

Historical Linguistics, Manuscript Tradition, and the Languages of Tolkien's Middle Earth

§0 Organizing Principle

Tolkien created a world he called Middle Earth; he peopled it with elves, orcs, dwarves, men, and other creatures (fantastic as well as otherwise); and he gave those peoples various languages. In this talk I examine some specific aspects of that creative process and explore how the process can inform our understanding of the Tolkien manuscript tradition and how the two interact with each other. The main argument I present, however, is that the process of creating and recreating the Elvish languages, as well as some aesthetic ideals of Tolkien himself, actually produced a more natural language system than would have existed if Tolkien had simply created the languages all at one time or had had the time to fully "finish" work on them.

§1 Background

Manuscript Tradition:

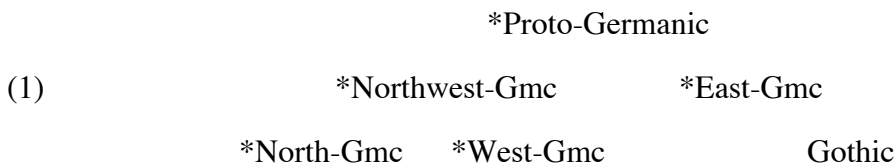
Different copies of the same text show patterns in the errors of propagation. These errors can be used to show groupings of manuscript families.

Historical Linguistics:

Fact: Different languages have similarities arising for various reasons.

Hypothesis: when those similarities are so pervasive as to rule out being due to chance, borrowing, and language universals, the languages must be genetically related.¹

Once we determine that there is a relationship, we want to find a convenient means of representing that relationship: the tree diagram. The idea for representing languages in this fashion was borrowed straight from the stemmata of the classical manuscript tradition.² An example for the Germanic family is shown below.



¹This is separate from the method used to discover the nature of the genetic relationship. That method is the Comparative Method, which will be discussed and exemplified further below.

²This borrowing is attributed to August Schleicher (1861). Darwinian thought was also prevalent and influential at the time and had a pronounced influence on Schleicher as well (see Schleicher 1873).

In the manuscript tradition, a node represents a shared error. For languages, a node represents a shared innovation. Note that a different interpretation of the original can alter understanding of the relationships among the descendants.³

The possibility of representing language and manuscript relations identically gave the first impetus for the talk today. I originally planned to map the textual relations and changes in drafts of Tolkien's stories and note correspondences with the simultaneous changes in the Elvish languages and their relations. As it happened, the nature of the languages and the manuscripts made that topic unfeasible.

§2 Tolkien's Manuscripts

Tolkien wrote a prodigious amount of material relating to Middle Earth and elves, but little of it was published. It is important, however, to have some idea of what he created in order to understand the relations between the various incarnations of the different stories.

Most of the stories were set in a time period much before that of the *Hobbit* or the *Lord of the Rings*,⁴ and they primarily involve the elves and their struggles.⁵ The writing of these stories took many years, and was never actually completed to Tolkien's satisfaction. The plot development and changes to the stories were very complex over the course of Tolkien's life, but the main periods of his writings are represented below.

The Lost Tales (1916-1926):⁶ The earliest version of the mythology, these tales tell the stories mentioned above in a very basic form. The Elvish languages are in their infancy.

Sketch of *Silmarillion* (1926):⁷ This is a lengthy summary of the *Lost Tales*, but one which introduces numerous changes (small and otherwise) in relation to *The Lost Tales*. The Elvish languages change little.

³Please note that for language families, such tree representations are merely that: a representation. For language, unlike for manuscripts, a tree cannot capture all the nuances of a relationship. For example, the West Germanic dialects show an extremely complex relationship that is impossible to adequately display using a tree diagram. Other models, like the wave model, of a provenance almost as early as that of the tree diagram (see Schmidt 1872), have been proposed, but none is without problems. See Dixon and Aikhenwald (eds) 2001 and the papers contained therein (especially that of Watkins) for discussion of the issue of representation of language relationships and also of limitation of the comparative method generally.

⁴The stories in Tolkien's published writings happened approximately 6000-10,000 years after the stories in the early legends, which were not published during his lifetime.

⁵Please see the attached map and text (Appendices A and C, respectively) for some details of the cosmology as well as information on the Elvish population groups and their early movements, which figure prominently in the story and history of Middle Earth. This map is adapted from Tolkien (1983: 81) and also contains information from Tolkien (1999: 309) and Tolkien (1987: 196)

⁶=Tolkein (1983b, 1984)

⁷Found in Tolkien (1986)

Quenta Noldorinwa (1930):⁷ This is a further reworking and significant expansion of the Sketch.

The Hobbit (1933):⁸ This was intended originally as an unrelated story.⁹

Quenta Silmarillion (1937):¹⁰ This rewriting was the fullest expansion of the stories begun in *the Lost Tales*. The languages reach a state of significant refinement.

The Lord of the Rings (1950s):¹¹ This is the story as we know it, incorporating and expanding upon the mythology of the all the earlier writings. The languages undergo some reworking but there are massive changes in their relationships to each other (see fn 20).

The Silmarillion (post-1948):¹² The *Quenta Silmarillion* served as the basis for this text,¹³ which was heavily revised during, and especially after, the writing of the *Lord of the Rings*.

The complexity of textual relationships hinders an easy decipherment of the compositional history, as does Tolkien's style of composition.¹⁴ The standard clues are helpful, as well as ones more specific to this case:

Absolute Dating: very rare; helped by the use of scrap paper

Relative Chronology: certain compositions are dependent on changes to earlier compositions, thus dating all three texts relative to each other

Handwriting: can be misleading, but can also be valuable for pieces of distinctly different chronological layers

Nomenclature: Tolkien frequently changed character names, so that particular names occur in particular periods

Fortunately, Tolkien's son Christopher performed the arduous task of deciphering and ordering the manuscripts, which were published as the *History of Middle Earth Series*.

While the manuscript relations are complicated, that complication is of a different nature than the relations of languages. There is a critical asymmetry: languages nearly always

⁸=Tolkien (1966).

⁹The book was revised in the 1950s after the *Lord of the the Rings* had reached completion, in order to bring elements of it into line with the story, developed during the writing of the *Lord of the Rings*.

¹⁰Found in Tolkien (1987)

¹¹=Tolkien (1993a)

¹²Found in Tolkien (1993b, 1994, 1999)

¹³Indeed, the emendations were written on the same paper as the 1937 text. In many cases, the earlier text was simply written over (see following note).

¹⁴This style was hinted at in the previous note. Tolkien often wrote a rough draft in pencil, extremely rapidly. Later, he would write over it in pen, sometimes with the same wording, sometimes changing the text greatly. Still later, he would then rewrite the revised text anew in a very fine manuscript, which was itself subject to extensive revisions of the same kind. The result, typically, was a jumble of often indecipherable text filled with riders and notes, in both pencil and pen, without dates and in several versions.

branch and develop in parallel; narrative texts generally do not.¹⁵ There are, however, two relations between text and language that provide interesting avenues of exploration.

- how changes can propagate in a language system or manuscript tradition.
- the relations of language families in real- vs book-time.

In natural language, change moves forward in time (i.e. only later forms of the language show the change, not earlier ones). In fiction, however, language change can propagate in both directions. Within the frame of the book, the change moves down the tree, just as in reality.¹⁶ Unlike natural language, however, change can also move up the language tree. This would correspond to introducing a change in a particular language and having that change affect the structure of the entire family (see §6 for examples involving **sr*, **sl*).

As should be clear, the times referred to in these cases are different. One is real-time, as in the time of composition, and the other is book-time, or time as it passes in the stories. These two times also are important in the second idea of relations between text and language. The relationship can be best represented diagrammatically:

(2)

This diagram maps several ideas. It assumes three languages: Eldarin, Quenya, and Noldorin. The system that each of these languages entails is represented in the horizontal plane. In the plane of the page is the relationship of the languages to one another at any one moment in real time. The axis coming through the page represents the change of these diachronic relationships as they move through real-time.¹⁷

The idea is that Tolkien created his languages and gave them a specific relationship. Then, every time he revised his manuscripts and changed the story, it changed the relationship of the languages to one another. The axis through the page, then, represents the set of discrete language relationships that obtained over Tolkien's life. This representation provides a point of departure, but we must first talk a little about historical linguistics.

¹⁵Certain genres do not follow this pattern: choose your own adventure books. Tolkien provides a single example of this with the flat-earth problem (Tolkien 1993: 3-8).

¹⁶Also, the change enters the manuscripts at that point and moves forward from there (i.e. all later manuscripts will show the particular change, be it linguistic or not). This fact allows changes to be dated relative to manuscript composition.

¹⁷The diagram is actually a four-dimensional mapping with two time axes: apparent time (top-bottom or y-axis) as represented in the flow of events in Tolkien's stories; and real time (z-axis diagonally through the page) as represented by any measure you wish to use (date of composition, Tolkien's age, etc).

§3 Historical Linguistics

In this discipline we study the history of a language family (see §1) by comparing forms within and between languages and postulating what the forms could have come from.

- language as system "*ouí tout se tient*"¹⁸
- synchrony vs. diachrony (the movement of systems through time)
- comparative method: relating synchronic systems to each other
 - internal reconstruction (Gmn [rat] [rat´s] vs [rat] [rad´s])
 - external (comparative) reconstruction (Gmn Zinn and Eng tin)

Essentially, historical linguistics is the examining and comparing of a number of systems from different languages and seeing if those systems can be projected back in time such that they converge on a common system (a proto-language). For the Elvish languages, the difficulty is that there is a series of continua. That is to say, there is an Elvish Language₁₉₁₆ continuum, an Elvish Language₁₉₃₇ continuum, an Elvish Language₁₉₄₈ continuum, etc.

§4 Elvish Language₁₉₃₇

Tolkien had a definite notion of the type of languages he wanted to create and was searching for the way to express that notion. We must therefore try to understand his motivations for creating the languages as he did.

- the "cellar door" phenomenon: certain sounds are more pleasing than others¹⁹
- Welsh and Finnish as exemplars
- Quenya ("Finnish") more finished; Noldorin ("Welsh") more raw

Though Quenya and Noldorin, mentioned above, were the most fully-developed of all the languages Tolkien created, there were at least four other Elvish languages: Telerin, Ilkorin, Doriathrin, and Danian.²⁰ Referring to the attached map (Appendix A) will show the populations associated with these groups and give some idea of the family of languages.

The year 1937 is important because, with the near-completion of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, the Elvish languages reached their best-documented stage. We now need to look at Quenta and Noldorin in a bit more depth. I will first lay out a very basic descriptive phonology of the two languages.

Quenya Phonemes						
(3)	p	t	ty	k	kw	a, e, i, o, u (short and long)
	m	n	ny	ŋ	ŋw	ai, au, oi, eu, iu, ui
	mb	nd	ndy	ŋg	ŋgw	r, l y, w, v
	ph	s	hy	h	hw	

¹⁸Meillet (1921: 16).

¹⁹Tolkien (1983a: 190-191).

²⁰Note that Noldorin has most of the features of Sindarin as presented in *Lord of the Rings*. By 1955, Ilkorin, an important language of 1937, was removed and its place in the Elvish language tree was filled with Sindarin (Noldorin). This is one example of the sometimes massive reworking that Tolkien undertook at times. In short Noldorin is Sindarin, but its place in the family tree of Elvish languages changed.

Note that in final position only *t*, *n*, *s*, *l*, and *r* are found: *soron*, pl *sorni* "eagle" but *talan*, pl *talmi* "flet."

				Noldorin Phonemes
	p	t	k	a, e, i, o, u, y [ü] (short and long)
	ph	th	kh/h	ae [ai], au/aw, ui
(4)	b	d	g	r/rh, l/lh, s, y, w
	v	dh [d̥]		
	m	n	ŋ	

The above sounds are the ones that are contrastive in the languages (i.e. if you substituted one of them for another in a word, it would change the meaning: N *beryn* "vassals" vs *teryn* "sons"). Please see Appendix B for a wordlist of Quenya₁₉₃₇ and Noldorin₁₉₃₇.

Internal Reconstruction in Noldorin

Internal reconstruction, as mentioned in §3, is the use of patterns within a language to tell something about the history of that language. We will now perform a little IR on Noldorin.

	<i>pód</i> "foot"	<i>i bód</i> "the foot"	<i>bór</i> "vassal"	<i>i vór</i> "the vassal"
(5)	<i>tulus</i> "poplar"	<i>i dulus</i> "the poplar"	<i>doron</i> "oak"	<i>i dhoron</i> "the oak"
	<i>kef</i> "soil"	<i>i gef</i> "the soil"	<i>gas</i> "hole"	<i>i 'as</i> "the hole"
	<i>rhaw</i> "lion"	<i>i raw</i> "the lion"	<i>lhank</i> "throat"	<i>i lank</i> "the throat"

Note that *l*, *r*, *v*, and *dh* never appear in the beginning of a word and that *p*, *t*, *k*, *lh*, and *rh* never occur after a vowel. These sorts of alternations allow us to propose a rule that lenited consonants after vowels in a word.²¹

Note also the following words:

	<i>lhún</i> , pl <i>lhuin</i> "blue"	<i>Ered Luin</i> "Blue Mountains"
(6)	<i>gorgoroth</i> "horror"	<i>Ered 'orgoroth</i> "Mountains of Horror"
	<i>orod</i> , pl <i>ered</i> "mountain"	

It is a synchronic fact of Noldorin that all plurals change the vowels in the word. Also, in names of mountain ranges, the initial word following *ered* "mountains" is lenited. With a little guesswork, we can suggest that plurals in Noldorin used to have a final vowel that lenited the consonant after them and changed the vowels in the plural. This sort of analysis is internal reconstruction. If done correctly, it makes it easier to do comparative reconstruction (for example, using Noldorin and Quenya together).

Comparative Reconstruction

In comparative reconstruction (see §3) one must compare forms between different languages and then postulate the most efficient, rule-governed system that could yield the

²¹Lenition is a decrease in energy required to make a sound. Voiced sounds are easier to produce after vowels than voiceless sounds and fricatives are easier to produce than stops. These facts, then, help explain how the pattern could arise in Noldorin.

compared languages. The examples below give enough information to recover a sub-set of Proto-Eldarin stops.

<u>Quenya</u>	<u>Noldorin</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Quenya</u>	<u>Noldorin</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
qáre	paur	"fist"	boron	bór	"brown"
karne	karan	"red"	yelwa	delu	"hateful"
tyelpe	keleb	"silver"	leo	dae	"shadow"
taure	taur	"forest"	assa	gas	"hole, gap"
tyulusse	tulus	"poplar"	yello	gell	"triumph"
peler	pél	"town"	wenya	bain	"green"

By finishing the reconstruction for Quenya and Noldorin, we can give the complete Proto-Eldarin phoneme system:²²

Proto-Eldarin Phonemes							
	p	ty	t	ky	k	kw	a, e, i, o, u (short and long)
	ph		th	khy	kh	khw	ai, au, ei, eu, oi, ou, iu, ui
(7)	b	dy	d	gy	g	gw	r, l, w, y, h, s
	mb	ndy	nd	ŋgy	ŋg	ŋgw	
	m	ny	n		ŋ	ŋw	

The proto-system, as is common, has a larger phoneme inventory than either daughter language. Note that the development from Proto-Eldarin to either Quenya or Noldorin should be seen (or was intended to be seen) as a natural and continuous development.

§5 Elvish Languages₁₉₁₆

The above represents, in its basic form, the state of the Elven languages in 1937, just before Tolkien began the writing of the *Lord of the Rings*. The crux of the talk, however, is based on their being a number of distinctly different stages for these languages. Here, then, are a few examples of differences between Elvish₁₉₁₆ and Elvish₁₉₃₇:

	1916	1937
	N <i>Balrog</i> "a fire demon"	N <i>Balrog</i> "a fire demon"
	Q <i>Malkarauke</i> "id"	Q <i>ŋwalarauko</i> "id"
(8)	N <i>bal</i> "anguish" < *mbal	N <i>bal</i> "torment" < *ŋgwal
	N <i>róg</i> "strong"	N <i>rhaug</i> "demon" < *rauko
	N <i>keleb</i> "silver"	N <i>keleb</i> "silver"
	Q <i>telpe</i> "id"	Q <i>tyelpe</i> "id"

Another difference is that in 1916, Noldorin had case relations, while in 1937 it had none: 1916 *glór*, gen *glora*, dat *glori*, nom pl *glorin* "gold" > 1937 *glaur*, pl *gluir* (?).

Tolkien thus made a number of changes between 1916 and 1937 that affected the "historical" development of the languages. These changes, however, are fundamentally different than the development of Quenya and Noldorin within the framework of the stories in 1916 or 1937. As mentioned at the end of §4, that development is supposedly

²²I am not, by any means, going through most of the evidence necessary to back up this reconstruction. That much detail is not useful for this talk, though I can provide it for the curious or skeptical.

continuous and natural, since it aims to mimic language in the real world. There is no way to see Tolkien's changing of "history" as a development either natural or continuous.

One effect of the peculiar changing of the Elvish languages, is that it left behind linguistic orphans: words whose histories were no longer valid because the sound laws that created them no longer existed. Tolkien usually changed all affected words when he created a new sound law. However, he occasionally forgot to change some or, for phono-aesthetic reasons mentioned in §4 (for "cellar doors"), he kept forms with their original meanings.

The best example of the latter phenomenon is the name Earendil. In Quenya, it means "lover of the sea" < **ayar* "sea" + **ndil* "lover." In the conception of 1916, earen was the genitive of ear and thus the compound made perfect sense. By 1937 Tolkien had changed the genitive to earon, but he had a particular attachment to the original form, noting²³ that the Anglo-Saxon name *éarendel* was particularly beautiful. He was therefore loath to change it.

§6 Elvish Languages¹⁹⁴⁸

Many new linguistic orphans arose when Tolkien finished the *Lord of the Rings* in 1948. He introduced many more new sound changes that further altered the relationships between Quenya and Noldorin (now called Sindarin) and thus isolated some of the forms from the linguistically very fully-developed 1937 period.²⁴

One major phonological change was that Proto-Eldarin **r* and **l* now gave Noldorin *r* and *l* in all contexts. The *rh* and *lh* of Elvish₁₉₃₇ could only come from **sr* and **sl*. This change necessitated the revision of all etymologies involving **r* or **l*:

N *rohirrim* < **rokko-khēru-rimbe* "horse-lord-people" vs 1937 N *rhaug* < **rauuko*
N *rhiw*, Q *hrive* "winter" < **sribe* vs 1937 N *thribi* < **srip*- "scratch"

Tolkien also changed some grammatical contexts in which lenition took place. It no longer occurred in all compounds.²⁵ However, it appears that Tolkien may have occasionally forgotten the change: *Eryn Vorn* "Forest of Blackness" < **Oroni Morne*.²⁶

²³He specifically mentions (Carpenter 1981: 385) the phrase from *Christ* 104 of the Junius Manuscript: *éala! éarendel engla beorhtast ofer middangeard monnum sended* "Behold éarendel, brightest of angels, sent over middle-earth to men!" It probably refers to John the Baptist. Note the connection with Quenya *Aiya Eārendil elenion ancalima* "Behold Earendil, brightest of stars!"

²⁴Perhaps significantly, most of these massive changes (see below and fn 20 for examples) were implemented in the last year or so before the final volume of the *Lord of the Rings* was published. This final volume contained the appendices, which were crucial in tying the world of the *Lord of the Rings* to the world Tolkien previously created (separated from the world of the *Lord of the Rings* by 6000-10,000 years). Tolkien was under extraordinary pressure to produce these appendices and indeed commented that he wished "that no appendices had been promised!" (Carpenter 1981: 250).

²⁵Thus Ered Mithrin "Ash Mountains" and Ered Luin "Blue Mountains" both show non-lenition of the first letter of the second word where Elvish₁₉₃₇ had lenition in this context: *Ered Luin* and *Ered 'orgoroth*.

²⁶Also, there is the Gulf of *Lhún*, which is the same word as in *Ered Luin*, but one has *l* and the other *lh*.

Various explanations can be offered for this disparity, but it seems that they were simply errors.²⁷

§7 Realism in Middle Earth

It is only now, at long last, that we can finally return to the proposal made at the beginning of this talk: the Elvish languages, specifically Noldorin, appear more realistic precisely because of the nature of their composition. To state it more precisely, since Tolkien wanted his languages to have certain sounds and forms, and since he himself changed the rules of the languages several times over the course of 50 years, slight irregularities crept into the language that cannot be explained using any single synchronic or diachronic system for that language. It is these irregularities that make Noldorin seem more real to a linguistically savvy audience.²⁸

The question then becomes what makes a language "real?"²⁹ I cannot hope to begin to cover that in any depth now, but I do want to concentrate briefly on one sub-area that yields some clues as to naturalness in language: irregularity. All languages contain irregularity and I maintain that that is an integral part of the system. The claim depends on a few observations:

- natural language is incredibly complex
- language contact and borrowing frequently create an impenetrable puzzle³⁰
- historical accidents happen

§8 Conclusion

I hope that the conclusion now follows from the ideas and evidence presented. While the process of creation for the Elvish languages in no way resembles the process of creation for natural language, several things (namely, the effect of the chronologically distant creation periods, frequent revisions, and phono-aesthetic desires) mimic the effects of language contact, dialect borrowing, and inexplicable accident, *inter alia*. All these factors serve to add a degree of irregularity to languages and that irregularity reinforces the reality by adding complexity. I hope that I have brought to light some of the small ways in which languages seem "real" and have shown how historical linguistics, manuscript history, and language reality can intersect in interesting and surprising ways.

²⁷Tolkien acknowledges as much, though not specifically for these words, in a letter to Richard Jeffery in 1972 (Carpenter 1981: 428).

²⁸There are other reasons, not necessarily linguistic, that give the whole *Lord of the Rings* a more authentic feel. The most commonly cited one of these is the "depth" that the entire history has (cf. the book blurb by Publishers Weekly on the back cover of Tolkien 1996). This depth is achieved because Tolkien actually created the entire backdrop against which the stories are set.

²⁹In a sense, the question is both huge and almost nonsensical at the same time. The obvious answer to what makes a language real is quite clear: if real people speak a language (or did), it is real. There are numerous subtleties, of course, and it is these that make the question quite a bit more difficult than it would seem at first blush.

³⁰For a recent view on language contact as a primary mechanism for language change, see Mufwene 2001.

Appendix A:
Map of Middle Earth with early Elvish population movements

Appendix B:
Quenya and Noldorin Wordlist

<u>Qenya</u>	<u>Noldorin</u>	<u>Gloss</u>	<u>Quenya</u>	<u>Noldorin</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
alda	galadh	'tree'	orko	orch	'orc'
atar	adar	'father'	pano	pán	'plank'
atari	edair	'fathers'	pika	pég	'dot'
feren	fér	'beech'	poika	puig	'tidy'
ferni	ferin	'beeches'	qáre	paur	'fist'
helwa	elu	'blue'	qende	penedh	'elf'
hiswa	hethu	'mist'	rauho	rhaug	'demon'
hyalma	half	'shell'	rimba	rhem(b)	'many'
kaime	kaew	'bed'	rimbe	rhim(b)	'crowd'
korna	korn	'round'	róna	rhún	'east'
kú	kú	'bow'	salqe	salab	'grass'
lóme	dú	'night'	sanka	thank	'split'
lúne	lhún	'blue'	selde	sell	'daughter'
makil	magol/magl	'sword'	talan	talaf	'floor'
malina	hmalen	'yellow'	talmi	telaif	'floors'
masta	bast	'bread'	tyelka	keleg	'agile'
mól	múl	'slave'	tyelpe	keleb	'silver'
namba	dam	'hammer'	tyulusse	tulus	'poplar'
Åarmo	garaf	'wolf'	vára	gwaur	'dirty'
nirwa	nedhu	'cushion'	varne	baran	'brown'
Åoldo	golodh	'gnome'	wenya	bain	'green'
nulla	doll	'dark'	yello	gell	'joy'
nyelle	nell	'bell'	yelwa	delu	'hateful'

Appendix C: Cosmology

The basic cosmological mythology of Middle Earth follows a fairly archetypal pattern. A divine creator (Ilúvatar "the all-father"), aided by lesser divines, creates the entire cosmos from nothing. The creator then withdraws from the world, which is called Middle Earth. The most powerful of the lesser divines rebels against the Design of Ilúvatar and the ensuing struggle between him and the other faithful divines threatens the creation. The semi-immortal elves and mortal men, both made by the creator without the help of the lesser divinities, inhabit the world, and it is for their sake that the lesser divinities fight to save Middle Earth. The early story concentrates mostly on the Elves. Men enter the picture only a little. It is not until *the Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* that men are featured prominently in the histories and legends.

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