Critical realism, critical discourse analysis and the aporetics of a critical ontology
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Aporia

> 'The difficult or the impracticable, the impossible passage'; (Gk) *aporous* -
> literally 'without way' - that which cannot be traversed or resolved; an edge
> or limit; 'the existence of an uncrossable border' (Derrida, 1993: 8, 20).

Thank you for coming. My paper is about critical realism, critical discourse analysis and the aporetics or *aporiai* of a critical ontology.

In this paper I propose to do four things:

1. To trace the correspondences and linkages between CDA and CR.
2. To interrogate from a poststructuralist perspective the critical realist understanding of the semiotic triangle of signifier, signified and referent and the relationship between the transitive (epistemological) and intransitive (ontological) dimensions of reality
3. To explore the nature of the truth claim which is presupposed by the insistence on judgemental rationalism in CR
4. To introduce a model of discourse analysis which meshes CDA with CR having considered the issues raised by 1, 2 and 3.

First let's start some comparative statements about CDA and CR

What is critical discourse analysis?

> Critical studies of language […] have from the beginning had a political project:
> broadly speaking that of altering inequitable distributions of economic, cultural and
> political goods in contemporary societies. The intention has been to bring a system
> of excessive inequalities of power into crisis through the analysis of potent cultural
> objects – texts – and thereby to help in achieving a more equitable social order. The
> issue has thus been one of transformation, unsettling the existing order, and
> transforming its elements into an arrangement less harmful to some, and perhaps
> more beneficial to all the members of a society. (Kress, 1996: 15)

What is critical realism?

> A movement in philosophy, social theory and cognate practices that seeks to
> underlabour for science and other ways of knowing in order to promote the cause of
> truth and freedom, hence the transformation of social structures and other
> constraints that impede that cause and their replacement with wanted or needed
> ones, or emancipation. (Hartwig, 2007, *Dictionary of Critical Realism*: 96)

The 'critical' in critical discourse analysis

> Approaches to discourse analysis that avoid combining a model of grammatical and
> textual analysis (of whatever sort) with sociopolitical and critical theories of society
> and its institutions are not forms of critical discourse analysis. (Gee, 2004: 20)

E.g. Marx, Foucault, Gramsci, Althusser, Bakhtin, Frankfurt School, Critical Realism. (Qualified and implicit) commitment to revolutionary social transformation through critical awareness. Anti-positivist and anti-objectivist view; and a refusal of the idea of 'neutral science' (Reisigl).

The *critical* in critical realism

> Critique is the 'critical' in critical realism, oriented to demystification, hence emancipation, and ultimately grounded in the human capacity reflexively to accept or reject (transcend) the received socio-cultural tradition […]. (Hartwig, *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, 2007: 105)

Teleology from Descartes, Kant, Hegel to Marx. An explicit commitment to a libertarian revolutionary socialism.

Approaches to analysis in CDA

The following approaches have critical discourse interests:

1. **Critical language awareness** – pedagogic approach to CDA (e.g. Clark, Fairclough, Ivanič and Martin-Jones, 1990, 1991; Wallace, 2003), originating in Freirean critical pedagogy, critical linguistics (e.g. Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew, 1979) and CDA (Fairclough *passim*). Argues that a principal objective of education ought to be developing a critical awareness of the world, and of the possibilities for changing it. Focus on inequality and asymmetries of power.

2. **Socio-cognitive approach** – argues that there is no direct relation between discourse structures and social structures. They are mediated by personal and social cognition (e.g. van Dijk, 2003).

3. **Discourse-historical approach** – seeks to maximise knowledge about the historical sources and background of social and political fields in which discursive events are embedded – studies of discursive construction of sexism, racism, anti-semitism via immanent and socio-diagnostic (i.e. 'demystifying') critique (e.g. Wodak, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

4. **Social semiotic (multimodal) approach** – promotes awareness and understanding of the multi-semiotic character of meaning creation – analyses multimodal representations of meaning in their relationship to social formations. Views the social as determining of representational practices, which in turn have ontological effects (e.g. Kress, van Leeuwen, Machin, Jewitt, Mavers, Bessemer, Pelletier, O'Regan, *passim*).

5. **Dialectical approach** – discourse as a *moment* of social processes dialectically related to other moments (facets of the material world, social institutions and social relations, identities, natures and habitus of social agents, and features of practical contexts) and applied to transdisciplinary research on contemporary social change; e.g. globalisation, language of New Labour, enterprise discourse, terrorism (Chouliaraki, Fairclough, Sayer *passim*). The dialectical approach utilises a model of CR explanatory critique in analysing discourse.

6. **'Post-critical' approach** (Critical Applied Linguistics: Pennycook, Rajagopalan, Blommaert, Luke, O'Regan) – people as discursively and historically situated within networks of power (Foucault *passim*). No Archimedean view possible. Questions emancipatory modernist and late modern/quasi-poststructuralist iterations of CDA (e.g. Chouliaraki and Fairclough). Promotes in its place 'the restive problematization of the given' (Pennycook, 2001: 8), and a persistent questioning of all categories.

> My view […] is that there is no escape from questions of power, no escape from ideology or discourse. (Pennycook, 2001: 88)

> There is no position outside power and no position from which we can arrive at the 'truth' outside relations of power. (Pennycook, 2001: 91)

CR is more or less compatible with CDAs 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 but, because of its declared poststructuralism, not CDA 6.

Six moments of critical realism (from DCR, 2007) correlated to CDA approaches

FIRST MOMENT

Transcendental realism (= CDA1-5; = / ≠ CDA6)

CDA is consistent with CR in claiming that a real world ontological intransitive physical domain of objects, events, structures and causal powers exists which affects discourse, knowledge and human activity in the epistemological transitive discursive domain.

SECOND MOMENT

Critical naturalism (CDA 1-6)

Critical naturalism (CN) insofar as it treats societies as objects of knowledge is consistent with all forms of CDA. That it undertakes this study through a process of immanent critique also has resonances with perspectives in CDAs 4 and 6.

THIRD MOMENT

Explanatory critique and ideology (= / ≠ CDA1-3,5;4?; ≠ CDA6)

Critique is determined through demonstration of why false beliefs are held (DCR: 196). There is a major emphasis on the power of science to free us. (DCR: 96).

CR holds that if a theory demonstrates that a widely held belief is false and that a prevailing social structure is an important causal factor in sustaining the prevalence of this false belief (cf. ideology critique), then a negative evaluation of the belief follows.

CDAs123 and 5 have each posited or intimated the false consciousness notion of ideology. This is expressly rejected in CDA6.

> Ideologies are often (though not necessarily) false or ungrounded constructions of society. (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997: 275)

> The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to be made use of [because], like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. (Foucault, 1980: 118)

Explanatory critique is adopted as the preferred discourse analytical framework in the dialectical discourse approach of CDA5 (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999: 60; Fairclough, 2003: 209-10).

FOURTH MOMENT

Emancipatory axiology (CDA1-3; 4?, 5?, ≠ CDA6)

CR embraces both EC and emancipatory axiology (EA) – i.e., the drive for emancipation whereby the free flourishing of each is a condition for the free flourishing of all (cf. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* – 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!')

> [A]n objective process of universal self realization, eudaimonia or flourishing (-in nature). (Bhaskar, 2008, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*: 176)

> Characteristically the transition from an unwanted, unnecessary and oppressive situation to a wanted and/or needed and empowering or more flourishing situation. (Bhaskar, 2008, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*: 397)

Most approaches to CDA embrace some form of emancipatory goal (*passim*):

> [The objective of CDA is] to help to increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation. (Fairclough, 1989/2001: 1)

But not CDA6 which views emancipatory discourse as potentially totalising.

> My view […] is that there is no escape from questions of power, no escape from ideology or discourse. (Pennycook, 2001: 88)

FIFTH MOMENT

Dialectical critical realism (= CDA3 and 6)

Both CR and CDA (3 and 6 explicitly) adopt a method of immanent critique:

> Immanent critique [in CR] proceeds, via a process of transcendental argument, essentially by identifying theory practice inconsistencies, contradictions and anomalies in rival discursive formations and remedying the constitutive absences or incompleteness that give rise to them, thereby effecting a move to a fuller, richer conceptual totality. (DCR: 99)

> 'Text or discourse immanent critique' aims at discovering inconsistencies, (self)contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in the text internal or discourse internal structures. (Wodak, 2001: 65)

> In […] immanent critique, 'objects' (e.g. social institutions, ideological concepts and beliefs) are judged according to whether they meet their own criteria of truth; that is, according to their own conceptions of what they think they are. (O'Regan, 2006a: 99)

SIXTH MOMENT

Philosophical discourse of modernity (= CDA1-6)

> The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilise this accumulation of specialised culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organisation of everyday social life. (Habermas, 1981: 9)

Inasmuch as CR seeks to preserve the emancipatory project of modernity it is located within this philosophical tradition. Where it differs is in its rejection of bourgeois triumphal 'endism' following the fall of the Berlin wall, and the consequent rise of globalised neo-liberal and Islamist fundamentalisms. In its opposition to fundamentalist discourses CR has much in common with all approaches to CDA, although CDA 6 rejects emancipatory discourse as potentially totalising.

The semiotic triangle
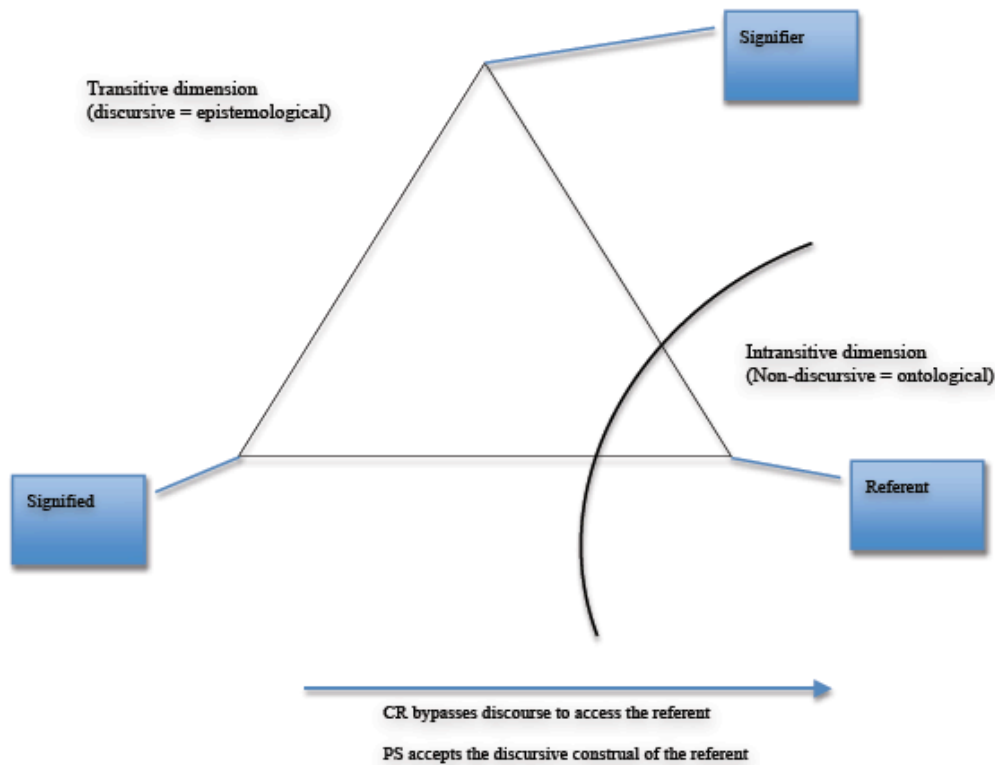
The critical realist case against poststructuralism (and by extension postmodernism) is that it does not possess an adequate theory of meaning, that is, an adequate theory of the sign. The reason given for this is that poststructuralist perceptions of discourse appear to exclude the concept of referential detachment. This holds that in order for anything to be talked about, it must be about something that is not part of the discourse which is being engaged in, that 'it must be about something other than itself' (Bhaskar, 2008: 212). This 'other' is to be found in the semiotic triangle of the signifier, the signified and the referent. The 'other' to which discourse refers is the referent. In critical realism, the charge is that poststructuralists, such as Derrida, elide the referent from their conception of the sign, and therefore deny the existence of the intransitive ontological dimension which in critical realism is prior to and separate from discourse in the transitive epistemological dimension. By confining meaning construction to the signifier and the signified in the transitive dimension, extra-discursive reality is reduced to discourse, and therefore can only exist in discourse. This is what is known in critical realism as the epistemic fallacy, of reducing ontology to epistemology. It is the epistemic fallacy which seemingly leads Derrida to declare that 'there is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida, 1976: 158). I question whether that is what Derrida actually meant, and you may ask me why later, but for now I will focus on the charge of discursive reductionism which has been set down here – the idea that poststructuralists believe that reality is constructed in discourse, and therefore that the ontological does not exist except in our discourses about it. I want to challenge this, because as Roy himself will attest, from the arguments he has had with poststructuralists, many of them deny this. They do not say that extra-discursive reality does not exist, neither do they say that it is not prior to discourse, or that it does not have causal effects upon us, but they do deny the possibility that the extra-discursive 'could constitute itself outside any discursive conditions of emergence' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 108). In other words, that meaning or knowledge could be constituted outside of a system of meaning relations, and so in order for the extra-discursive dimension to have any meaning for us – in order for this dimension to be accessed – this has to be done through discourse of one kind or another, but for all that it is still discourse.

Rather than being an epistemic fallacy, this perspective seems consistent with the critical realist principle of epistemic relativism which, 'asserts that all beliefs are socially produced, so that all knowledge is transient, and neither truth-values or criteria of rationality exist outside historical time' (Bhaskar, 1998: 83). Given these discoursal, historical and temporal constraints, critical realism nevertheless appears to want to maintain that the extra-discursive realm is accessible by non-discursive means. That is, critical realism appears to hold that true knowledge of the non-discursive object can be known without having to resort to any discursive description of it. In this, critical realism seems to be able to bypass the Saussurean sign itself and yet still gain access to the referent. Poststructuralists and many applied linguists would see this as a form of superidealism. I accept that this argument will be immediately rejected by most critical realists, and that's fine, but if critical realism is itself to have an adequate theory of meaning in addition to a robust critical ontology, it will have to deal more effectively with the problem of how true knowledge of the referent can be accessed either by non-discursive means, or, if not that, by discursive means which do not involve 'pulling the referent back to the level of the transitive, to its constitution in discourse' (Bhaskar, 2002: 94). In other words, of doing precisely what critical realists accuse poststructuralists of doing, and this is in spite of the commitment to objective truth values that may 'transcend or surpass the limits of human knowledge' (Bhaskar citation, DCR: 475).

The aporiai of the semiotic triangle spill across the critical realist conjuncture between the acceptance of epistemic relativism on the one hand and the rejection of judgemental relativism on the other (this is also the move of CDA5). That accepting epistemic relativism seems a judgementally relative thing to do is one issue, but a minor one, so I will pass over that. The problem which ensues from the concept of referential detachment is that if the referent can only be made intelligible through discourse, then the true nature of the object cannot be known, except insofar as discourse is able to replicate it. However, since discourse and the referent are not identical, any discursive representation of the referent will only ever be an approximation rather than a reproduction of the thing in itself as it exists in the intransitive dimension. It follows then that discursive representations by being just that, representations, cannot be relied upon to be once and for all true representations, they are always imperfect, and may even be completely false. It is the problem of the intransitive dimension that discourse has to stand in for it. By standing in for the intransitive rather than *being* the intransitive itself, discourse becomes unreliable as a bearer of truth about the intransitive, and this is why poststructuralists (and postmodernists) are wary of truth, because to claim truth is to claim non-discursive, ahistorical, non-temporal, and ideal access to the thing in itself, whatever that thing may be, and thus also to foundational truth.

In questions of moral judgement it therefore follows that for truth judgements to be valid (once and for all), the adjudication to be made must be based on ideal knowledge of moral truths in the intransitive dimension – that is, for want of a better metaphor, of God's truth. Since such truths are beyond the confines of lived existence, this entails that our own 'situated' moral truths are unreliable, even as we are scientifically able to demonstrate that it is advisable to leave the building via the ground floor than via the second floor. The poststructuralist and postmodern objection to truth lies in the observation that in this century and in past ones, the claim to truth been used as a means of naked oppression and terror against those who stand against it. Which is not to say that moral truth does not exist, only that we cannot (once and for all) know it.

Does this suggest that there are no grounds for preferring one domain to another (Bhaskar, 1998: 58)? Of course not, only that we cannot presume that our beliefs are the best beliefs even as we make our decisions of preference. The tragedy is that when truth is claimed, the duty of care – the care not to assume that our truths are the universally right truths – which ought to be placed on truth judgements – is rarely made in practice, and so the world we inhabit is organised by whichever overarching truth claim is hegemonically dominant in a particular place at a particular time. Some truths are clearly better than other truths, and some hegemonies are better than other hegemonies, but that's not because they are true, but because they allow for greater openness and diversity in human activity and relations – more free flourishing (?). It is the truths which work in opposition to these which are the

most dangerous, and the most oppressive, the ones which privilege closure over openness, uniformity over diversity and conformity over difference.

Critical realism posits:

- Ontological realism > epistemic relativism > judgemental rationalism

Poststructuralist CDA posits:

- Ontological realism > epistemic relativism > judgemental *care*

We must imbue our judgements with the care that they may not be true, for science cannot tell us this.

Critical realism and critical discourse analysis as generative methods of discourse enquiry

Fig 1. 4D method cube of critical realism > critical discourse analysis > immanent critique > discourse
+
4D discourse cube of ontology > epistemology > orders of discourse > text
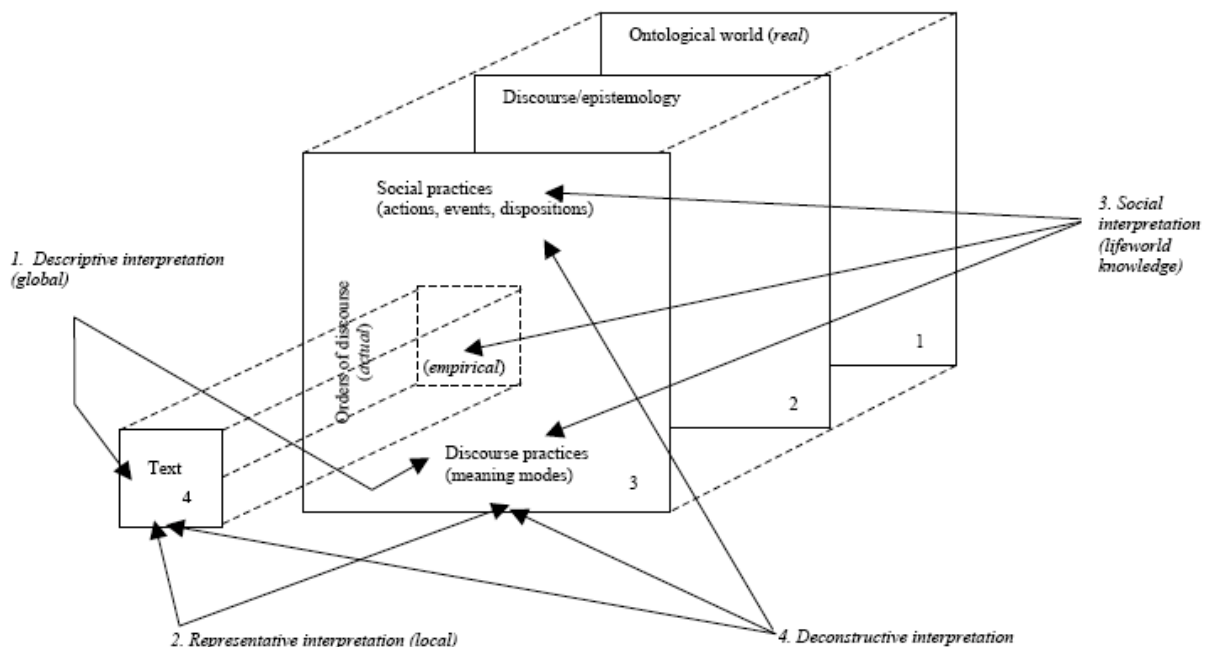
(Based on O'Regan, 2006a: 156)

Reality (DCR: 400) Generative mechanisms > events (they generate) > experiences (in which they are apprehended)

They ∴ 'constitute three overlapping domains of reality' (Bhaskar, 1978, *The Realist Theory of Science*: 56):

- The *real* (mechanisms, events, experiences)
- The *actual* (events and experiences)
- The *empirical/subjective* (experiences/concepts and signs)

Model contrasts with Fairclough's (1989, 2001) 3D view of the same in which discourse analysis proceeds from description to interpretation to explanation.

(i)   Description   (of the language text) = technical knowledge
(ii)   Interpretation (of the relationship between the - productive and interpretative - discursive processes and the text) = interpretative knowledge

(iii)   Explanation   (of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes) = emancipatory knowledge (i.e. explanatory truth)

(Based on Fairclough, 1989, 2001)

Slembrouck (2001) and Blommaert (2005) have both drawn attention to the claims to explanatory power which are suggested by Fairclough's three dimensions of description, interpretation and explanation, and O'Regan (2006b) from the perspective of education has proposed removing explanation altogether in favour of a wholly interpretative approach to texts.

The Text as a Critical Object (O'Regan, 2006b: 191)

1. **Descriptive interpretation**: the frame of the text, the visual organization of the text, the topic, the reading position, the preferred reading and the ideal reader.
2. **Representative interpretation**: description and interpretation of the image, grammar, vocabulary and genre choices of the text.
3. **Social interpretation**: the social context(s) which the text seems to be a part of: e.g. contexts of gender, race, economy, politics, family, class, income, age, sex, property, geography, etc.
4. **Deconstructive interpretation**: aspects of the descriptive, representative and social dimensions of the text which appear to contradict or undermine the preferred reading.

The model is influenced by the **immanent critique** of Adorno (1973) and the **deconstruction** of Derrida (1976). It is a strategic attack on 'fixism' and 'identity thinking' *in texts* (= reification of the object; unquestioning acceptance of the preferred or dominant reading).

> Immanent criticism of phenomena seeks to grasp, through the analysis of their form
> and meaning […] a heightened perception of the thing itself (Adorno, 1967: 32).

> [T]he reading aims at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between
> what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that
> he uses. (Derrida, 1976: 158).

The object of immanent critique is not to 'explain' or resolve the text, but to problematise it. It contrasts with immanent critique in CR, while still sharing many (but not all) of its perceptions.

In CR immanent critique is like intelligent surgery. It heals and makes whole. In TACO this is not the principal objective. CR critique isolates error. TACO critique isolates inconsistency and contradiction, and undermines closure.

> A discourse which is oriented to closure seeks to suppress difference through the
> employment of truth as an organising principle. '[T]he spread of the principle
> imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total'
> (Adorno, 1973: 146). A discourse which is oriented to closure is not a loose
> framework of beliefs guiding individuals' everyday actions and choices. Rather, it
> seeks through the practice of its utterance and its dissemination a permanent
> reordering of social relations according to the truth which it conveys. (O'Regan,
> unpublished MS)

Despite the differences which exist between CR and CDA, the injunction to be CRITICAL still holds:

C   is for critical. Be critical; resist closure
R   is for respect. Respect how the text seems to want to be read
I   is for interpretation. Interpret the text from within
T   is for teaching. Teach your interpretation to others
I   is for investigation. Investigate the interpretations of others
C   is for cooperation and communication. Cooperate in order to communicate
A   is for analysis. Analyse the construction of knowledge
L   is for learning. Learn from the knowledge of others

(O'Regan, 2006b: 204-205)

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