

INVECTIVE METAPHORS IN THE BULGARIAN LANGUAGE. AN ATTEMPT AT A GENERAL CHARACTERISTIC

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Invective metaphors constitute a substantial portion of the metaphorical landscape within the Bulgarian language, and likely in other languages as well. This article endeavors to explore Bulgarian invective metaphors from various perspectives, including their vitality, expressiveness, conceptualization schemes, etc. To conduct this research, a questionnaire featuring 20 metaphors was administered to respondents. The collected data revealed two primary categories of metaphors: those with clearly discernible source images and those with obscure source images. Notably, the latter group appears to be transitioning towards *historical metaphoricality*. The paper proposes a hypothesis elucidating the reasons for that. Additionally, within the framework of the aforementioned aspects, efforts are made to systematize and delineate specific characteristics. Special attention is dedicated to examining Turkisms and insults prevalent not only among individuals, but also between distinct societal fractions, such as football fans.

Keywords: metaphors, insult, Bulgarian language, expressiveness, metaphorical death, Turkisms, conceptualization

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present paper is to identify and describe the main characteristics of invective metaphors in the Bulgarian language. This task places it among the growing body of research on insulting speech, which in recent times has attracted the attention of linguists.

Insults are an integral part of human verbal and written communication, employing various tools with metaphor being one of them. It is a widely acknowledged fact that due to their expressiveness, metaphors harbor substantial invective potential. Words like *pig*, *scum*,

and *bastard* are frequently used figuratively to offend someone. Some of these offensive metaphors are cross-linguistically widespread and deeply rooted, such as the metaphor cited by Quintilian: *Glaucius is shit in the senate* (Quintilian 1982: 495). While insults are undoubtedly influenced by social class – speakers from the lower social edge use swearwords, insults and other kinds of verbal abuse more frequently than those belonging to the upper stratum (Martinez & Yus 2000: 3) – they also pervade public discourse, often employed by individuals termed as political elites (see Winberg 2017, Kuchina 2023, Maliszewski 2021).

The history of metaphor has traversed various conceptualizations, from traditional substitution and simile theories to interaction theory (Black 1955), predication theory (Ricoeur 1994, Dobrzynska 1994), the theory of metaphor as an implicit categorization (Glucksberg & Keysar 1990), the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson 2003), which has dominated for the past 40 years, and extended conceptual metaphor theory (Kovecses 2020). In this text, none of these theories is applied in its pure form; instead, different postulates from each have been adopted.

G. Lakoff highlights that in contemporary metaphor research (CMT), the term *metaphor* denotes cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system, differing from its usage in the *old theory* (Lakoff 1992: 202–203). In this paper, I adopt the traditional usage of the term. Following I. Richards, I also accept that a metaphor is a two-component structure comprising *tenor* and *vehicle* (Richards 1990: 48).

Referring to the narrower term *invective metaphors*, I employ it to denote metaphors serving the purpose of insult, offense, and moral injury. Despite its sporadic occurrences in Russian (Merzlikina 2021, Maslov 2014) and Polish studies (Mickiewicz 2019), this term is not widely used. However, for the sake of convenience and readability, I use it in the present text.

To facilitate research, approximately 70 metaphors (both conventional and occasional) used to insult individuals were gathered from social networks, forums (media or interest-based), and everyday communication. To narrow down the scope of the study, only conventional metaphors meeting the following criteria were considered:

- a) high frequency in usage;
- b) established sense prevalent in a given language community, determining subsequent characteristics;
- c) lack of interpretive difficulties and absence of *the enigma of understanding*, invoking ready-made construal (Kronfeld 1980–1981: 15, 22);

d) quick and easy perception and understanding, fostering prompt comprehension between the speaker and listener, swiftly registering in the addressee's consciousness.

For illustration, I present comments that served as a source of empirical material. Within them, nine conventional metaphors were used, three of which were insults, and none were novel:

Учиндолския месия¹ иска да захване сладката магистрала Тракия на концесия с поставени хора и цял живот да смуче от тол таксите. Е, деба, как всеки път си избираме боклуци. Пълен простак по-зле от тулуна.² Подигра се с половин България.

(The Uchindol Messiah wants to bite into the sweet Trakia motorway deal through a concession with moles and skim the toll fees for life. Damn, how do we get to elect scumbags every time. What a jerk, he is worse than the Moron. He fooled half of Bulgaria.)

Абе селски, това да не ти е бащиния? Ти за прости ли ни мислиш, като оня примат от Банкя?³ Ще изчезнеш от политическата карта по-бързо от царчето. Бойко може да е просто хитър, а ти си и глупав селтак.

(Hey, peasant, this ain't your daddy's homestay. Do you think we are dumb like the Bankya primate? You will disappear from the political map faster than the kinglet.⁴ Boyko might be just sneaky, but you are a dumb peasant.)

2. DEAD OR ALIVE?

In Bulgarian, a multitude of offensive metaphors exists where the original image is either heavily obscured or entirely lost. This phenomenon directly correlates with the *vitality* of metaphors, a concept aligned with G. Lakoff's postulates on the nature of *dead* and *alive* metaphors. Lakoff disagreed with the traditional folk theory of language, stating: *Since none of these are novel or poetic, the traditional theory would lump them all together as dead metaphor* (Lakoff 1987: 3) and he defined as dead those metaphors whose *source image is dead* (Lakoff 1987: 2). Lakoff emphasized the importance of distinguishing between conventional and obsolete metaphors, stating that it is extremely important to distinguish metaphors that are conventional from metaphors

¹ The object of this text is Slavy Trifinov, showman and founder of the *There is Such a People* political party. *Uchindol* is the previous old name of the *Todorovo village*, where he is from, and is often perused in the show gigs in search of comical stylistic effect.

² Boyko Borisov, leader of the GERB party and three times Prime Minister of Bulgaria from 2009 to 2021 is visualized here.

³ See footnote 2.

⁴ Concerns Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the last heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Bulgaria, who was banished from the country at the age of 9 in 1946 after a referendum organized by the communist regime. He became prime minister in 2001, staying in power till 2005 as a leader of the political party *His Majesty Simeon the Second*.

that do not exist anymore (Lakoff 1987: 3). Personally, I find Lakoff's assertion that *historical metaphor is more accurate but less vivid* particularly rational and relevant from a terminological standpoint.

In this study, I adopted a distinctive method to assess the vitality of metaphors, employing a survey administered to users of the Bulgarian language. The survey involved 30 participants ranging from ages 15 to 65, representing diverse geographical locations across the country and varying educational backgrounds. A carefully chosen set of 20 lexemes was presented to the respondents, who were tasked with defining these terms and identifying their potential applications. The outcomes of this survey revealed the following categorizations:

- a) The first group comprises lexemes like *задник* (ass), *боклук* (garbage), *парцал* ('rag'), *свиня* (pig), *цървул* (a type of peasant shoe, moccasin), *маймуна* (monkey), among others. In this group, all respondents (100%) primarily identified their fundamental meanings, while a significant portion (75%) additionally remarked, *It can be used as an insult*.
- b) However, another group of lexemes, such as *чукундур*, *тулун*, *пачавра*, *плюжек*, *тюфлек*⁵ was defined by the respondents firstly with the figurative, offensive meaning, and from the definition it becomes clear that they refer to a person. Around 90% of the answers started with: *This is a person who... and also means...* Of all the respondents 60% did not indicate a literal meaning at all, which is why they were asked an additional question as to whether or not these words could also mean something else. Seven of them confirmed their negative answer, but others answered: *it seems to mean something else, but I don't remember at the moment; it also means something else, but I have to check it*, etc. Regarding their knowledge of alternative meanings such *чукундур* means *beetroot* (dial.), *тюфлек* – *mattress*, *пачавра* – *wiping cloth*, *плюжек* – *slug* etc., some of them replied: *Actually, I remember now that my grandmother used it in that sense, or I asked my mother, and she remembered hearing about it, but I didn't know it*. The negative answer was especially categorical among the surveyed undergraduate students, i.e. among the younger generation.

In isolated cases (10%), there were answers which contained knowledge only of the literal meaning, without the metaphorical one, and in particular there were only two: *чукундур* meaning *beetroot* (2) and *тулун* – *the skin of the rabbit's belly* or *fur-coat* (1).

⁵ The literal and figurative meanings of the lexemes in this group are listed in the table at the end of the paper.

The conclusion to be drawn is that among the second group of lexemes there is a strong hesitation and fading relevance of literal meanings in the mind of the modern language users, as its place is steadily taken by the metaphorical meaning. We can definitely say that they are developing towards the direction of *historical metaphoricity* and it appears that, over time, their literal significance will likely remain solely within etymological dictionaries.

What are the reasons for this?

A. One reason for this phenomenon resides in the regional nature of these lexemes, such as *чукундур* (beetroot), or their archaic nature or progression toward archaism, as seen in *тулун* (fur-coat or the skin of a rabbit's belly), *тюфлек* (mattress), *пачавра* (wiping cloth). The decline in the frequency of their primary meanings has predetermined their decline, while the prevalent use of their metaphorical meanings signifies their stabilization.

B. The second group of lexemes possesses a distinct specificity. Many of these words are Turkisms that have been ingrained in the Bulgarian language for an extensive period. During the National Revival period in the 19th century, efforts to shape the Bulgarian literary language led to purist tendencies, especially concerning Turkisms. These tendencies intensified after the Liberation (1878), deliberately purging Turkish borrowings from the language. Those that persisted were relegated to the realm of informal speech, stylistically marked as colloquial or even vernacular.

M. Stamenov characterized this process as the *systematic pejoration on a large scale* of Turkish borrowings in our country (Stamenov 2011: 44), resulting in numerous Turkisms functioning solely as *abusive words* within the language. R. Grzegorzczkova posited that the emotion of the language user can be a semantic component of a word and highlighted a group of numerous lexemes that carry implicit aesthetic or moral judgments, often accompanied by disapproval (Grzegorzczkova 1978: 119). A significant portion of Turkisms in the Bulgarian language unquestionably falls into this category, predisposing them to metaphorical productivity, particularly in the realm of insulting vocabulary. In a separate study on the metaphorical potential of animal-related lexemes, I demonstrated how pairs of synonymous animal names, one being a Turkism, function as conventional metaphors with established offensive connotations in most cases, for instance, *овен* – *коч* (ram), *пуйка* – *мисирка* (turkey), *язовец* – *борсук* (badger).⁶

⁶ Cf. Dencheva, D. "Slug, Badger, Cattle. Connotation and Metaphoricity." („Плужек, борсук, говедо. Конотация и метафоричност.") *Balgarska rech*, no 2–3 (2020): 59–72.

Another characteristic process observed in Turkisms within the Bulgarian language is their gradual decline. The younger generation in Bulgaria shows decreasing recognition of these words, resulting in limited usage and, consequently, the diminishing relevance of their original imagery. Nonetheless, certain Turkisms that have acquired metaphorical meanings persist and remain alive and active predominantly through these connotations.

C. I propose a hypothesis correlating the rise in urbanization and disconnection from nature with an increased unfamiliarity regarding certain animal species. Consequently, words such as *борсук* (badger), *дропа* (great bustard), *керкенец* (kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*) are seldom associated with their real referents. Similar to regionalisms and archaisms, the metaphorical usage of these animal-related terms prevails, leading to their predominance in the user's mind as the primary interpretations.

D. Additionally, beyond the lexemes themselves, in some instances their referents are also falling out of common usage. For instance, *тюфлек*'s literal meaning is *straw mattress*, a factor contributing to its displacement from its original metaphorical context.

A categorical conclusion can be drawn that within the conventional offensive metaphors of the Bulgarian language, a distinct group is progressing towards metaphorical obsolescence or what G. Lakoff terms as *historical metaphoricity*. The likelihood of these terms mirroring the fate of the word *мекепе* (lickspittle, toady, scoundrel), whose original meaning *cattle* has been completely replaced, is notably high.

3. EXPRESSIVENESS

The invective metaphors can be classified from the point of view of their expressiveness. J. Zima (as cited in Grabias 1978: 113) distinguishes three types of expressiveness based on the degree of lexicalization: inherent, adherent, and contextual. Inherent expressiveness is an innate characteristic of the sign and does not require context, observed, for instance, in diminutives. Adherent expressiveness is linked with a change in meaning (e.g., metaphorical usage) and is recognized as a characteristic during the stage of lexicalization. Contextual expressiveness refers to words initially neutral in nature, but acquires expressive qualities in specific contexts.

Drawing upon J. Zima's distinctions in expressiveness, two categories of invective metaphors can be identified:

- a) **Inherent Expressiveness:** This type is ingrained in metaphors recognized for their *historical metaphoricity*, where the offensiveness is immediately apparent without the need for context, exemplified by terms like *чукундур* (beetroot, dial.), *тюфлек* (straw mattress).
- b) **Adherent Expressiveness:** These metaphors display expressiveness contingent on contextual cues signaling their metaphorical usage, as seen in words like *свиня* (pig), *тиквеник* (Bulgarian pumpkin strudel). Within this category, T. Skubalanka's assertion that a reorganization occurs in the hierarchy of language functions holds true, as the secondary expressive and impressive functions shift to the primary position (Skubalanka 1972: 129).

The expressiveness of invective metaphors has another characteristic feature. Let us consider them in the light of the definition, used by E. Gorlewska in a study of expressivisms in the Polish constitution: *expressing the speaker's emotional attitude to the content of the speech with the intention to provoke in listeners a certain attitude/mindset towards the described reality* (Gorlewska 2016: 2). Reflecting on this definition, it is apparent that it encapsulates both the expressive and impressive functions of language. However, while means of communication aiming to provoke poetic or rhetorical influence seek to evoke in the listener emotions akin to those of the speaker, invective metaphors serve a different purpose. While the speaker may aim to express emotions such as anger or hostility, the emotions they attempt to evoke in the listener are often distinct, possibly eliciting bitterness, suffering, or humiliation.

4. INVECTIVE METAPHORS IN WIERZBICKA'S AND WIATROWSKI'S MODES

A. Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka 1968: 101) suggests the explication of verbal predicates in the following modes:

I think that...

I want to...

I do not want to...

I feel that...

In line with this approach, P. Wiatrowski (Wiatrowski 2010) generates explications of *lexical expressivisms* utilizing modes such as *I think that...* and *I feel on this occasion...* The present study adopts and broadens this approach. Let us explore the explicit schemes of metaphors featuring the vehicles *овца* (sheep), *кифла* (bun), *зоведо* (cattle), *нpace* (pig).

Example 1

Разкриха защо овцете в парламента гласуваха бюджета „Василев” по първи петли.⁷

(It was revealed why the sheep in the parliament passed the budget ‘Vassilev’ early in the morning.)

Metaphor: the members of Parliament are sheep.

I think: the members of Parliament are stupid, have no opinion of their own and allow to be led on and used.

I feel: disapproval, contempt, and resentment.

I know exactly what qualities of the people provoke these feelings and I know that they are inherent in the sheep and herd mentality.

Example 2⁸

Защо да издържам някаква глупава кифла дет ще ми харчи парите, или ще гледа турски сериали по цял ден вкъщи?

(Why would I provide for some stupid ‘bun’ that will be spending my money, or watching Turkish series all day at home?)

Metaphor: a certain type of women is кифли (buns):

I think this type of women is stupid, simple and materialistic.

I feel: disapproval, contempt, and neglect.

I know exactly what qualities of women evoke these feelings, but they are not inherent in the bun.

Example 3

Загубихме от прасетата. Ние, които бяхме в сектор Б, си направихме шоуто. И до последно, дори 20 минути след края на мача стояхме и си пеехме. А свинете, както винаги, гледаха отчаяно.

(We lost to the pigs. But we who were in sector B made the show. And till the end, even 20 minutes after the end of the match, we were standing and singing. And the pigs, as always, watched desperately.)⁹

Metaphor: CSKA players and fans are pigs.

I think they are: ... ?

I feel: hatred, resentment, and hostility.

I know that these feelings are caused by the fact that the players and fans of CSKA team are perceived as an enemy, but I cannot say which specific qualities of the pig are inherent in them.

⁷ “В ИМЕТО НА НАРОДА ЛИ? Разкриха защо овцете в парламента гласуваха бюджета Василев по първи петли.” <https://pik.bg/в-името-на-народа-ли-разкриха-защо-овцете-в-парламента-гласуваха-бюджета-василев-по-първи--news1187402.html> (published 1.08.2023; accessed 4.10.2024).

⁸ The next three examples are excerpted from internet forums.

⁹ The fans of football clubs Levski and CSKA traditionally call each other *pigs* and *cattle*.

Example 4

Говедата, станавте за смях в цял свят! Говедата на Герена полудяха и започнаха да скандират 'оставка' по повод играта на отбора и италианския 'специалист'.

(*Cattle, you have become a laughing stock all over the world! The cattle at Gerena stadium went crazy and started chanting 'resignation' over the game of the team and the Italian 'expert'.*)

Metaphor: Levski's players and fans are cattle.

I think they are: ... ?

I feel: hatred, resentment, and hostility.

I know that these feelings are caused by the fact that the players and fans of the football team Levski are perceived as an enemy, but I cannot say which specific qualities of cattle are inherent in them.

In the last two examples, determining the qualities of the offended object is practically unattainable, rendering the *I think that...* mode unfilled. The examples are based on the opposition of *own* versus *foreign* and on the identification of *the other* as an adversary who must be devalued, ridiculed, humiliated, etc. Therefore, their explication could adopt an alternative form: *Играчите и феновете на Левски / ЦСКА са ВРАГ. Чувствам неодобрение, неприязън, враждебност към ВРАГА, който трябва да бъде наранен, понякога не само вербално, но и физически.* (The players and fans of Levski / CSKA are an ENEMY. I feel disapproval, resentment, hostility towards the ENEMY, who must be hurt, sometimes not only verbally, but also physically).

The absence of specific attributes is supported by the fact that the fans of both teams insult each other reciprocally, albeit using different metaphoric vehicles. The specifics in the last two examples are a consequence of the specifics of the insult itself. As Vasileva-Yordanova emphasizes, insults manifest not only in interpersonal communication, but also between groups, in the attitude of the individual towards the group, and vice versa – in the attitude of the group towards the individual (Vasileva-Yordanova 2012: 23). In communication between groups, hostility leading to hatred is often solely based upon the characteristic *not one of us*, whether it is a bias towards football team or in religious affiliation. That is why it is very difficult to deduce the characteristics of the offended object that motivate the insult. The criterion of objectivity¹⁰ is completely missing, which is understandable given that one of the characteristics of the insult noted by Vasileva-Yordanova is precisely the *injustice* (Vasileva-Yordanova 2012: 16).

¹⁰ I do not ignore the fact that in the creation of metaphors generally the criterion of truth does not exist; I will recall the example of J. Searle on the metaphorical projection of gorillas and the incompatibility with ethological research, as well as his statement: *I am not saying that a metaphorical assertion can never be equivalent in meaning to a statement of similarity – whether or not it is would depend on the intentions of the speaker, but I am saying that it is not a necessary feature of metaphor – and is certainly*

In the last two examples also emerges prominently the usage of dehumanization, stripping the enemy of human attributes.

On the basis of the above-mentioned explicative schemes, the following mechanisms of metaphorization can be distinguished—based on the motivating trait (*members of Parliament are sheep*), random associations (associating a certain type of women with buns) and attitude transfer (Levski / CSKA fans being referred to as cattle / pigs).

5. CONCEPTUALISATION

The conceptualisation of offensive metaphors presents a distinct specificity as the tenor of these metaphors tends to be personalized rather than possessing an abstract and generalizing character. That's why a conceptual metaphor can rarely be constructed in them based on the model of the classic example ARGUMENT IS WAR (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). However, within the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS we can separate the submetaphor STUPID, WEAK PEOPLE ARE AGRICULTURAL ANIMALS because of the frequency of vehicles *овца* (sheep), *гъска* (goose), *крава* (cow), *говедо* (cattle) or within PEOPLE ARE COMMODITIES – the submetaphor AN EASY WOMAN IS A DIRT RAG / WIPING CLOTH¹¹ because of the vehicles *парцал* (rag), *пачавра* (wiping cloth), *мундил* (dialect word for tablecloth). However, these instances are rarer compared to conceptual metaphors focusing on abstract human qualities like stupidity, intelligence, stinginess, and so on. This highlights systemicity more so in defining the source domains without the need to fill in the left position.

Empirical observations of the material have outlined several predominant source domains within offensive metaphors:¹²

- Domestic animals: *свиня* (pig), *говедо* (cattle), *крава* (cow), *магаре* (donkey), *патка* (duck), *кокошка* (hen), *кучка* (bitch);
- Wild animals: *маймуна* (monkey), *змия* (snake), both genus and species, e.g. *кобра* (cobra), *усойница* (viper), *пепелянка* (horned viper), etc.;

not the point of having metaphor – that metaphorical assertions are equivalent in meaning to statements of similarity (Searle 1979: 90).

¹¹ It falls within the scope of social dimensions, which include the differentiation of society into men and women, young and old, middle-class and working class, and so forth (Kovecses 2010: 209).

¹² An extremely precise classification of the objects of the offensive speech in Bulgarian and French is presented by A. Vasileva-Yordanova (Vasileva-Yordanova 2012: 174).

- The human and animal body – secretions, excrement, body parts: *сопол* (snot), *лайно* (shit) and its synonyms, *задник* (butt) (and its synonyms, e.g. *гъз* (ass), *трътка* (rump), etc.), as well as references to genitals;
- Fabrics used for wiping: *парцал* (dirt rag), *пачавра* (wiping cloth), *миндил* (tablecloth);
- Unnecessary things: *боклук* (garbage), *измет* (rubbish), *друпа* (tatter);
- Plants and parts of plants: *чукундур* (dial. for beetroot), *тиква* (pumpkin), *кратуна* (gourd), *панон* (dial. for turnip), *чвор* (knar), *пън* (stump);
- Rural or obsolete shoes and clothing: *цървул* (kind of peasant moccasin), *галош* (gumshoe);
- Food items: *пача* (khash), *кифла* (bun), *тутманик* (Bulgarian cheese bread), *тиквеник* (Bulgarian pumpkin strudel), *кюфте* (meatball).

There are also metaphors which do not fall into those categories, such as *ръб* (ledge), *дръвник* (chopping log) etc.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The presented observations allow us to highlight four main conclusions:

1. The specificity of Bulgarian invective metaphors is the presence of a large group which is moving towards *historical metaphoricity*. The reasons for this are mainly related to the historical development of the Bulgarian language, in which there is a strong pejoration of a certain language layer, leading to active negative metaphORIZATION. The process is accompanied by archaisation and decline of literal meanings, notably evident in the language culture of the younger generation.
2. Expressiveness stands as an inherent feature of offensive metaphors, as they always contain evaluation and attitude. Evaluation and attitude can be a major factor for metaphORIZATION.
3. The systematic nature of conceptualization primarily pertains to the source domain within offensive metaphors. This is rooted in the fact that offensive metaphors are usually personalised and lack abstract or generalising characteristics.
4. Cultural influences are evident in the metaphorical landscape, notably through the presence of Turkisms that function as insults within the Bulgarian language.

7. APPENDIX

7.1. Lexemes predominantly defined with their basic meanings, frequently employed as insults (13): *свиня* (pig), *лайно* (shit), *парцал* (rug), *магаре* (donkey), *маймуна* (monkey), *задник* (butt), *говедо* (cattle), *боклук* (garbage), *сопол* (snot), *пача* (khash), *кранта* (old mare), *леке* (stain), *гнида* (nit).

7.2. Lexemes primarily defined with their metaphorical meanings (generalized definitions provided by respondents – 7):

lexeme	transcription	literal meaning	metaphorical meaning
борсук	[bor'suk]	Badger	an uncommunicative, gloomy, unpleasant person
керкенец	[kerke'nes]	kestrel, Falco tinnunculus	1. a person who boasts a lot; 2. an unpleasant, mean, bad person
пачавра	[pa'tʃavra]	wiping cloth	easy woman
плужек	[ˈpluzek]	Slug	a person without dignity, without opinion, a bootlicker
тулуп	[tu'lup]	thick fur coat	a simpleton, stupid person
тюфлек	[tjuf'lek]	straw mattress	a fat, lazy, careless person
чукундур	[tʃukun'dur]	beetroot (dial.)	a rude, clumsy, unapologetic, stubborn, uncommunicative person

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