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Models of language variation and change: new evidence from language contact

Reports on major dialectal areas in Southern Italy

Sicily

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1. History

1.1. Ancient era

Due to its position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and its closeness to the rest of Italy, Sicily has always been one of the most important commercial hubs – not to say the most important – since ancient times. Therefore, it is not surprising that some traces of these ancient populations can be still visible today, for example in some toponyms. Arguably, *Siculi* and *Sicani* gave their name to the island. The former apparently have Italic origin and founded the important colony of Zancle (modern Messina), while the latter could be an indigenous group vaguely related to ancient Ligurians (see for example the toponym Entella, that we find both in modern Sicily and Liguria), a non-Indo-European ethnic group (Varvaro 1981, Rohlf 1984). The north-western part of the island, which was occupied by *Elimi* (see the foundation of towns like Erice, Segesta) soon ended up under Punic hegemony, whose fundamental centres (which were mostly commercial *hubs*) were Mozia, Palermo, Solunto and, later, Lilibeo (Varvaro 1981). Carthaginians had a political-military hegemony on the north-western part of the island until the concurrence of the Greek colonization. Indeed, from the 7th century onwards, many Greek colonies were founded, such as Taormina, Naxos, Lentini, Tapso, Selinunte, Gela, Agrigento and Syracuse. In particular, the latter became increasingly powerful. By the centuries going by, these *poleis* were constantly in contact, leading to a growing uniformity of the dialectal varieties towards a Doric koinè, which spread all over the island (Varvaro 1981, Tribulato 2012).

1.2. Romans and Greeks

The Romanization of the Hellenistic world, therefore that of Sicily, had a political and military goal rather than a linguistic one. Of course, Romans founded their colonies such as *Thermae Himeræae* and *Tauromenium*, but the Greek linguistic identity, due to its high prestige, remained untouched. Tribulato (2012: 313) shows that instances of calques are found in an honorific inscription from Agrigentum, as well as in a set of honorifics from Segesta. The Agrigentum text, discovered in the old agora and precisely dated between 2 BC and AD 14: it is an official document written in Greek, but celebrating Augustus and his *flamen*, and mentioning the *duumviri*. According to the author «In keeping with the bilingual flavour of the text, this inscription retains the word *flamen*, while the Roman magistracy of the *duumviri* is translated into Greek (here in the gen. δύο ἀνδρες). While the

latter is a case of borrowing through calque (the expression ‘two men’ is kept, but translated into the corresponding Greek words), the first word is simply borrowed into Greek as it is» Tribulato (2012: 313). On the other hand, we can find several borrowings and calques from Greek into Latin, as shown in an inscription published by Nenci (1995: 1184–5) that commemorates the restoration of a road at the hands of L. Iulius Agrippa: *L(ucio) Iulio C(aii) f(ilio) Agrippae euergetae hic plateam a Sosia usque ad fanum*. In this brief inscription, many borrowings and calques can be detected: «the road is mentioned with the rare term *platea*, clearly deriving from *πλαταια* [...]; the loanword *euergeta* – here in its oldest attestation – is used for the title of benefactor; and the name *Sosias*, too, is a Greek form (vs Latin *Sosius*)» Tribulato (2012: 314). However, funerary and commemorative Latin inscriptions are more frequently found in Western Sicily, while Greek is still hegemonic in the east (except for Messina, due to its more frequent contacts with the peninsula). In any case, a widespread bilingualism seems to be the most appropriate picture for Sicily in this period. During the Late Imperial Age, Latin inscriptions for the western area seemed to prevail, while Greek inscriptions for the eastern area. Western Sicily, in fact, gravitated in the African orbit, which still maintained a very flourishing city economy (in deeply Latinised cities) (Khoronen 2012).

1.3. The Middle Ages

The economic aspect and habitat of Sicily does not seem to have changed much since the Byzantine conquest in the 6th century. There are not so many big urban settlements, and the population is more concentrated in the countryside, with a very scattered distribution. Due to the influence of the Greek church, (Varvaro 1981, von Falkenhausen 1982), Greek was still considered a prestigious variety, while Latin remains at a popular level. This situation changes during the Muslim conquest. Arabs took at least a century and a half to conquer Sicily (IX century – mid X century) but their colonizations left many traces even in the modern lexicon and toponyms, such as Calatafimi and Calascibetta, both deriving from arabic *qalah* or *qalat* 'castle'; Gibraltar, and Mongibello from arabic *ǧabal*. In this period, many Latin-speaking people belonging to the lower class converted to Islam, but did not shift to Arabic. This leads Varvaro (1981) to label this variety of Latin (but we should say Romance) Sicilian Mozarabic, which was the same name given to the Romance varieties spoken in Spain under Arabic dominations. There are no many traces of this variety, but there are some few attestations that show that Latin final -S was still preserved, as it was preserved in the Romance variety that still was spoken in Africa in the X century (Varvaro 1981).

1.4. Normans and the birth of Modern Sicilian

The Norman conquest of Sicily (1061 Messina, 1091 Butera, Noto and Malta, see Varvaro 1981) brought about a new process of linguistic homologation. Until then, none of the three major linguistic components of

the island (Greek, Romance, Arabic) had prevailed definitively, but it was precisely in this period that some sort of “proto-Sicilian” arose (Varvaro 1981: 200-216). At that time, there were many demographic gaps that needed to be filled, so Normans called faith-proven people coming from their traditional feudal possessions in northern Italy. Moreover, the Arab community was not completely resigned to the new domination. In this turbulent situation, Normans needed a deeper control of their new conquests. So, they tried to organize new matrimonial and demographic policies with the aim of separating the north-western Arab community from the one living in the south-east. Such territorial division and the strict alliance of Normans with the traditional Roman clergy gradually led to the hegemony of a Romance variety, slowly making Greek and Arabic lose their prestige, even though we have traces of Greek surviving until the Renaissance period. There were more or less latent rebellions of the Arabs until 1243, when they took Entella, but they were finally defeated in 1246 and deported to Lucera (Varvaro 1981). The separation of Sicily from the rest of Southern Italy, occurred when after the war of the *Vespro Siciliano* (1282), did not bring about dramatic cultural consequences. The cultural and linguistic aspect of Sicily as we know it today had roughly settled during the two centuries of Norman power (Varvaro 1981). From a historical point of view, Sicily was annexed again to the rest of Southern Italy only in the 16th century, with the passage of the island into the hands of Bourbons.

2. General properties



Map adapted from Pellegrini (1977)

According to the classification of the Italian dialects made by Pellegrini (1977), all of the dialects of Sicily belong to the Extreme Southern Italo-Romance group, essentially because all these dialects are encompassed south of isogloss 24, which is the inferior limit of final vowels melting into -ə, and south of isogloss 25,

which is the upper limit of the “Sicilian” vowel system. Other isoglossae are drawn to make further partitions within Sicily, but we are going to deal with those in the following paragraphs.

3. Vowel system

The Sicilian vowel system, characterizing all the Extreme Italo-Romance dialects, shows three degrees of aperture and five phonemes in stressed positions (/i ε a ɔ u/, and two degrees of aperture and three phonemes in non-stressed positions (/i a u/) (see Tagliavini 1972; Rohlf's 1966, Fanciullo 1984; Varvaro 1988; Loporcaro 2011; Ledgeway 2016, Cruschina 2020):

Tab. 1: Sicilian stressed vowel system

Ī Ĭ Ē	Ĕ	Ā	Ō	Ō Ū Ū
i	ε	a	ɔ	u

- (1) *filu* < FĪLU ‘thread’, *nivi* < NĪVE ‘snow’, *tila* < TĒLA ‘canvas’,
- (2) *terra* < TĔRRA ‘hearth’
- (3) *kani* < CANE ‘dog’
- (4) *forti* < FŌRTE ‘strong’
- (5) *vuči* < VŌCE ‘voice’, *kruči* < CRŪCE ‘cross’ *luči* < LŪCE ‘light’

This scheme is generally valid for the whole Sicily, with local variants. For example, in the western part of Sicily (Trapanese and surroundings) the outcomes of stressed Lat. Ĕ, Ō are not the low-mid vowels shown in (2) and (4), but have the superficial realization of, respectively, [e] and [o] (Ruffino 1984, 1991, 1997). For a more in-depth account of these local variations, see Cruschina (2020). According to Fanciullo (1984, 1996, 2001), this pentavocalic system arose in the Romance dialects that underwent the effect of a Greek substratum. Therefore, the so-called Sicilian vowel system characterizing the extreme Southern Romance dialects can be considered a further evolution of the common Romance system under the influence of Greek. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that this evolution started from several lexemes shared by both varieties, that bilingual speakers made probably no effort to switch when needed. Let us see some examples:

- (6) ‘candle’
 - i. Gr. *ξανθῆλιον* (with <ῆ> and <ι> both melted into /i/)
 - ii. Ital. *cand[e]lla*
 - iii. Sicil. *kannila*

(7) ‘halter’

- i. Gr. *χαλίστριον*
- ii. Ital. *cap[e]stro*
- iii. Sicil. *kapistru*

(8) ‘oven’

- i. φουρνος (with < ου > = /u/)
- ii. *f[o]rno*
- iii. Sicil. *Furnu*

(9) ‘grape must’

- i. μουστος
- ii. *m[o]sto*
- iii. Sicil. *mustu*

(Fanciullo 2001:72).

3.1. Metaphony in Sicily

The presence or the absence of metaphony has been used within the traditional classification by Piccitto (1950), accepted by Pellegrini (see the map above), for a sub-partition of the dialects of the island. Broadly speaking, metaphony is absent in the north-western part of the region, whereas it is present with various phonetic realizations and outcomes, in the central and south-eastern part: a rising diphthong (10i), a falling diphthong (10ii) or monophthongization to a high vowel (10iii) (see Piccitto 1951, 1969; Ruffino 2001; Cruschina 2006, Cruschina 2020):

(10) Ē-Ō > a. 'bɛddu, 'bɔnu ‘beautiful’, ‘good’

- i. ié-uó (biéddu, buónu)
- ii. íe-úo / íə-úə (biéddu/bíəddu)
- iii. í-ú (bíddu, búnu)

adapted from Cruschina (2020: 83)

The area around Palermo shows diphthongization of the stressed mid-vowels, which is not triggered by the outcomes of Lat. -U and -I, as is the case of the “usual” metaphony. Such diphthongization seems independent of any sort of phonological context. Therefore, Ruffino (1991, but see also 1997) argues that such diphthongization might be a recent innovation, essentially due to a wrong imitation of an exterior model:

(11) bbwɔnu < BŌNU - bbwɔni < BŌNI ‘good (masculine)’

(12) bbwɔna < BŌNA - bbwɔni < BŌN(A)E ‘good (feminine)’

(13) pjɛri < PĚDE - pjɛri < *PĚDI ‘foot – feet’

adapted from Ruffino (1997: 365)

Although metaphony is widespread in Sicily, in those dialects it never became the only means to convey some morphological features, as it is the case for many other dialects of Southern Italy, where metaphony extended to other cases which were unexpected etymologically (see Fanciullo 1994, Maiden 1991, Savoia and Maiden 1997, a. o.).

4. Consonants

In the traditional literature, many *isoglossae* concerning single consonants or clusters of consonants have been used to classify the dialects of Sicily. Piccitto (1950) divides such *isoglossae* into three geographical sub-groups: a) western area; b) central area; c) eastern area. The western *isoglossae* can be listed as follows:

- (14) palatalisation of preconsonantal [r] (e.g. CARNE > ['karni] > ['kajnni] meat)
- (15) -L̄- (+vowel), GL > [λλ]: FILIU(M) > ['fiλλu]; GLOMERU(M) > ['λλɔmmaru] 'ball'
- (16) FL- > [ç] (FLUMEN > ['çumi] 'river');
- (17) -BL- > [λλ] (NEB(U)LA(M) > ['neλλa] 'fog')

The central *isoglossae* can be listed as follows:

- (18) LD > [ll] (e.g. CAL(I)DU(M) > ['kallu] 'hot');
- (19) L > [n] preceding a dental or a palatal consonant (FALSU(M) > ['fantsu] 'false');
- (20) NF > [mp] and SF > [sp] (shared with East Agrigentino, INFAME(M) > [m'pami] 'infamous')

The eastern *isoglossae* can be listed as follows:

- (21) South-eastern dialects: palatal outcome of CL PL (CLAUE(M) > ['čavi] 'key', PLUMBU(M) > ['čummu] 'lead')
- (22) Catanese-Syracusan: assimilation of preconsonantal R (CARNE(M)) > ['kanni] 'flesh')
- (23) Messina: preservation of Latin -ND- and -MB- clusters (['kwandu] 'when', [pa'lumba] 'dove'); preservation of B at the beginning of the word (e.g. *bbucca*, *bbutti* VS sicil. *vukka*, *vutti* 'mouth, barrel')

adapted from Piccitto (1950:25 ff)

Although Piccitto's classification has always represented a major contribution, more recent classification, such as those by Ruffino (1984, 1991, 1997), raised some criticism because the older classification took into account only phonetic and phonological traits, neglecting other morpho-syntactic features. Moreover, Ruffino argues that, for the sake of a truly informative classification, the historic evolution of every single phenomenon should be considered and described. In Ruffino's words:

«We can always delimit dialect groupings by more or less reliable procedures, but then we are merely focusing on the latest stage of a historical development rooted in the very distant past. If we consider individual innovations, or the persistence through time of significant archaisms, we can discern by what channels

innovatory currents have appeared, or where the major barriers to innovation have been. Thus we may bring to light both the historical operation of linguistic and cultural influences, and the ongoing linguistic dynamics internal to the relevant area» (Ruffino 1997: 367)

One of the criteria Ruffino chooses for his classification is the difference between conservative and innovative traits. We just provide some examples concerning the consonantism (Ruffino 1997:369):

- (24) D > [d], [ð] mainly in central areas; elsewhere we have [r] or [ɹ]; [d] > [t] is typical of Eastern Messinese dialects and some N.E. dialects on the slopes of mount Etna (Linguaglossa, Calatabiano);
- (25) FL > [ç] in a wide central area, in some isolated points in the Messina area (Floresta), and some points around Etna (Bronte), on Lipari; elsewhere the innovatory [ʃ];
- (26) especially interesting is the conservation in a small part of the W. Agrigento area, and on Pantelleria, of the Arabic pharyngeal fricative articulated as [xI or [h] (elsewhere [k, ɣ, f]: [ha'rara] 'gust of warm air' < Arabic HARARA(H)

Other lexical and morphological isoglossae that can provide a more precise picture of the dialects of Sicily are dealt with in the following paragraph.

5. Some shared morphological and lexical phenomena

First, we are going to list some morphological salient elements that are shared everywhere in Sicily, such as (Ruffino 1997: 368):

- (27) the lack of apocope in the infinitival forms of the verbs in the final syllable: merid. [va'sa] vs. Sicil. [va'sari] 'to kiss'
- (28) lack of an enclitic possessive adjective with kinship terms: sicil. *me frati* vs napol. *fratəmə* 'my brother'

Besides these morphological phenomena, the traditional literature (at least since Rohlfs 1924) highlighted the presence of several lexical items borrowed from Northern-Italian migrations origin (see. Rohlfs 1972), that contrast with other lexical types which are widespread everywhere in continental Southern Italy. Those examples are listed in Table 2:

Tab.2

Sicily	Central and Northern Calabria	English
<i>Testa</i>	<i>kapu</i>	head
<i>Badagghjari</i>	<i>alà(re)</i>	yawn
<i>Orbu</i>	<i>cikatu</i>	blind
<i>Maritarisi</i>	<i>nzura(re)</i>	get married
<i>Racina</i>	<i>uva</i>	grape
<i>Dumani</i>	<i>kraj</i>	tomorrow
<i>Vucceri</i>	<i>kjankjeri</i>	butcher

The words in the first column are beyond any reasonable doubt borrowings. However, in some cases the bare contrast between the local vs the borrowed form might be misleading and not informative for a generalizing classification of dialects. For instance, Varvaro (1984) focuses on the contrast between the borrowed lexical type *vucceri* and the “local” type *kjankjeri*. The former type is attested all over the island, whereas the latter is attested in the biggest cities (and their immediate surroundings) such as Palermo, Catania and Messina. However, if we consider that in Palermo there is a popular district called *Vucciria* ‘lit. the place of the butchers’, we must necessarily admit that also Palermo had known the lexical type *vucceri*. Moreover, in ancient times *PLANCA* < *kjankjeri* was also widespread elsewhere than in the main cities. Since *chianca* is often associated with Jewish butcheries, it is presumable to think that *vucceri* and *kjankjeri* were two different words to designate the butcher in relation to the type of meat they produced (different ways to cook or cut...) and that only later one of them ended up with pointing the butcher *tout court*.

Another important characteristic, which is also considered by Pellegrini 1977 (isogloss 29) is the lack of analytical perfect, which is used, according to (Varvaro 1988), even in those cases when the action described by the verb took place in a very recent time. As for the example he provides in (29), Varvaro says that this can be uttered also when the speaker has just finished eating, while he is still probably sitting at the table (Varvaro 1988:724):

- (29) *comu mangiasti*
 how eat.2S.PAST
 ‘how did you eat?’

However, Mocciaro 1978 points out that there actually is a periphrastic perfect, formed by the auxiliary HAVE and past participle. The only auxiliary admitted in Sicily is HAVE (La Fauci 1984). Unlike many Romance varieties, such as Italian, the analytical perfect is used instead used not to «durative or iterative situations encompassing the Speech Time» or to describe situations whose effects are still perceivable at the Speech Time. Let us compare this minimum pair provided by Mocciaro (1978: 345):

- (30) *stamatina aju sparatu cingu voti e unn aju pigghjatu*
nendi
 this.morning have.1S shot five times and not have.1S
 caught anything
 ‘I have shot five times this morning, but I haven’t caught anything’
- (31) *stamatina aju sparatu cingu voti e un pighhjau nendi*
 this.morning have.1S shot five times and not took.1S
 anything
 ‘I have shot five times this morning, but I didn’t catch anything’

In (30), the event of hunting has not finished yet and the hunter might still catch something, whereas in (31) the sentence is uttered when the event of the hunting is over.

6. Some remarks about morpho-syntax in the nominal domain

6.1. Nouns and adjectives

Like all other Extreme Southern dialects, the dialects of Sicily do not melt final vowels into -ə. Sicily has a tripartite final vowel system: /i u a/. Consequently, in these dialects, overt singular vs. plural distinctions on suffixes were preserved too (see Piccitto 1950, Ruffino 1991, 1997); by contrast, gender distinctions were maintained in the singular, but were lost in the plural, due to phonetic changes occurred to unstressed -Ī/-Ī̃ and -Ē (e.g. e.g. *figghju* ‘son’, *figghja* ‘daughter’ *figghji* ‘children’). For a more detailed description see Lausberg 1971, Tagliavini 1972, a. o. In some dialects of Sicily, a plural ending -a is visible on nouns ending in -u in the singular (Guardiano, Cambria, Stalfieri 2022: 39 (footnote 50)):

(32)	stu	rròddzu	sti	rròddza
	this.M.SG	clock.M.SG	this.PL	clock.PL)
	‘this clock’		‘these clocks’	

Ribera

Also, some nouns ending in -i (< -E(M)) take the plural affix -a:

(33)	u	prufissuri	pittfwòttu	i	prufissura	pittfwòtti
	the.M.SG	professor.SG young.	M.SG	the.PL	professor.PL	young.PL
	‘the young teacher’			‘the young teachers’		

Ragusa

These -a plurals are well-known to the literature: we refer to Rohlf's (1966-69, § 368) and Sornicola (2010) for an overview.

Gender and Number features trigger agreement within the same nominal structure, (e.g. *un piccjwottu bbedu* ‘a beautiful boy’, *na piccjotta bbeda* ‘a beautiful girl’), but Number has further syntactic consequences. For instance, it may interact with other superficial patterns within the nominal phrase. Delfitto and Schrotten (1991) pointed out that the morphological representation of the feature Number on nouns and the possibility for nouns to be realized as bare (i.e., not introduced by any overt determiner) are strictly related. If nouns show visible morphology, bare nominal arguments are allowed, whereas bare nominal arguments are not allowed in languages where Number is not realized on nouns. Consequently, we would expect that Bare Nouns be acceptable in some dialects like those of Sicily, where Number is overtly marked on nouns. In fact, in Guardiano, Cambria, Stalfieri (2022), all the dialects of Sicily considered in the sample allow bare nominal arguments, whereas this is not true for some Upper Southern dialects, which melted final vowels into -ə, and for Northern Italo-Romance dialects, who generally lost their suffixes¹.

¹ The questionnaire used to collect the data is available at <http://www.parametriccomparison.unimore.it/site/home/projects/prin-2017/documents-and-materials.html>

since they attach to D, prenominal possessives always precede numerals, if a determiner is visible, as shown in (39)-(40). Due to this restriction, these possessives have been dubbed “Wackernagel” in Guardiano et alii (2018: 120):

- (39) i/sti mo tri libbra Ragusa
 the.PL/this.PL my three book.PL
 ‘my books/ these books of mine’
- (40) *i/sti tri mo libbra Ragusa
 the.PL/this.PL three my book.PL
 ‘my books/ these books of mine’

6.2.1. Possessives and kinship nouns

It is widely known that in Southern dialects of Italy possessives with singular kinship nouns (Rohlf 1966-69), cliticize on the head noun, which is not preceded by an article: (e.g. *fratata* ‘your brother’). This superficial configuration is an instance of movement of proper names into the D position (Longobardi 1994 and subsequent works, in particular 1995, 2001, 2005). Since kinship nouns and possessives are intrinsically referential, they are raised to the position where [+referentiality] is usually spelt out, i. e. the D position. In the dialects of Sicily there are no enclitic possessives, like Italian, but such raising to D is equally attested, because kinship nouns always occur without a visible determiner: (me frati “my brother”). However, there is a crucial difference between Sicilian and Italian when we consider the interpretation that (certain types of) kinship terms receive in some contexts. For instance, in Italian an unpronounced possessive can be interpreted as a 3d person singular possessive with some kinship nouns. In (41), the article can be interpreted as a 3d person pronoun, which is bound to “Gianni” (Guardiano et al. 2018: 126):

- (41) Gianni deve accompagnare la madre all’aeroporto
 Gianni must.3S drive the mother to.the airport
 ‘Gianni has to drive her mother to the airport’

By contrast, in the dialects of Sicily, such interpretation of the unpronounced possessive is not possible. In other words, a 3d person overt possessive cannot be omitted (Guardiano et alii 2018: 127):

- (42) Gjovanni ha ppurtari *aa muggjeri / a sso
 mugghjeri aa stazzjoni
 Gianni has drive dom.the wife/ dom his
 wife to.the station
 ‘Giovanni has to drive her wife to the station’

In order to account for such differences, Guardiano et al. (2018: 127) tentatively propose the introduction of a new parameter, \pm *obligatory possessive with kinship N*. The value + is assigned to languages like Italian, that allows an unpronounced possessives pronoun to convey a 3d person interpretation.

7. Conclusions

The traditional classifications that have been proposed within traditional literature (Piccitto 1950, Ruffino 1984, 1991, 1997, Matranga and Sottile 2013) tend to emphasize local differences in order to get a very detailed picture of the dialects of Sicily. All these scholars have considered morpho-phonological and lexical phenomena, but syntax has been seldom considered. The Parametric Comparison Method (Longobardi and Guardiano 2009, Longobardi et al. 2013, Crisma et al. 2020), based on the formal syntax (Chomsky 1981, 1995) of the Determiner Phrase (DP), may represent a novel tool for the collection of syntactic data. Within this method, a parameter is an abstract and discrete property, which may be active (value +) or non-active (value -). The availability or unavailability of certain syntactic properties as binary syntactic characters can potentially enable us to calculate the syntactic distance between any two languages and build new taxonomies in a more objective way than it was done in the past. At this aim, some tentative classifications have already been made (Guardiano et al. 2016), and the method successfully retrieved the strict relation of the dialects of Sicily with the other Extreme Southern dialects. However, more and finer-grained experiments are required in order to have a more detailed picture of the dialects of Sicily, at least as far as nominal syntax is concerned. At the present, within the Parametric Comparison Model, the dialects that have received a first data collection and first attempts of analysis are, from Western to Eastern Sicily: Trapani, Ribera, Sant'Angelo Muxaro, Mussomeli, Ragusa, San Filippo del Mela. We refer the reader to the following link <http://www.parametriccomparison.unimore.it/site/home/projects/prin-2017/romance-and-greek-dialects-the-database.html> for further data and an up-to-date list of all the dialects that have been (and will be) parametrized.

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