

## A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF SOME SPACE PREPOSITIONS IN ENGLISH AND THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN ARMENIAN

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**ABSTRACT:** *The article offers a cross-linguistic study of the English space prepositions **in**, **on** and **at** and their counterparts in Armenian. The choice of these prepositions for analysis is predetermined, firstly, by the fact that they are often used arbitrarily in English, when the priority of one over another in a particular prepositional phrase often appears obscure and hardly motivated. Secondly, English space prepositions are rendered into Armenian by means of both postpositions and case inflections, with the latter functioning as morphological synonyms to the former. The analysis is carried out in the framework of cognitive semantics as well as the theory of oppositions which help distinguish all the subtle differences in the usage of these linguistic units triggered in most cases by extralinguistic factors. The study reveals that the oppositions made up with the space prepositions **in**, **on** and **at** in English outnumber those in Armenian and that their functional scope in English is rather extensive and diversified in comparison with those in Armenian.*

**KEYWORDS:** space prepositions; cognitive semantics; theory of oppositions; comparative analysis; postpositions; contextual opposites

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### INTRODUCTION

#### **On Cognitive linguistics**

Over the past few decades an increasing interest has been observed in cognitive studies, especially in the field of comparative linguistics. The transition from structural linguistics and transformational grammar to cognitive linguistics led to better understanding the relationship between linguistic facts and human cognition. As L. Janda puts it, “cognitive linguistics views linguistic cognition as indistinguishable from general cognition and thus seeks explanation of linguistic phenomena in terms of general cognitive strategies” [1,131]. R. Langacker notes that cognitive linguistics “presupposes an elaborate conceptual substrate, including such matters as background knowledge and apprehension of the physical, social and linguistic context”. However, the linguist warns that it is impossible to reflect all the countless ways of conceiving and portraying the situation in question [2, 4]. In contrast to transformationalists, for cognitive linguists the central object of language study is meaning. “Linguistic structures serve the function of expressing meanings”, says R. Langacker, claiming that “all constructs validly posited for grammatical description must in some way be meaningful“ [2, 5].

Naturally, these views are in direct opposition to the principles of Chomsky’s Transformational Grammar, in which the basic object of interest is syntax. In this view the structures of language are not motivated by meaning, but instead are governed by principles essentially independent of meaning [3]. Nevertheless, Chomsky finds that the two fields address language aspects that are complementary to each other. He also believes that cognitive linguistics needs to accept some

foundation from the theory of generative grammar [4,5]. We would welcome this optimistic tone, adding that any aspect of language taken separately cannot be self-sufficient and in order to be presented in full blood and flesh it should be viewed in conjunction with other aspects of language.

### **Means of expressing space relations in English and Armenian**

The object of our study is space prepositions in English and their counterparts in Armenian. We have chosen these prepositions because they present a major difficulty for foreign learners of English, particularly Armenian learners. Firstly, the prepositions **at**, **in** and **on** are often used in English arbitrarily when the choice of one over another in a particular phrase seems rather obscure and vague. Secondly, English space prepositions are rendered into Armenian by means of both prepositions and postpositions (both types are indicated by the same term *kaper* meaning *connectives*) as well as by case inflections. As far as these particular prepositions **in** and **on** are concerned, they are expressed by postpositions in Armenian: **mej- in**, **vra-on** or the case inflections (Locative and Dative respectively); as for the preposition **at**, it has no direct equivalence in Armenian expressing the meanings of both postpositions and inflections.

The fact that case relations may be expressed by different linguistic means as it is observed in our case is not an extraordinary phenomenon. Many linguists (including Fillmore) mention that various forms of expressing case relations are mere surface realizations of the deep cases: prepositions, postpositions and case inflections may present the realization of the same deep cases [5, 418]. J. Lyons says that it is impossible to examine the category only from the morphological point of view (6,320). Though prepositions/postpositions and their synonymous case inflections are characterized by common semantic content there is a certain difference between them. According to the Armenian linguist V. Arakelian, prepositional phrases express space relations in a more explicit, vivid way than the respective inflective forms [7]. As M. Asatrian puts it, prepositions /postpositions fill in the function that inflections fail to do [8].

### **The theory of oppositions as the theoretical ground for analysis space prepositions**

It should be mentioned that space prepositions have been the object of many researches, but they were in most cases examined on the semantic and syntactic level [9; 10; 11, 49-50; 12, 88; 13; 14, 226-227]. We have undertaken to examine these prepositions from the cognitive point of view by considering extralinguistic factors like the various physical characteristics of the space object that the use of the given preposition is related to. This kind of analysis may help foreign learners of English better understand all possible semantic and pragmatic differences of prepositional phrases and use them in appropriate speech patterns. We will apply the theory of oppositions because in this way it will be possible to see more explicitly all the differences that the members of the opposition can reveal.

The term “opposition” is widely used in linguistics due to F. de Saussure and N. Trubetskoy, who used the term in a wider sense. “In linguistics everything is reduced to differentiation”, claimed F. de Saussure. “All the linguistic mechanism turns round the similarities and differences, and the latter only are the counterparts of the first one” (15,118- 125).

Trubetskoy’s linguistic theory is constructed completely on the notion of oppositions, which are introduced through concepts *distinction* and *similarity*. According to Trubetskoy contrast (opposition) not only presupposes features that distinguish members of oppositions, but also features that are common for both members of the opposition. Common features serve as the basis

of contrast, while differential features express the immediate function in question (16,75). As for a lexical opposition, it is viewed “as a semantically relevant relationship of partial difference between two partially similar words” [17]. The object of our study is prepositional phrases containing **in**, **on** and **at** which exhibit different forms of usage determined by the perception of space objects and their characteristics by the speaker/observer.

### The English opposition **in/on** and its Armenian counterpart

The study of the prepositions **in**, **on** and **at** on the basis of the theory of oppositions (**in/on**, **in/at**) can proceed in two directions: paradigmatic and syntagmatic. On the paradigmatic level the prepositions **in** and **on** are members of the opposition: **inside** – **on the surface**, which is a partial realization of a wider contrary opposition **inside- outside**. On the syntagmatic level this opposition is realized on the basis of the observer’s perception of the correlated space objects and their characteristics, i.e. contextual information. We can say that in this sense the members of opposition become contextual opposites, in contrast to paradigmatic opposites which are not defined by context. Now what information is important for the description of space objects so as to provide the appropriate choice of prepositions **in**, **on** and **at** in a particular context.

We would first characterize the prepositions **at**, **on** and **in** from the point of their physical characteristics, i.e. dimensions: height, width, length. Based on this characteristic, **at** is usually identified with one-dimensional objects, i.e. expressing a specific point in space, **on**- two dimensional and **in** as three- dimensional objects. Considering the prepositions in these terms helps us explain certain facts, which cannot be explained otherwise. For instance, in the opposition **in the grass// on the grass** the first member presupposes that the grass is high, which gives the impression of extended space; while the second member of the opposition presupposes short grass, which is perceived as surface on which something can be put or done, i.e. two-dimensional object. Let’s discuss contextual oppositions on the basis of the most-widely used space prepositions **in** and **on** in detail. This type of oppositions can be distinguished by the following parameters:

- a) size of the space object
- b) form of the space object
- c) mode of location within the space object
- d) specificity of action within the object

### Size of the space object

Here belong the following space oppositions: Eng.: **in the island// on the island, in the peninsula // on the peninsula, in the grass// on the grass, in the boat //on the boat**. Arm.: **kghzum//kghzu vra// khoti mej// khoti vra, etc.**

When the space preposition is correlated with a large object, the preposition **in** – **mej** is used as the space object is viewed as a three-dimensional space within the borders of which the action takes place. The preposition **on** –**vra** is used when the space object is smaller and is seen as a surface, i.e. a two-dimensional space:

The purser of the Oahu told me that he hadn’t met a nicer girl **in the islands**. (Maugham)      **On my island** in the Paumotus there is never at night the complete stillness that there was here. (Maugham)

We sat **in the grass** of a quiet roadside, looking west where the mountains rose in a blue haze. (Cramer)

Sitting **on the grass**, eating peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches, they chanced upon a strange ritual.

... <b>khoti mej</b> taqnvats mi kanach zhptum er. (Tumanyan)	Parkel ein <b>khoti vra</b> ev anush zruyc ein anum. (AHBB)
...a green thing hidden <b>in the grass</b> was smiling.	They were lying <b>on the grass</b> , talking happily.
Iharke mi anmardabnak <b>kghzum</b> Robinzoni hamar yur vayreni Urbatn el mi lav ynker er. (Muracan)	<b>Kghzu vra</b> kar dproc, mankapartez ev yerku yekegheci. (AHBB)
Naturally, for Robinson living <b>in</b> an uninhabited <b>island</b> even wild Friday could be a good friend.	There was a school, a kindergarten and two churches <b>on the island</b> .

### Form of the space object

This type includes such oppositions as Eng.: *in the plate// on the plate, in the tray// on the tray, in the pan// on the pan, in the chair //on the chair*; Arm.: *bazkatorum//bazkatori vra, skuteghum//skuteghi vra*, etc. In these cases the preposition **on-vra** is used when the space object has a flat shape, while the preposition **in-mej** is used when the object is associated with depth. Or: if a chair or an arm-chair has sides on which you can rest your arms and elbows, it is perceived as 3-dimensional space, consequently **in –mej** is used.

*He replaced the morsel of food <b>in his plate</b> and read the paragraph attentively (Joyce)	He ...put, now and then, a little bit <b>on my plate</b> , and guided it to my mouth. (Joyce)
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If you are going to make yourself  
at home, why don't you sit **in an**  
**armchair?** (Maugham)

...niharel er ayn banic heto, yerb cher  
karoghacel teghavorvel odanavi  
**bazkatorum.** (AHBB)

...got thinner after he was  
unable to sit **in** the airplane **armchair**.  
Yes bakhtavor em u hesht em khosum,  
bayc nra kyanqy chi teghavorvum ayn  
**skuteghum**, vor tetev brnats qez em  
matutsum. (AHBB)

I'm lucky and speak easily, but her life  
cannot be placed **in the tray** that I  
serve you with pleasure.

He sat down **on the only chair** that had no arms  
and tilted himself on the back legs. (Maugham)

Mets graseghani handep,  
nuynpes mets **bazkatori vra**,  
nstats e na. (Raffi)

He is sitting **on** a large **armchair**,  
in front of a big desk.  
...verjapes veradardzan berelov  
irenc het artsate **skuteghi vra**  
osharak. (Muracan)

...finally they returned with a syrup  
**on** a silver **tray**.

### Mode of location within the space object

The oppositions of this type include such phrases as Eng.: *in the tree// on the tree, in the moon// on the moon, in the sun// on the sun, in the picture// on the picture, in bed// on bed, in the mountains// on the mountain, in the window// on the window*. Arm.: *ankoghnu mej//ankoghnu vra, achqerum//achqerin, lernerum//lernereri vra, nkarum//nkari vra*.

In case of **on- vra** the emphasis is on the external part of the space object; **in- mej** is used when the location of the object is within the borders of the space object. For example, *in bed* means *under the blanket*; *on (the) bed* is used to mean *on the blanket, on the surface of the bed*. The same opposition is observed in Armenian.

Nra demudem **ankoghnu mej** parkac er  
Seyrany. (Shirvanzade)  
Across him was Seyran  
lying **in bed**.

Ays aselov, Seyrann aragutyamb  
votqi kangnec **ankoghnu vra**. (Shirvanzade)  
Saying this, Seyran quickly stood up  
**on the bed**.

Likewise the phrase **in the picture- nkarum** is used to describe what is depicted in the painting, to characterize and evaluate the contents of the picture. The phrase **on the picture- nkari vra** is associated with the external, mechanical location of objects on the picture.

...in all of them was the passion of the unseen  
which Philip felt **in the pictures** of El Greco.

There is a fly **on the picture**.

(Maugham)

Im **achqeri mej** aynqan krakner em  
marel yes. (Charenc)  
I have quenched so much fire  
**in my eyes**.

Ayrin arcunqn **achqerin** nayum er  
harsanakan lusankarnery. (AHBB)  
With tears **on her eyes**, the widow  
was looking at wedding photos.

In case of the opposition **in the tree// on the tree** the first member of the opposition is used when birds, animals, or people are posited in the tree, that is, among the branches and the leaves. The second member of the opposition implicates the external part of the tree (leaves, fruit).

At last, early one morning, when the birds were  
chattering noisily **in the trees**, he heard his  
name called. (Maugham)

... beneath it, shook and roared  
till the leaves **on the trees** trembled .  
(Maugham)

The phrases **in the mountains- lernerum** indicates a mountainous territory, unlike the phrase with **on -vra** which points to the mountain peaks.

Three others were up **in the mountains** at  
dressing-stations. (Hemingway)

I could see ...the lake with white-caps  
and beyond, the moon **on the high snow  
mountains**. (Hemingway)

In English the phrase **in the sun** means “the sunny part of the earth”. This meaning occurs in the phrases **to sit, to lie, to sleep in the sun**. The phrase **on the sun** is used, for instance, when spots on the sun are mentioned. In Armenian this opposition is expressed by the postposition **tak (under)** and **vra (on)**.

Na chi karogh yerkar nstel **arevi tak**.  
(AHBB)  
He couldn't stay **under the sun**  
for a long time.

**Arevi vra** teghi e unecel nor hzoraguyn  
paytyun. (AHBB)  
There was a massive explosion  
**on the sun**.

The fact that the English phrase **in the sun** is rendered into Armenian by means of the postposition **tak (under)** testifies to the more concrete character of expressing space relations in Armenian. This thesis will be supported by our further analysis.

#### 2.4. Specificity of actions within the space object

Here belong the oppositions as Eng.: **in the train // on the train, in the field// on the field, in the street// at the street**; Arm.: **dashtum//dashti vra, poghocum//poghoci vra, etc**.

When the space object is perceived as an enclosed area within borders of which an action is taking place, the preposition/postposition **in- mej** is used. However, when we want to emphasize that the name of place is connected with a certain kind of activity, **on-vra** is applied, for instance, **in the field** but **on the field of battle**, when the place is associated with fighting.

I could see our two big moving-vans of cars stuck **in the field**. (Hemingway)  
 ...tesnum e mi **dashtum** mets nakhir e aratum. (Tumanyan)  
 ...he sees a big herd grazing **in the field**.

When a means of transportation is indicated, the preposition **in –mej** is used if the meaning of the place is actualized, without mentioning the fact of the traveling, or motion. Otherwise, the preposition/postposition **on-vra** is applied.

It was very hot **in the train**.

(Hemingway)

Aha te inch e katarvum **navi mej** potoriki zhamanak. (AHBB)

Here is what happening **in the ship** during the storm.

...glkhavor **poghocum** yerevac shahap ishkhany. (S. Zoryan/

... there appeared Great Ishkhan **in the main street**.

It is better to negotiate than to settle political disputes **on the field of battle**. (LLA)

Na chi karogh bac **dashti vra**

handipel mez. (Muracan)

He cannot meet us **on the open field**.

**On the train** going into the town Jack

didn't talk. (Hemingway)

**Navi vra** teghadrecinq kerosinayin sharzhich. (AHBB)

We placed a kerosene motor **on the ship**.

Ays **poghoci vra** er yev mets ishkhanyatuny` yerku masi bazhanvac. (S. Zoryan)

Here **on this street** was Ishkhan's big house divided into two parts.

### Opposition in-at

This type of opposition is not found in the Armenian language data and it is not surprising. Differences in the lexical expression of entities of objective reality in various languages can be accounted for by the fact that each language sees and describes them differently. As C. Kramsch puts it, speakers of different languages do not cut up reality or categorize experience in the same manner, and it does not depend on structural equivalences but on common conceptual systems (18,13). As we see, peoples' thoughts and perceptions are not determined by the words and structures of their languages, as it is suggested by the Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis called *linguistic determination* [19,26]. Objects of the physical world are reflected in human consciousness, passing through the prism of their perceptions and sensations, a property that E. Benvenist called "a human factor in language [20], which later was paraphrased as anthropological principle [21,50). This is compatible with the tenets of cognitive linguistics, which is based on the assumption that in interpreting and analyzing linguistic facts, a due attention should be paid to extralinguistic factors, including the presence of the speaker /observer. The fact that Armenian has no counterpart of the English preposition **at** shows that in the characterization of space objects only two parameters are valid here: two- dimensionality and three- dimensionality; one-dimensionality that in English is represented by the preposition **at** due to its specific abstract character proves to be of no validity in describing space objects in Armenian. The meanings of the English preposition **at** are rendered into Armenian basically by means of the postposition **mej (in)** and (rarely) **vra (on)**.

In English the phrases with the preposition **in** indicate the place or area as three-dimensional space, whereas the phrases with the preposition **at** imply additional characteristics: the place of work, meeting, visit, temporary residence, etc.: **in the theatre// at the theatre, in the restaurant //at the restaurant, in the hotel// at the hotel, in the library// at the library, in school // at school**, etc.

It's inadvisable to comment on what

... he left a note for Baby Warren who was just

goes on **in this house.** (Fitzgerald)

back from Sardinia and staying **at the house.** (Fitzgerald)

But it was pleasant **in the gym.** There was good air and light ... (Hemingway)

The professor **at the boxing gymnasium** wore moustaches and was very precise and jerky... (Hemingway)

... made up at Turin and reached Milan about half past ten at night and lay **in the station** until time to leave. (Hemingway)

I told him I would be **at the station** a little before midnight. (Hemingway)

There is a bar **in the theatre.** (OCD)

We were **at the theatre** last night. (OCD)

Let's consider cases with the names of cities and towns.

The preposition **in** is used when the name of the city is perceived as a place for habitation, with streets and houses and other advantages of city life; **at** may be used as a point in space, a geographical point on a map.

...he made up his mind ...that he would live the rest of his life **in Alexandria.** (Maugham)

One morning the tramp docked **at Alexandria** (Maugham)

The name of the city may be associated with the names of various types of establishments, offices, educational institutions, museums, memorials, etc.

Pay respects to thousands who have given their lives in the name of US freedom at the National military cemetery **in Arlington.** (Int)

Five state funerals have been held **at Arlington.** (Int)

Now let's discuss occurrences of prepositions **in** and **at** with the names of streets.

The preposition **in** is used when the mere name of the street is mentioned; with **at** the name of the street is associated with a specific house, an institution, an office, etc. located in it.

When they were back **at Addison Crescent,** it dawned on Ted that he and Sara had not really talked privately....( Segal)

They then proceeded in his Morris Minor to the small terraced house **in Addison Crescent.**

(Segal)

We suppose that in some cases differences in the use of opposite prepositions may be accounted for by the structure of the prepositional phrase. We observed the following regularity: **in** is preferable, when the prepositional phrase is more complex, lengthy, containing some information of descriptive character.

I am staying **in a strange couple's house** under crept into

Last Christmas **at Mum's house** I

completely false pretences. (Kinsella)

the kitchen... (Kinsella)

I'm dining **in a little grabby restaurant** **restaurant.**

Watson asked him to dinner **at a**

**suitd to our joint means.** (Hemingway)

(Maugham)

We're staying **in a two-star hotel in the centre of the city.** (OCD)

We met **at the hotel .** (OCD)

Another observation is connected with concrete names of space objects: hotel, restaurants, office, church, etc. in which cases **at** is normally found.

... the wedding ceremony that took place **at the Memorial Church of Harvard University.** (Ahern)

I told Tiare the story of a man I had known **at St.Thomas hospital.** (Maugham)

If you're a lawyer **at Carter Spink**, you don't sit around. (Kinsella)

### Neutralization of oppositions

The concept of neutralization was initially applied on the phonological level, later it extended to the other aspects of language, including lexicology. In case of neutralization one member of the opposition becomes fully identified with its counterpart. In other words, neutralization is the reduction of the opposition to one of its members [22]. In this sense neutralization may be identified with variability which leads to creation of variants of words, phrases and structure [23].

The most powerful factor leading to neutralization is extralinguistic context – the situation of immediate perception of correlated objects. As we know, objects of objective reality are not marked in the sense of space measurement, therefore one and the same object can be described from different angles and perspectives. Moreover, if we take into account the subjective factor in estimating and perceiving entities of objective reality, we would understand why the characteristics of space objects becomes so vague, uncertain, indistinct and even blurred. As a result, the use of prepositions/postpositions with nouns expressing these objects gains an unsteady, inconsistent character. This fluctuation of forms is considered to be a natural phenomenon. As M. Swan notes, the ability to deploy different styles appropriately is part of linguistic competence and “if two competing forms are widespread among speakers of a standard language, all that one can reasonably say is that the two forms are widespread [24, 67-68].

The process of neutralization is characteristic of the two correlated languages, with the English prepositional phrases more affected by it. In English neutralization is more persistent with the opposition **in//at**, in Armenian it is normally characteristic of the opposition **mej//vra in//on**. In English neutralization affects such parallel phrases as **in the library//at the library, in the hotel//at the hotel, in the restaurant//at the restaurant, in the hospital//at the hospital, in the university//at the university, in the school//at school, in the theatre//at the theatre**, etc

We come across some cases when the same author in the same book, and even in the same page uses two correlated parallel phrases without any visible pragmatic differences in meaning. Below are examples to illustrate this.

But I seriously have to be back **in the office** by one. (Kinsella)

You always wanted the paper **in the hospital**. (Hemingway)

I found a man **in the station** and asked him

If he knew what hotels were open. (Hemingway)

In Armenian neutralization is found in the opposition **mej//vra** (i.e. **in//on**) and its synonymous case inflections **um//in**.

Sari **lanjum**, khagh es kanchum.../Tumanyan/

She was dancing **in the sidehill**.

Mut anamp **yerknqum** astghery yerevum en trtracogh krakneri nman /Shirvanzade/

Practically living **at the office**, some weeks ... (Kinsella)

**At the hospital** we went in and I carried the bag. (Hemingway)

**At the station** I had expected to see the

porters from the hotel... (Hemingway)

Akh, en kanach **sari lanjin**, Ov e qynen tyghen.../Tumanyan/

Oh, who is the boy sleeping **on the green sidehill**.

...ditel sksec arajin daluk poqrik astghery, vor varvum ein handart

**yerknqin**. /AHBB/



**In the** dark, cloudless **sky** the stars looked like ...he started to watch the first, small and pale dancing fires. stars that were shining **on the** quiet **sky**.

It should be mentioned that even the dictionaries register this phenomenon, giving parallel uses of prepositions with a slash:

We stayed **at/in a hotel**. [Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary,2005]

He works **at/in a shoe factory** [Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English, 2005]

The problem of neutralization of prepositional phrases cannot be confined to the results of our study. Naturally, there are some issues that require further investigation; for example, how variants of prepositional opposites are distributed between British and American English. Even superfluous observation allows us to assume that phrases with **at** are more characteristic of British English, whereas **in** is more common in American English. This is registered in the dictionaries: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2005 (OALD) and Longman Language Activator, Second Edition, 2003(LLA).

OALD	They're <b>in church</b> . AmE	They're <b>at church</b> . BrE
	(=attending a church service)	
(LLA)	He is <b>in school</b> . AmE	He is <b>at school</b> . BrE
	(=attending school)	

## CONCLUSION

The comparative study shows that the English space prepositions **in**, **on** and **at** are rendered into Armenian by means of both postpositions and case inflections, with the latter functioning as morphological synonyms to the former. The cognitive analysis carried out in the framework of the theory of oppositions proved effective in revealing all the subtleties of semantic-pragmatic meanings of the members of oppositions **in/on** and **in/at** and their Armenian counterparts. The choice of a particular preposition is predetermined by the extralinguistic information concerning the characteristics of the space object that the preposition/postposition is related to: size, form of the space object, mode of location, specificity of action within the space object, as well as syntactic and other factors. The cross-linguistic analysis reveals that the space oppositions with **in**, **on** and **at** in English outnumber those in Armenian and that their functional scope in English is rather extensive and diversified in comparison with those in Armenian. As far as neutralization is concerned, it affects more the English opposition **in/at**, which finds no counterpart in Armenian. Neutralization in Armenian prepositional oppositions affects predominantly **mej -vra (in-on)** and their synonymous case inflections.

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### DICTIONARIES

- OALD - Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005)
- LLA - Longman Language Activator (2003)
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