



## CONSTRUCTION OF COLLOCATIONS IN THE WRITING OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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It is widely acknowledged that collocations play an important role in second language learning, particularly at the intermediate and advanced levels. This study intended to explore the influence of first language (L1) and the cultural background of learners on the production of collocations. Thirty Iranian postgraduate students participated in this study and their academic writings have been analyzed to determine the collocations they produced and to identify the basis for their difficulties in producing collocations. A focus group interview has been used to determine the influence of L1 and cultural background of the learners on the production of collocations. The result showed that learners have difficulties with both lexical and grammatical collocations in their writing. First language influence appeared to have a strong effect on the learners' production of collocation. In addition, as language and culture are not separable, the cultural difference between the first language and target language caused students to come up with odd lexical collocations. The results indicated that learners are often not aware of the collocations and are not able to control their collocation production.

Keywords: Collocations, Construction, Culture, L1 influence.

### Introduction

This paper intended to investigate the influence of L1 and cultural background of the EFL Iranian learners on the production of collocations. In addition this study investigated learners' use of collocations by analyzing the learners' written works based on a writing task. Collocations are two or more words which have a strong tendency to co-occur in a language as a prefabricated combination of two or more words in a particular context. (Halliday, 1968) They are one of the difficulties that second language learners, in particular, adult second language learners, have to deal with in the process of learning English. Students often come across quite a large number of difficulties in all language skills. These difficulties depend on a variety of variables such as students' native language (L1) background, age, and personality, vary in their intensity and nature.

So much of language teaching over the years has been based on the dichotomy of grammar and vocabulary: master the grammar system, learn lots of words and then the speaker will be able to talk about any topic. This view of language has meant that students have learned to name a lot of things - an extensive vocabulary, predominantly nouns - and then struggled to use grammar to talk about those things. This is the reason for so many grammar mistakes (Lewis, 1997). People are using grammar to do what it was never meant to do. Grammar enables them to construct language when they are unable to find what they want ready-made in their mental lexicons. But so much of the language of the effective language user is already in prefabricated chunks, stored in their mental lexicons just waiting to be recalled

for use. Among these combinations, there are words that “co-occur naturally with greater than random frequency” (Lewis, 1997, p. 25) and with “mutual expectancy” (Zhang, 1993, p. 1). Those words are well linked in a native speaker’s memory and retrieved as a chunk (Aghbar, 1990). For example *sour milk and rancid milk* are well-established collocations that are remembered in chunks and are used by native speakers as chunks. However, *rotten milk* is not stored as a unit in a native speaker’s memory and therefore, is not a collocation. ESL/EFL learners can concoct an awkward expression such as *rotten milk* when they have no memory or intuition of the correct or acceptable collocation that native speakers use. These chunks of lexis, which include collocations, do more than just name things, they also have a pragmatic element. They enable learners to talk about things - to 'do' things. This raises the status of collocation to much more than just 'words which go together.

The majority of Iranian EFL learners have some knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; however, they seem to have serious problems with the use of collocations. For instance; “make a mistake” is an acceptable collocation in the English language. Iranian learners using the Persian language say “*baran-e- shadid*” which literally means “*hard rain*” and when it comes to English they think in their first language and instead of “*heavy rain*” they write or say “*hard rain.*” This example is a semantic expansion, in which learners impose a corresponding word meaning into target-language word, reflecting influence from Persian *shadid* = “hard” and “heavy”. This inefficiency is most likely due to the lack of knowledge of word combinations among Iranian EFL students, and to a large extent, the inadequate emphasis given to the teaching of collocational patterns in their textbooks, and the type of instruction they receive. Producing collocations in writing poses particular difficulties. To enhance EFL learners' writing competence, English teachers have been making significant efforts, spending a great deal of time devoting themselves to correcting students' writing and attempting to identify the difficult areas in students' English compositions. Despite this effort, the same errors continue to occur. In fact, as Bahn and Eldaw (1993) state, it is usually the case that the majority of EFL learners have different problems in their oral and written production. According to Hill, "Students with good ideas often lose marks because they don't know the four or five most important collocations of a key word that is central to what they are writing about" (Hill, 2000:5).

## Literature Review

According to Robins (1976), studies on collocations started 2.300 years ago in Greece. The Greek Stoics related collocations to semantics and used the concept of collocation to study the meaning relationships between words. According to these ancient scholars, words “do not exist in isolation, and they may differ according to the collocation in which they are used” (Robins, 1967, p.21). The British linguist J. R. Firth, who is the father of collocational studies in modern times, is in the tradition of the Greek Stoics. Many of his statements about collocations are similar to the ancient Greek scholars; for example “words are mutually expectant and mutually comprehended” (Firth, 1957, p.12) or “you shall know a word by the company it keeps” (p. 11). Although, it is widely accepted that Firth is the first linguist in modern times to explicitly introduce the notion of collocation into a theory of meaning, Mitchell (1971) believes that Firth in the selection of the term collocation may have been influenced by Palmer’s monograph on collocations.

After Palmer’s work in 1930s, second language teachers have looked at collocations as both an opportunity and a problem. There have been some factors in recent years, which helped collocations in particular and 'formulaic language' in general to come into focus for second language learners: The expansion of computerized texts and works of Sinclair (1987) showed the quick spreading of the use of collocation. For Pawley and Syder (1983) multi-word ‘lexicalized’ phrases have the important role in producing fluent and idiomatic language; regular and odd chunks are at the heart of those usage-based models in both language description and first language acquisition (Tomasello 2003). In a study which is a case study, Seesink (2007) investigated intermediate students with Arabic, Chinese, Japans, and Korean background to see if teaching vocabulary and collocations in particular improves the writing of the

students or not. She used an online program to teach students collocation. In the end she concluded that attention to collocations had a positive impact on the students' results. But she didn't clarify that what type of collocations she used. In her study she didn't show what types of collocations are difficult for the learners. Due to the huge number of collocations, it is not possible to teach students all types of collocations, therefore, those collocations which are more problematic to the students should be recognized and taught first.

Based on Smith's (2005) statement including collocation in the curriculum is very important. The first reason is when non-native speakers encounter extensive difficulty in selecting the accurate combination of words, even in cases where the learner knows the individual words, collocations are still likely to be problematic. According to Lewis (1993) the second reason is the need for learners to go beyond the 'intermediate plateau'. These students can cope in most situations, but they tend to 'avoid' or 'talk around' the more challenging tasks of advanced language learning. Collocation instruction is especially motivating for upper level students (Williams, 2002). The third reason is that possessing knowledge of frequently occurring collocations increases vocabulary knowledge and improves fluency and helps stress and intention (Williams, 2002). The final reason is that collocation errors are more damaging to the communication process than most grammatical errors. The result is unnatural sounding expressions or odd or possibly out of date phrasing. While the need for research on collocations has been identified a long time ago, academic investigations have only been conducted recently. Statements on the degree of L1 influence on lexis in general are contradictory. On the one hand, it has been claimed that L1 influence is not very important in the area of lexis (Martin 1984) while on the other hand, that lexis is among the levels of language most likely to be affected by transfer (Ellis 1996: 315). Among the small number of recent studies on collocation there is a study by Burgschmidt and Perkins (1985) cited in Nesselhauf (2004). They have observed frequent transfer by advanced learners. The same result is obtained by Baigent (1999), though in neither study is this influence quantified. With regard to individual types of phraseological units, the findings are also contradictory. For collocations, a whole range of claims can be found. Some authors conclude on the basis of their studies that L1 influence is very weak. For example, Farghal and Obiedat (1995: 320) in their elicitation test and Lombard (1997) in her production study observe transfer in about 10% of the non-native-like collocations produced by advanced learners (cf. Section 1.2). Biskup (1992) observes a somewhat greater degree of L1 influence in a translation test on collocations, but also a considerable difference between groups with different L1s. She finds 21% L1 influence on inappropriate collocations with German learners and 48% with Polish learners.

Unfortunately, these studies don't provide the desirable information regarding the general proficiency level of the subjects or statistical information on the test instruments used. To some extent, it is difficult to know exactly how solid their findings are because most of them have used a lexical approach and eliminated the grammar aspect. In addition, none of these studies have investigated the influence of culture on the production of collocations.

## **The Study**

This paper intended to investigate the influence of L1 and cultural background of the learners on the production of collocations. In addition this study investigated learners' use of collocations by analyzing the learners' written work based on a writing task. The next sections of this paper will explain the classification of collocations, research questions, methodology, and result and discussion.

## **Classification of Collocations**

Based on Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986), collocations fall into two categories: Grammatical collocations and Lexical collocations. Following Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986), a grammatical collocation generally is a dominant open class word (noun, adjective or verb) and a preposition or particular structural pattern such as an infinitive or a clause. The major types of grammatical collocations

are: Noun + Preposition/ to infinitive/ that clause (access to, agreement that...), Preposition + Noun (in advance, to somebody's advantage), Adjective + Preposition/ to infinitive/ that clause (aware of, necessary to, afraid that...), a verb combining in different ways with a preposition, an infinitive with to, an infinitive without to, a verb form ending in -ing, that clause (Adjust to, begin to, keep doing, think that...).

A lexical collocation, on the other hand, normally does not contain infinitive or clauses. It typically consists of open class words (Noun, Adjective, verb or adverb). According to syntactic characteristics, Lewis (2001, p. 51) classifies lexical collocations into six major types: Adjective + Noun (*strong tea, major problem, key issue*), Noun + Noun (*a pocket calculator, sense of pride*), Verb + Noun (*make an impression, set an alarm*), Verb + Adverb (*spell accurately, live dangerously, smiled proudly*), Adverb + Adjective (*strictly accurate, completely soaked, happily married*), and Noun + Verb (*companies merged, pose a problem*).

### Research Question

This study intends to answer the following research question.

1. To what extent do L1 and cultural background influence the production of collocations?

### Methodology

#### Subjects

The participants in this study are 30 Iranian, male and female, postgraduate students at UKM (University Kebangsaan Malaysia) University. Their age varies from twenty four to thirty five. Their level of English is intermediate and above as it is compulsory for students to have a minimum IELTS 5.5 to be able to register at the university. English language is their foreign language. Those students who do not have IELTS are required to take a placement test and they are required to score at least 80%. The university has an intensive English course program to accommodate those who score less than 80% in the placement test. Placement test consists of speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. Students remain in this program until they managed to obtain the university's admission requirement.

#### Instruments

The data collection instruments used in this study were a writing task and focus group interview. For analyzing the data SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) V19 has been used to show the quantitative data clearly.

#### Writing Task

Students were asked to write about the following topic:

1. Write about unforgettable experience you have had.
2. How did you spend your last Norouz holiday (Iranian New Year holiday)?

In order to make it easier for students to complete the writing task a number of things were considered in the selection of these titles. First, writing about an unforgettable experience is a personal matter and therefore it is assumed to be motivating and thought-provoking. Second, the topic related to friends, family, and culture are familiar enough to write about easily for the students. The participants

were asked to write an essay on a topic provided for them. They had 45 min to write the essay. They were asked to write an essay not shorter than 250 words. The subjects' writing production was used to analyze the use of their lexical and grammatical collocations. Uses of collocations were measured by the quantity, variety, and accuracy of collocations. Frequencies of occurrence of lexical and grammatical collocations were counted both in quantity and variety.

### Focus Group Interview

A focus group is a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being 'focused' on a given topic' (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). There were 7 postgraduate students participated in the interview. 7 students were selected for the group interview according to Krueger & Casey (2000) suggestion. They say that the number of participants in group interview should be seven students, large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorganized or fragmented. A Focus group interview was used to discuss on the collocations produced by subjects and to see if these collocations are commonly used amongst Iranians. The interview section took 3 hours to finish and whole the duration was recorded by the researcher. Later the recorded data was transcribed for data analysis.

### Data Analysis Procedure

There was a coding procedure after data collection. All the materials were placed into folders with an identifying number on each. To assure participants' anonymity, identifying numbers were used instead of names. For analyzing the interview data this study used 'framework analysis' by Krueger's (1994). For analyzing the interview data five steps have been used. The steps are: 1. familiarization; 2. identifying a thematic framework; 3. indexing; 4. charting; and 5. mapping and interpretation.

### Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the frequency of use for both grammatical and lexical collocation by the subjects in their writings. The following conclusions can be drawn from table 2:

- a) Lexical collocations are easier for learners to acquire than grammatical collocations. The total number of grammatical collocations is 58 whereas the total number for lexical collocations is 115.
- b) The performance of the subjects on different subtypes of lexical collocation is significantly different. Among different subtypes of lexical collocation, *verb + noun* appear the easiest for learners to acquire in comparison with other types of lexical collocations.
- c) The subjects' performance on three subtypes of grammatical collocation is significantly different. In grammatical collocation, *verb + preposition* appeared easier for the subjects than *noun+preposition* and *adjective+ preposition*.

During second language learning, two practical restrictions not present in L1 acquisition determine that there is a significant difference between L1 and L2 lexical development processes. The first restriction is the poverty of input in connection with both quantity and quality. Classroom L2 learners often lack sufficient, highly contextualized input in the target language. As a result, this makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for an L2 learner to extract and create semantic, syntactic, and morphological specifications about a word and integrate such information into the lexical entry of that word. EFL learners usually focus on the individual words and neglect other important information, that is to say, what these individual words co-occurred with. They learn collocations as separate words rather than in chunks. As a result, when they want to produce collocation, they refer to their first language to find a

suitable word for producing collocation in target language. When that happens the consequences are under the influence of L1 on L2. This phenomenon is referred to by linguists as *transfer*. Transfer can be positive or negative. Positive transfer occurs when the patterns of L1 and L2 are the same. Negative transfer occurs when the patterns of students' L1 and L2 are different, in which case problems may arise.

**Table 1.** Frequency of use in the writing samples.

Type of Collocation	Subtypes	Frequency	Percent (%)	Total collocation
<b>Grammatical</b>	Verb+ Proposition	38	65.5	58
	Proposition + Noun	13	22.4	
	Adjective + proposition	7	12.1	
<b>Lexical</b>	Verb + Noun	76	66.1	115
	Adjective + Noun	26	22.6	
	Noun + Noun	9	7.8	
	Verb + Adverb	1	.9	
	Verb + Adjective	2	1.7	
	Noun + Adjective	1	.9	

### Positive Transfer

In the participants writing tasks it was seen that when collocations had equivalents in Persian, it was easy for students to produce them. The following items are among the positively-transferred items:

1. album comes out
2. breaks promise
3. do homework
4. blank tape
5. golden opportunities
6. preference to
7. success in

### Negative Transfer

Based on the results, negative transfer like positive transfer is a common phenomenon among second language learners. The data showed that students had problems with collocations that had no equivalents

in Persian. As a result, when students did not know a certain collocation, they relied on their first language and negatively transferred collocations from their L1. The collocation *heavy rain*, for instance, was one of the problematic collocations. In addition to the fact that such a collocation does not have a Persian equivalent and thus cause a difficulty to students. As such, having difficulty with *heavy rain* may be explained by either the nature of the collocation or negative transfer factors. One of the interviewee said: *For heavy, I say I am heavy. We use heavy for weight. We don't say the rain is heavy. I say hard rain. Do you know why? Because I am talking in English now. I am not very good in English. I want to say heavy rain, I don't know heavy, the first word comes in my mind I use it and I say hard rain.* Another example is *leave message* where one of the students instead of *leave message* has used *give message*. In Persian *leave* means go away from or leave something behind. It has a negative meaning and it is different from English. So, everybody uses verb 'give' and not 'leave'. Another interviewee said: *most of Persian compound verbs consist of 3 verbs: give, do, and take. That's why when we produce compound verbs usually we use one of these verbs with them.* The table 2,3, and 4 may show his point. The following tables show the common compound verbs in Persian and how these 3 verbs collocate with other words.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 show that verbs *kardan* (to do), *dadan* (to give), and *gereftan* (to take) are part of the most of the collocations or compound verbs in Persian while on the other hand in English there are so many verbs that are involve in making and constructing the collocations. These three verbs are the most commonly used verbs in Persian simply because apart from their direct and standalone meaning, they are used in thousands of different expressions and "compound verbs" as an auxiliary verb. One of the unique characteristics of the Persian verbal system is its predominant use of compound verbs to express verbal notions. Unlike English, where it has over 5000 simple verbs, Persian has less than 200. All other verbal notions are expressed through complex expressions. Therefore, when Iranian learners try to produce collocations they follow the compound verbs in Persian and by relying on them produce the collocations. In table 4, the first item is *take a shower*, take means '*gereftan*' in Persian. As it shows *gereftan* collocates with *doosh* (shower) in Persian. Therefore, this collocation has an equivalent in Persian language and the learners do not confront any problem to produce it in their writing.

Table 2. Kardan= to do.

English	+	collocates	Persian verb	+	collocates
Paint		apply, put on	Kardan (do)		rang (paint)
Mistake		make	Kardan		eshtebah (mistake)
Save		make	Kardan		pasandaz (save)
Shower		take	Kardan		hamam (shower)
Watch		-----	Kardan		tamasha (watch a movie)
Annoy		-----	Kardan		narahat (annoy)
Lecture		give a	Kardan		sokhanrani (lecture)
Reservation		make	Kardan		salam (hello)
Hello		say	Kardan		reserve (reserve)
Suicide		commit	Kardan		Khodkoshi (suicide)
Effort		make)	Kardan		talash (effort)
Fight		for, with	Kardan		daava (fight)
try		have	Kardan		emtehan (try)
Call		make	Kardan		Telephone (phone )
Plan		make	Kardan		barnamerizi (plan)
Trip		take, make)	Kardan		safar (trip)
Improvement		achieve, make	Kardan		pishraft (improvement)
Risk		take	Kardan		risk (khatar)
Guidance		give	Kardan		rahnamee (guidance)

Note	<b>take</b>	<b>Kardan</b>	yaddasht (note)
Fishing	<b>go</b>	<b>Kardan</b>	mahigiri (fishing)
Visit	<b>make</b>	<b>Kardan</b>	molaghat (visit)
Request	<b>make, submit</b>	<b>Kardan</b>	darkhast (request)
Accident	<b>Have</b>	<b>Kardan</b>	tasadof (accident)

Table 3. Dadan= to give.

English	+	collocates	Persian verb	+	collocates
Message		<b>leave</b>	<b>Dadan (give)</b>		peigham
Hand		<b>shake</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		dast
Promise		<b>make</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		ghol
Listen		<b>to</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		goosh
Request		<b>make</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		darkhast
Exam		<b>take</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		emtehan
Divorce		<b>get, apply for</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		talagh
Return		-----	<b>Dadan</b>		pas
Show		-----	<b>Dadan</b>		neshan
Happen		-----	<b>dadan</b>		Rokh
Important		<b>consider</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		ahammiyat
Defeat		-----	<b>Dadan</b>		shekast
Noise		<b>make</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		seda
Explain		-----	<b>Dadan</b>		tozih
Taste		<b>have</b>	<b>Dadan</b>		mazzeh

Table 4. Gereftan= to take.

English	+	collocates	Persian	+	collocates
Shower		<b>take</b>	<b>gereftan (take)</b>		doosh
Decision		<b>make</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		tasmim
Fetid		<b>turn</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		bu
Diet		<b>have, go on</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		regim
Driving license		<b>get</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		govahiname
Present		<b>receive</b>	<b>gefetan</b>		hadiyeh
Divorce		<b>get</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		talagh
Permission		<b>gain</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		ejazeh
Fire		<b>catch</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		atash
Witness		<b>call to</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		shahed
Pain		<b>have</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		dard
Photo		<b>take</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		aks
Delivery		<b>receive</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		tahvil
Headache		<b>have</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		sardard
Visa		<b>get</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		visa
Celebration		<b>hold, have</b>	<b>gereftan</b>		jashn

Another factor that influences on the production of collocation is culture and background of the subjects. It is widely accepted that language and culture are not separable. Language is a part of culture and plays a significance role in it. Therefore, language concomitantly reflects culture and is affected and formed by it. Since culture consists of people's historical and cultural background, it is considered as the symbolic representation of people and also as their way of living and thinking and their approach to life. Learners construct the new knowledge by using their previous knowledge they have acquired. Their previous knowledge comes from past experience, culture and environment. In other words, learning is



social and it happens within a culture. Learners make new meaning by relying on the previous knowledge and the action of this construction is mental and it happens in the mind. As learning is a social activity, learners' knowledge and their learning is associated with their connection with other human being, their teachers, their peers, their family and in general with society. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language. People of different cultures can refer to different things while using the same language forms. According to Cowie (1998), "cultural background refers to information that is most difficult to formalize, as it is connected with semantics in a very indirect and still unexplored way. We say that a word or a word-combination has 'cultural background' when it possesses a clearly discernible ideological aura associated with a historical situation, a political movement, a fashionable trend, and so on." Therefore when an Iranian learner comes up with a collocation like *darken hair* (dye hair) Cultural background can be discerned in such lexical collocation. Collocation *dye hair* in English has an equivalent in Persian, but Iranian learners usually say *darken hair* instead of *dye hair*. Considering the learners' culture, an explanation is that the use of the verb *darkening* is a result of cultural interference because people usually don't see the hair of ladies and they see the hair of men. In Iran men only dye their hair black. It is clear that this learner has relied on his background knowledge and produced this collocation. However, cultural patterns differ from one language to another language and from culture to culture. For example, *bread* collocates with *cheese* in Persian, but with *butter* in English. Both the English and the Iranians value their neighbors' goodness and friendliness. However, the English prefer quiet neighbors, whereas Iranians are happy to have watchful neighbors. They are people who help us and take care and watch our house when we are not around. This may indicate that Iranians have a much closer relationship with their neighbors than do the English. So, differences in collocational patterning in different languages reflect the preferences of specific language communities for certain modes of expression. Some collocations are a direct reflection of the material, social, or moral environment in which they occur. Therefore, as L2 English learners' culture is different from the culture of the target language, so it causes them to produce collocations which sound raw and unacceptable to the native speaker of English but cannot be consider as a wrong collocation because it has a cultural background and it is related to the culture of the learners. So, as language and culture are not separable one cannot accept the language but skip its culture.

### Conclusion and Implication

This study investigated the influence of L1 and cultural background of the learners on the production of collocations. In addition this study investigated learners' use of collocations by analyzing the learners' written work based on writing task. This study illustrated that when there was a confluence between the English collocations and Persian equivalents, the students tended to provide the correct collocation but in an opposite manner, when there was a deviation between the collocations in the two languages, students faced difficulty with the items. This study showed that culture and background of the subjects influence on the production of collocations.

Based on the findings of this study it is recommended that:

1. Considering difficulty of the production in collocations, learners are in need of more practice producing collocations. Also, they should receive as much collocation input as possible.
2. Non-congruent collocations should receive more attention in language teaching without neglecting congruent collocations as some researchers suggested (Bahns, 1993).
3. In teaching collocations, more attention should be given to teaching those collocations, which the results showed to be more difficult, if not a challenge, to the participants.

Collocations are very important in writing and using them properly enhances the writing skill. Acquisition of specialized collocations will enable learner to communicate in a professionally acceptable way. In addition to, when time is limited to formulate a message and get it across in writing, writers

would feel a more pressing need to use prefabricated expressions to save processing time and energy. Including collocations in curriculum and preparing the students to use collocations effectively and appropriately in writing will contribute to efficient communication. Particularly, with adult ESL/EFL learners, who are uncomfortable about their limited structural and lexical knowledge, the teaching of collocations can have additional advantages. This is because collocations can decrease their affective filter by providing them with ready-made chunks and prepackaged building blocks so that their worry about structure and lack of words can be reduced.

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