Vocabulary Acquisition: Verbs First

R. Jeffrey Blair

Abstract
This paper examines and evaluates a representative self-study book for increasing English vocabulary. Some ideas are presented for integrating the intake of vocabulary and their grammar patterns and maximizing the retention of both.

Riding to work on the Nagoya subways I frequently see students studying. One can’t help but notice many of these students reading through self-study books for building up their English vocabulary. They often have a red plastic sheet to cover the page that they are reading, making the targeted words and phrases, which are printed in red letters, invisible. It can double as a book marker. Vocabulary is perhaps their primary concern when focusing on exams, and they are always focused on exams (Blair 2017, 239 and 2019, 64).

Enchanted by this ubiquitous and powerful tool, I bought myself a couple of these books in order to have a closer look. The series title of the books I purchased was KIKUTAN in huge, evenly spaced katakana. Thinking that the katakana title must be a foreign loan word (外来語), I imagined that it meant “kick turn”, referring to flip turns, a technique that helps competitive swimmers (in free style and backstroke) achieve a smooth turn and a fast finish. Ah, ha … the book’s aim is to help you acquire English vocabulary as effortlessly
and quickly as possible, I thought. Closer inspection, however, revealed an explanation of the title in small letters. The title actually comes from two separate words KIKU (聞く, to listen) and TAN (単語, vocabulary). Indeed, each book does come with a two-disk set of CDs for listening practice.

The yellow book KIKUTAN (Basic) 4000 and green KIKUTAN (Advanced) 6000 introduce 1,120 vocabulary words each: 16 words/daily lesson × 70 lessons. Words are presented in a specific order within each level: first verbs, then nouns, followed by adjectives, and finally adverbs. KIKUTAN (Basic) includes some special sections: words with multiple meanings (7 lessons), vocabulary for daily conversation (6 lessons), and special topics: 1 lesson on politics, 2 lessons each on people, science, and economy, and 3 lessons on society. They follow the same verb – noun – adjective order of presentation within each of these groups of lessons.

Three Study Modes

Each lesson consists of 16 vocabulary words presented in three study modes: (1) listening to each target word and a one-word translation of each while reading basic definitions in Japanese, (2) reading the target word inside a couple of phrases with Japanese translations of those phrases, and (3) reading the words in the context of a full sentence with its translation.

I would now like to evaluate this study technique, using KIKUTAN 4000 as an example, and offer some constructive criticism. First, I will point out what I consider to be its advantages then its disadvantages and follow that up with some ways to improve the process of retaining target vocabulary and learning how to use it.

To a certain extent the study technique follows A. J. Hoge’s first four rules
for language acquisition (see Blair 2016, 7). The chants on the set of two CDs for study mode 1 allow students to hear each target word pronounced three times, first by itself quickly followed by a Japanese equivalent. Then the word is repeated with a pause, which could be used for repetition practice. After a group of four words are covered in this way all four words are quickly repeated again. Background music and the pause create an easy listening atmosphere and encourage the students to chant along. The CDs are intended as an introduction, but can also be used as a quick review. Thus to a certain extent students are “learning with their ears” (Rule #3) and may take the time to learn the pronunciation “deeply” (Rule #4) by listening to, and perhaps repeating, the words many times.

Study modes 2 (in phrases) and 3 (in sentences) put the target words in grammatical context with Japanese translations, without explanation of grammar rules (A. J. Hoge Rules #1 and #2). The target words are usually presented as a given part of speech: verb, noun, adjective, or adverb. The forms of the phrases appearing in study mode 2 vary accordingly. Let’s take them one at a time. The verb in phrasal context is nearly always in its dictionary form without any subject provided (example 1). Then typically it is followed by a single object or a prepositional phrase. Once in a while a typical preposition appears without its noun phrase (example 2). If the verb is an intransitive one, by the way, this can mislead students into thinking that the verb is a phrasal verb.

Example 1. save money for retirement

Example 2. lend support to …

Very occasionally verbs in their –ed form (ie. past participle) and –s form (plural subject) appear (examples 3 and 4, next page).
Example 3. be **designed** for children
Example 4. This article **suggests** that …

Equally rare in this phrase section is a short, but full sentence (examples 5 and 6). These sentences are always kept short.

Example 5. What do you **mean** by that?
Example 6. All roads **lead** to Rome.

When the target word is a **noun** about 2/3 of the phrases do not contain a verb. The noun may be in a simple noun phrase (example 7) or an embedded noun phrase (examples 8 and 9). Sometimes the noun functions as an adjective (example 10).

Example 7. a danger **signal**
Example 8. show of **force**
Example 9. a **moment** of silence
Example 10. **brain** damage

Sometimes a verb precedes the target word and its noun phrase (examples 11 and 12).

Example 11. deliver a **paper**
Example 12. catch **sight** of …

When the target word is an **adjective**, the phrases are even less likely (about 1/5 of them) to have a verb unless the target word is a predicate adjective (examples 13 and 14, next page).
Example 13. be **worth** the time

Example 14. look **familiar**

When the target word is an adverb, it seems to occur in one of three positions: in the verb cluster—between the subject (usually omitted) and the object, which may also be omitted—(example 15); at the end of the sentence (example 16); or in front of the adjective which it modifies (example 17).

Example 15. I don’t **actually** remember …

Example 16. Give me … **instead**.

Example 17. **nearly** empty

As you can see, study mode 2 puts the target vocabulary into short phrases that give them a rather simple and often vague, but easy to understand grammatical context. Study mode 3 provides a fuller, more meaningful context for the target word within a complete sentence, as suggested by A. J. Hoge (Rule #1), without any grammatical explanations (Rule #2). After each block of seven daily lessons comes a short review section, a written text of three paragraphs with some (about 19) of the (112=7×16) target words embedded. This gives these particular words a richer context than the diverse and unconnected sentences in study mode 3 provide. In addition, these texts are recorded on the CD set. Students can listen to them again and again, if they wish—deep learning with their ears, not their eyes (A. J. Hoge Rules #3 and #4).

The three study modes correspond to columns in the book, printed on two facing pages. Each page has two columns. The first column on the left-hand page contains eight target words (half a daily lesson) in big bold print with pronunciation symbols in teeny tiny print. Sometimes there are brief notes
about confusing points—synonyms (eg. waste vs. waist), near synonyms (eg. wonder and wander) … to the Japanese ear (eg. long and wrong), irregular conjugations (eg. drew – drawn, for the word draw). The second column gives some translations—one in larger bold red print—and, if applicable, some variations of the target word (eg. comparison and comparable, for the word compare). The facing page on the right contains two columns: the first column has one or two (mostly two) phrases, as described above, while the second column contains a single sentence. The target words in both columns are printed in red. The weekly review takes up three pages. The first page (on the left side) has the text of the story as described above. Facing it on the right are a couple of multiple choice (abcd) questions in English. The correct answers and a Japanese translation of the entire story appear on the back side (ie. the next left page). The target words and their translations in the Japanese version of the story are printed in red. A small red plastic sheet comes with each book, thus any of the text printed in red can be covered up to make it disappear from view—a good way for readers to test their memorization of the material and to review (A. J. Hoge Rule Rule #4, deep learning).

These self-study books are certainly much more fun to read than any dictionary, and they can be used as reference books. There is an index of all the target vocabulary and some variations of those words in the back.

**Shortcomings**

The meanings of words—thus the choice of translations—are highly sensitive to context. A. J. Hoge understands this (Rule #1, learn phrases, not individual words) and so do the authors of KIKUTAN. That is why in KIKUTAN Basic 4000 they devote a full seven lessons (lessons 20, 41, and 45–49) to words
with multiple meanings. Not only meanings, but even a word’s part of speech depends on the way that it is used (examples 18a-20b from Lesson 20).

Example 18a. order drinks
Example 18b. alphabetical order
Example 19a. long for peace
Example 19b. a long distance
Example 20a. park a car
Example 20b. a national park

These examples are, in fact, not at all unusual. Consider these six words from Lesson 9, a lesson devoted completely to nouns: reason, experience, cause, respect, thought, and effect. The first four can be used as verbs. Thought can be used as a verb in the past tense. Although effect undergoes a slight spelling change to affect to become a verb the pronunciation of the two words is identical (leading to a common spelling mistake among native speakers). The point is clear. Vocabulary can only be learned in grammatical context. The single-word translations of target words in study mode 1 (translation and repetition) are inadequate.

The authors do a fairly good job of compensating for the problem of vocabulary complexity in study mode 2 (phrases) and more so in study mode 3 (sentences). Yet mysteriously the single-word translation from mode 1 sometimes does not appear in the translation of the sentence in mode 3 and occasionally in any of the translations in mode 2 or mode 3 (examples 21–23, next page, Note that the spaces are not in the original text. They have been added to highlight the translations of the target words.).
Example 21. improve (a verb from Lesson 1)
Mode 1: 改善する
Mode 2: 機械を改良する and 生産性を高める
Mode 3: …英語を上達させたい。

Example 22. direction (a noun from Lesson 10)
Mode 1: 方向
Mode 2: 反対の方向に and 指示に従う
Mode 3: どちらの方角から…

Example 23. close (an adjective from Lesson 15)
Mode 1: 接近した
Mode 2: 近距離で and 親友
Mode 3: …学校に近い。

The fact that everything is translated, and that those translations are quite often unnaturally literal (直訳), encourages students to approach language learning quite mechanically—like human computers—memorizing vocabulary as a word-to-word correspondence between English and Japanese (Blair, 2019, 65). The above examples show, however, that such a simple correspondence distorts the reality of languages.

Let’s turn our attention to study mode 3. The purpose of these self-study books, of course, is not just to introduce English vocabulary to Japanese students, but to help them remember the target words and how to use them. The random nature of the list of words and the lack of any meaningful connections between the sentences assures that they will be forgotten soon after a student turns the page. On the next page is an example.
Example 24. consecutive vocabulary items from Lesson 35

Mode 1: target, vitamin, cellphone, passion

Mode 2: hit the target; meet the target; lack of vitamin A; vitamin pills charge one’s cellphone; the passion of love; have a passion for …

Mode 3: My arrow missed the target by one inch.
This fruit is rich in vitamins.

My cellphone’s battery is running out.
He talked about his dreams with passion.

An archery contest, an unidentified fruit, a low battery, an unidentified male talking about his unidentified dreams—what possible connections do they have to each other? How long could a student remember these vocabulary items at a pace of 16 words in a daily lesson? Would they ever want to reread the list, the phrases, or the full sentences?

A few lessons in KIKUTAN 4000 concentrate on special topics: politics (56), people (60–61), science (62–63), society (66–68), and the economy (69–70). There are also ten stories on various topics—pizza, memory and the brain, sign language, puppy mills, the danger of asteroids, Internet education, methods for learning English, dealing with stress, boring science classes, and global climate change—one at the end of each week.

Basing a lesson on a special topic connects the sentences to a certain extent, but it’s a very weak connection. The ideas expressed in the sentences do not flow as they would in a coherent text. On the next page is an example from Lesson 56 (politics).
Example 25. consecutive sentences (from mode 3, Lesson 56)

After a long revolution, the country became a republic.
She dedicated her life to social welfare.
The country got over its economic crisis.
The people were hoping for fair, democratic elections.

The reader is asked to jump from one idea to another. The people and countries involved are never identified. The only consistent thread running through them is some abstract connection to politics. There are no details that would connect these sentences in a more concrete manner, unless a student provides them in their own imagination. Did “she” participate in the “long revolution” hoping to improve people’s social welfare? Did “the country” have an economic crisis before or after the “revolution”? Did “the country” hold democratic elections after becoming a republic? Which country are we talking about? Or are these simply four disconnected sentences about politics, to be practiced in case the vocabulary appears on a future examination? Without the richer context that intersentential connections would provide, the words and sentences are doomed to fade from the reader’s memory.

The weekly review stories provide strong, concrete connections from sentence to sentence. One weakness, however, is the academic treatment of the topics, the lack of any personal connections. Various groups of people, but few individuals appear in the texts. These groups include soldiers, the scientific community, non-deaf people, experts, specialists, adults, future generations, today’s students, co-workers, and athletes. The few individuals that do appear are unidentified or stereotypes: a famous chef, a respected breeder, a (university) fellow, the mad professor, the enthusiastic genius, et cetera.
Improvements

If the purpose of these self-study vocabulary books includes teaching students how to use the target vocabulary, then basic grammar patterns must be emphasized in some way, visually or through audio repetition. A simple way to accomplish visual emphasis is to divide sentences into four parts (Blair, 2019). Let’s use the sentences from example 24 to illustrate this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>O/C</th>
<th>+A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My arrow</td>
<td>missed</td>
<td>the target</td>
<td>by one inch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This fruit</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>rich</td>
<td>in vitamins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My cellphone’s battery</td>
<td>is running</td>
<td></td>
<td>out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>talked</td>
<td></td>
<td>about his dreams with passion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The position and structure of the various noun phrases becomes quite salient and their connections to the verb obvious. The isolation of the verb clusters puts a spotlight on their forms and functions. Audio emphasis through the repetition of each sentence—first with long pauses between each section and between noun phrases that occur together in the same section, then with shorter pauses until the pronunciation was completely natural and at native-speaker speed—would be ideal. The target words (in bold print here) would, of course, be printed in red letters. Japanese translations of each sentence, if desired, could be conveniently provided on the facing page.

Books often come with CDs and even DVDs in this age of multimedia. It is becoming popular to download audio and video files onto cellphones and computer tablets. Educational institutions can easily upload similar study materials onto Internet servers and thereby make them available to their
students or even the entire global community. In this brave new era we can bypass translation to convey meaning. Hyperlinks allow us to soak students in images and video clips so that they can vicariously experience the reality behind meaning and form direct associations between them and target vocabulary. Gattegno (1976, 10 & 33) explained it nicely in his book about The Silent Way. He declared rote memorization to be useless. Language, he stated, is generated from perception. It is these [sensory] associations that bring about [long-term] retention.

The actual sounds and images of (a) an arrow missing its target and (b) a man talking passionately about his dreams for the future would make much more powerful impressions on the reader’s mind than the Japanese translations of those events. The (c) vitamins in a piece of fruit and (d) a battery running out of electricity admittedly present challenges to the search for visual associations.

Another powerful aid to retention is the flow of a text, especially if it comes from a story (Gottschall, 2012)—a video story (example 26a) can provide both a story line and a wealth of visual associations, ready to be hyperlinked.

Example 26a. from TV drama Trapper John, MD (1979)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>O/C</th>
<th>+A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura McCaffrey</td>
<td>saw</td>
<td>two ambulances</td>
<td>in front of the hospital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There</td>
<td>had been</td>
<td>an accident.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors and nurses</td>
<td>quickly unloaded</td>
<td>four patients</td>
<td>from those ambulances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>took</td>
<td>the pulse of one of the patients.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She</td>
<td>told</td>
<td>Gonzo Gates</td>
<td>that …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… the patient</td>
<td>was</td>
<td></td>
<td>in shock.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conversations are based upon sentences even if those sentences occur below the surface of what is audible. The sentence fragments in spoken English come
from or can be expressed as full sentences. At the core of each sentence (and dependent clause as well) lies a verb. Noun phrases and adverbs are peripheral elements. Being buried within noun phrases (explicit or implied), adjectives are one step further removed from the center of this syntactic hierarchy. Japanese, English, and many other languages share this same structure, which has been compared to a solar system (Figure 1 reprinted\(^1\) from Blair, 2019, 75).

![Diagram of SOV and SVO Solar System](image)

Figure 1. Illustrated metaphor for the basic structures of Japanese and English declarative sentences

While a noun phrase can occupy any one of three slots in the sentence structure, the verb’s position is fixed. Furthermore, verbs fulfill the central role of syntax. A sentence without a verb is not a sentence. Furthermore they control the macro-grammar (Blair, 2013, 136–138 and 2019, 72), the pattern of connections with noun phrases within the sentence. Given these facts, it seems sensible to give them special consideration in vocabulary acquisition, to give them precedence over nouns and adjectives. Looking at word frequency (Davies, 2008), a general measure of how useful a word is, the most common...
adjective (one) comes in at #51 and the most common noun (time) at #52. There are eight verbs and three auxiliary verbs (can, would, will) ahead of them. (Four of the verbs—be, have, do, get—are also used as auxiliary verbs.)

Verbal Sudoku

_Cloze testing_ removes a word from a sentence often within a longer text and challenges students to guess the missing word. The _red sheet_ review falls into this category of self-testing. _Removing the verb_ from a sentence basically leaves a disconnected series of noun phrases in place, usually one or two in each slot. These noun phrases can be studied as isolated examples of micro-grammar (Blair, 2013, 136–138 and 2019, 72). Their (a) meanings, (b) placement within a 4۠۠۠(four-slot) macro-grammatical framework (Blair, 2011), and (c) and connecting words, in the case of a prepositional phrases, provide clues as to the identity of the missing verb. Thus there are two very different criteria—semantic and grammatical—to choose a suitable verb to complete the sentence. A third condition—the flow of the story—comes into play, if the sentences tell a story (see example 26b, next page).

Used as a classroom exercise, this worksheet encourages students to consider all three conditions simultaneously, much like the popular number game _sudoku_. They focus (a) on the noun phrases for the clues that they supply and (b) on all the verbs and auxiliary verbs that might go into each missing verb cluster to create sentences with suitable meaning. Students also have to decide what form—tense, aspect, negative or affirmative—are appropriate for that cluster.

Japanese students are quite reluctant to play any guessing games in the classroom. In order to stimulate their brains with some linguistic food for
Example 26b. from TV drama Trapper John, MD (1979)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>O/C</th>
<th>+A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura McCaffrey</td>
<td>two ambulances</td>
<td>in front of the hospital.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There</td>
<td>an accident.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors and nurses</td>
<td>quickly</td>
<td>four patients</td>
<td>from those ambulances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>the pulse of one of the patients.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She</td>
<td>Gonzo Gates</td>
<td>that…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… the patient</td>
<td>in shock.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even though she</td>
<td>for the hospital, …</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… she</td>
<td>Claudia</td>
<td>on a gurney to an exam room.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trapper and Claudia</td>
<td>suddenly</td>
<td>hands.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gonzo</td>
<td>a letter of recommendation</td>
<td>for Laura.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>with Miss Langley.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trapper</td>
<td>Claudia’s x-ray</td>
<td>with Gonzo.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem</td>
<td>in her pancreas.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudia</td>
<td>a fancier room.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elma</td>
<td>some things</td>
<td>a long way for Claudia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudia</td>
<td>some perfume.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td></td>
<td>about her past in her application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She</td>
<td></td>
<td>in a prison hospital.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Penguin 2</th>
<th>Penguin 2</th>
<th>Genius 1 and 3</th>
<th>Genius 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bring</td>
<td>Take</td>
<td>Hold</td>
<td>Argue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put on</td>
<td>Tell</td>
<td>Lie</td>
<td>Demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Examine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unload</td>
<td>Wheel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
thought, I usually add a list of suitable verbs, in dictionary form, at the bottom of the worksheet. I tell them, however, that they are free to use any verbs that they think might fit all three conditions: (1) noun-verb connections and verb form, (2) the meaning of each individual sentence, and (3) the flow of the story.

**Verb Thesaurus: From Target Words to Target Sentences**

When Japanese students are at a loss for words in the English language, they often rely on a Japanese-English dictionary or on a smartphone app. These searches usually produce a very short list of single-word translations or even just a single word. With little or no context provided for word choice, the hapless student simply chooses the first word on the list. The limited choice of words and the lack of either syntactic or collocation support can lead to awkward, flawed, or even bizarre sentences.

Dictionaries present words and phrases in an ordered sequence for easy access. They group words in alphabetical order. My intuition as a native-English speaker is that we use dictionaries to check our spelling much more often than to find the definitions of words that we do not understand.

The use of flashcards as a tool for increasing vocabulary randomizes the sequence of presentation in order to test a learner’s ability to recognize words completely out of context. For foreign language acquisition a target word is typically printed on one side while an equivalent word in the learner’s native language is on the other. Such one-to-one correspondences can only be effective with a limited range of vocabulary items—numbers, colors and physical nouns with iconic shapes—chair, table, television, dog, cat, for example.

Words identify a class of items, not any particular item in that class. When two languages divide a class of items differently, word-to-word correspondences...
lose their value. Pictures on flashcards and in dictionaries can reduce this ambiguity in definitions and translations. This visual perception gives their target word a direct connection with its meaning, duplicating the natural process of language development in children. To a certain extent, ideographic symbols, such as Arabic numerals and Chinese characters might also be utilized to provide a direct path to meaning. Video technology and multimedia are opening up even more powerful ways to harness visual experience to language learning.

Dictionaries often provide more than simply definitions or translations. They provide sample phrases and even sentences to demonstrate how the words can be used. The reason that these sample sentences are such a valuable addition, is the fact that sentences, not individual words, are the primary objective of anyone who wants to communicate in a language.

Vocabulary self-study books place a heavy emphasis on sample sentences, but may, like the KIKUTAN series try to include other aspects of the dictionary approach—definitions and an index which allows learners to search and access specific words and, sometimes, a few closely related target words. Unfortunately they do not attempt to break sentences down into their principle constituents. The simple framework described above would increase visual perception of the noun phrase structure of sentences. It would make their positions (S, O/C, or A) and connecting prepositions (+) much more salient.

The thesaurus is a reference book used by native speakers to help them use their vast passive vocabulary actively in their writing. Synonyms and other words that have similar meanings are grouped together. It offers a choice of individual words, but lacks the syntactic support that foreign language learners need. Verbs have a unique and central role in sentence structure. This makes them the ideal candidate for grouping collections of sentences into a (verb) thesaurus. Video and hypertext technology allow links between such full
sentences and suitable video images. With video links this verb thesaurus could become a video thesaurus (currently under construction at http://www3.agu.ac.jp/~jeffreyb/Vocab/index.html).

Points of Contact

Any comments on this article will be welcomed and should be mailed to the author at Aichi Gakuin University, General Education Division, 12 Araike, Iwasaki-cho, Nisshin, Japan 470–0195 or e-mailed to him. Some previous papers may be accessed at http://www3.agu.ac.jp/~jeffreyb/research/index.html.

Notes

(1) A slight mistake in the original planet labels has been corrected here.
(2) A 9 by 9 sudoku matrix is solved when the numbers 1–9 appear once and only once in each horizontal row, each vertical column, and each 3 by 3 sub-matrix.

References

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