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# Master Thesis: Gender in Somali

**Investigated issues:**

- Grammatical category of gender in Somali

- Formal and semantic processes behind the labels of "masculine" and "feminine"

- Concept of "gender polarity"

**Methods:**

- Reconstruction of gender system through the agreement-based approach (Corbett, 1991; Güldemann, 2000):

  o Agreement class system

  o Head noun classes

  o Gender system (interaction of agreement classes and number)

  o Assignment criteria

- Investigation on the nominal lexicon (Zorc and Osman, 1987) and classification of all nouns according to the identified genders

**Results:**

- The investigation provides evidence for 4 agreement classes and a crossed system with 8 genders

- Gender attribution depends mainly on segmental and suprasegmental properties of nouns, with the semantic criterion of biological sex playing a complementary role

- Male and female reference is systematically reflected in the singular agreement of nouns

- Two macro-genders can be identified corresponding to the Somali masculine and feminine gender

- Polarity as a phenomenon restricted to the domain of determiners

## 1. Background and problem statement

**Gender**: Class of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words (Corbett 1991)

**Agreement class**: set of regular morphological patterns triggered by a noun on other parts of speech in a given sentence.

Somali:

- 2 genders (masculine/feminine)

- 2 numbers (singular/plural)

- *Gender polarity*

**Table 1: Gender polarity in Somali (after Saeed 1993: 124-125)**

| SINGULAR | DEF | PLURAL | DEF | MEANING |
|----------|-----|--------|-----|---------|
| baabùur (M) | **-kii** | baabuurró (F) | **-tii** | truck/s |
| dayuurád (F) | **-tii** | dayuuradó (M) | **-kii** | airplane/s |

Note: M = masculine, F = feminine

**Figure 1: Gender system in German**

Definite articles

Singular                              Plural
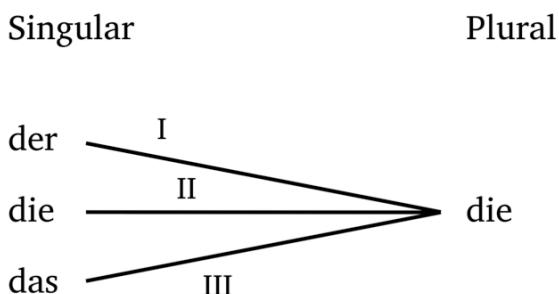


Note: I = masculine, II = feminine, III = neuter

## 2. Reconstruction of gender system

## 2.1 Agreement classes

**Table 2: Agreement class system**

| Agreement Class | Determiner | Verb affix | Clitic Pronoun | Example nouns |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | -k | y- | -uu | *ínan* 'boy', *nin* 'man', *díbi* 'ox' |
| **2** | -t | t- | -ay | *inàn* 'girl', *amley* 'dagger', *dibí* 'oxen' |
| **3** | -t | y-...-een | -ay | *inammo* 'boys', *amleeyo* 'daggers' |
| **4** | -k | y-...-een | -ay | *inamo* 'girls', *niman* 'men' |

**(1a)**

| baabùur-kii | waa + **uu** | y-imid |
|---|---|---|
| truck-**1**.DEF | DM + CPRO.3p.**1** | **1**-came.3p |
| 'the truck came' | | (Saeed 1999: 55) |

**(1b)**

| náag-tii | waa + **ay** | t-imid |
|---|---|---|
| truck-**2**.DEF | DM + CPRO.3p.**2** | **2**-came.3p |
| 'the woman came' | | (Saeed 1999: 56) |

**(1c)**

| baabuurró-dii | waa + **ay** | y-imad-een |
|---|---|---|
| trucks-**3**.DEF | DM + CPRO.3p.**3** | **3**-came.3p |
| 'the trucks came' | | (Saeed 1999: 56) |

**(1d)**

| naagó-hii | waa + **ay** | y-imad-een |
|---|---|---|
| women-**4**.DEF | DM + CPRO.3p.**4** | **4**-came.3p |
| 'the women came' | | (Saeed 1999: 56) |

## 2.2 Head noun classes

- Different system of classification relying on formal markers on the noun itself (morphology + phonology).

- Stress is associated with tone: high tone = strong stress, falling tone = weak stress, low tone = no stress

-Saeed (1999) distinguishes between 2 tonal patterns

- • TP1: High tone on the last mora, Low elsewhere.

- TP2: High tone on the penultimate mora, Low elsewhere.

- Saeed's declension classes are based on 3 criteria: plural formation features, tonal patterns and agreement.


**Table 3: Declension classes (after Saeed, 1999)**

| Declension class | Singular form | Plural formation | Tonal Pattern | | Example noun |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | singular | plural | |
| 1 | | -(y)o | TP1 | TP1 | cabsí > cabsiyó |
| 2 | | -(y)o / -Co | TP2/TP1 | TP1 | ólol > ololló |
| 3 | | -(y)o + vowel drop | TP2 | TP1 | ílig > ilkó |
| 4 | monosyllabic | -aC | TP2 | TP1 | sán > sanán |
| 5 | | same form | TP2 | TP1 | àwr > áwr |
| 6 | end in -o | -oyin | TP1/TP2 | TP2 | dawó > dawóoyin |
| 7 | end in -e | -yaal | TP1/TP2 | TP1 | tuké > tukayáal |

This classification is problematic due to the lack of:

    a) a strict demarcation with respect to some of its classes (namely 1, 2, 3, 5)

    b) an account of some countable nouns (i.e. Arabic plurals)

    c) any treatment of uncountable nouns.


→ Unified and transparent system of head noun classes


**Table 4: Head noun classes**

| No. | Final segment | Tone pattern | Number | Function etc. | Agreement class |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | zero class | 1/2 | Sg/Pl | underived nouns, loans | 1, 2, 3 |
| 1a | -aal | 1 | Sg | product of Xing | 2 |
| 1b | -aal | 2 | Sg | product of Xing | 1 |
| 2 | -aan | 1 | Sg | abstract [-ness] | 2 |
| 3 | -ad | 1 | Sg | feminine counterpart | 2 |
| 4 | -asho | 1 | Sg | gerund [act of Xing] | 2 |
| 5 | /d | 2 | Sg | verbal noun | 1 |
| 6 | -darro | 1 | Sg | privative/antonym | 2 |
| 7 | -Ce | 1/2 | Sg | agentive/instrumental | 2 |
| 8 | -id (-is) | 1 | Sg | gerund [act of Xing] | 2 |
| 9 | -itaan | 2 | Sg | verbal noun | 1 |

| 10 | -iyad | 1 | Sg | abstract [-ism, -logy] | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | -le | 2 | Sg | owner/possessor of X | 1 |
| 12 | -n | 1 | Sg | gerund | 2 |
| 13a | -niin | 1 | Sg | gerund | 2 |
| 13b | -niin | 2 | Sg | gerund | 1 |
| 14 | -nimo | 1 | Sg | abstract [-ness, -ity] | 2 |
| 15 | -s | 2 | Sg | verbal noun | 1 |
| 16 | -tan | 1 | Sg | reciprocal | 1 |
| 17 | -tin | 1 | Sg | result of Xing | 1, 2 |
| 18 | -tinnimo | 1 | Sg | abstract | 2 |
| 19 | -to | 1 | Sg | agentive + collective | 2 |
| 20 | -tooyo | 1 | Sg | abstract [state of being X] | 2 |
| 21 | -xumo | 1 | Sg | negation | 2 |
| 22 | monosyllables | 2 | Sg | underived nouns | 1, 2 |
| 23 | bare verb roots | n.a. | Sg | Ø nominalization | 1 |
| 24 | -(y)o | 1/2 | Sg/Pl | feminization, pluralization | 1, 2, 3, 4 |
| 25 | -oyin | 2 | Pl | pluralization | 4 |
| 26 | -y | 2 | Pl | pluralization | 2 (3) |
| 27 | -yaal | 1 | Pl | pluralization | 3 |
| 28 | -a*C* reduplication | 1 | Pl | pluralization | 4 |
| 29 | internal plurals | n.a. | Pl | pluralization | 3, 4 |

**Table 5: Unpaired head noun classes**

| Class | Tone | Agreement |
|---|---|---|
| 0 zero | 1/2 | 1, 2 |
| 1a -aal | 1 | 2 |
| 1b -aal | 2 | 1 |
| 2 -aan | 1 | 2 |
| 4 -asho | 1 | 2 |
| 6 -darro | 1 | 2 |
| 8 -id (-is) | 1 | 2 |
| 9 -itaan | 2 | 1 |
| 10 -iyad | 1 | 2 |
| 12 -n | 1 | 2 |
| 13a -niin | 1 | 2 |
| 13b -niin | 2 | 1 |
| 14 -nimo | 1 | 2 |
| 15 -s | 2 | 1 |

| 16 -tan | 1 | 1 |
|---|---|---|
| 17 -tin | 1 | 1, 2 |
| 18 -tinnimo | 1 | 2 |
| 19 -to | 1 | 2 |
| 20 -tooyo | 1 | 2 |
| 23 bare verb roots | n.a. | 2 |
| 24 -(y)o | 1 | 2, 4 |

**Table 6: Head noun class singular/plural pairings**

| Head class | Tone | Head class | Tone | Saeed | Agreement |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1a -aal | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | 1 | 2/4 |
| 3 -ad | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 8 -id (-is) | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 10 -iyad | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 13a -niin | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 17 -tin | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | 2/4, 1/3 |
| 0 zero | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | 2/4, 1/4 |
| 0 zero | 2 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | 2, 3 | 1/3, 2/3, 1/4, 2/4 |
| 1b -aal | 2 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | 2 | 1/3 |
| 5 /d | 2 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 9 -itaan | 2 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 13b -niin | 2 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 15 -s | 2 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 16 -tan | 1 | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 23 bare verb roots | n.a. | 24 -(y)o | 1 | | |
| 22 monosyllables | 2 | 28 -aC reduplication | 1 | 4 | 1/4, 2/4 |
| 0 zero | 2 | 0 same form | 1 | 5 | 1/2 (or 1/3) |
| 11 –le | 2 | 26 –y | 1 | | |
| 4 –asho | 1 | 25 –oyin | 2 | 6 | 2/4 |
| 6 –darro | 1 | 25 –oyin | 2 | | |
| 14 –nimo | 1 | 25 –oyin | 2 | | |
| 18 –tinnimo | 1 | 25 –oyin | 2 | | |
| 19 –to | 1 | 25 –oyin | 2 | | |
| 20 –tooyo | 1 | 25 –oyin | 2 | | |
| 24 –(y)o | 1 | 25 –oyin | 2 | | 2/4, 1/4 |
| 7 –Ce | 1 | 27 –yaal | 1 | 7 | 1/3 |
| 11 –le | 2 | 27 –yaal | 1 | | |
| 0 zero | n.a. | 29 internal plurals | n.a. | "8" | 1/3, 2/4 |

**Figure 2: Head noun class pairings**
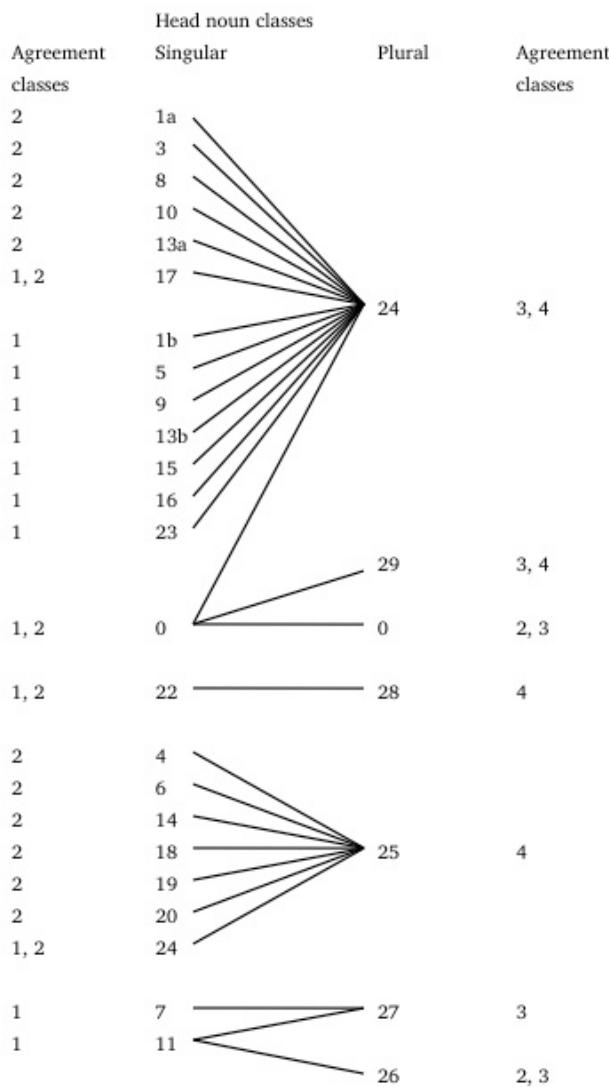


- Predominantly convergent system. Exceptions: class 0 and 11

**Table 7: Correlation between head noun classes and agreement classes**

| Singular | | Plural | | English | Class pair | AGR Pair |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NOUN | DEF | NOUN | DEF | | | |
| kulliy-ád | -da | kulliyad-ó | -ha | 'airplane/s' | 3/24 | 2/4 |
| abaabul-é | -ha | abaabula-yaal | -sha | 'organizer/s' | 7/27 | 1/3 |
| abaabu-shó | -da | abaabusho-óyin | -ka | 'organizer/s' | 4/25 | 2/4 |
| áf | -ka | afáf | -ka | 'mouth/s' | 22/28 | 1/4 |
| díbi | -ga | dibí | -da | 'bull/s' | 0/0 | 1/2 (1/3) |
| geel-le | -ha | geelle-y | -da | 'camel owner/s' | 11/26 | 1/2 (1/3) |

- Head noun classes only partially reflected in agreement
- Head class pairings associated with more than one agreement class pairing: 0/24, 17/24, 0/29, 22/28 and 24/25

**Table 8: Head noun class 0/24**

| Singular | | Plural | | English | AGR Pair |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NOUN | DEF | NOUN | DEF | | |
| dagáal | -ka | dagaalló | -da | 'war/s' | 1/3 |
| maálin | -ka | maalmó | -ha | 'day/s' | 1/4 |
| gacán | -ta | gacmó | -ha | 'hand/s' | 2/4 |
| amley | -da | amleeyo | -da | 'dagger/s' | 2/3 |

## 2.3 Gender system

Interaction of agreement classes and number:

**Figure 3: Gender system of Somali**
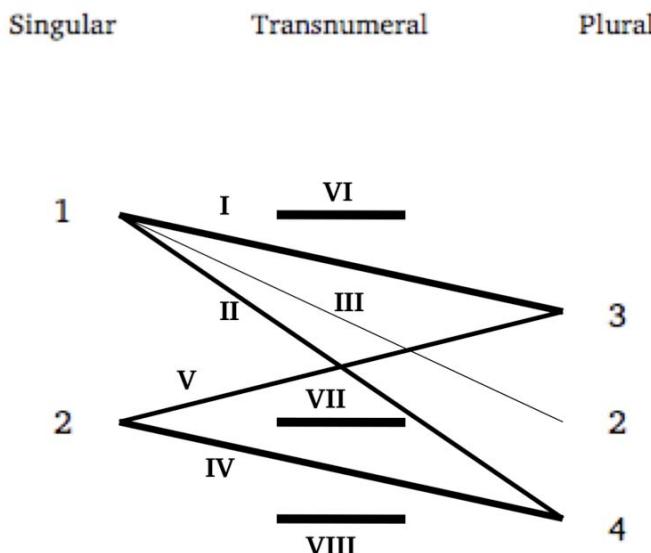


- crossed system
- 8 genders (5 paired, 3 unpaired)

Observations:

a) Agreement class 2 proves to be insensitive towards the grammatical category of number;

b) Somali, along with a few other African languages, contradicts Greenberg's Universal 37: "A language never has more gender categories in non-singular numbers than in the singular."

## 2.4 Assignment criteria

**Table 9: Genders and assignment criteria**

| GENDER | AGREEMENT CLASS | HEAD NOUN CLASS | SEMANTIC CORE | NUMBER OF PAIRINGS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | 1/3 | 0/24<br>1b/24<br>5/24<br>9/24<br>13b/24<br>15/24<br>16/24<br>17/24<br>23/24<br>0/0<br>11/26<br>7/27<br>11/27<br>0/29 | (male/unspecified) animates | 5555<br>(42,6%) |
| II | 1/4 | 0/24<br>22/28<br>24/25 | (male/unspecified) animates, body parts (?) | 662<br>(5%) |
| III | 1/2 | 0/0<br>11/26 | (male/unspecified) animates, plants | 99<br>(0,8 %) |
| IV | 2/4 | 0/24<br>1a/24<br>3/24<br>8/24<br>10/24<br>13a/24<br>17/24<br>23/24<br>22/28<br>4/25<br>6/25<br>14/25<br>18/25<br>19/25<br>20/25<br>24/25<br>0/29 | female animates | 3122<br>(23,9 %) |
| V | 2/3 | 0/24 | female animates | 418<br>(3,2 %) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **VI** | 1 | 0<br>1b<br>9<br>13b<br>15<br>16<br>17 | abstract, mass, collective | |
| **VII** | 2 | 0<br>1a<br>2<br>4<br>6<br>8<br>10<br>12<br>13a<br>14<br>17<br>18<br>19<br>20<br>23<br>24 | abstract, mass, collective | 3196<br>(24,5 %) |
| **VIII** | 4 | 24 | mass, collective | |

**Gender I**

- Leaves out only female animates

- Male reference assigns nouns of class 0/24 and 0/29 to gender I (see examples 2, 3, 7, 8 below)

- Overlap of formal and semantic criteria (see 4, 5, 6 below, where the suffix -*e* and the male reference concur on the gender attribution):

**(2)** *abboow* 'older brother' (head noun class 0/24)

**(3)** *abti* 'maternal uncle' (0/24)

**(4)** *curre* 'male cat' (7/27)

**(5)** *madhale* 'childless man' (7/27)

**(6)** *xoogsade* 'male worker' (7/27)

**(7)** *fannaan* 'male artist' (0/29)

**(8)** *farakh* 'illegittimate son, bastard' (0/29)

**Gender II**

- mostly monosyllables with reduplicated plurals (class 22/28)
- some disyllabic nouns from class 0/24
- 2 recurrent semantic traits: male animates, body parts:

**Table 10: Semantic patterns of Gender II**

| Class pair | Male animates | Body parts |
|---|---|---|
| 0/24 | *ku* 'someone, something masculine', *walaal* 'brother, male sibling' | *boqon* 'ankle', *garab* 'shoulder', *harag* 'skin', *ilig* 'tooth', *jilib* 'knee', *naas* 'breast', *qodob* 'nail', *tin* 'hair', *xiidan* 'small intestine', *xubin* 'limb, joint', *yoos* 'bush of unkempt hair' |
| 22/28 | *aar* 'adult male lion', *coon* 'male dwarf', *diig* 'cock, rooster', *doob* 'bachelor', *gool* 'fattened male camel', *lab* 'male', *liig* 'male gazelle', shaab 'young man', *sheyb* 'old man', *wiil* 'boy, son', *xuur* 'young boy' | *af* 'mouth', *can* 'cheek', *cur* 'Adam's apple' *dub* 'skin', *dhaad* 'part of the leg just above the ankle', *fool* 'face, forehead', *fuq* 'jaw', *gadh* 'beard, chin', *goon* 'cheek', *gows* 'molar, back tooth', *gus* 'penis', *haan* 'throat', *jaah* 'face', *jidh* 'body', *koodh* 'temple', *kor* 'body, skin', *kub* 'lower leg', *kur* 'head', *laan* 'vagina', *lun* 'furrow', *qal* 'jaw', *ruug* 'knee', *saab* 'thorax', *san* 'nose', *siil* 'vagina', *sur* 'neck', *suul* 'thumb; big toe', *shaf* 'chest', *shuun* 'pubic hair', *tun* 'nape', *wiil* 'pupil of the eye' |

- There is also a group of 13 nouns of class 24/25 (normally converging into gender IV) which are assigned to gender II without any clear explanation:

**(9)** *barbarro* 'side, parallel line', *darnaansho* 'state of being worse', *dhaaddanaansho* 'state of being well-fed', *dhaqaalo* 'economy', *fillaansho* 'sufficing', *fogaansho* 'state of being far', *gaafo* 'plenty', *hogfo* 'knock-knees', *istuudiyo* 'studio', *samaanyo* 'gift', *samo* 'kindness', *suuro* 'possibility', *tabaalo* 'trouble'.

**Gender III**

- Class 0 nouns, tonal change in plural
- Half of these nouns occur also in gender I
- Many of these nouns refer to male (or unspecified) animates (10-15) and plants (16, 17):

**(10)** *arday* 'student'

**(11)** *ariile* 'trader of sheep and goats' (also gender I)

**(12)** *Soomaali* 'Somali man'

**(13)** *awr* 'male pack camel'

**(14)** *dibi* 'bull, ox' (also gender I)

**(15)** *orgi* 'billy, male goat' (also gender I)

**(16)** *dhebi* 'tree species' (also gender I)

**(17)** *sarmaan* 'thorny plant species'

- Inquorate gender? Subgender of gender I?

## Gender IV

- Counterpart of gender I (see Fig. 3)
- TP1 as preferred pattern
- Core related to female animates:

**(18)** *alkun* 'girlfriend'

**(19)** *eysin* 'niece'

**(20)** *daayeerad* 'female monkey'

**(21)** *goso* 'cow; female elephant'

**(22)** *hiindo* 'mother'

**(23)** *arrimiso* 'woman in charge, directress'

**(24)** *macallimad* 'female teacher'

## Gender V

- Semantic core: female animates
- Mostly zero-suffix nouns
- Assignment rules not clear: neither semantic nor formal rules are able to tell apart gender V from gender IV.

## Gender VI, VII, VIII

- Nouns with only one value for number
- Mass, collective, abstract nouns
- The partition of these nouns across the three genders relies exclusively on formal principles (different interaction with head noun classes).

**Generalization**: if one considers the fact that also the main semantic predictor (sex distinction) correlates often with morpho-phonological features, it could be argued that formal principles generally provide a far better tool for explaining gender attribution.

→ Predominantly formal system

Further evidence comes from **loan words**, which are assigned by reason of their formal resemblance to Somali nouns, as in the following examples:

- Monosyllabic loan words are assigned by default to gender II, as those of class pairing 22/28:

**(25)** *nuur* 'light' (Arabic)
**(26)** *muus* 'banana' (Arabic)
**(27)** *buug* 'book' (English)
**(28)** *juus* 'juice' (English)
**(29)** *tan* 'ton' (English)

- The Italian loan *bandiraad* 'flag' takes the plural suffix *-o* and falls into gender IV like class 3/24 nouns (ending in *-ad/-o*).

- The Italian loans *ansalaato* 'lettuce', *aranjaato* 'orange beverage' behave like nouns of class 24 (ending in *-o*), thus taking *-oyin* in the plural (class 25) and being assigned to gender IV.

**Multiple genders**: 4% of all nouns occur in more than one gender

→ dialectal variation? degree of arbitrariness?


## 3. Conclusions

- Predominantly formal system, depending on segmental and suprasegmental properties.

- Sex distinction plays a complementary role. Two minor semantic criteria: body parts (II), plants (III)

- Natural gender is reflected in the singular agreement. This allows to identify two semantically motivated macro-genders (I-II-III for male, IV-V for female), which correspond in some sense to the traditional masculine and feminine gender respectively.

- Complex system of genders as the consequence of the plural morphology and, more generally, of the unclear category of number.

- Polarity as a morphological reversal restricted to the domain of determiners, whose range is not systematically extended to all nouns.

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