



Theater Activities: Contributions to the pragmatic development in children's language

Atividades Teatrais: Contribuições para o desenvolvimento da pragmática na linguagem infantil

Actividades teatrales: Contribuciones al desarrollo de la pragmática en el lenguaje infantil

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Abstract

Introduction: The process of acquisition and development of language skills occurs from the interaction between neurobiological and environmental aspects. Scholars believe that theater, being an art that stimulates the most varied expressions, favors this process. **Objective:** To investigate the influence of theater activities on children's linguistic development at the pragmatic level of language. **Methods:** Observation of ten students of a private school located in São José - Santa Catarina, aged between five and seven years old, organized in a research group (GP) and a comparative group (CG). The research was conducted in three phases: evaluation, intervention and reassessment. In the first phase, which took place at the beginning of the school year, both groups were subjected to a pragmatic evaluation through the Children's Language Test - ABFW - part D. The intervention phase, during which the GP students participated in drama classes, was implemented throughout the course of the school year. At the end of the school year, in the third phase of the research, both groups were evaluated with the same methodological

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rigor applied in the first stage. **Results:** It was found that GP students exhibited better performance in the linguistic competence in the post-intervention period when compared to the CG students. **Conclusion:** Drama classes can stimulate pragmatic skills and children's language development.

Keywords: Speech Therapy; Language; Language development; Children's language.

Resumo

Introdução: O processo de aquisição e desenvolvimento das competências linguísticas ocorre a partir da interação entre aspectos neurobiológicos e ambientais. Estudiosos acreditam que o teatro, por ser uma arte que estimula as mais variadas expressões, favorece esse processo. **Objetivo:** Investigar a influência das atividades teatrais sobre o desenvolvimento linguístico infantil no nível pragmático da linguagem. **Método:** Participaram do estudo dez escolares, com idades entre cinco e sete anos, matriculados em uma instituição de ensino privada do município de São José - Santa Catarina, organizados em grupo pesquisa e grupo comparativo, ambos compostos por cinco indivíduos. As etapas da pesquisa compreenderam três fases, sendo estas: avaliação, intervenção e reavaliação, respectivamente. Na primeira fase, início do ano letivo, ambos os grupos foram submetidos à avaliação pragmática por meio do Teste de Linguagem Infantil - ABFW - parte D. A fase de intervenção, período no qual o GP participou das aulas de teatro, deu-se durante o transcorrer do mesmo ano. Ao final do período letivo, na terceira fase da pesquisa, ambos os grupos foram reavaliados, seguindo o mesmo rigor metodológico utilizado na primeira etapa. **Resultados:** Verificou-se que o GP exibiu melhor desempenho na competência linguística estudada no período pós-intervenção, quando comparado ao GC. **Conclusão:** O teatro é um potencial estimulador das habilidades pragmáticas e da linguagem infantil.

Palavras-chave: Fonoaudiologia; Linguagem; Desenvolvimento da Linguagem; Linguagem infantil.

Resumen

Introducción: El proceso de adquisición y desarrollo de las habilidades lingüísticas se da a partir de la interacción entre aspectos neurobiológicos y ambientales. Los estudiosos creen que el teatro, al ser un arte que estimula las más variadas expresiones, favorece este proceso. **Objetivo:** investigar la influencia de las actividades teatrales en el desarrollo lingüístico de los niños en el nivel pragmático del lenguaje. **Métodos:** Diez estudiantes, con edades comprendidas entre cinco y siete años, inscritos en una institución educativa privada en la ciudad de São José - Santa Catarina, participaron en el estudio, organizados en un grupo de investigación y un grupo comparativo, ambos compuestos por cinco individuos. Las etapas de investigación constan de tres fases, a saber: evaluación, intervención y reevaluación, respectivamente. En la primera fase, al comienzo del año escolar, ambos grupos fueron sometidos a una evaluación pragmática a través del Child Language Test (ABFW) - parte D. La fase de intervención, durante la cual el GP participó en clases de teatro, tuvo lugar durante el mismo año. Al final del período académico, en la tercera fase de la investigación, ambos grupos fueron reevaluados siguiendo el mismo rigor metodológico utilizado en la primera etapa. **Resultados:** se encontró que el GP mostró un mejor desempeño en la competencia lingüística estudiada en el período posterior a la intervención, en comparación con el GC. **Conclusión:** el teatro es un estimulador potencial de habilidades pragmáticas y lenguaje infantil.

Palabras clave: Logopedia; Idioma; Desarrollo del lenguaje; Lenguaje infantil.

Introduction

Scholars¹⁻⁵ postulate that the acquisition and development process of language skills occurs from the interaction between neurobiological and environmental aspects. Thus, language is understood as a superior cortical function, cognitively structured (when considering genetically based anato-functional conditions) and socially structured (by means of continuous environment interactions). With this in mind, even though genetically inherited predispositions are capable of influencing behavior, linguistic development is sensitive to environmental inputs and, hence, operates on it, too. For that reason, both biological aspects and the quantity and quality of stimuli provided by the environment are essential conditions for the process of language acquisition and development⁶.

Furthermore, chronological age is another point to be considered. It is believed that there is a sensitive period for linguistic development. Accordingly, by the age of seven, it is expected that the essential elements of competent communication be mastered. Although the duration of this period is still an object of study, this moment is assumed to be as stage of brain maturation; therefore, it must coincide with the exposure of certain sensory experiences⁷.

Regarding the development of oral language, four interdependent linguistic levels are taken into account: Pragmatic, Semantic, Phonological and Morphosyntactic⁸. It is expected that, in the absence of neurological, psychological and organic impairments, around eight months of age, the child recognize the other individuals around him/her and start to manifest intentional communicative acts evidencing, thereupon, the pragmatic development⁹. In addition, the child will have been exposed to, at least, one language since birth. It is common knowledge that, when it comes to language acquisition, it is imperative to understand in order to be able to express. In view of this, when entering a linguistic environment, their receptive lexicon-semantic is stimulated and, close to twelve months of age, their expression, in addition to their phonological inventory, are evidenced¹⁰. Moreover, with the development of all these linguistic skills, the child starts to establish relationships between lexicons and sentences, as well as to make use of inflections, revealing their morphosyntactic development¹¹. It is noteworthy that, for the aforementioned

language development milestones, there is also auditory integrity, memory, attention, motivation and learning opportunities¹².

Scholars^{4,13,14} state that the stages that comprise language acquisition are well developed when children are placed in a favorable environment. In this sense, they consider the family and school settings to be influential on language development. In addition, the National Curriculum of Reference for Early Childhood Education¹⁵, along with the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs)¹⁶ for elementary education, give the school environment co-responsibility for the development of the child's ability to speak orally, with the task of preparing students for the use of language in different communicative contexts. Still, it is understood that the school settings promote the child's physical, emotional, linguistic, intellectual and social development. This way, it must be organized to provide vast stimuli⁴. When dealing with early childhood education, it is vital to consider that the construction of knowledge happens through playfulness. In light of this, drama can be implied as a potentiator of this process within the school setting¹⁷.

The study of drama activities has been gaining ground in neuroscience, recognized as a multidisciplinary knowledge field that has an interface and complementarity with other specialties and devotes special attention to the study of cognitive-linguistic skills¹³. With regard to child development, it is said that drama is capable of promoting language in its oral modality, including comprehension and expression, favoring verbal and non-verbal skills, let alone its written and reading modality, in addition to motor aspects. On top of that, it mobilizes and integrates human capabilities, including cognition, motor skills, emotions and sensory perceptions. Additionally, drama benefits attentional skills, auditory, visual and kinesthetic organization, besides contributing to learning and social interaction¹⁸.

Studies^{18,19} state that drama activities favor child development, as schoolchildren are stimulated from the expression of creativity, spontaneity, imagination, observation, perception, verbal and non-verbal expression, in addition to having their lexicon-semantic expanded and pragmatic aspects stimulated, since the proposals of drama classes lie in the interaction among the individuals and in the dialogue in different contexts. Given the scarcity in the literature of research that adopts pragmatics as an object of study, added to research investigating

the contributions of drama to linguistic development, the present study sought to investigate the influence of drama activities on children's linguistic development at the pragmatic level of language.

Method

Outline and participants

This present study was conceived after the consent and formal agreement of the institution, in a private school, located in the city of São José - Santa Catarina/Brazil, which offers drama lessons before/after school time. This research is characterized as a descriptive, exploratory, cross-sectional study with quantitative analysis derived from data obtained in pre and post-intervention assessments.

Schoolchildren between five and seven years of age – 60 in total – enrolled in the chosen institution, were invited to participate in the research. From the children who presented the required regulation, 10

fit the pre-established criteria for the present study, which were to be between five and seven years old; regularly enrolled in the chosen institution; to present the signature of the consent form signed by the ones responsible for them, including the free informed consent, agreeing to participate in the research; not having attended drama classes before; and not having an interdisciplinary diagnosis of any language or learning difficulty, which is specific or secondary to any developmental disorder.

From the sample selection, according to the description above, the subjects were categorized into two distinct groups: five students who met the inclusion criteria described above and enrolled to attend drama classes before/after school time made up the test group (TG). The other five subjects, who met the inclusion criteria, but were not enrolled in drama classes, constituted the comparative group (CG). It is important to mention that the factor that affects the distinction between the groups under study is taking drama classes.

Table 1. Characterization of data regarding age and sex

Group	No. Subjects	Age Average	SD	Female	Male
TG	5	5.64	0.376667	3 (60%)	2 (40%)
CG	5	6	0.881105	4 (80%)	1 (20%)

Caption: TG: test group; CG: comparative group; SD: standard deviation

Procedures

The study was organized in three stages: assessment, drama classes (here considered intervention) and reassessment, respectively (**Figure 1**).

- **Assessment and reassessment:** Both groups underwent pragmatic language assessment, at the beginning and end of the school year, using ABFW20 Child Language Test - part D. In this sense, they were recorded with an audio and video camera (FugiFilm Finepix 300), 30 minutes of interaction between evaluator and child, as suggested by the test used, for further analysis. For this purpose, a box of playful material was used, as suggested by the evaluation instrument chosen for the present research, which contained miniature animals and dolls, doll accessories (watch, glasses, bottle, shampoo, baby powder, and mirror), kitchen utensils, tools, ball, bow and arrow and medical accessories. These evaluative moments took place within the school environ-

ment, in a quiet, illuminated and comfortable space, provided by the institution.

Concerning the analysis of pragmatic evaluations, the Communicative Acts, the Communicative Initiative, the Communicative Functions and the Communicative Means were considered, following the guidelines of the evaluation instrument used. It is worth mentioning that the participating students' performance analysis was carried out by the same researcher, with a second opinion only when the speech sample raised doubts or gave rise to more than one interpretation. In these cases, giving consideration to the rigor of the data analysis, two judges with expertise in the area joined in for the assessment.

- **Intervention/theatre classes:** The TG participated in drama classes, offered by the school either before/after school time during the school year, 50 minutes each session, once a week, comprising a total of eight months (35 classes), between

the periods for evaluation and reevaluation. It is significant to mention that all subjects belonged to the same drama class, and the same teacher taught all classes, from the beginning to the end of the research.

The students' attendance was registered and controlled, by the teacher, through a roll call. If there were a number of absences greater than two,

the absent individual would be excluded. Nevertheless, when considering this aspect, the exclusion was not necessary, since there were no absences.

The objectives that were chosen and worked on by the drama teacher during the school year included body expression, creative imagination, rhythm, motor coordination, improvisation and character laboratory.



Caption: TG = test group; CG = comparative group.

Figure 1. Characterization of research procedures

Statistical analysis

Descriptive data analysis was performed by obtaining the mean and standard deviation of the categorical variables. For statistical analysis, we used the STATISTICS 7 Software, Kruskal-Wallis test, in order to investigate the intergroup performance, comparing the results of the TG with the CG, and intragroup, when analyzing the results obtained in each group, comparing them with the performance of children in the same group, in the pre and post-intervention periods. Only P-values <0.05 were considered significant.

Ethical considerations

This study follows the requirements of Resolution 466/12, and was submitted and approved by the Institution's Research Ethics Committee (no. 88964318.9.0000.0121). In addition, the teacher responsible for the drama classes and the participants' legal guardians were informed about the research and signed the Free and Informed Consent Term and the students were also invited and instructed, in a simplified way, about their participation in this study and signed the consent form.

Results

The results of the present research were based on the descriptive analysis of the quantitative data and the qualitative observation of the performance of the participating groups, and CG, according to the aforementioned study stages. In this sense, the intergroup performance was investigated, comparing the results of the TG with the CG, and intragroup, that is, analysis of the results obtained in each group, comparing it with the performance of the children of the same group, in pre and post-intervention periods. For that, communicative acts, communicative initiative, communicative means and communicative functions were considered.

It is noteworthy that this study focused on the analysis of the Communicative Functions and Communicative Means that presented the highest occurrence of use, that is, the functions and communicative means used most frequently by the research subjects, making possible the comparative analysis between groups and intragroup. In this sense, this study presented the data referring to the analysis of the communicative functions (Narrative, Commentary, Shared Game and Information

Request) and the communicative means (Gestural, Verbal, and Verbal and Gestural associated).

The Communicative Functions comprised in Appointment, Protest, Consent Request, Action Request, Performative, Exhibition, Self-Regulatory, Exclamatory, Reactive and Exploratory, as well as the Communicative Means, such as Vocalization and Gesture associated with Vocalization, were not presented and discussed in this study, despite

having been identified during the evaluations. Likewise, among the analyzed aspects, those that presented statistical significance were highlighted.

Below, **Tables 2** and **3** present, respectively, the results of the intergroup performance analysis for Communicative Acts, Communicative Initiative, Communicative Means and Communicative Functions.

Table 2. Analysis of intergroup performance for Communicative Acts and Communicative Initiative

Variable	Period	TG		CG		P-value
		Average	SD	Average	SD	
Communicative Acts	Pre	185.5	13.28	208.8	28.96	0.2506
	Acts	217.8	10.56	207.2	28.56	0.9168
Initiative – Adult	Pre	98.2	21.04	102	18	0.4647
	Post	110.2	29.04	97.4	19.68	0.6004
Initiative – Children	Pre	102.6	13.68	104.6	24.72	0.9168
	Post	94.8	11.44	109.8	18.16	0.3472

Caption: TG: test group; CG: comparative group; SD: standard deviation; *=significant; p<0,05

Tabela 3. Análise do desempenho intergrupo para Meios Comunicativos e Funções Comunicativas

Variable	Period	TG		CG		P-value	
		Average	SD	Average	SD		
Communicative Means	Gestural	Pre	23.6	5.52	20.2	9.44	0.2948
		Post	22.2	5.44	19.8	14.96	0.6015
	Verbal	Pre	51.4	23.12	30.6	22.16	0.2506
		Post	16.5	3.68	38.8	22.88	0.0283*
	Verbal and gestural	Pre	105.6	35.92	144.2	27.84	0.2087
		Post	167.4	12.32	134	26.8	0.1425
Communicative Functions	Narrative	Pre	5.4	2.08	5.2	4.64	0.9155
		Post	30.4	13.84	5	1.2	0.009*
	Commentary	Pre	63.2	14.32	98.2	31.12	0.0465*
		Post	79.2	17.04	92.2	37.76	0.754
	Shared game	Pre	83.06	28.88	63.06	24.72	0.6015
		Post	85	21.6	77.4	32.48	0.754
	Information Request	Pre	8.6	3.04	16.2	5.76	0.1161
		Post	10	4.8	8.4	2.08	0.1693

Caption: TG: test group; CG: comparative group; SD: standard deviation; *=significant; p<0,05

From the analysis of **Table 2**, it appears that the variables included in Communicative Acts and Communicative Initiative did not show results of statistical relevance when analyzing the intergroup performance. For Communicative Means, in turn, whose results are shown in **Table 3**, there is statistical significance for the Verbal Communicative Means in the post-intervention period (p=0.0283).

It is also observed – when comparing the averages obtained by the two groups in the evaluation and reassessment – greater use of Verbal Communicative Means in the TG in the pre-intervention period (51.4) compared to the post-intervention period (16.5). Whereas it is visible an increase in the associated verbal and gestural communicative means, contrasting the pre (105.6) and post inter-

vention (167.4) period, not being observed the same behavior in the CG. With regard to the gestural communicative means, no statistically significant differences between the groups were found.

Still in relation to **Table 3**, there is statistical significance for the Narrative communicative function ($p=0.009$) in the post-intervention period, with a noticeable increase in the average in the TG compared to the CG, when considering the pre and post-intervention periods. Additionally, the analysis showed a statistically significant result for the Commentary communicative function ($p=0.0465$), in the pre-intervention period, with a higher average also being observed in the CG (98.2) in relation to the TG (63.2); notwithstanding, the same

is not observed in the post-intervention period. Despite the fact that the CG still shows a higher average than the TG in the reassessment, there is no statistical significance between the groups for this stage, indicating a possible homogenization of the performance among the subjects for this communicative function, after the intervention period. As for the other Communicative Functions, the intergroup analysis did not show results of statistical relevance.

Tables 4 and **5**, in turn, present the results of the intragroup performance analysis for Communicative Acts, Communicative Initiative, Communicative Means and Communicative Functions, respectively.

Table 4. Analysis of intragroup performance for Communicative Acts and Communicative Initiative

Variable	Period	TG			CG		
		Average	SD	P-value	Average	SD	P-value
Communicative Acts	Pre	185.5	13.28	0.0163*	208.8	28.96	0.6752
	Post	217.8	10.56		207.2	28.56	
Initiative - Adult	Pre	98.2	21.04	0.6004	102	18	0.754
	Post	110.2	29.04		97.4	19.68	
Initiative - Children	Pre	102.6	13.68	0.9168	104.6	24.72	0.9168
	Post	94.8	11.44		109.8	18.16	

Caption: TG: test group; CG: comparative group; SD: standard deviation; *=significant; $p<0,05$

Table 5. Analysis of intragroup performance for Communicative Means and Communicative Functions

Variable	Period	TG			CG			
		Average	SD	P-value	Average	SD	P-value	
Communicative Means	Gestural	Pre	23.6	5.52	0.5993	20.2	9.44	0.402
		Post	22.2	5.44		19.8	14.96	
	Verbal	Pre	51.4	23.12	0.0119*	30.6	22.16	0.2506
		Post	16.5	3.68		38.8	22.88	
	Verbal & gestural	Pre	105.6	35.92	0.0283*	144.2	27.84	0.9168
		Post	167.4	12.32		134	26.8	
Communicative Functions	Narrative	Pre	5.4	2.08	0.0088*	5.2	4.64	0.8335
		Post	30.4	13.84		5	1.2	
	Commentary	Pre	63.2	14.32	0.3457	98.2	31.12	0.754
		Post	79.2	17.04		92.2	37.76	
	Shared Game	Pre	83.06	28.88	0.9168	63.06	24.72	0.4647
		Post	85	21.6		77.4	32.48	
	Information Request	Pre	8.6	3.04	0.4005	16.2	5.76	0.1138
		Post	10	4.8		8.4	2.08	

Caption: TG: test group; CG: comparative group; SD: standard deviation; *=significant; $p<0,05$

From the analysis of **Table 4**, there is statistical significance for Communicative Acts ($p=0.0163$) in the TG when comparing the performance of this group in the pre and post-intervention periods, not being observed the same for the CG. Despite that, there are no statistically significant results for the variable *Communicative Initiative*.

As to the Communicative Means, **Table 5**, statistical significance was found for the Verbal Communicative Means ($p=0.0119$) and associated Verbal and Gestural Communicative Means ($p=0.0283$) in the TG when comparing the performance of this group in the pre and post-intervention periods, not being verified in the CG. As for the gestural communication means, the analysis did not show statistical relevance.

Still in relation to **Table 5**, there is a statistically significant performance for Narrative Communicative Function ($p=0.0088$) in the TG when comparing the performance of this group in the pre and post-intervention periods, while the same is not observed for the CG. As for the other Communicative Functions, the intragroup analysis did not show results of statistical significance.

Discussion

It is unquestionable that the limitations of the present study lie on the theoretical support, since there is scarcity in the research literature that adopt pragmatics as an object of study, as well as research investigating the contributions of drama to linguistic development, to the application of the study. Along with it, the reduced number of participating subjects, familiar and socioenvironmental aspects, aside from the bond between evaluator and schoolchildren are also recognized as limitations. Yet, the results obtained reinforce the need for further research.

This study aimed to investigate the influence of drama activities on children's linguistic development at the pragmatic level of language. Taking into account inter and intra-group analysis presented, it is suggested that the development of pragmatic skills was benefited by drama. The TG, after the intervention, showed an increase in communicative intention, in the communicative narrative function, in parallel with a higher frequency of use of Verbal and gestural communicative means associated, not being observed the same behavior in the CG.

The intention to communicate, to share thoughts and emotions favors communication and learning opportunities that, in turn, improve cognitive, social and linguistic development. This process involves shared attention that occurs in the ability to alternate contact between a social partner and an object or event, establishing communication, whether through oral and/or non-verbal language. Consequently, it also involves taking turns²¹. That said, it is believed that the increase in communicative intention observed in the TG (**Table 4**) represents language stimulation.

In addition, it is assumed that drama, as it is an art that allows creating and recreating numerous contexts²², favors the learning of social rules of communication and, subsequently, the development and improvement of pragmatic skills. Despite observing statistical significance for the variable *Communicative Acts*, there was no statistically significant difference in any of the variables analyzed for the Communicative Initiative (**Tables 2 and 4**), both in the intergroup and intragroup analysis. This fact is surprising because, in view of the increase in communicative intention, translated by the statistically significant result of the GP for Communicative Acts (**Table 4**), it was expected to find a statistical difference for the variable *Communicative Initiative*.

In view of the data referring to the Communicative Means (**Tables 3 and 5**), in the TG, there is a reduction in the frequency of use of the verbal communicative means and an increase in the verbal means associated with gestures after exposure to drama classes. At the same time, the CG increased the use of verbal means to communicate and decreased the association between verbal and non-verbal. In this sense, it is thought that drama favors language skills, since language is structured in verbal and non-verbal elements.

It is known that non-verbal communication qualifies the interaction, as it increases oral expression, also cooperating with the adequate understanding, by the others, of what you want to share, since the message comprises the intrinsic perception of a verbal code, not based solely on signifier and signified. It is reinforced that non-verbal signals can complement, replace or contradict an oral message. For that reason, such impact on the interaction is recognized, since in case of conflict between verbal and non-verbal modalities, non-verbal communicative elements will prevail²³.

Based on the aforementioned, the aim is not only the integration between the communicative means, but the quality of expression from them. On this account, it is reputed that, in addition to favoring the communicative process, drama qualifies its elements, as it is an art based on expressiveness²⁴.

Also noteworthy are the findings relating to Communicative Functions (**Tables 3 and 5**). The evaluations revealed a statistically significant increase in the narrative function for the TG after the intervention period, that is, after the drama classes, which again does not coincide with the results of the CG. Therefore, it strengthens the hypothesis that the subjects who participate in drama activities have a favored linguistic development.

It is known that oral narrative is a complex linguistic task that requires syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and phonological skills for its proper performance, as well as cognitive skills. Given that, it is a skill acquired gradually, as language is developed. To this end, it is considered that neurological maturation is not the only factor responsible for this linguistic ability. It is currently understood that the opportunities provided by the environment in which an individual is inserted enhance language and, as a consequence, the ability to narrate^{25,26}. Since linguistic development starts from understanding to expression, the contact with narrative models provided by the contexts that surround the subject helps in the acquisition and development of such competence^{26,27}, which corroborates the findings of this study.

The narrative development, as already mentioned, depends on linguistic factors, such as lexical repertoire and syntactic elements, in addition to social experiences and cognitive maturation. This being said, as semantic and syntactic levels develop, the narrative becomes more complex and structured. It should be noted that such factors are essential to the narrative discourse²⁷. Owing to the statistically significant increase in the narrative function for the TG (**Tables 3 and 5**), it is speculated that drama also favors other levels of language, in addition to pragmatics.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the influence of drama activities on children's linguistic development at the pragmatic level of language. In virtue of the measurable results, it appears

that drama, indeed, favored the development of pragmatic skills. Still, it is speculated that drama activities favor the other linguistic levels, since the results showed a greater occurrence of Narratives after participating in drama classes, and this is a communicative function that interdepends on other language skills, such as syntax and semantics.

Bearing in mind the information given, it is suggested to carry out other studies aimed both at investigating the influence of drama on pragmatics, and on other levels that comprise language. For future research, we recommend the robust number of participating subjects and the analysis of the results by blind raters.

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