COGNITION IN CONTEXT: INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR FRANZ PÖCHHACKER

Cognição em Contexto: Entrevista com Professor Franz Pöchhacker

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RESUMO: Esta entrevista, obtida por trocas de *e-mail* em 2025, apresenta as ideias e opiniões de Franz Pöchhacker, da Universidade de Viena, na Áustria, sobre uma série de questões relacionadas aos Estudos da Interpretação. Com base em sua experiência em pesquisa e ensino, os tópicos discutidos incluem os recursos mentais dos intérpretes, a criatividade e a tomada de decisão situacional, bem como o impacto da tecnologia na interpretação e o potencial e as limitações de várias metodologias de pesquisa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Franz Pöchhacker. Cognição. Estudos da Interpretação. Interpretação de Línguas Orais. Interpretação de Línguas de Sinais.

ABSTRACT: This interview, obtained through email exchange in 2025, presents the ideas and views of Franz Pöchhacker, from the University of Vienna, Austria, on a range of issues in interpreting studies. Against the background of his research and teaching experience, the topics discussed include interpreters' mental resources, creativity, and situated decision-making, as well as the impact of technology on interpreting and the potential and limitations of various research methodologies.

KEYWORDS: Franz Pöchhacker. Cognition. Interpreting Studies. Spoken Language Interpreting. Sign Language Interpreting.

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Franz Pöchhacker is Professor of Interpreting Studies at the Center for Translation Studies at the University of Vienna. With a background in conference interpreting, his research interests include simultaneous interpreting in conference and media settings, community interpreting in healthcare, social service and asylum settings, and issues of interpreting studies as a discipline. His recent work focuses on technology-mediated interpreting, speech-to-text interpreting and automation. He has lectured and published widely; his English books include *Introducing Interpreting Studies* (2004/2022, 3rd ed.) and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies* (2015). For some twenty years, he has been co-editor of *Interpreting: International Journal of Research and Practice in Interpreting*.

1. **Esqueda and Gorovitz:** It is an honor, Professor Franz Pöchhacker, to have you with us for the special issue of *Letras & Letras*, a publication of Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, Brazil. The issue is dedicated to "Cognition and Translation/Interpreting in/for Sign Languages" (v. 41, 2025), and places a strong emphasis on the social role of the interpreter (https://seer.ufu.br/index.php/letraseletras/announcement/view/394). To begin with, could you share how your professional and academic background in conference interpreting has informed your perspective on the cognitive processes and social aspects of interpreting?

Professor Pöchhacker: Many thanks, first of all, for proposing this interview and for this first question, whose four keywords – cognitive and social, professional and academic – open up a broad space for reflection and retrospection. At the risk of sounding too personal, I must confess that my background in conference interpreting, shaped at the University of Vienna and the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS), now regrettably being wound up, was essentially professional rather than academic. Back in the 1980s, I was trained rather than educated: Even after completing two MA programs, thanks to excellent teachers and role models such as Ingrid Kurz and Bill Weber, I did not have much of a theoretical conception of interpreting, whether cognitive or social. The way I developed a deeper understanding of what

I was trained to do as a practitioner was largely a matter of chancing upon inspiring people and books. In Monterey, for example, a German professor visiting from the University of Heidelberg introduced me to Vermeer's functionalist theory of translation, or *skopos* theory, which is neither cognitive nor distinctly social in orientation, despite its focus on (inter)action (Vermeer, 2000). At the same time, I discovered a milestone publication in the MIIS library: On a small shelf with books on 'translation theory' was the proceedings volume of the 1977 Venice Symposium organized by David Gerver (Gerver; Sinaiko, 1978). That book, with more than 30 chapters by scholars of many different disciplines, proved to be my 'gateway drug' – getting me hooked on further reading, on the cognitive process of interpreting and, more generally, on research in a range of disciplines. I admit, with shame, that in reading that thick volume from cover to cover, I went rather lightly over one or two sections on interpreters other than conference interpreters, such as liaison interpreters and sign language interpreters, including Bob Ingram's paper (1978) on an approach from communication theory. I relished the insights of conference interpreting practitioners and scholars and was most fascinated by models from cognitive psychology, such as those by Le Ny, Massaro, and Moser (1978). It was a captivating experience, and I started following up on some of the many references to research in cognitive science, kindly procured for me by the MIIS reference librarian via interlibrary loan. Thanks to this educational experience, I was not entirely unprepared when I attended my first conference – the 29th Annual Conference of the American Translators Association (ATA), held in 1988 in Seattle, where a certain Daniel Gile (1988) offered "An overview of conference interpretation research and theory." His presentation of the state of the art gave a strong boost to my emerging views and served as a kind of induction to this field of study and academic community, whose main concern seemed to be a better understanding of the cognitive process of interpreting.

Apologies for all this personal reminiscing in response to your question, but I think that these memories from the late 1980s also show where we are coming from and how much our field has developed over the past three or four decades.

2. Esqueda and Gorovitz: Thank you, Professor Pöchhacker, for this insightful introduction of your experiences. The present special issue of *Letras & Letras*, dedicated to

> "Cognition and Translation/Interpreting in/for Sign Languages" (v. 42, 2026), highlights the "high demand" and "high effort" inherent in interpreting. From a cognitive perspective, what are the most critical mental resources conference interpreters must manage in real time, and what strategies do they employ to mitigate cognitive overload?

Professor Pöchhacker: In a word, my answer would have to be 'memory'. Memory, as a construct from cognitive psychology, is not what we typically talk about in interpreting or with our students. It is much more common to talk about skills and also, though maybe less so, about knowledge. But even an instructor unaware of research in cognitive science will probably impress on their interpreting students that they need to know something about what they are interpreting. Why? Because, as Seleskovitch (1968) famously wrote, to interpret one must first understand. And we can only understand what we already know, or what we can link to our existing knowledge. So, interpreters need to be familiar with the subject at hand, which is why they will often need to prepare for an assignment. But even when the topic is not technical, speakers may come up with anything, so interpreters should really know about anything and everything. Even in earliest writings about professional interpreting, authors stressed that interpreters need a broad general knowledge, or knowledge of the world. That, whether general or specialized, is what psychologists call declarative knowledge, which is stored in memory as a function of the human brain. This includes our knowledge of languages, which many people think is the only knowledge an interpreter needs. On the contrary, our general store of knowledge, known as long-term memory to psychologists, also includes procedural knowledge – that is, knowing how to do things, with language and in general. This is what we commonly call skills. For interpreters, of signed as well as spoken languages, these are primarily language skills, such as speaking coherently with a lively intonation, fingerspelling fluently or, more fundamentally, grasping a speaker's line of thought. When we encounter difficulties in language processing, we use a type of procedural knowledge that psycholinguists have called strategies, which are problem-solving plans we have learned to apply. Paraphrasing a term for which we do not know an equivalent, giving an approximate figure when we did not grasp (or recall) every digit, or compressing a concluding statement to finish with the speaker in an

interactive debate are just a few examples of 'online' strategies applied during processing, aside from 'offline' strategies such as preparation to acquire relevant knowledge and terminology.

So memory, or knowledge, both declarative and procedural, and also of the 'episodic' kind, is the crucial cognitive resource in interpreting. However, working with what we have stored in our (long-term) memory requires yet another type of cognitive resource. This is working memory, previously known only as short-term memory. This psychological construct is closely linked to the concept of attention and focuses on what we are processing at a given moment. And since our capacity for attention is not unlimited, there are also limits to what we can hold and process in working memory. We may recall only a handful of new information units, and fresh input may decay within seconds unless linked up with items in (long-term) memory. This intrinsic limitation of human information processing capacity is what Daniel Gile (1992; 2009) foregrounded in his well-known Efforts Models, which highlight the role of attention management, particularly in simultaneous interpreting (SI) as an extreme form of cognitive multi-tasking.

3. Esqueda and Gorovitz: The one-word answer on 'memory' you have chosen brilliantly clarified our ideas on "high demand and effort" involving the work of interpreters. Additionally, the proposal of the special issue of *Letras & Letras* mentions a range of semantic phenomena, including ambiguity and vagueness. In the rapid-fire context of simultaneous interpreting, how do interpreters cognitively process and render complex or nuanced semantic units that require immediate, on-the-spot disambiguation? Do you see a distinction between managing these challenges in simultaneous versus consecutive mode?

Professor Pöchhacker: If my one-word answer to the previous question was memory, for this question it would have to be 'context'. It has become a truism even among linguists that meaning is not inherent in lexical units but is essentially shaped by its use in context. Back in the early 1960s, when there were high hopes for machine translation (MT), disambiguation was a persistent challenge – except for interpreters, who processed language in the context of a particular communicative event. In articulating this, Seleskovitch (1968) went so far as to

downplay the role of words and linguistic form, which she saw as merely pointing to the relevant meaning, or sense, that interpreters were able to grasp thanks to their knowledge of the event, the subject matter and the communicative situation. In my early work on simultaneous conference interpreting, I devoted much attention to the notion of the situation of interaction, which allows us to view the participants in a communicative event as key factors (Pöchhacker, 1992). And if the situation is essentially constituted by the interacting parties, we need to consider their background, knowledge, expectations and intentions as factors shaping meaning-making in a particular context. The notion of the 'context of situation' has been around for a long time, of course, but context is still often poorly defined and viewed more narrowly as adjacent linguistic material. By the way, this view of context also applies to Large Language Models (LLMs), which have become exceptionally good at processing meaning based on a full record of all lexical relations in the database. For MT using LLMs, disambiguation is no longer a problem, nor should it be for interpreters, who have the additional advantage of knowing, more or less, who is talking to whom where, when and for what purpose. This applies to either mode of interpreting, but consecutive interpreting obviously offers the distinct advantage of a more extensive linguistic context. Several sentences or even minutes of speech may contain a complete idea or argument for the interpreter to grasp, whereas simultaneous interpreters typically process much shorter propositional segments at a time.

4. Esqueda and Gorovitz: That is an excellent summary of the inherent benefit of 'context' to manage challenges in any particular mode of interpreting. Building on that foundational concept of 'context', from your extensive experience with spoken language interpreting, what are the key cognitive commonalities and differences you would anticipate in the simultaneous interpreting of sign languages, particularly concerning the processing of visual versus auditory input?

Professor Pöchhacker: This is quite a challenging question, considering that there has been quite a lot of research on cognitive issues in signed language interpreting over the years. The early modeling efforts by Betty Colonomos (e.g., 1997) come to mind, which show significant parallels with the original sense-based triangular conception of Seleskovitch

(1968; Seleskovitch; Lederer, 1984), but also Dennis Cokely's (1992) multi-phase process model incorporating the visual modality as well as sociocultural and cognitive constraints. And of course there is Daniel Gile's (2009) variant of the Efforts Model for sign language interpreting, informed by the PhD research of Sophie Pointurier (2009). This serves very well to highlight both the common ground and the specifics of (simultaneous) interpreting involving spoken and signed languages. On the one hand, everything I said in response to your earlier questions – about the role of knowledge and context in interpreting and about the role of working memory constraints in language processing – fully applies to interpreting in either linguistic modality. Nor is multimodal input limited to working with signed languages, even though the mix of resources for meaning making may differ considerably, for instance in the case of SI with text. On the other hand, there are various features that are particular to interpreting from and into signed languages. This includes the effect of directionality itself but also the complexity of visual output monitoring or dealing with deaf listener feedback during interpreting, quite apart from the linguistic and terminological challenges for sign language interpreters in specialized fields. There is also research pointing to cognitive differences in unimodal versus bimodal (spoken to signed) language processing, for instance with regard to memory retention, but I am not aware of well-described particularities in, say, working memory processes. On the face of it, sign languages have their particular features and challenges just like other languages and may therefore require specific processing strategies, but the process of interpreting as such would largely be the same when we focus on the social role and purpose of enabling understanding in a given situation of communicative interaction.

5. Esqueda and Gorovitz: Absolutely, sign languages possess distinct features and challenges that necessitate tailored processing strategies, just as other languages do. From a cognitive and professional standpoint, at what stage does the interpreter's processing move beyond reconstruction and re-expression into what could be considered a creative act, and how is this creativity manifested in the final output?

Professor Pöchhacker: Another very difficult question that I do not really feel qualified to answer as long as we have not agreed on how creativity is to be defined. Even so, the way you have phrased your question, speaking of 'reconstruction and re-expression', actually suggests an initial response asserting that such 're-creating' of a message with different expressive resources should by definition be regarded as a 'creative act'. Since this would apply, in principle, also to what MT and LLMs can do, we can strengthen our case for the uniqueness of interpreting by foregrounding once again its situatedness and embeddedness in a given communicative context. Unlike computing systems, interpreters are not limited to matching or reshuffling linguistic patterns but may draw on multimodal cues and perceptions in choosing the form of (re-)expression that will best serve the goal of the interaction. Consider, for instance, an inadvertently face-threatening statement in a negotiation, which an interpreter may decide to tone down in the interest of achieving a deal. But individual choices are likely to differ also on the linguistic level, even among interpreters with similar training and professional backgrounds. After all, an interpreter's re-creation of a message is, to some extent, an individual, a 'whole-person' act that reflects personal preferences and a certain style. In this sense, an interpretation is precisely that: a way of interpreting, construing an original message and expressing it again for different addressees. Similar re-creative processes could be said to be at play, for instance, in the way a conductor has the orchestra perform a score or a director has their actors perform in a new staging of a play. The same 'story' will be told, but with different forms of expression, also when a novel is turned into a movie. But if such comparisons with some of the most prestigious forms of artistic creativity seem far-fetched, we can also fall back on what Jean Herbert (1952) said in his handbook about conference interpreting as one of the loftiest professions, namely, that it serves to *create* understanding between the communicating parties.

6. Esqueda and Gorovitz: Yes, the act of re-creating the message through reconstruction and re-expression can inherently be considered a sort of creative act. Moving on our discussion, what potential do you see for technologies – from classic interpreting

booths to future AI-assisted tools – to change the cognitive effort and decision-making processes of conference interpreters?

Professor Pöchhacker: The impact of technology on interpreting is among the hottest topics in interpreting studies, and there is a general sense that interpreting is undergoing major change, prompting some to speak of a 'technological turn' (Fantinuoli, 2018). But responding to this question requires a few distinctions and clarifications. One concerns the function for which technology is used, and I will come to this under the heading of assistance versus service delivery. Another is whether we are talking about conference interpreting as involving professional work in both the consecutive and the simultaneous mode. If so, I would say that technological assistance has had a rather limited effect on consecutive interpreting, notwithstanding such innovations as recorder-based SimConsec interpreting and the use of tablet computers and apps for digital note-taking. So far, attention has centered on computer-assisted interpreting (CAI) in the simultaneous mode, but even here the impact of CAI tools for, say, corpus compilation, term extraction and terminology management remained rather modest until the introduction of automatic speech recognition (ASR) for support during the SI process. These so-called third-generation CAI tools have sparked interest also among professional interpreters, particularly for support in rendering numbers, names and technical terms. Assistance with these well-known 'problem triggers' could be expected until now to come from boothmates, who would jot down figures or point to terms in a glossary. ASR systems can now deliver such visual input on the computer screen in the booth in a way that may be less disruptive than the former analog methods. Even so, the crucial question investigated in a number of experimental studies is whether such additional visual input is a help or a hindrance in the interpreting process. The answer is mostly based on analyzing the interpreter's output for accuracy and completeness in rendering numbers, names and terms, and that answer is then mostly favorable to CAI tool use. Gauging the effect on cognitive effort, however, is a different matter, as there is no direct way of measuring this construct. Eye tracking, pupillometry, self-rated difficulty and physiological measures such as heart rate and EEG patterns have nevertheless been used in sophisticated experimental designs, and there

seems to be little evidence so far that the use of CAI tools is associated with a significant increase in cognitive load. Given the countless parameters involved, not least with regard to ASR output features such as accuracy, latency, relevance, etc., it will take some time before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Compared to the considerable effort expended on studying technological assistance in the interpreting process, which also includes recent studies on CAI in the consecutive mode, the way technology use affects the delivery of interpreting services has attracted rather less attention. Research interest in remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) was obviously at a peak during the COVID pandemic, which forced many conference interpreters to accept working in this mode. With delegates and interpreters returning to conference rooms and booths, however, distance interpreting, whether performed from an interpreting hub or via a videoconferencing platform, appears to have become just one more facet of professional practice, made more acceptable by adjustments to working conditions in recognition of the fact that RSI is widely felt to be more tiring. That is not to say that RSI is without challenges or does not impact the way interpreters work. On the contrary, constraints on accessing documents and turn-taking among remote boothmates, for instance, clearly affect the 'peri-process' of SI, to use Sylvia Kalina's (2005) term, and hence the interpreters' decision-making processes. It is not clear, however, that these different work practices have a distinct and measurable cognitive effect.

7. Esqueda and Gorovitz: Concerning research technologies, what do you consider the most promising methodological approaches for studying the cognitive processes of interpreters? How can methods like eye-tracking, keystroke logging, or corpus analysis be effectively applied to capture the real-time "language-in-interaction"?

Professor Pöchhacker: I do not consider myself a specialist in research on cognitive processes, even though so much of the research on conference interpreting that I have followed over the years is indeed concerned with this topic. My interest has centered on what I call the macro-process of interpreting, which runs from receiving an offer for an assignment all the way to its successful completion, and I argue that many decisions and

factors at this macro level will have an impact on what happens during the cognitive process and therefore on the results or product of that micro-process. In this sense, product-oriented research is always linked to the interpreting process but does not investigate the mental mechanisms as such. The corpus-analytical methods you have mentioned would fall in this category, and this methodological approach certainly has great potential to yield deeper insights into process-related phenomena. There is of course a trade-off between quantity and quality in this research approach, and we should therefore pursue small-scale case studies as well as large-scale corpus-based analyses. The former can employ multiple methods to collect data of different types from various sources and yield a rich multi-layered account of interpreting at a given event. This might include fieldwork methods like observations, document analysis and stakeholder interviews combined with discourse-based analyses, retrospective protocols and questionnaires. For all its potential interest, an individual case cannot, of course, supply generalizable findings, which is why the analysis of large corpora is a most welcome methodological complement that allows us to identify linguistic features and patterns that would otherwise be impossible to discern. Still, neither qualitative nor quantitative product-based approaches can give us 'direct' insight into cognitive processes in the interpreter's brain. And I would say that no method that is currently available to interpreting scholars can be expected to do that. There are some promising methods for capturing some parts of the complex cognitive process. Eye tracking, for instance, has successfully been used to track interpreters' visual attention in different tasks and also study specific processes, such as prediction, in the so-called visual-world paradigm. Various neuroscientific methods, such as EEG recording and magnetic resonance imaging, have also been employed, as described in various chapters of a recent volume on research methods in cognitive translation and interpreting studies. Still, despite impressive progress, I think that methods capable of delivering a blow-by-blow account of cognitive processing during interpreting are not within reach in the foreseeable future.

8. Esqueda and Gorovitz: Certainly, we think that our interests are also centered on the macro-process of interpreting, particularly on the resources involving the pedagogy of interpreting. In this sense, the concept of translator/interpreter competence seems to

be central both to translation and interpreting studies. How do you define interpreter competence (to use this dated concept) from a purely cognitive standpoint, and to what extent can these specific cognitive skills be taught or developed through formal training/education?

Professor Pöchhacker: If we focus on the cognitive dimension of competence, we can connect this to what we discussed earlier regarding an interpreter's most critical mental resources. Under the heading of memory we mentioned declarative as well as procedural knowledge, and this covers the knowledge and skills I consider the crucial components of competence: knowledge of one's working languages and of the sociocultural contexts in which they are used, and knowing how to use these cognitive resources to accomplish an interpreter's task in various working modes and settings. Everything we said about the strategies employed in language comprehension and production, from inferencing, prediction and responding to multimodal cues to restructuring, explicitation, paraphrasing and compression, to name only a few, makes up the interpreter's specific skill set. This interpret*ing* competence focused on task performance is complemented by what we could distinguish as interprete*r* competence, which comprises interpersonal skills (for negotiating and teamwork), techn(olog)ical competence and professionalism in the sense of an interpreter's role perception and ethical behavior. Professional behavior would also include such practical matters as preparing for an assignment and even invoicing the client and also overlaps with the skilled use of technology. Technological competence used to be a minor concern among interpreters until well into the 21st century, but as we had mentioned earlier, the use of videoconferencing platforms and CAI tools, which are increasingly likely to occur together, has given much more weight to this component of an interpreter's competence. In fact, some would argue that the so-called technological turn in interpreting implies the need for a profound reshaping of curricula and training practices. I do not share this view, even though there is no question that would-be interpreters need to become familiar with the technologies available and learn how to work with various devices and applications during their training. Recalling what we said about the role of context and the 'sense of situation' that guides an interpreter's decision-making, I strongly believe that

training must not stop at exercises designed to ensure complete and terminologically accurate renditions. Rather, interpreter training should, or should continue to develop the situated expertise that will help junior interpreters to 'do the right thing' in a given communicative event and constellation of interacting parties. Role-play, simulations, internships and service learning have been used for this purpose, and their role in the curriculum should not diminish but be strengthened so as to foreground the role of human perceptive and affective skills in interpreting as an embodied, situated performance.

I am not sure whether the personal and professional components of an interpreter's competence would also be regarded as being of a cognitive nature. Ultimately, though, all facets of competence are grounded in the interpreter's memory as a result of some process of acquisition of knowledge and skills. Clearly, then, all these skill components and cognitive resources can be learned, and we as educators firmly believe that the most effective and efficient way of doing so is through formal instruction.

9. **Esqueda and Gorovitz:** We know that the work of many interpreters, particularly those in community settings and with sign languages, extends beyond linguistic transfer to include aspects of social mediation and advocacy. How do these distinct social demands influence the cognitive load and processing strategies of interpreters, especially when compared to the context of spoken language conference interpreting?

Professor Pöchhacker: This question links up, I think, with what was just said about interpreting as a situated performance and about the social, interpersonal and professional components of an interpreter's competence. We know that task demands are usually different in short-consecutive dialogue interpreting compared to SI of conference speeches, but there has been little progress in gauging the cognitive load associated with such subtasks as interaction monitoring and turn-taking management in dialogue settings. We tend to construe the notion of cognitive load rather narrowly, emphasizing language processing, or multimodal cognitive information processing, at best. This seems more intense in SI in conference settings compared to dialogue interpreting in consecutive mode, but there is little or no accounting for the 'load' imposed by, say, explaining a culturally loaded expression, asking for clarification or deciding

whether to speak out against a disparaging remark, or the load experienced when expressing empathy with a client in distress through eye contact and facial expression. Such affective components of an interpreter's behavior are more commonly discussed in terms of stress rather than cognitive load, but the relationship between the two constructs is far from clear. Techniques for measuring psychosocial stress, for instance by using galvanic skin response, have become quite accessible to interpreting researchers, but it remains a big challenge to measure 'mental stress'. A number of techniques, from eye tracking and pupillometry to EEG measures and to vocal indicators such as fundamental frequency and voiced hesitation, have shown promise, but it probably takes a combination of these complex methods to achieve more reliable measurements of cognitive load or cognitive effort.

10. Esqueda and Gorovitz: Professor Pöchhacker, thank you again for your valuable time. This was a unique and truly insightful opportunity to 'talk' to you. Your contributions, forged through decades of rigorous scholarship and professional engagement, affirm our belief that this beautiful profession of interpreting still presents so many vital avenues for us to explore. As a final point, do you have any concluding remarks or insights you would like to share with us and our readers?

Professor Pöchhacker: To conclude, I would want to express my gratitude once again for the opportunity to engage in this exchange, in which we have foregrounded the topic of cognitive processes and conference interpreting. Because of this I would simply like to reaffirm my belief in the need for complementarity in our field. There has been a distinct move in recent years to promote cognitive approaches to research on translation and interpreting, and that is of course very welcome. At the same time, sociological and sociolinguistic research paradigms have lost nothing of their relevance and should receive equal attention. In short, whenever we focus on one, we should remain mindful of the importance of the other – the cognitive and the social, mental processes and situated interaction. This complementarity also applies to the use of different methodologies – fieldwork on cases and analysis of large corpora; quantitative and qualitative – and to interpreting in different linguistic modalities. It is truly gratifying to see how the academic and professional communities of spoken-language interpreting and signed-

language interpreting have been coming together over the years – as reflected also in this exchange, to which I have therefore been so happy to contribute.

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