

PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES OF VERBAL HUMOR IN AN AMERICAN SITCOM

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: This study aimed at finding out the types of illocutionary acts which create humor effect in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* Episode *The Thespian Catalyst* (S04E14).

Methodology: A descriptive qualitative study with the pragmatic approach of illocutionary acts suggested by [Searle \(1975\)](#) was undertaken by observing the utterances spoken by all the characters in the sitcom.

Main findings: The results of the study showed that there were four types of illocutionary acts found in the sitcom; assertive, directive, commissive, and expressive. Those illocutionary acts also flouted the maxim of Cooperative Principles, i.e. quality and relevance. In conclusion, it can be known that the humor that occurred in the sitcom is the result of the way the characters conveyed illocutionary acts that also have flouted the maxim as in the Cooperative Principles.

Applications of this study: This study is expected to be a reference for other studies in the field of pragmatics particularly in illocutionary acts.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This current study, however, would discuss *The Big Bang Theory* sitcom by using the Illocutionary Act framework proposed by [Searle \(1975\)](#).

Keywords: *Humour, Illocutionary Acts, Maxim Flouting, Pragmatic, Sitcom.*

INTRODUCTION

The problems of life and the competition at the workplace trigger people in their lives to work hard, discipline, and live with worries. Therefore, humor is needed to provide entertainment and relaxation in our daily life. [Wijana \(1995\)](#) defines humor as a spontaneous verbal and/or visual stimulus that provokes a smile or laughter of the listener or the person who sees it. Humour can be served as a powerful tool of criticism because it can be used to criticize so there would not be any confrontation ([Hart, 2007](#); [Soedjatmiko, 1991](#)). Furthermore, humor can also help people to break from the burden of anxiety, confusion, cruelty, and misery ([Gelkopf, 2011](#)). Moreover, in producing humor, individuals may vary their degree in daily interaction with each other ([Martin, 2007](#)). Thus, humor is not only considered acceptable in formal interaction but also an informal one.

In this development era, people use many media to express their emotions or ideas. Using humor can be one of the examples. [Berlyne \(1972, p. 45\)](#) stated that "Humor has always stood out as a unique and puzzling psychological phenomenon, and the scant attention it has received from psychologists does the little credit". As it said, humor also can be found in any way, for example in a sitcom. [Sherman \(2003\)](#) defined a sitcom as a funny show where every episode exposes a new unexpected comic situation. Therefore, we conclude here that humor performs a vital role in a sitcom. Some examples of the television program that shows humor are *The Comment*, *Comedy Night Live*, *The Office*, and the series of *The Big Bang Theory*.

Hence, to understand the humorous occurrences in a sitcom, it is important to understand the utterances well. As one of the linguistic branches, pragmatics reckon with the basic understanding of utterance expressed by speakers that relate to context ([Levinson, 1983](#); [Sinclair, 1992](#)). [Allan and Nodoushan \(2015\)](#) defined utterance as a sentence or a sentence chunk that is spoken by a speaker or written by a writer in a particular occurrence. To have a better understanding of an utterance, there lies the theory of speech acts ([Amalia, 2017](#); [Gusthini, et al., 2018](#); [Sameer, 2017](#)), which firstly developed by Austin in 1962. According to [Austin \(1962\)](#), speech acts are the act of saying something. He divided speech acts into three types; locutionary acts which deal with an act of saying something without considering the context, illocutionary acts as the act to accomplish in producing an utterance, and perlocutionary act as the act which causes certain effects on the hearer or the others. Among the other two types of speech acts, illocutionary acts are known as the core one because it is closely connected with the speaker's intention, such as stating, directing, giving commands, and so on ([Justová, 2006](#); [Kiuk&Ghozali, 2018](#)).

Illocutionary acts are known as the core of speech acts because it is closely connected with the speaker's intention, such as stating, directing, giving commands, etc. Hence, to avoid the similar meaning with other types of speech acts, [Searle \(1975\)](#) then refined the type of acts into five types: assertive as the act of stating the truth of the expressed proposition,

directive as the act of to get the hearer to do something, commissive as the act of a speaker to commit doing further action, expressive as the act of knowing one's psychological attitude towards a presupposed state of affairs, and declarative as the act of making a statement to change the world by "representing it as having been changed".

Despite the understanding of speech acts that have been apprehended, another point to comprehend is the four types of Cooperative Principles which were developed by Grice in 1975. [Grice \(1975\)](#) stated that communication can be achieved well when the speakers are obeying the Cooperative Principle, which is known as the four types of the maxim: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. Maxim of quality happens when a speaker provides sufficient information, not more or less. Maxim of quality occurs when a speaker must tell the truth. Maxim of relevance ensues when a speaker contributes a relevant issue or topic being discussed. Lastly, maxim manner betides where a speaker must speak directly, and not ambiguous. However, if the four types of maxims are flouted, misunderstanding that leads to humor will take place ([Dynel, 2009](#)).

There are some studies conducted on the aforementioned subject; [Wardoyo \(2015\)](#) discussed a study of speech acts that contain humor in one of the Indonesian Comedy Series entitled "*Premam Pensium*". [Kehinde \(2016\)](#) conducted a pragmatic study of humor in A Night of A Thousand Laughs event in Nigeria discussing Gricean maxims which are flouted and violated by the Nigerian comedian. Lastly, a study by [Ariefandi \(2018\)](#) that analyzed illocutionary acts containing humor that give effects to readers of Azuma Kiyohiko's Manga Amazing Daioh Volume 1. The study explained the form of illocutionary acts along with the flouting maxim of the Cooperative Principle that gives a humorous effect in the manga. [Hu \(2012\)](#) used a pragmatic perspective in analyzing humor in The Big Bang Theory by applying two theories, namely cooperative principle and relevance. [Hu \(2012\)](#) claimed that those theories are efficient in creating humor in the sitcom. [Ma and Jiang \(2013\)](#) discussed the interpretation of verbal humor in The Big Bang Theory sitcom from the perspective of adaptation relevance theory; a relatively new theory in pragmatic that combines two theories: adaptation and relevance theories. They summed up that adaptation relevance theory is the more powerful description and explanation force rather than the adaptation and relevance theories alone. This current study, however, would discuss The Big Bang Theory sitcom by using the Illocutionary Act framework proposed by [Searle \(1975\)](#).

The Big Bang Theory, an American TV sitcom, aired on CBS, is one of the most entertaining TV shows since it tells about the life of four friendship of geeky scientist; Sheldon Cooper (characterized by Jim Parsons), Leonard Hofstadter (figured by Jhonny Galecki), Howard Wolowitz (portrayed by Simon Helberg) and Rajesh Koothrappali (represented by Kunal Nayyar). These four geeky scientists like to read comic books, come to a comic con (a costume party), and do the other "geeky" activities. Hence, all of the "geeky" activities are starting to change since an aspiring actress, Penny (portrayed by Kaley Couco) comes to their lives.

The language used in this sitcom has its characteristic; a strong scientific language in expressing the jokes. Hence, since pragmatics focuses on how speakers or authors use their knowledge to express meaning ([Bloomer, et al., 2005](#)), the understanding of the meaning of the jokes uttered using the pragmatic perspectives is needed. Therefore, we formulated this research question: *what are the types of illocutionary acts which create the humor effect found in the sitcom?*

As social beings, humans need to interact with others. To interact with others, a language is needed to establish communication properly. There will be a speaker and a hearer during the communication. Good communication happens when the hearers understand what is delivered well. Conversely, if the communication is not well understood by the speakers, there will be a lot of accidents happening, humor is one of them.

Humor happens not only in our everyday life but also through media such as situation comedy. On the other hand, a sitcom is often assumed to be less valuable than more serious and factual programs such as news or documentaries. Hence, humor also plays an important role in situation comedy. [Critchley \(2002\)](#) and [Ritchie \(2004\)](#) cited that humor involves spoken or written jokes and actions that cause someone to laugh. Its goal in a sitcom is to make the audience laugh as much as possible since it is acted out with humorous dialogues and conversations.

The dialogue in the sitcom The Big Bang Theory (S04E04) often shows a contradiction in each of the characters, as well as the action and common sense. Therefore, this research is analyzed using speech acts theory especially illocutionary acts and Gricean's maxims to expose the meaning behind the humor that occurs.

METHODOLOGY

According to [Bogdan and Biklen \(1982\)](#), the collected data in a qualitative study are usually in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. Therefore, in this study, we took the data in the form of words that were taken from the characters' utterances in the sitcom The Big Bang Theory Episode *The Thespian Catalyst* (S04E14).

Instrument

[Parahoo \(1997\)](#) mentioned that a tool used to collect data is called a research instrument. Data formats, recorders, or observation sheets are usually used for a qualitative study. Furthermore, the research instrument used in this study is observation sheets which are created based on [Searle's \(1975\)](#) theory in categorizing illocutionary acts (this includes assertive, directive, commissive, expressive and declarative) and [Cutting's \(2005\)](#) in defining the flouting of the maxim which includes maxim quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

Procedures

The data analysis is written on the observation sheets. Hence, since the data used in this study is in the form of transcripts, we then collected and classified data based on the utterances spoken by the characters which consist of illocutionary acts that create a humorous effect found in the sitcom. [Bogdan and Biklen \(1982\)](#) mentioned few steps to analyze data in a qualitative study: organizing the data, dividing the data into some units that can be managed, arranging the data, seeking for patterns, determining which one is important and which one is to be reviewed, and finally selecting what should be explained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated in the research method section, one of the methods used to collect the data to answer the research question of this study is using observation. To support the data from the result of observation, we used observation sheets to analyze the data. The explanation of the results of the research is deeply explained as follows.

Assertive

[Searle \(1975\)](#) stated that assertive acts can be said as committing the truth of the expressed proposition. On the other hand, it can also be defined as stating a fact to a condition. Here are the examples of assertive acts found in the sitcom:

(S04E14/The Apartment/00.03.13-00.03.31)

Sheldon : Well, I suppose everyone's entitled to their own opinion. I think I'll turn in. I didn't want to teach those poopy heads, anyway.

Howard : *FYI, I think that's what Darth Vader said just before he started building the Death Star.*

In this scene, Sheldon is reading some of the students' reviews about his lecture. He feels disappointed because he thinks his lecture is a failure since some students do not like the way he gives the lecture. Howard, on the other hand, is trying to mock him by comparing Sheldon and Darth Vader (an antagonist character from the movie *Star Wars*).

From the dialogue above, Howard is doing the act of assertive because he states his own opinion to compare between Sheldon's feelings of sadness and Darth Vader's willingness before he builds a death star. The humor occurs when he does this act while flouting the maxim of quality. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) argues if this kind of maxim flouting happens when using hyperbole to represent what they think. It is seen from the way Howard expresses his opinion to compare between Sheldon's action and Darth Vader's decision to build a Death Star (which is unknown).

(S04E14/Penny's Apartment/00.06.46-00.07.00)

Sheldon : You're a (*finger-quoting*) actress, correct?

Penny : I'm not a (*finger-quoting*) actress. I'm an actress.

Sheldon : All right. You're an actress(*finger-quoting*). I need you to teach me.

From the dialogue, Sheldon is doing the assertive act since he states a fact by supporting Penny's argument if she is an actress. While doing these acts, the humor occurs when he flouts the maxim of quality. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) argued if this kind of maxim is flouted when a speaker is not representing what they think. It is seen from the way Sheldon ends up agreeing with Penny's argument if she is an actress, while the fact is Penny rarely appears in a movie. Humour was created as he comes to believe that Penny is an actress while mockingly raising one of his hands.

(S04E14/The University Cafeteria/00.08.56-00.09.01)

Howard : What is ya thinking so hard about?

Raj : *Just that I'm not gay.*

In this scene, Raj is having a daydream that Howard gets an offer for a fellowship at the Weitzmann Institute in Israel. In his daydream, Howard wants him to take care of Bernadette sexually while he is away. He then agrees to Howard's offer and concludes that he is not gay.

From the dialogue, it can be seen that Raj is doing the act of assertiveness because he is stating his true opinion that he is not gay. The humor occurs when he also flouts the maxim of manner. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) argues if this kind of maxim flouting happens when a speaker gives an ambiguous response. It can be seen since he answers Howard's question ambiguously. On the other hand, Howard has no idea about Raj's daydream, so when Raj is answering "*Just that I'm not gay*", he brings ambiguity to Howard as the listener.

Directive

The act of getting someone else (or the hearer) to do something towards the speaker can be defined as a directive act ([Searle, 1975](#)). Here are the examples of directive acts found in the sitcom:

(S04E14/The Apartment/Amy's Apartment/00.05.36-00.05.47)

Amy : If this humiliating experience is troubling you, there are things we could do about it.

Sheldon : For instance?

Amy : *Well, the first thing that comes to mind is isolating the part of your brain where the memory is stored and destroying it with a laser.*

In this scene, Sheldon and Amy are video-calling through Skype. Sheldon tells Amy about his failure in giving a lecture and asks Amy about what he should do to improve his lecturing skills. From the dialogue, it can be seen that Amy is doing the act of directive as in illocutionary acts because she suggests Sheldon to isolate the memory part of his brain and destroy it with a laser. The humor occurs when Amy is also flouting the maxim of relevance while doing the directive act. According to [Cutting \(2005\)](#), this kind of flouting maxim happens when a speaker expects the hearer to make the connection between their utterance and the preceding one(s). That is seen since her answer is irrelevant to Sheldon's question, in which she should suggest him to do something that would probably help him in deepening his teaching skill, not technically destroy his brain.

(S04E14/Penny's Apartment/00.14.57-00.15.03)

Sheldon : I'm glad you asked. I took the liberty of adapting a Star Trek fan fiction novella I wrote when I was ten into a one-act play.

Penny : And you think it's better than Tennessee Williams?

Sheldon : *Why don't we leave that for future generations to decide?*

From the dialogue, Sheldon is seen to do the act of directive because he suggests Penny to use his novella fan fiction as the material to recite in their acting lesson. While doing this act, he also flouts the maxim of relevance as a humorous occurrence. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) affirmed if this kind of flouting maxim happens when the speechmaker expects the listeners to be capable to imagine what the utterances did not mention and create the connection between their utterance and the preceding one(s). Therefore, it is known that Sheldon is flouting this type of maxim since he is diverting the topic of their talking (which turns out to be irrelevant with Penny's earlier utterance) with the purpose to force Penny to use his novella fan fiction story as their learning material by saying "*Why don't we leave that for future generations to decide?*".

Commissive

As stated by [Searle \(1975\)](#), this kind of act can happen when the speaker is planning to do some future action. Here are the examples of the commissive act found in the sitcom.

(S04E14/Penny's Apartment/00.07.40-00.07.47)

Sheldon : Are you going to help me?

Penny : *Probably. I'm just enjoying the foreplay.* Does this mean you are done mocking my acting career?

In this scene, Sheldon is asking Penny to teach him an acting lesson. Hence, instead of being straight to the point, she plays hard because she is tired of being mocked for her acting career. From the dialogue above, it can be seen that Penny is doing the act of commissive because she promises to "*probably*" teach Sheldon an acting lesson. While doing this act, she also flouts the maxim of manners which results in humorous occurrence. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) stated that this kind of maxim flouting happens when a speaker gives an ambiguous response. It is somehow seen from the way Penny states "*I'm enjoying the foreplay*" which can bring an ambiguity meaning since it can also refer to sexual things.

(S04E14/Penny's Apartment/00.10.27-00.10.38)

Penny : Okay. One of the things that might help you in connecting with your students is being a little more spontaneous. So why don't we try some improvisation?

Sheldon : *Why not? It seems like you're improvising your entire curriculum.*

From the dialogue, Sheldon is doing the act of commissive since he is willing to do what Penny asks him to do. While doing this act, he also flouts the maxim of quality which can be resulting in a humorous occurrence. According to [Cutting \(2005\)](#), this kind of maxim flouting happens when a speaker does not represent what they think. The maxim flouting is seen from the way Sheldon indirectly lies to be agreeing to do what Penny has proposed, where he does not agree at all since he does not want Penny to teach him spontaneously but based on the acting curriculum she may have. That can happen because Sheldon is appearing to be an organized person.

(S04E14/PA/00.07.48-00.07.59)

Sheldon : Oh, I'm sorry, I thought making the transition from actor to the acting teacher was the signal that one's career had reached the end of the road.

Penny : Forget it.

Sheldon : I'll pay you 40 dollars.

In this scene, Sheldon is asking Penny for her willingness to teach him an acting lesson. However, after listening to Sheldon's explanation about the reason Penny should take to start teaching an acting lesson, Penny denies to teach him. In the end, Sheldon promises to pay Penny for the acting lesson.

From the dialogue, it is seen that Sheldon is doing a commissive act because he promises Penny to pay her for the acting lesson. The humor occurs while he does this, he also flouts the maxim of relevance which is seen from his irrelevant act, *that is*, to pay Penny for the acting class after knowing Penny says "*forget it*". As supported by [Cutting \(2005\)](#), this kind of flouting happens when a speaker is giving an irrelevant answer to the hearer.

Expressive

[Searle \(1975\)](#) defined an expressive act as the act of a speaker to know one's psychological attitude to a presupposed state of affairs. On the other hand, it can also be said as the act of stating what the speaker feels. Here are the examples of expressive acts found in the sitcom:

(S04E14/The University Cafeteria/00.03.58-00.04.19)

Howard	:	Sheldon still moping?
Leonard	:	Yeah, it is weird. Even though he didn't want to give the lecture in the first place, being rejected by those students hit him hard.
Raj	:	<i>Mmm, I know the feeling. It's like accidentally walking into a gay bar and then having no one hit on you.</i> (doubting). It-it happened to a friend of mine.

In this scene, Leonard, Howard, and Rajesh are having lunch at the University Cafeteria. The three of them are talking about Sheldon's psychological state after knowing that not many students like the way he gives the lecture. From the dialogue, it can be seen that Raj is doing the act of expressive because he is indirectly showing his sympathy to Sheldon by telling his story at the gay bar. While doing this act, he also flouts the maxim of manners that can give a humorous effect. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) stated if this kind of flouting happens when a speaker is giving an ambiguous response. That somehow can be seen from the way Raj compares his "misfortune" experience in a gay bar and Sheldon's failure experience in giving the lecture. Raj thinks that both of him and Sheldon share the same feeling of being rejected by people, which in this case, Raj is being rejected by the people at the gay bar, while Sheldon is being rejected by his students at this lecture. However, his statement is giving ambiguous thoughts to Howard and Leonard, since it is not known if Raj ever visits a gay bar. Therefore, to avoid getting another question which is probably asked by either Howard or Leonard, he adds "*It happened to a friend of mine*".

(S04E14/Penny's Apartment/00.07.41-00.07.56)

Penny	:	Probably. I'm just enjoying the foreplay. Does this mean you are done mocking my acting career?
Sheldon	:	<i>Oh, I'm sorry, I thought making the transition from actor to the acting teacher was the signal that one's career had reached the end of the road.</i>

In this scene, Sheldon is asking Penny for her willingness to teach him an acting lesson. However, by the time Penny affirms if Sheldon would not mock her acting career anymore, he then explains if it is undoubted for her to be an acting teacher since he thinks Penny has never accomplished anything yet from her career as an actress. From the dialogue, it can be seen that Sheldon is doing the act of expressive because he is indirectly expressing his sympathy for Penny. On the other hand, the humor occurs while he is doing this act, he also flouts the maxim of quantity. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) claimed if this kind of flouting happens when a speaker is giving too little or too much information. It is shown by the way he indirectly implies his sympathy while also giving too much information as seen from the utterance "*making the transition from actor to the acting teacher was the signal that one's career had reached the end of the road*". By that, it can be concluded if Penny's appearance as an aspiring-but-also-broke-actress that has not accepted a single achievement yet, should be starting to use this reason to teach an acting lesson.

(S04E14/Penny's Apartment/00.19.23-00.19.35)

Penny	:	All right, come on, just try it my way. Pretend you're sad to see him go. I'm gonna lead you in. His unique genius is our best hope for bringing peace to a vast and troubled galaxy. That's your cue.
Sheldon	:	<i>I'm sorry. I just love that line.</i> Even the way you do it.

From the dialogue, Sheldon is doing the act of expressive because he is expressing his feelings by complimenting the way Penny reads the line. While doing this act, he also flouts the maxim of relevance which causes a humorous effect. [Cutting \(2005\)](#) stated that this type of flouting happens when a speaker is giving irrelevant information. On the other hand, when Penny is reading the line "*his unique genius is our best hope for bringing peace to a vast and troubled galaxy*", Sheldon considers that the words are suitable enough to picture his characters in real life. As a result, he does an irrelevant thing by not continuing to act as his mother in their acting lesson, meanwhile, he compliments the way Penny reads the line.

Based on the analysis of the data, we have indicated assertive acts used by the characters in the sitcom. Some of these acts create humor while others do not. The assertive acts that create humor flout the four types of the maxim: two occurrences for the maxim of quality, six occurrences for the maxim of quantity, one occurrence for the maxim of relevance, and three occurrences for the maxim of manner. This finding is in line with studies in the same topic conducted by [Ariefandi \(2018\)](#) and [Wardoyo \(2015\)](#) who also found that it is common for characters (or speakers) to flout the four types of maxim while doing the act of assertive to create humor, because this act leads to an ambiguous understanding among the characters, and this ambiguous situation results to the humorous occurrence.

We have also indicated directive acts that create humorous occurrences performed by the characters of the sitcom. We found that the directive acts that create humor in the sitcom flout two types of the maxim: two occurrences for the maxim of quantity and four occurrences for the maxim of relevance. [Wardoyo \(2015\)](#) stated that it is common for characters (or speakers) to flout the maxim of quantity while doing the act of directive because what is directed is answered with utterances that contain unrequired information. Besides, the maxim of relevance also commonly occurs while doing this activity because the characters are doing an irrelevant thing as what they are directed to do. Therefore, both maxim of quantity and maxim of relevance, if flouted while doing a directive act, can create humor to the hearers/watchers.

Commissive acts were also performed by the characters of the sitcom; some of these acts create humor while some others do not. We found that the commissive acts that create humor flout two types of the maxim: one occurrence for the maxim of quality and two occurrences for the maxim of relevance. This is in line with [Ariefandi's \(2018\)](#) statement that it is common for characters (or speakers) to flout the maxim of quality to represent what they do not think while doing the act of commission. Besides, the maxim of relevance occurs while doing this activity because the characters are giving irrelevant information to what they are committed to doing. Therefore, both maxim of quality and maxim of relevance, if flouted while doing a commissive act, can create a humorous effect.

Expressive is the last act listed in the analysis which is found used by the characters in the sitcom. We found that the commissive acts that create humor flout two types of the maxim: one occurrence for the maxim of quantity, one occurrence for the maxim of relevance, and two occurrences for the maxim of manner. As assembled by [Ariefandi \(2018\)](#) on his research, in bringing the humorous effect, characters (or speakers) are accustomed to flouting the maxim of quantity because they often give too much information while performing an expressive act. He also mentioned that humor occurs as well when the characters are flouting the maxim of relevance because they tend to give irrelevant information while they are doing the act of expression. Besides, as claimed by [Wardoyo \(2015\)](#), the humor occurs when the characters also flout the maxim of manner because they often state ambiguous information, in this case, in answering a question.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study, it can be concluded that some illocutionary acts are creating the humorous effects in the Big Bang Theory Episode *The Thespian Catalyst (S04E14)* namely assertive, directive, commissive, and expressive. However, there was no declarative act found in the sitcom, because it tends to be seriously uttered. Also, while doing the illocutionary acts, the characters are flouting the two types of the maxim, i.e. quality and relevance.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Our study is completed not without limitation. Even though we have explored the illocutionary acts of humor in Big bang Theory sitcom, we did not investigate the detailed sub-types of each act of illocution. Hence, we suggest future researchers also to study illocutionary acts Big Bang Theory sitcom in terms of the sub-types of assertive including claim, assure, argue, inform, conjecture and swear, and other subtypes of the directive, commissive and expressive.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

The first author is the leader of this research. The second author contributed to the writing of the results and discussion section of our paper and the third author contributed to the data collection and analysis.

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