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THE LINGUISTIC ASPECT OF A BRAND NAME
CASE STUDY BASED ON BRANDING STRATEGY OF *OPEL*

The creation of a good brand name involves many branches of human knowledge. Linguistics is one of them and a very important one. Phonetics, sound symbolism, semantics, word formation and comparative studies of different languages have a considerable contribution to creating a good name of a product. The aim of the research, presented in the article is to apply this kind of knowledge to analyse the names of currently available OPEL cars.

1. Introduction

The study of all the research work on brands and branding seems to be an impossible task for an individual. Most of this research, however, is confined to the spheres of marketing while the study of linguistic aspects of brands seems to be less developed. This is rather surprising on bearing in mind that the development of a good name for a business or a product is a task beyond the competence of a single expert on marketing.

The aim of this article is to present briefly the contribution that a linguistic study can bring into the field of branding. The analysis starts with the presentation of the basic concepts connected with brand names. This provides a framework in which a linguistic study of product names is set. The case study based on the analysis of the names of currently available models of OPEL cars serves as an example of the potential contribution that a linguist can make in the process of development and evaluation of brands.

2. Branding – definition, function and strategies

Philip Kotler observes that branding "… is such a strong force today that hardly anything goes unbranded…" (2001:189). American Marketing Association (AMA) defines brand in the following way:

A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name. (http://www.marketingpower.com/ mg-dictionary-view329.php. 2007-05-07)

Philip Kotler complements this concept by focusing on brand in terms of seller – buyer relationship. According to him a brand is : "a seller's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services consistent to the buyers…" (2001:188).

The ability to "…create, maintain, protect and enhance brands…" is "…the most distinctive skill of professional marketers …" (Kotler 2001:188). This skill involves the choice of the proper branding strategy. Kotler distinguishes four basic brand name strategies:

- Individual names, e.g. *Bisquick, Gold Metal* and *Betty Crocker* offered by *General Mills*. The failure of one product does not harm the company's reputation;
- Blanket family names, e.g. *Campbell's, Heinz* and *General Electric.* This limits the spending on advertising and name research and makes it possible to benefit from good brand names of manufacturers;
- Separate family names for all products, e.g. *Sears* uses *Kenmore* brand for appliances and Craftsman for tools. This is appropriate when a firm offers a quite different products;
- Company trade name with individual product names, e.g. *Kellog's Rice Krispies*, *Kellog's Raisin Bran*. This makes it possible to use the company name to legitimise the names of products. Simultaneously products are individualised by their individual names (2001:192) .

The author also makes the following list of desirable features of a good brand name. Thus a good brand name should:

- suggest the products benefits and qualities, e.g. *Die Hard, Sunkis* and *Craftsman*;
- be easy to pronounce, recognise and remember, e.g. short names like *Tide, Aim* or *Puffs*;
- be distinctive, e.g. *Kodak, Exxon* and *Oracle*;
- be extendable, e.g. *Amazon.com* expanded from a bookseller into other categories;
- not carry poor meanings in other countries and languages, e.g. *Nova* means "doesn't go" in Spanish (Kotler 2001:192).

3. Linguistics versus branding

There are major failures and successes of brands who paid little or a lot of attention to the linguistic aspect of a brand, especially in its cross cultural context. When FIAT introduced the *Panda* model in 1980 they checked that the name was pronounced in a similar way in eight major languages of the world. (Metelski 1980). On the other hand Rolls Royce *Silver Mist* did not sell well in Germany. The name meant "silver animal dropping" in their own language. OPEL's parent company is famous for its *Chevy Nova* (i.e. *Chevy* cannot do it)) not selling well in Latin America (Haig 2006:181).

The examples clearly indicate that linguists should be consulted when a product name is being developed and the linguistic dimension of a brand must not be overlooked.

3.1. Brand as a linguistic message

Speaking about the relationship between linguistics and marketing in the area of brands it is worth mentioning the concept of *chrematonim* developed by a Polish linguist Czesław Kosyl. The terms is derived from the Greek language where *chrema, chrematos* stand for: thing, object, commodity (Kosyl 2001:447). C. Kosyl defines *chrematonyms* as the proper names of material products made by people in the process of handicraft, manufacturing, individually or in series that are not permanently tied to a specific landscape (ibid.). This definition, which seems to be a linguistic interpretation of brand name, has gained no wide acceptance. However, Kosyl's classification of *chrematonyms*, which will be presented later in this paper, complements the classification offered by the marketing theory.

Very briefly speaking one may say that brand is a kind of message that is sent by the manufacturer, provider of services or the seller on the one hand to the potential client on the other hand. A brand that takes the form of a name, as indicated in AMA's definition above has a linguistic character and the linguistic criteria must be applied to analyse it. In other words, the features of a brand discussed in the previous section connected with its meaning, pronunciation, remembering and recognition clearly indicate that linguists must have their say in designing new and interpreting the existing brands. Jacek Kall gives the following list of disciplines that serve such a purpose:

- etymology
- lexical statistics
- lexicology
- logic
- neology
- onomastics
- phonetics
- pragmatics

- psycholinguistics
- rhetoric
- semantics
- semiotics
- sociolinguistics
- word formation (Kall 2001:19)
  The author also identifies the following structural elements of a brand:
- Brand contents, i.e. the persuasive and promotional message that consists of and idea, a message and the contents the brand conveys.
- Brand form, i.e. a linguistic sign that functions on three levels:
  - Linguistic record – type, colour, size of letters, symbols, motifs and design;
  - Form of the linguistic sign – meaning, position in the name, repetitiveness, combination of letters, length of the name its internal, symmetry
  - Meaning of the linguistic sign – the lexical formula, stylistic and semantic values (2001:150)

As far as the disciplines listed above are concerned it seems that the most important position is occupied by semiotics, which investigates "…the structure of all possible sign systems, and the role thee play in the way we create or perceive patterns (or 'meanings') in sociocultural behaviour…" (Crystal 2005a:403) and semantics – the study of meaning "…ins systematic and objective way …" (Crystal 2005a:100). As far as branding is concerned, the most important thing is that the brand designer creates a relationship between the referent, an extra-linguistic entity, i.e. a given firm or its product and a symbol, i.e. a brand. This relationship is usually created by the marketer in a more or less arbitrary way, however, contextual, linguistics and non-linguistics aspects (such as legal protection of existing and new brands) have to be taken into consideration.

The conventional and arbitrary relationship between the symbol (brand) and the referent may be seen in the classification of brands given by Marek Zboralski (2000:138-139):

- Transferred names – existing lexemes, mainly common and proper nouns, adjectives and numerals are equipped with some new meaning related to the products they give name to, e.g. *Golf* is a transfer of a noun denoting a game onto a car model.
- Invented names which include acronyms like *Microsoft*, abbreviations like *IBM*, words created by the removal of an affix or suffix, e.g. fanta-stic – *Fanta*. In fact they are "…semantically empty but phonotactically correct combinations of letters or whole words…" (Zboralski 2000: 139, transl. P.M).

A more elaborate classification of brands given by the same author is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Types of brand names (own study based on Zboralski 2000:80)

Brand type	Brand character – method of transferring the message	Examples
Descriptive (semantic)	Direct motivation through the meaning of words	Lux
Suggestive (relative)	Allusion, connotation, suggestion	Dr Witt, Mustang
Symbolic (emblematic)	Symbol contents	Gold, Ivory
Arbitrary (speculative)	Motivation: • hidden from the receiver • free (accidental • image based	Hit, Renault
Artificial (non-semantic)	No motivation	Adidas, Kodak

As mentioned above this classification may be complemented with the classification provided by Kosyl who distinguishes three types of brands (*chrematonyms*):

- proper names transferred form one class to another in the process of transonimisation, e.g. the name *Aramis* being originally a literary character and then a product name;
- common names transferred to the class of proper names, eg. golf → *Golf*;
- word formation, often bearing the connotations of technical or scientific vocabulary, e.g. *Pianon* (Kosyl 2001:449-450)

One may say that the process of naming the product explores the existing semantic links or creates new ones using simultaneously the knowledge provided by pragmatics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Rhetoric is a good source of knowledge about the persuasive character of a brand, e.g. through metaphoric connotations. Onomastics may support this process by information on how the existing names function while statistics will supply data on the frequency of use of the existing names. Each discipline may be treated separately in terms of its contribution to a good product name, however sound symbolism and phonotactics seem to deserve a more elaborate study.

3.2. Sound symbolism

David Crystal indicates that "…individual sounds are thought to reflect, or symbolize the properties of the world and thus 'to have meaning'…" (2005a:176). This may be easily connected with branding. Fernando Dogana maintains that even phonetic composition of words, even those we hear for the first time, carries suggestions and values (after Kall 2001:151). This means that sounds and their symbolic properties may be used in developing names, e.g.

- [a], [o], [u] express heaviness and slowness but also round shapes,
- [i] suggests dynamism and sharp shapes,
- [e] expresses dynamism and round shapes (ibid.).

This corresponds with the research made by Crystal who claims that close vowels, especially [i] suggest smallness while the open ones, especially [a] suggest largeness (2005a :177)). Dogana also indicates that sounds are more important that letters in the process of communicating of the brand. Thus, the name AKSE has the same number of sounds as the name RENAULT, which has more letters (after Kall 2001:151).).

Many consulting firms are engaged in the process of designing the names of businesses and products. Their research uses data obtained from surveys on how selected groups of people interpret sounds. The research carried out by Lexicon company in co-operation with the scientists of Stanford University makes it possible to make a kind of matrix that summarizes symbolism of sounds (Table 2).

Table 2. Connotations of sounds according to Stanford University research

sound/ feature	b	d	f	g	k	l	p	r	s	t	v	z
slowness	+	+					+			+		
speed			+						+		+	+
large and luxurious		+		+							+	+
small and uncomfortable			+		+				+	+		
pleasant feelings						+			+		+	
unpleasant feelings		+			+		+	+		+		

(own study based on: http://www.stanford.edu/class/linguist34/Unit_08/blackberry. htm. Accessed: 2005-11-29)

One may observe that the data obtained from the analysis of sound symbolism are in some kind of relation to such notions as meaning and connotations.

3.3. Phonotactics

Phonotactics may be defined as a branch of phonology that deals with the distribution of phonological units and their acceptable sets. The basic unit of a phonotactic investigation is syllable (Polański 1999: 177). This branch of linguistics may play a major role in determining whether names fulfil the criteria of being short and easy to remember and pronounce.

Again, the research made by specialised firms should be quoted, e.g. Lexicon gives the example of Russian vodka sold in the western markets. The name of the product is ZIMA and it is a well chosen one. It is short because it consists of two syllables and the syllables form the same set: consonant + vowel (C+V) creating

the widely preferred pattern CVCV. In addition to that the pattern accented syllable + unaccented syllable is also used in English for creating nicknames which gives the name an individual character (based on: http://lexicon-branding.com/process2bAnatomy.html. Accessed: 2005-11-14).

Another interesting claim is made by a Polish researcher, Jerzy Bralczyk, who indicates that a perfect name begins and ends with a vowel, e.g. *Alba* (2000:77).

4. An analysis of OPEL brand names

With the use of the data presented above one may undertake the task of analysing the names of cars offered by OPEL. The analysed corpus, as indicated in tables in Enclosure 1, is based on the current offer available in the Internet. The relevant web pages are shown in the bibliography. The fleet of models offered by car manufacturers tends to change surprisingly quickly. This is why sometimes the researcher has to make arbitrary decisions about the range of analysed models. Thus it has been decided that both *Antara* – the model being launched at the moment of writing this article and *Zafira* – the model which is likely to be withdrawn were both included in the analysed corpus.

To begin with the analysis one should notice that the name of each model is preceded by the name of the manufactures, e.g. *Opel Corsa*. As it has already been said this is one of the basic branding strategies indicated by Kotler, i.e. company trade name with individual product names (2001:192).

The name OPEL itself is the so-called transferred name (Zboralski 2000:138) and it is an adaptation of a proper noun – the name of the company founder.

In terms of sound symbolism, following the criteria presented above one may say that the first sounds [o] and [p] suggests heaviness and slowness. On the other hand this is compensated by the [e] sound suggesting dynamism and round shapes and the [l]sound that brings about positive feelings.

In terms of phonotactic features the name has many advantages which make it easy to pronounce and remember:
- It is short – it consists of two syllables V+CVC;
- The syllables do not contain clusters of consonants which makes it easier to pronounce the name.

Having analysed briefly the features of the name of the company one may concentrate on the names of particular models.

4.1. Letters as classification devices

One may notice that OPEL uses letters as graphic sign to introduce some order into the fleet of cars the company offers. This is justifies by the following regularities:

- The names of vans end with the – [o] grapheme [*Combo, Movano, Vivaro*].
- The names of cars end with the – [a] grapheme [*Corsa, Astra*]. The exceptions are the models *Opel GT* and *Signum.* Both exceptions can explained in terms of an exceptional character of both models. The former name is an obvious recollection or, perhaps continuation, of a successful model from the seventies – *Das Comeback einer Legende* http://www.opel.de/shop/cars/gt/ product/bodystyle/content.act. Accessed: 2007-05-21). The latter model was supposed not be typical, in terms of body design (http://www.opel.com.pl/ site/showroom/signum/desc1.html. Accessed: 2005-12-10) and therefore, one may conclude, also in terms of its name.

4.2. Sound symbolism

There do not seem to be any clear-cut criteria of attributing meaning to sounds. Moreover, it may be difficult if, not impossible to create a name that would consists exclusively of sounds with positive connotations. The analysis below is just an attempt at analysing the names of OPEL cars in terms of sound symbolism:

- Using the criteria from the matrix indicated in Table 2 most of the names of OPEL models contain sounds suggesting dynamism and speed, e.g. [s] in *Astra, Corsa, Signum,* [v] in *Vectra* and *Meriva* or [z] in *Zafira.* These sounds are absent in *Agila,* which in turn contains [g] sound suggesting it is large and luxurious and [l] sound that has the connotations of pleasant feelings. *Antara* and *GT* seem to fail the test. Both of them contain the [t] sound suggesting: small, uncomfortable and unpleasant feelings. The [g] sound in *GT* suggests it is large and luxurious, which is not altogether true but, at least it compensates the negative connotations of the neighbouring [t] sound.
- Names like *Agila, Meriva, Movano, Vivaro* do not contain voiceless sounds at all. Generally speaking the names are dominated by vowels. Vowels are voiced, which seems makes the names distinctive and seems to give them with some power or, voice versa express the power of cars bearing the "voiced names".
- The [r] sound is absent only in the names of four models. The sound is classified as an unpleasant one but to many people it may have the connotations of the engine noise and of such sports cars like *Ferrari* or *Porsche.* This may possibly explain why the [r] sound does not occur in the names of van s [*Combo, Movano*], the name of a city car [*Agila*] and in the distinguished, elegant and quiet *Signum.*
- The [a] sound is present in the names of most of the models. Crystal indicates that such an open vowel may indicate largeness as opposed to close vowels (2005a:177). One has to bear in mind that "…female names tend to end in a (spoken) vowel…" (Crystal 2005b : 153). The [a] ending may be connected with female Christian names and this may be a major cultural issue for a car manufacturer operating across cultures. One should also remember the quoted above Dogana's concept about [a] suggesting heaviness and slowness.

- The names of vans [*Combo, Movano*] do not contain "dynamic" sounds. This may create their image of "working horses", also stressed by the occurrence of the [o]sound. The model *Vivaro* is an interesting case. It is offered in two versions (http://www.opel.com.pl.site/commercial/vivaro/desc1.html. Accessed: 2005-12-10), one of them is designed to carry cargo and the other is supposed to carry people and to possess the features of a "normal" car. Therefore, its name contains "dynamic" [i] and [v] as well as the "heavy" [o].

It seems impossible to invent a name that would consist of sounds bearing exclusively positive connotations. Opel *Agila*, for example contains both "slow" and "large" [a] and "sharp", "dynamic" and "small" [i] sounds. The requirements of phonotactics and semantics have to be observed and the researchers seems to be forced to study, in an arbitrary way, only the form, the end, the "positive" or the "negative" sounds"

4.3. Phonotactic features of the analysed names

To begin with, one may observe that the smaller models have names that consist of 5 graphemes and 5 sounds [*Agila, Corsa, Astra*] while bigger cars have 6 graphemes and 6 sounds [*Vectra, Signum, Meriva*]. One may say that the number of sounds and graphemes is a way of categorizing the fleet of offered cars.

It is also the number of the syllables that plays a similar sole. No single name is longer than 3 syllables following the concept of a short and easy to remember brand. The basic models have two-syllable names [*Corsa, Astra, Vectra,* and *Signum*]. Three syllables form a separate category of cars of [*Agila, Meriva* and *Zafira*] + [*Movano, Vivaro*]. The relationship of vowels to consonants (V:C) is well balanced as well. This is shown in the following table:

Table 3. V:C relationship in the analysed names

V:C	Models
3:2	Agila
2:3	Corsa, Astra, Tigra, Vectra, Signum, Combo
3:3	Antara, Meriva, Movano, Vivaro, Zafira,

The relationship of graphemes to sounds is even and for all the models it is 1:1.

Only three names contain closed syllables, which may slow down their pronunciation and it is only *Signum* which is exceptional again and consists of closed vowels only.

All the names used by OPEL avoid long clusters of consonants. *Astra,* and *Vectra* contain 3 consonant cluster while *Corsa, Tigra, Signum* and *Combo* contain 2 consonant clusters and *Agila, Vivaro* and *Movano* do not contain clusters of

consonants at all. No cluster of consonants is placed at the beginning or end of the name thus making it easier to pronounce.

Following Jerzy Bralczyk's criteria (2000:77) mentioned above three models, i.e. *Agila*, *Astra* and *Antara* are perfect because they start and end with a vowel.

4.4. Semantic features of the analysed names

Several names have a reference to an object outside the world of the motor industry: *Agila, Astra, Combo, Corsa, Frontera* and *Signum*. One of them is of English origin [*Combo*], two of them are of Latin origin [*Astra* and *Signum*] and three of them come from the Spanish language [*Agila, Corsa* and *Frontera*]. None of them is of German origin or has any relationship with the size or segment the car belongs to. The combination of the two elements was typical for OPEL in the past when *Kadett* stood for the smallest car and *Diplomat* or *Senator* signified higher class of cars. Currently it seems that the company puts more emphasis on good connotations.

Table 3 in the Enclosure analyses the names of OPEL cars in terms of their relationship with lexical items in English. The names are analysed in terms of their similarity or existence in the English language and the mental effort a speaker would have to make to convert the names of OPEL cars into the most similar lexemes in the English language.

One may doubt whether the authors of the name *Corsa* took into consideration the term "corsage", used incidentally in English, i.e. a kind of bra.

Generally speaking, while easy to pronounce in English, the names are not semantically rotted in English an the process of their conversion into English lexemes would be a tiresome and an artificial one.

One may notice that the number of transferred names (6: *Agila, Astra, Corsa, Signum, Tigra* and *Combo*) is well balanced with the invented ones (6: *Antara, Meriva, Vectra, Zafira, Movano, Vivaro*). As far as the domain sources are concerned one may notice a total lack of geographical names, used by SEAT e.g. *Cordoba, Ibiza* or games and winds as used by Volkswagen e.g. *Polo, Golf, Passat, Scirocco*. Opel does not rely on one type of domain as the sources of names. The sources include fauna (*Agila, Tigra*), astronomy (*Astra*) entertainment (*Corsa*) or music (*Combo*). Transfer applies to 50 % of names the other half being invented ones. Opel's names seem to be ordered on lower level by means of graphemes and sounds as indicated above.

Generally speaking the ńames bring about positive or at least neutral connotations. This is hardly surprising but one has to bear in mind the names used by some competitors, i.e. "biting and poisonous" names like *Cobra* or *Scorpio* or the *Probe* one which brings about both space exploration and medical test connotations.

5. Conclusions

The process of creation of a good product name is a very complicated and so-phisticated process. It involves many branches of science and linguistics is one of them. In turn there are many branches of linguistics that have to be taken into consideration and they involve different levels of analysis. Thus we have an analysis of phonemes in isolation to satisfy the needs of sound symbolism and then one goes on through larger units such as syllables to analyses the length of the name and its phonotactic features. The highest level is that of whole words – in search of their semantic features.

One can see many regularities in Opels' policy regarding the names of their cars such as ordering the range of offered cars by means of final phoneme and grapheme. The names consist of two or three syllables and the vowel: consonant relationship is well balanced. Clusters of consonants are also well avoided which facilitates pronunciation.

In terms of semantics Opel specialists seem to draw from a variety of sources, e.g. music, entertainment, science or fauna and but also they seem to be ready to invent names. There is no clear cut policy in terms of semantics as compared with the major competitor's games/winds policy. On the other hand all the names have positive connotations and unless one is afraid of female tigers, one does not have to be afraid of being poisonously bitten when using Opel cars since names like *Cobra* or *Scorpio* are not used.

The almost omni present [a] sound illustrates the problems the branding experts face. One the one hand it has both positive and negative connotations in terms of sound symbolism and, on the other hand it has to be used for semantic reasons in names like *Astra* or *Corsa*. The [a] ending is a major ordering device used by OPEL on an international scale but in the Polish language the names ending with suggest female names and this does not contribute to the virile image of the cars.

The considerations concerning Opel brands presented above are certainly very subjective and the author's point of view is that of an English speaking linguist living in Poland. One has to bear in mind that OPEL is a brand General Motors a global brand, based in the USA and the broad picture should be based on a similar research made across countries and cultures.

Table 1. OPEL car names – a summary of linguistic features

	AGILA	ANTARA	ASTRA	CORSA	MERIVA	SIGNUM	TIGRA	VECTRA	ZAFIRA
Vehicle type	mini SUV	SUV	car	car	SUV	car	sports car	car	SUV
No of graphemes	5	6	5	5	6	6	5	6	6
No of sounds	5	6	5	5	6	6	5	6	6
No of syllables	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	3
V:C	3:2	3	2:3	2:3	3:3	2:3	2:3	2:3	3:3
Pattern of syllables	V + CV + CV	Vc + CV + CV	VC + CCV	CVC + CV	CV + CV + CV	CVC + CVC	CV + CCV	CVC + CCV	CV + CV + CV
Meaning	Eagle		Stars	Race		Sign	Tigress		
Language	Spanish		Latin	Spanish		Latin	German		
Connotations	Agility (*agile-*)		Success and achievement *Per aspera ad astram*				Tiger – power, predacity	Victor, power, science	
Type of name*/	Suggestive	Artificial	Arbitrary	Suggestive / arbitrary	Artificial	Symbolic / arbitrary	Suggestive	Suggestive / arbitrary	Artificial
Noun	Common			Common	Common				
Invented/ transferred **/ (from)	Transf. (Fauna)	Invented	Transf. (Astronomy)	Transf. (Sport, entertainment)	Invented	Transf. (Semiotics)	Transf. (Fauna)	Invented	Invented

*   based on Zboralski (2000:80)

** based on Kosyl (2001:249-250)

Table 2. OPEL car names (vans) – a summary of major linguistic features

	COMBO	**MOVANO**	**VIVARO**
No of graphemes	5	6	6
No of sounds	5	6	6
No. of vowels	2	3	3
V:C	2:3	3:3	3:3
Pattern of syllables	CVC + CV	CV + CV + CV	CV + CV + CV
Meaning	A group of musicians		
Language	English		
Connotations	Music, fun	Move, moving in/ out, moving on	Lively, exciting, attractive *Viva Maria !*
Type of name*/	Suggestive	Artificial, suggestive	Artificial, suggestive
Noun	Common		
Invented/ transferred (from) **/	Transferred (Music)	Invented	Invented

* based on Zboralski (2000:80)
** based on Kosyl (2001:249-250)

Table 3. The names of OPEL car versus English lexemes

Model	Most similar English lexeme	Type of change
Agila (Eagle – Spanish)	Agile	Change of pronounciation and end grapheme
Astra (Stars – Latin)	Astral	Removal of end grapheme and sound
Antara	Anteroom	Preservation of prefix and replacement of the main lexeme
Signum (Sign – Latin)	Sign	Suffixation
Meriva	Merry	Change of part of the root of the word
Tigra	Tiger	Change of end syllable
Vectra	Vector	Change of end syllable
Zafira	Zephyr	Two graphemes and sounds in common [z] and [r].
Combo	Combo	No change
Movano	Move /Move on	Blending
Vivaro	Viva	Suffixation

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