked about temperature of the water and habits of the fish; the Japanese examined the fish jar carefully and tried to guess its material and price; the Chinese was wondering whether the fish was eatable or not. Though we do not know whether this story is true, the differences between cultures can be clearly seen from it.

Professor Ji Xianlin from Beijing University thinks that the basic difference between Chinese and western countries is the difference in the mode of thinking. "The mode of thinking in eastern cultural system is comprehensive, while in western culture it is analytical," said he. Professor Wu Sen pointed out that there are three pillars in western culture: science, law and religion, and two cornerstones in Chinese culture: morality and art. The most remarkable difference between the two cultures is that Chinese culture is artistic while western culture is scientific.[3]

From the two professors' words, we have obtained a general idea of the differences between Chinese and western cultures. In the author's opinion, these differences could be studied from six aspects:

- Different cultural backgrounds
- Different customs
- Different imaginations
- Different beliefs and world outlooks

- Different social etiquette
- Cultural blanks and conflicts

3.2.1 *Different Cultural Backgrounds*

Agriculture has played a very important role in China since ancient times. Most people in this country are farmers, and there are large numbers of proverbs about farming. Such as, 槁木死灰 (withered wood or cold ashes), 骨瘦如柴 (be lean as a rake), 对牛弹琴 (play the lute to a cow), 众人拾柴火焰高 (when everybody adds fuel the flames rise high), 竹篮打水一场空 (drawing water in a bamboo basket means drawing nothing) (Chen Anding, 1998)

British people love sailing, so a lot of proverbs come from sailing, such as, Hoist your sail when wind is fair; Still waters run deep; In a calm sea, every man is a pilot; A small leak will sink a great ship. It is said that school boys in France can list more than ten names of wines. In Arabic, there are hundreds of words to describe different parts of a camel. Eskimos have thousands of words to describe snow and various shapes of it.

3.2.2 *Different Customs*

It seems natural when we hear Chinese say "用我的心爱你", and Englishmen say "I love you with my heart". According to Nida, however, some people in Africa say, "Love with my liver; love with my stomach; love with my throat..." These words sound weird to us, but they are indeed being used by those people during their everyday life. If hearing a Chinese introducing his wife by the name of "lover" (translated from the Chinese words '爱人'), an American would be very surprised, because "lover" means "mistress" in English. "爱人" in Chinese actually equals "wife" or "husband" in English.

In China, owl is regarded as an unlucky animal, but in English-speaking countries, owl is a symbolization of wisdom. They have an expression "as wise as an owl". In China, everyone takes dragon as a mystical animal, which possesses inconceivable power, and is therefore a symbolization of emperors, too. Chinese parents all wish their children to become as wise and powerful as dragons in the future, and that is the idiom "望子成龙". However, dragon is completely different to westerners. They think it is a furious monster which can blow flame.

3.2.3 *Different Imaginations*

Some idioms in Chinese and English which bear similar meanings are compared.

"身壮如牛" — as strong as a horse

"胆小如鼠" — as timid as a rabbit

"守口如瓶" — dumb as an oyster

"害群之马" — black sheep

"挥金如土" — to spend money like water

"海底捞针" — to look for a needle in a haystack

"猫哭老鼠" — to shed crocodile tears

These are only a few examples to show different imaginations and associations of Chinese and western people. For example, Chinese believe mouse is the most timid animal, when Englishmen think rabbit is the most timid. No one knows which animal is actually more coward, but the different cultures make this difference happen. We can also attribute the difference in imagination to different cultural backgrounds that has been discussed in 3.2.1.

3.2.4 *Different Beliefs and World Outlooks*

In English-speaking world, the colour black stands for sadness and solemnness, but in China and Korea, the colour white is used for the same purpose. Black is occasionally used. The colour green sometimes means jealous to Americans and Englishmen, but it means disregarding previous unpleasant matters to French. In Europe, purple is the sign of power, but in the east, yellow is the supreme colour of imperial families.

The number "3" and "5" appear frequently in Chinese, which are used to show a large quantity of people or things, such as "三山五岳" (high mountains), "三令五申" (give repeated orders and injunctions), "三番五次" (over and over again). The number "13" as the number "4" in China, is a taboo in the west. Street number and the number of players both avoid "13". Strangely, many Beijingers like this number in particular. The famous novelist Wen Kang of late Qing Dynasty gave the name "十三妹" (the 13th sister) to the heroine in his work 《儿女英雄传》(The Story of the Hero And The Sisters). There is a well-known pharmacy with a hundred years' history called "同仁堂" in Beijing, which is also called "十三太保".

3.2.5 *Different Social Etiquette*

Americans greet each other with "hello" or "hi", but when Chinese meet, they often ask "have you had your lunch/supper" as a greeting. Chinese people also like to raise a question "where have you been" when they meet someone on his way back. This question has obviously annoyed some people from English-speaking countries, because they think that it is none of other people's business. Nevertheless, we Chinese know it is just a greeting, which shows our caring and friendliness. At the time of parting, westerners say "goodbye/bye-bye/bye", while Chinese say "慢走 (go slowly and take care)/好走 (walk well)/请留步 (please don't bother to see me out)" "您辛苦了" is widely used in China, but there is no corresponding words in English to express an exactly same meaning. We can translate it literally into "you've had a hard time" or "you've gone through a lot of hardships", but both of them are not good enough, and sometimes they would cause misunderstanding.

3.2.6 *Cultural Blanks and Cultural Conflicts*

Cultural blanks refer to those things/sayings/doings that are owned by one country but not by any other country in the world. In Chinese, we have some sayings like "唱红脸" (literally meaning "sing the red face"), "老油条" (literally meaning "over-cooked fried dough stick"), "半路出家" (literally meaning "become a monk or nun late in life"), "跑龙套" (literally meaning "play an insignificant role") and "拍马屁" (literally meaning "pat a horse' bottom"), which have no corresponding phrases in English. "唱红脸" means pretending to be generous and kind, opposite to the phrase "唱白脸", which means pretending to be harsh and severe; "老油条" means hard-boiled and slippery person; "半路出家" means switching to a job one was not trained for or switching to a new profession; "跑龙套" means playing an insignificant role; "拍马屁" means ingratiating oneself into someone's favor. These phrases are closely linked to Chinese culture. For example, "唱红脸" and "跑龙套" have developed from Peking Opera, and "拍马屁" has developed its meaning from an old story. In English, there are some sayings which cannot find their counterparts in Chinese, either. Such as, "as poor as a church mouse", "Trojan horse", "take French leave", "a white lie" and "a frog in the throat".

Cultural conflicts refer to those things/sayings/doings that are shared by both China and English-speaking countries, the meanings of which, however, are different. There is a sentence in China "中国是块肥肉,谁都想吃。" (China is like a piece of fat, and everybody wants to have it.) Foreign students find it hard to understand, and they ask, "why not compare it to a piece of lean meat?"

In short, the above chapter discusses definition of culture and cultural differences between China and western countries, and concludes that most untranslatability is caused by cultural differences.

4. **VARIOUS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES CAUSE UNTRANSLATABILITY**

Translating means to express one language's cultural information by another language. No translating activity can proceed without culture. Cultural differences then become an obstacle during translating work. Something is self-evident in one culture, but is difficult to understand in another. In this chapter, the author is going to have a further discussion over how cultural differences cause untranslatability.

4.1 *Untranslatability Caused by Differences of Historical Culture*

As various countries and peoples have developed different histories, they have therefore formed their own historical culture through hundreds or even thousands of years' histories.

Example 1:

"东施效颦" (Xi Shih was a famous beauty in the ancient kingdom of Yueh. Tung Shih was an ugly girl who tried to imitate her way.) This is a Chinese idiom, whose cultural connotation is not difficult to understand by Chinese. For westerners, who are not familiar with Chinese history and culture, however, it is obviously difficult to know what this idiom means, if they are presented with the translation "Tung Shih imitates Xi Shih". Who is "Tung shih"? Who is "Xi Shih" then? The translator can not show us who is who clearly.

Example 2:

"三个臭皮匠,顶个诸葛亮" (Three cobblers equal Chukeh Liang.) Chukeh Liang was a famous person in Chinese history, and it is widely known in China that he is a symbolization of wisdom, but

westerners totally have no idea of who is Chukeh Liang and how is he related to the three cobblers.

China has a long and splendid history, during which people have created lots of proverbs and idioms. Every idiom contains abundant cultural information, and is a vivid story itself. Things are the same in western culture. There have been more than seven hundred allusions in the Bible being included in dictionaries. Many persons and deeds in Shakespeare's works have become allusions, too. The *Times* magazine once inserted a sentence, "Many took to gambling and got in over their heads, borrowing from Shylocks to pay their debts." In this sentence, Shylock is no longer the very person in *Merchant of Venice*, but a representation of those who lend usury. If we do not know the story of *Merchant of Venice*, it is very likely that we cannot understand what the above sentence means. We can list many other idioms that contain historical and cultural information, such as, "paint the lily", "meet one's Waterloo", "cut the Guardian's knot" and so on.

As the differences existing in history and culture, some words or phrases coming from a certain country's allusions cannot be translated literally to the target language. Readers of the target language will not understand the connotations of certain words or phrases due to lack of background knowledge. [7]

4.2 Untranslatability Caused by Differences of Regional Culture

Regional culture refers to the culture formed and influenced by region, natural condition and geographic environment. For example, "东风" and "east wind" have the same literary meaning, but their connotations are quite different. "东风" stands for warmth and spring, which brings green and vigor to the land. In England, the "east wind" comes from the north of European Continent, which symbolizes coldness, unpleasantness, so English people do not like "east wind" at all. On the contrary, they like west wind very much. We can see this from the famous poem "Ode to the West Wind" from Shelley. "O, wind, if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" When translating this sentence to Chinese, the translator have to add an annotation that west wind means warmth and spring to Britain, otherwise, some Chinese who do not know geographic features of Britain will be confused or misunderstood.

4.3 Untranslatability Caused by Differences of Custom Culture

Custom culture means a culture that formed by people's custom through their everyday life and communication. Different peoples vary in the ways of greeting, addressing, thanking, complimenting, apologizing, telephoning and saying goodbye. For example, some common ways of greeting in China would be "去哪儿?" (where are you going?) "干什么去?" (what are you going to do?) "吃饭了没?" (have you had your lunch?) These greetings are different from those of western countries. The author has already pointed out in Chapter Two that if we translate these literally into English and use them when communicate with westerners, they would misunderstand you and get annoyed.

As for addressing, English seems to put it in a very simple way, while Chinese has a much more complicated system. In English, younger sisters and elder sisters are both addressed "sisters", but in Chinese, the two forms of addresses are clearly separated. Chinese system for the English word "cousin" is complicated as well. The cousins on Mother's side are called "表..." and those on Father's side are called "堂...". At the same time, females and males do not share one addressing, such as "表姐" "表哥", "堂姐" and "堂哥", and younger cousins and elder cousins are addressed separately, such as "表哥", "表弟", "堂姐" and "堂妹". Similarly, "uncle" "aunt" "father-in-law" "mother-in-law", "brother-in-law" and "sister-in-law" in English do not have corresponding words in Chinese with exact denotations and connotations. These English words seem very simple, but they cannot be understood or translated without specific linguistic context. [8]

4.4 Untranslatability Caused by Differences of Religious Culture

Religious culture is an important part of human culture, and is formed by people's religious belief and consciousness. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are the three major religions in China. In Chinese traditional culture, there is a "玉帝"(Jade Emperor) in Taoism, a "阎王"(King of nether world) in Buddhism, and a "老天爷"(God of Heaven) who controls everything in nature. These concepts do not exist in European or American culture. Most of European and American people believe in Christianity, and they believe that God creates the world, and everything on the earth has been arranged according to God's order. When

confronted with the Chinese idiom "谋事在人, 成事在天" in *A Dream of Red Mansions* (《红楼梦》), the famous translator David Hawks translated it into the English proverb "Man proposes, God disposes". It seems appropriate both in meaning and form, but English readers might doubt the old lady "刘姥姥" in China believed in Christianity, too. Consequently, words and sentences concerning religion are not easy to translate. The "dragon" that we discussed in the previous chapter is a typical example. As connotations of "dragon" are different in the east and the west, we cannot simply translate the Chinese character "龙" into "dragon", as in idioms like "望子成龙", "龙飞凤舞", "龙腾虎跃" and "龙马精神". [9]

If we want to translate one language to another, we need to learn both languages, and more importantly, we have to know both cultures, and understand the differences between them. Although cultural differences cause untranslatability to some extent, we have several methods to solve the problem. We will introduce some approaches in the next chapter.

In summary, the above chapter discusses how cultural differences influence translation and even cause untranslatability in a detailed way with examples, and concludes that translators need to understand these cultural differences before they try to find resolutions to untranslatability.

5. APPROACHES TO UNTRANSLATABILITY

Cultural differences between China and western countries inevitably cause untranslatability, but in order to achieve the goal of communication, we have to find solutions to the problem. The author will introduce some approaches to untranslatability.

5.1 Equivalence

If corresponding concepts are found in target language through analysis, we can use these corresponding concepts to replace the words in source language. For example, "证明信" can be translated into "To Whom It May Concern". The expression "证明信" in Chinese do not have the exactly corresponding word in English, but letters titled "To Whom It May Concern" and "证明信" actually have the same function.

5.2 Interpretation

If no corresponding concepts are found, the translator could interpret the word in target language. This kind of interpretation is usually a word, too, which is different from annotation and note. Take the word "精神文明" for example. We Chinese usually translate it to "spiritual civilization". When the two English words appear in western newspapers, they are often quoted with two quotation marks, because it is a Chinese way of translation. Actually, this translation does not express the connotation very well, because "civilization" is the opposite of "barbarism". We advocate "socialistic spiritual civilization", not because of the existence of "socialistic barbarism". *China Daily* has a better translation — "socialist ethic". This version is more appropriate than the original one. [10]

This approach is used frequently. Following are several examples.

Example 1: "You're a fox." — "你真聪明。"

"Fox" also means smart person in English. Here the translator interprets the meaning of fox and expresses it in another way.

Example 2: "walkman" — "随身听"

This is a perfect translation, which is very appropriate.

Example 3: By the winter of 1942, their resistance to the Nazi terror had become only a shadow.

到了 1942 年冬季,他们对纳粹恐怖统治的抵抗已经名存实亡了。

Example 4: Every family is said to have at least one skeleton in the cupboard.

据说家家户户多多少少都有自家丑事。

5.3 Concession

Sometimes, similar concepts can be found in target language instead of corresponding concepts. Moreover, these similar concepts have been gradually accepted by people speaking the target language. In this situation, translators can make some concession and adopt the similar concepts which have already existed.

Example 1: Sinologists of the older generation called the language spoken by northern officials "mandarin". They use the speakers' name "满大人" to

stand for the language they speak. Nowadays, the Putonghua we speak is also called "Mandarin" by most English-speaking countries. Now that they have connected Putonghua with Mandarin in their minds, there is no need for us to break the connection and translate "Putonghua" into "common spoken Chinese".

Example 2: "馒头" — "steamed bread"

This translation is objected by some people, who believe "馒头" and "bread" cannot be equalized, because "馒头" is steamed, but "bread" is baked. However, "steamed bread" has been accepted by people speaking English. "Steamed" is used here to emphasize that this food is steamed but not baked.

5.4 *Literal Translation*

When translating some very important things, literal translation could be used with supplement, because some words and events are peculiar to Chinese. Such as, "纸老虎" — "paper tiger" and "四人帮" — "the Gang of Four".

5.5 *Transliteration*

Some words which do not have corresponding concepts in target language can be transliterated, for example, "Karaoke" — "卡拉 OK". In some southern cities of China, a similar pronunciation of "walkman" is directly used. More examples: "豆腐" — "Tou Fu", "功夫" — "Kung Fu", "馄饨" — "Won Ton".

5.6 *Modification*

If none of the above approaches is suitable, translators could add annotation or intratextual supplement to the text in order to solve the problem. For example, Dr. Anne Birrell from Britain adopted this method when writing the prelude for her translation of 《玉台新咏》 (*New Songs from a Jade Terrace*, Penguin Books, 1986). She translated "咏物诗" to "Yung-wu poem", and added an annotation of "composition on an object". When adding an annotation to "赋", she wrote "the descriptive prose poem genre".

Finally, in the situation that the author makes mistakes on spelling or grammar on purpose to meet certain literature needs, we do have a solution to untranslatability. Here is an example:

"But it was not from Henry, it was a message from the desk clerk. She read: '9:20, Mr. Ramsee fone. You lost pkg in his ownership. He bid you stop before tiring.' She judged the last word was intended to be 'retiring'. Following is a translation from Hua Zhou: "但那不是亨利写的,而是前台服务员留下的条子。她读到: '九点二十分,拉姆西先生来电话,说你把包裹落在他家。他让你旧侵前到他那儿去。'她判断'旧侵'两个字可能是'就寝'".

"旧侵" and "就寝" are very good translations of "tiring" and "retiring". Although "fone" and "stop" which should be "phoned" and "stop by" are not well translated, "来电话" and "到他那儿去" are used as oral language, which also show the desk clerk's low level of education.

6. CONCLUSION

Due to linguistic and cultural differences between China and western countries, untranslatability is inevitably caused during practical translating activities. However, in order to achieve the goal of communication, we have to find solutions to the problem. The author introduces some approaches to untranslatability in this thesis. Anyway, translators should try their best to convey connotations and cultural information to receptors.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Hui Li.

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