

How Should These Names Be Pronounced? Specific Phonetic Features of Proper Names in Czech

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Abstract

The paper analyses proper names in contemporary Czech that are interesting with regard to their pronunciation. There is a high degree of uncertainty regarding the adequate pronunciation of many proper names (most of them of foreign origin) used in everyday communication. The analysed material (several hundreds of proper names) is based on a database of inquiries addressed to the Language Consulting Centre of the Institute of the Czech Language, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, and on a special database of proper names which occur in contemporary media discourse and whose pronunciation is variable. The second database shows how the proper name is spelled and includes a transcription of its recorded pronunciation in Czech and a transcription of its pronunciation in its original language.

The analysis focuses on the most prominent questions relating to pronunciation problems. Such questions focus, for example, on which languages the problematic proper names originate in, why speakers hesitate about the pronunciation of a given form and what categories of proper names (anthroponyms, toponyms, etc.) occur in the data. In addition, some specific phonetic features of proper names are compared to phonetic features of common nouns.

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Introduction

The paper¹ analyses proper names in contemporary Czech that are interesting from the point of view of their pronunciation. The analysed material is from two different sources: from (1) a database of inquiries sent to the Language Consulting Centre of the Institute of the Czech Language, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and (2) a special database of proper names that occur in contemporary media discourse and whose pronunciation is variable.

There are currently more than 200 different proper names about whose pronunciation language users were unsure in the internal database of the Language Consulting Centre. The public repeatedly inquired about the pronunciation of some more frequent proper names, for example, about the pronunciation of the surname of the composer *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*.

This database thus shows which names Czech speakers consider to be problematic with regard to pronunciation, which types of names are difficult for them in spoken discourse, or in which names they have noticed variation in pronunciation and for which they want to find out which pronunciation is recommended by linguists in standard Czech. These data are especially valuable for linguists because they highlight pronunciation problems experienced

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by everyday language users that have to date not been identified or recorded in specialised literature.

The second source also contains proper names interesting from the point of view of their pronunciation, but these names were recorded by phoneticians monitoring spoken discourse in the Czech media.² The proper names are mostly those, whose pronunciation in Czech is variable and, for instance, even within a single, short programme may be pronounced differently. Proper names recorded in this way are registered in the database in their orthographic form, and are accompanied by the authentic pronunciation written in phonetic transcription; the name of the speaker (if known), the name of the programme and radio/television station are recorded, as is the date of the broadcast and the language in which the name originates. Supplementary notes include information of the type that a speaker stumbled over the pronunciation of a given name or even commented that he or she was uncertain about the pronunciation. This database of proper names will be released as one of the outputs of the project Pronunciation of Non-Integrated Lexical Items in Czech (GAČR 13-00372S). The project is running from 2013 to 2015 and deals extensively with the pronunciation of loan words and proper names in contemporary Czech.

Material

213 different proper names from the database of the inquiries sent to the Language Consulting Centre and 106 items selected from the database of names recorded in the media were analysed. Every proper name is counted only once, though many names have been recorded repeatedly; that is, they appear in different sound variants or are the subject of multiple inquiries.

It is interesting to compare the representation of the individual categories of proper names in both databases. Anthroponyms appear most frequently; unsurprisingly, they form the biggest proportion of proper names in both databases. However, in the database of proper names from the media, chrematonyms are also very frequent – the fact that in advertisements the pronunciation of various products is variable is distinctly manifested here. On the other hand, individuals who contact the Language Consulting Centre are more often interested in toponyms than in chrematonyms. We can only speculate why this is the case. It is possible, for example, that individuals wish to verify the pronunciation of those categories of proper names in which they expect the existence of a standard sound form (i.e. in anthroponyms and toponyms), whereas they are less concerned with the names of individual products, etc. It is also plausible that language users believe that the appropriate pronunciation of names and brands of products, organisations, etc. should not be recommended by linguists, but should be determined exclusively by the authors of the given names, clients ordering advertisements or directors of individual firms (who are, however, often foreigners without a basic knowledge of Czech and its functioning).

A typical example of this situation is represented by the recent decision of the Hyundai Group to present their car brand *Hyundai* as [ˈɦjɔndɛ:] in the Czech media, despite

² The database also contains common nouns of foreign origin interesting from the point of view of pronunciation and expressions recorded beyond medial discourse; these categories are not analysed in this paper.

the well-established form [ˈɦjundaj] being commonly used. However, even after this decision, the pronunciation of this brand name in advertisements was not consistent; for example, a variant sounding rather like [ˈɦjundɛ:] had been recorded, which consequently spread also in the speech of one of the professional speakers of Czech TV, whereas most of her colleagues used the traditional form [ˈɦjundaj]. Another speaker on the public TV used the variant [ˈɦjundɛj], which is a compromise between the traditional pronunciation and the new one.

Language of origin

All the names from both databases were classified according to the language of their origin to identify which languages the names with interesting or problematic pronunciation come from.³ In particular, I have been trying to answer the question whether names from English, the contemporary European lingua franca,⁴ would prevail in both databases or not. The relationship between spelling and pronunciation is not so straightforward or regular; it is more complicated than the Czech system. Ološtiak (2011) observes the same concerning the relationship between English and Slovak. Moreover, English has more regional varieties. These facts could lead to the occurrence of various pronunciation variants of English proper names in Czech, and therefore the names of English origin could prevail in both databases. On the other hand, the occurrence of English names is very frequent in Czech, many Czechs studied English at school⁵ and knowledge of English is automatically expected in many professions; this could mean that English pronunciation would be known to Czech speakers.

³ The principles of phonetic adaptation of foreign common nouns and proper names into Czech are described in detail by Duběda *et al.* (2014).

⁴ Cf. the surveys of Eurobarometer ‘Europeans and their languages’, in which English repeatedly occupies first position in the scale showing knowledge of foreign languages in Europe (European Commission 2006: 12; European Commission 2012: 19).

⁵ According to the survey of Eurobarometer 243 (European Commission 2006: 33), 89% of Czechs believed that children should learn English as the first foreign language at school; six years later the number had risen to 92% (European Commission 2012: 78).

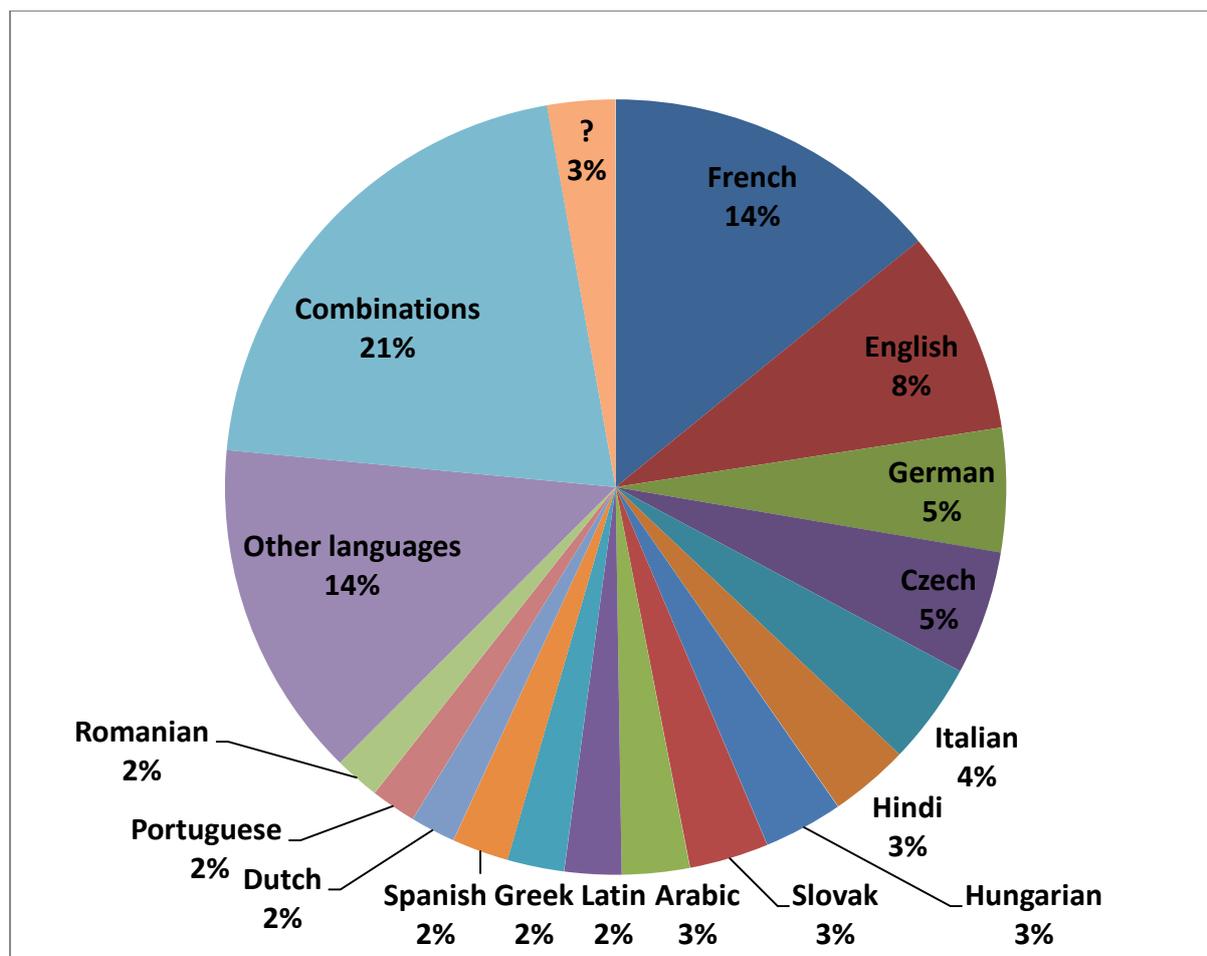


Fig. 1. Languages of origin of the proper names (data: inquiries in the Language Consulting Centre; 213 items)

Figure 1 shows the most frequent languages of origin of the proper names that were the subject of the inquiries sent to the Language Consulting Centre. More than 30 different languages were recorded. Matching an individual name with a certain language was not always easy because, for example, the origin of some ‘exotic’ anthroponyms cannot be found in the available sources (such cases are marked by a question mark in Fig. 1). Furthermore, several names cannot be matched unambiguously with only one language (such cases are marked as Combinations in Fig. 1). Examples of this type include an inquiry concerning the pronunciation of the surname of an African person living in Britain (*Oguntoye*) and a surname of a German citizen of Polish origin (*Wisniewski*).⁶ In these cases, the inquirers were often unsure whether the pronunciation of these names should be influenced by the form reflecting the origin of the name or whether their pronunciation in the language of mediation should be respected. In such cases it is more important to know how the person himself/herself pronounces the name rather than to rely on linguistic knowledge; however, such information is often difficult to find.⁷

⁶ This situation is described as so-called multiple language interference by Ološtiak (2011: 6).

⁷ It is an advantage if easily accessible lists are available, in which an appropriate pronunciation form of names of individual persons, places, etc. can be found. It is not realistic, of course, to have a universal worldwide

There are also some names which are not of Czech origin, but which have been used for a very long time in Czech (some of them like the surname of German origin *Langer/Langr* have even been orthographically adapted). Moreover, there are also names whose origin may be found in various languages (e.g. the female given name *Nina*) and while the language of their origin is known, these names are used in many European languages and we cannot be sure how they started to be used in Czech (i.e. we cannot be sure through which language(s) they were adapted) and in some cases a name (e.g. the female given name *Adina*) may have entered Czech in different ways.

Most inquiries (21%) dealt with by the Language Consulting Centre concerning the pronunciation of proper names are thus made up of names that cannot be unambiguously attributed to one language of origin. The inquirers are often aware of this fact, and this is why they ask linguists for advice.

If we skip the category ‘Other languages’ that contains all the names from the languages that occurred fewer than four times in the database, we find that most often the inquirers were unsure about the pronunciation of names of French origin (14% of inquiries). Again, this is related to a relatively high frequency of French names in Czech discourse, together with a relatively complicated relationship between French orthography and pronunciation. A frequent problem is the pronunciation of some French names that are declined in Czech; in oblique cases a vocalic ending is added to the final consonant (e.g. the surname *Flaubert* [flobɛ:r], genitive *Flauberta* [flobɛ:ra] or [flobɛ:rta] – no satisfactory and unambiguous recommendation can be found in Czech pronunciation manuals).

Inquiries concerning the pronunciation of English proper names are not so frequent (8%); their number is only slightly higher than that of the names of German origin, as well as of Czech names (5% each). German proper names are problematic in Czech mostly with regard to vowel quantity (cf. the name of the supermarket chain *Lidl*, pronounced both as [li:dɫ] and [lɪdɫ] the surname of the composer *Richard Wagner*, attested both as [va:gner] and [vagnɛr] in Czech). Other inquiries concerned voicing of final consonants in the oblique cases (for example, the genitive of the surname of the German president *Paul von Hindenburg*, fluctuates in Czech between [hɪndɛnbɜrga] and [hɪndɛnbɜrka]), or the groups *-el*, *-er*, *-en* in final position (speakers are unsure whether they should pronounce the German automobile brand as [ʔopɫ] or [ʔopɛɫ]). Though the frequency of German names in Czech is still relatively high, German proper names do not usually cause problems for Czech speakers. The relationship between the graphical and the sound form is relatively regular and uncomplicated in German; moreover, many Czechs are familiar with German (cf. European Commission 2006: 13).

Particularly interesting is the relatively high number of inquiries concerning the pronunciation of names of local (i.e. Czech) origin. The graphics–pronunciation relationship is basically regular and the orthography is to a large extent phonetic; nevertheless, native speakers of Czech are unsure how to read some names that are quite frequent. This is usually the case for names that appear to be of foreign origin but are in fact Czech. Non-linguists tend not to be aware of the ‘local’ origin of these names, as the relationship between these names

database; however, lists such as, for example, the NHL Pronunciation Guide (2014), regularly updated, may be very useful.

and other Czech words is often not evident, and/or these names are related to peripheral, rarely used, dialectal or archaic words, which most everyday language users do not know. For example, inquiries were made about the pronunciation of the name of the cheese *Niva* (the common noun *niva* is a bookish expression for a meadow or field); the initial syllable *ni-* is palatalised – as [ɲɪ] – in Czech words, whereas in words of foreign origin it is usually pronounced [nɪ]. Another example is the toponym *Pecopala*: speakers did not realise its relation to the Czech expression *pec* [pɛts] ‘oven’ and pronounced it incorrectly, under the influence of English, as [pɛkɔpala] instead of [pɛtsɔpala].

As we see in Fig. 1, other inquiries concerned proper names originating from Italian, Hindi, Hungarian, Slovak, Arabic, Latin, Greek, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and Romanian.

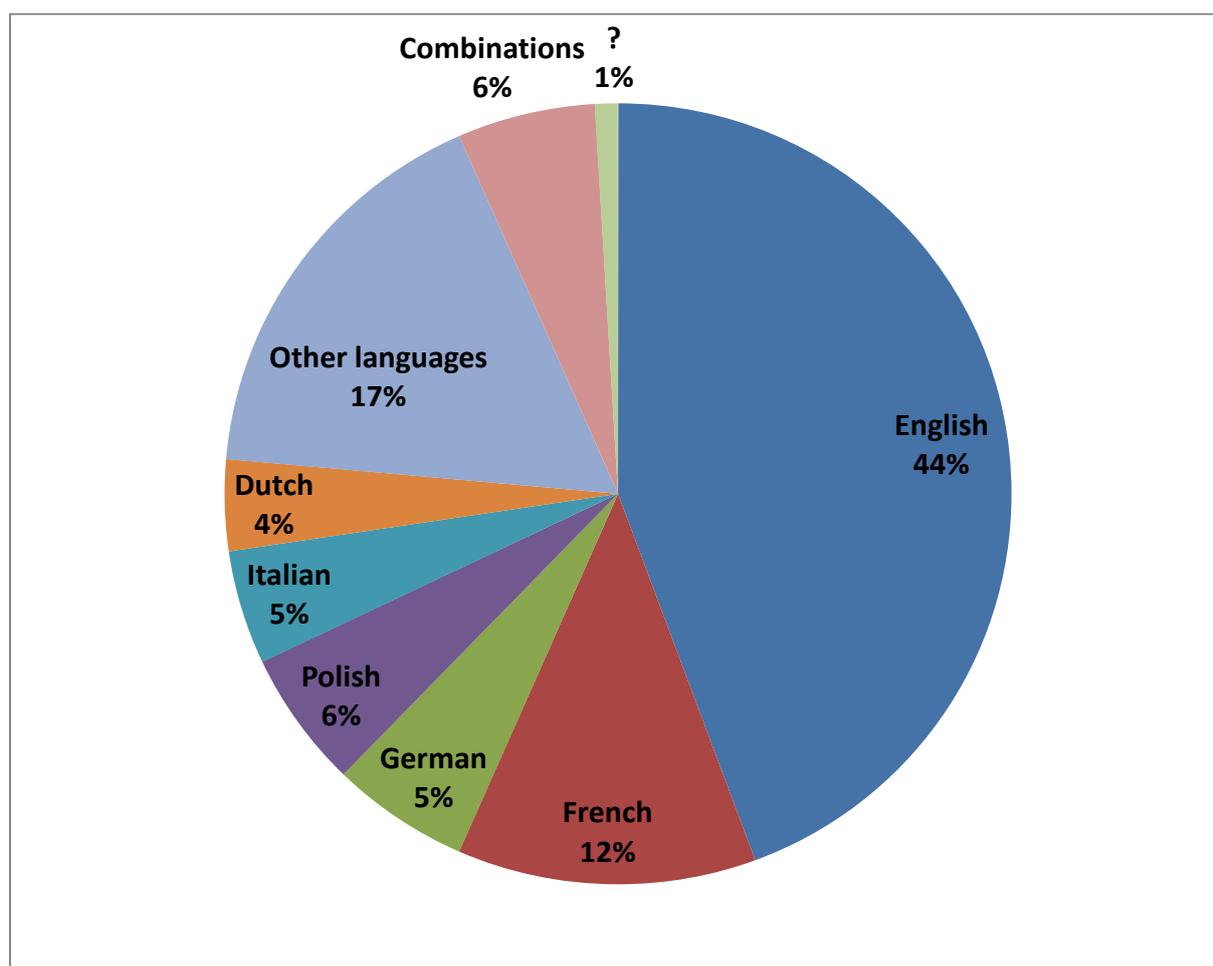


Fig. 2. Languages of origin of the proper names (data: Czech media; 106 items)

The second graph (Figure 2) based on the second database shows the most frequent languages of origin of names interesting in terms of their pronunciation, recorded by phoneticians when monitoring spoken discourse in the Czech media. In comparison with the first database there are fewer languages; altogether, this database comprises names originating from approximately 20 different languages. Names from French and German have almost the same proportion as in the first database. However, there is a striking difference with regard to names of English origin. English proper names form almost half of the total number of all

proper names included in the second database (44%) compared to just 8% in the first database. This confirms the initial assumption that proper names of English origin are encountered very often at present, especially in the media, and at the same time, many names occur in more pronunciation variants in Czech; moreover their pronunciation is sometimes indeed problematic for Czech speakers (for the reasons given above). This finding would be in no way new or surprising, if there were many inquiries concerning the pronunciation of English names sent to the Language Consulting Centre. We can only speculate why Czech speakers do not write to the Language Consulting Centre for information about the pronunciation of English names so often. Perhaps many speakers consider themselves to be proficient users of English and are therefore reluctant to admit that they are uncertain about the appropriate pronunciation of English names. If these speakers are employed in the media, they can, as speech models, spread certain pronunciation forms in the public. For example, the pronunciation [roubr̩t] for the name *Robert* is commonly heard among Czech speakers (including professionals). However, this form with the diphthong [ou] does not correspond to the original English pronunciation or to the graphical form of the name. Similarly, the names *Andrew* and *Bruce* are often pronounced [ʔɛndrju:] and [brju:s], although the consonant [j] is not present in this position in standard varieties of English.⁸ Another example, this time concerning the pronunciation of a toponym, is the name *Wounded Knee Creek* in South Dakota, USA. The name *Wounded Knee* was recorded twice in the Czech media – once it was used by the presenter of a competition program on Czech Television; in the second case, it was in the text of a country song that was played on a commercial radio station. In the first case it was pronounced [vaundit ni:], while in the second it was pronounced [waundit ni:].⁹ However, the appropriate pronunciation of the English lexeme *wounded* should be [vu:ndit] if it is adapted in Czech. In such cases, it usually occurs neither to speakers nor to listeners to verify the original English pronunciation. On the phonetic level, so called Czenglish (poor or ‘broken’ English spoken by native Czech speakers, see Sparling (1991)) comes into play in these cases, and the Czenglish pronounced examples are adapted in Czech.

Another reason why there are so few inquiries about English names sent to the Language Consulting Centre may be that inquirers are embarrassed and are not willing to confess that they have problems with such a widespread language as English, assuming that its knowledge is considered to be natural and absolutely necessary.¹⁰ Thus the inquirers ask linguists to help them mostly with the pronunciation of such names in which it is not completely clear that they have been borrowed from English (the programming language *Java*, for instance) or names that are rare (e.g. Australian athletics coach *Percy Wells Cerutti*). In addition, inquiries are made about names that are unusual in English (e.g. the

⁸ Ološtiak (2011) also recorded this phenomenon in Slovak; it may also be observed in some other Slavic languages.

⁹ It is evident that the singers of the country band tried to pronounce the name *Wounded Knee* according to the original pronunciation; that is, as close to the English original as possible. This is reflected in the use of the sound [w], which – in contrast to English – does not normally occur in Czech. However, their knowledge of English was not sufficient for them to realise the correct pronunciation of the following vowel.

¹⁰ Evidence confirming this assumption is supported by the following inquiry: ‘I have a device from the firm *Hewlett-Packard*. The English pronunciation is overly complicated for me and I do not know if it would be understood in everyday communication. How could I, please, modify the pronunciation not to be embarrassed? Is this at all possible?’

book title *Brisingr*) or about names that evidently entered English via another language (e.g. the surname of *Noam Chomsky* or the name of the hurricane *Ivan*).

Discussion

As the database of proper names in contemporary media discourse shows, the pronunciation of certain English proper names, some of which are relatively frequent and widely known, is not fully stabilised in Czech, and linguists should devote more attention to the pronunciation of proper names.¹¹ On the other hand, we cannot speak about an absolute pronunciation ‘anarchy’ even in such cases in which we find more sound variants of one name in actual language use; we do not necessarily face the danger of misunderstanding in these cases.¹² The adaptation of proper names from other languages into Czech is often not a simple process and it does not proceed according to a single principle.¹³ Rather, as Ološtiak (2011: 10) identified for Slovak, the situation in Czech can be characterised as dynamically stable and stably dynamic (cf. also the concept of flexible stability, introduced into linguistics in 1932 by Mathesius, a member of the Prague Linguistics Circle).

Conclusion

Monitoring spoken discourse in the media and communication with language users through the Language Consulting Centre are valuable sources of information both for phoneticians investigating current trends in pronunciation and onomasticians or, more precisely, socioonomasticians, dealing with the use of proper names in social communication. Due to globalisation we encounter immense heterogeneity of proper names coming from foreign languages, which are – from our point of view – sometimes regarded as ‘exotic’. Moreover, from the phonetic point of view, proper names often show some non-standard features; that is, their pronunciation often does not follow the rules generally valid for most common nouns,¹⁴ or the determination of their appropriate pronunciation is complicated due to their uncertain origin and/or doubts concerning the rules that should be applied for them.

¹¹ For Slovak an extensive electronic dictionary of English personal and geographical names, comprising their recommended pronunciation in Slovak, as well as their declension, is already available; cf. Projekt Vega 01/0102/09 (2009).

¹² However, in connection with at least eight different (and very diverse) existing pronunciation forms of the name *Wordsworth*, Zeman warns that a very high number of variants that are substantially different from one another can act as a communication barrier (Kučera and Zeman 1998: 6).

¹³ The eight different adaptation principles of integration of foreign common nouns and proper names into Czech were recently described by Duběda *et al.* (2014).

¹⁴ In connection with pronunciation, the specificities of proper nouns are pointed out also by Ološtiak (2011: 14): ‘In these cases the knowledge of the language in its common noun sphere is not enough. *Onymic competence*, including the presupposition and reference identification, which are immediately tied to the expression aspect of the proper name, is foregrounded.’

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