
LEXICAL EVALUATION OF LEGAL TEXT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The present study is a lexical evaluation of Pakistani legal documents in comparison with international legal documents. The objectives of the study are to quantify the lexical features of legal documents. We selected six legal documents as sample; two court judgements, two agreements and two international treaties. Descriptive quantitative research methodology was applied to measure the lexical features of written legal discourse. The focus of the study was to evaluate the documents at Lexical level. The lexical category was further divided into linguistic features and every feature was quantified using frequency as information analysis tool to deal with discreet data. This analysis was presented through charts and tables. The findings revealed that the repetition and over use of certain linguistic features i.e. synonymy, legal jargons and foreign words are the hallmark of legal documents. These linguistic features should be dealt carefully while teaching English as foreign language to yield better results in improving reading comprehensibility of an educated layman, professional lawyers and the students of law.

Key Words: *lexical evaluation, legal discourse, synonymy, jargon, foreign words*

1-Introduction

Functions and the uses of language have become variant and complex over a period of time. This is the most compelling reason for the persistent study of different domains of languages where that of law is one of them.

Different linguistic theories have affected the directions of the study of legal language. The researchers are constantly putting these theories in test to check their validity. Since legal discourse has been the topic of research for the last forty years, many linguistic features of legal language are now well understood today. The important findings of this active research divide the domain of legal language into two different categories i.e. the spoken and written. Damova (2007) is of the view that spoken legal English should not be taken just as the manifestation of written legal discourse. It is a separate genre because it is influenced by “how it is said and why, and the situation

in which the speech is uttered. On the other hand, written legal English seems to be the other extreme – it is constant, stable and almost context-free.”

Over the past few decades, linguistics and its working areas have been the variables of frequent research studies in the field of language. The linguists have been observing the dynamic effects of language on different fields of life including social, professional and educational etc.

Scott (1973) asserts in his review on Turner’s book “Stylistics”, “Stylistics is an intelligent, witty, articulate, general introduction to the subject of language variation, written obviously for the educated layman but not without some interest for the linguist as well” (p.274p.162)

The purpose of the stylistics is to explore the features of a language. Simpson (2004) has opined that the sole aim of stylistics is to explore language and its creative use. He further has asserted that while applying stylistics on a literary piece of writing, one broadens one’s literary perspective and understanding. Stylistics helps the language user analyse and appreciate any type of text. Applying stylistics to interpret a text opens new vistas of meaning for its readers. In his words, *Stylistics* is a process which involves interpretation of a text with primary focus on language. “The reason why language is so important to stylisticians is because the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text” (ibid, p. 3).

1.2 English Language and Law

Legal English or legal language is new emerging area of interest for linguists and the law practitioners. The lawyers are so closely acquainted with the certain pattern of the language in written legal documents that it comes to them naturally. McGowan (1961) says, “as lawyers, we make our living each day by the use of words, but perhaps this very fact causes us to think too little about the ways in which we use them.” Mellinkoff (1963) comments, “The law is a profession of words.” Danet (1980) has asserted that language and the law has emerged as a new area of research in the field of social science during the last five years. “Social scientists, lawyers, and linguists are attempting to hurdle disciplinary barriers in order to study how language relates to the functions of law in society.” (ibid, p.447). He finds the similarity between language and law. “Though law and language have generally been treated separately in the past, they share certain features: both are rule-governed symbolic systems that are uniquely human and essential to the fabric of society.” (Ibid, p.448)

1.3 Lawyers’ Language

It means that it is specific type of language which lawyers use among themselves and to communicate with other members of legal community. Lang (2008, p.7) describes in her research, “This type of language is used in ordinances and legal writings, in the addresses of barristers and in theoretical remarks concerning the law as well as many different types of this language e.g. journalistic legal language.” He divides legal language into two types i.e. language used by the lawyers and the language of jurisprudence. “In this context, jurisprudence shall denote a particular legal doctrine, whose main focus is directed towards proper interpretation of legal norms and institutions such as language of jurisprudence, legal doctrine or legal sciences” (ibid, p.7).

It is important for the lawyer to be skilled at the use of language. Mattila (2003, p.19) has declared language as a tool in the hands of a lawyer and knowing a tool is the most important concern for its user. “Traditionally, this familiarity has been obtained indirectly: in studying the

content of the legal order, the young lawyer simultaneously adopts legal terminology and style. However, a practical process of this kind only provides familiarity of a certain type” (ibid).

1.4 Types of Legal Writings

Risto Hiltunen (1990) has divided the legal documents into 3 categories: “(a) academic texts which consist of academic research journals and legal textbooks, (b) juridical texts covering court judgements or law reports and (c) legislative or statutory writings consisting of Acts of Parliament, contracts, treaties, etc.” The researchers and law practitioners have divided legal writings into different types according to their use and their users.

Stanojevic (2011) claims that lawyers use creative language in speaking especially when they are cross-examining in the court-room while written legal discourse is rigid and formal. “Legal texts, on the other hand, consist of case law, law reports and prescriptive legal texts. They comprise international treaties, constitutions, orders, regulations, insurance policies, wills and contracts” (ibid).

1.5 Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the lexical density scores of authentic legal texts across the sub-genres of court judgements, agreements, and how do these scores differ descriptively from one another?
- Which lexical sophistication features — nominalisation, technical terms, and low-frequency Latinate vocabulary — recur most systematically in naturally produced legal texts, and how are they distributed across sub-genres?

1.6 Significance of the Study and the Research Gap

The importance of the study is many folds. Firstly, the educated layman who is commonly afraid of spiral legal expression with multi-layered meanings feels stuck while confronting any legal document in day-to-day life. Being uncertain of the intensity of the legal implications of any legal text, a common man remains indecisive before signing and accepting it.

There is a growing focus on how lexical choices reflect the underlying values of the legal profession. While some terms like "clearly" are used similarly in general and legal English, others are found to be uniquely salient within legal sub corpora, indicating their role in upholding professional standards (Qadir & Saleh, 2024).

This field of study has pedagogical integration too. Scholars are increasingly using insights from corpus-based studies of lexical bundles and formulaicity to enhance the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and legal English (Mariko, 2025).

In the field of translation, there is a recognized need to investigate how lexical precision is maintained across languages, particularly when translating between different legal systems and cultures (Sun, 2026).

Existing studies on legal language treat legal texts as a monolithic genre. There is limited comparative research on how lexical density varies systematically across legal sub-genres (e.g., statutes vs. judicial opinions vs. contracts) within a unified Register & Genre Theory framework. The bulk of register-based lexical analysis of legal texts draws on Anglo-American common law corpora. There is a significant gap in studies examining how lexical density and sophistication manifest in Pakistani Court Judgment, and local and international treaties systems using Descriptive Linguistics Theory.

2- Literature Review

In past years, the researchers have identified its linguistic and structural features. Mellinkoff (1963), and Crystal and Davy (1983) investigated the common features of legal English with special focus on its jargons, syntax and style. Tiersma and Solan (2002) have identified in their research the areas of language working on legal process. They have opined that in different legal scenarios, linguistic issues may arise. They have further explained that *phonetics* is used to resolve the cases of trademark, *discourse analysis* is used to help jury comprehend the criminal conversation and Syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are consulted when the meaning of legal documents is disputed. In other words, linguists, phonetician and dialectologist may be resourceful for the jury to resolve complex legal cases

Matilla (2006) puts the same thing in his book, “The specific properties of legal language only show themselves when under examination at textual level. It is the concept of text that unites the elements of the language: semantic, lexical, syntactic, and stylistic, as Jean-Claude Gémard puts it.” Stanojević (2011) also concludes that the complexity of the legal language is due to the fact that it is instilled with legalism, “... i.e. archaic technical terms, and the overuse of synonymous, redundant and obscure expressions, as well as long and complex sentences written in the passive voice” (ibid). Previously, different researchers have identified different varieties of legal vocabulary. Riley (1995) has distributed legal vocabulary in three types, i.e. pure, legal terminology and every day words.

The study of legal lexicality involves different levels of linguistic analysis, ranging from morphological derivations to semantic fields (Nguyễn et al, 2025). It is not merely a collection of technical terms but a spiral system of "legalese" that cover archaic forms, bureaucratic clichés, and specific syntactic structures like binomial phrases and performative verbs (Litvishko, Galichkina, & Chibisova, 2024, and Fanego et al, 2017). This review examines these features through the lens of recent scholarly contributions, focusing on their functions, variations across genres, and the methodologies used to analyze them.

2.1 Core Lexical Features of Legal Discourse

Garner (2002) believes, "several types of words in legal prose: fancy words, vague words, euphemisms, timid phrases, empty dogmatisms, and neologisms." In addition, Stanojevic (2011, p.69) reinforces, “The changing perspective of legal English vocabulary comprises archaic, technical and foreign words and phrases, as well as binomials.” Ufot (2013) says that legal lexicon exhibits three qualities i.e. “‘precision’, ‘preservation’ and ‘prestige’”. Its arcaneness and essential inaccessibility result from a reluctance to experiment with new words and thereby risk instability and ambiguity of meaning with the possible consequence of invalidation of agreements and contracts.

2.1.1 Specialized Terminology

Specific terms are used exclusively in legal settings, such as "barrister," "tort," "real property," and "fee simple". They are typically monosemic and stable, ensuring technical accuracy and legal certainty (Berūkštienė, 2016).

2.1.2 Archaic words

Legal discourse is notably conservative, preserving many archaic and semi-archaic forms that have largely disappeared from general use. These "fossilized" elements contribute to the solemnity and authority of the law but also to its rigidity (Feng, 2012).

2.1.3 Lexical Bundles

Legal writing relies heavily on formulaic multiword expressions (MWEs), often referred to as lexical bundles. These are sequences of 4 to 8 words that serve specific structural and functional roles (Alasmary, 2019 and Breeze, 2017).

2.1.4 Density in Lexical Use

Legal texts are characterized by high lexical density—a high proportion of content words to function words—which facilitates dense information packaging. This density involves complexity which is measured through quantitative approach (Breeze, 2007).

2.1.5 Foreign Words

Tiersma, in his *Legal Language* (1999), opines that the use of Latin secret words in legal text ‘might seem like just another way of oppressing the masses’. Some reasons for the use of Latin terms in legal discourse have also been discussed by the researchers. Matulewska & Wasielewska (2003) write that the reason of using Latin in legal documents is that the judges have been the clergymen who use to put Latin words in legal discourse.

3-Methodology

Descriptive quantitative research methodology has been adopted to carry out this study. This methodology had been selected because the prime objective of the researcher was to document and describe the existing characteristics of written legal discourse in national and international legal documents. The text analysis of the sample legal documents in this particular study was made under the set parameters of the Descriptive research. According to this, the sample text will be analyzed on Graphological, Lexical, syntactic or Grammatical, Pragmatic and Discourse Levels. However, due to limited scope of a research paper, our focus is lexical level of the text only.

3.1 The Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework of the present study is the “Descriptive Linguistics” theory i.e. stylistic evaluation (see section 1.2.4). Descriptive approach identifies, evaluates and interprets the nature and function of components or features of an object under study. Similarly, the researcher has set out to describe, evaluate and quantify the linguistic features of written legal discourse.

3.2 Sample:

This study is a written text analysis. In this linguistic investigation, the researcher has used 6 legal documents randomly selected from international and Pakistani national written legal discourse. These sample documents were selected randomly from the sub-genre of legal texts, i.e. court judgments and agreements This study sample comprises of the following legal text types:

1. **Lahore High Court Judgment** (LHCJ) on Case No: W.P. No.30786/2012
2. **Supreme Court Judgment** (SCJ) on C.M.A. NO.3470 OF 2013 IN C.M.A. NO.1536 OF 2013 IN CIVIL APPEALS NO.191-L & 409 OF 2010.
3. **Agreement of Revenue Sharing** (ARS) 2009 between Pakistan Telecommunication Limited and another incorporated company in Pakistan.
4. **Power Purchase Agreement** (PPA) between a public limited Distribution Company established under the laws of Pakistan and another incorporated private company of Generation Facility in Pakistan.

4. Analysis

Lexical elements constitute a distinctive feature of legal texts. Crystal and Davy asserted (1983, p.207), “It is especially noticeable that any passage of legal English is usually well studded with archaic words and phrases of a kind that can be used by no one else but lawyers.” There are no examples of colloquial and slang expressions. However, following are the archaic features found in the sample.

Table 4.1

Frequency Distribution of “Archaic Words” in Legal Documents

Document	Instances	Frequency
LHCJ	None	0
SCJ	Inter alia, whereafter, herein, thereafter	4
ARS	Hereinafter, inter alia, hereby, hereof, thereto, whereat, herein, thereof, hereto.	18
PPA	Hereinafter, here-in-forth, herein, hereby, thereof, toto, hereof, whereof, hereto.	11

The sample legal documents are replete with the examples of technical terms and Jargons related to the field about which the legal document is. Many of the technical terms as used in the documents are mainly capitalized (see tables 1-6). In the sample under investigation the following instances can be found easily. We can fairly identify the following examples in the sample data.

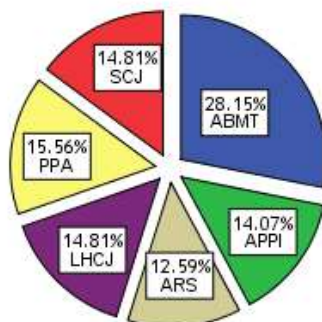
Table 4.2

Frequency Distribution of “Technical Terms and Jargons” in Legal Documents

Documents	Instances	Frequency
LHCJ	<i>petition, consensus</i> for agreement <i>learned counsel, respondent, alleviate</i> for ease and comfort, <i>impugned notices, writ petitions</i>	20
SCJ	identify <i>Mst.</i> stands for an urdu word, “mismaata”, <i>filed</i> for submitted, <i>Civil Misc. Application, forged or fabricated, appended</i> for attached, <i>constitution, mis-declaration</i> for lying, <i>held liable</i> for being guilty, <i>course of arguments, rival contentions, contended</i> for argued	20
ARS	<i>deemed, successors-in-interest, permitted assigns, duly authorized, duly licensed, mutual covenants, pursuant, interim, reconciliation statements</i> for agreement, <i>duly notified</i>	17
PPA	<i>pursuance of Notification, successors and assigns, amendments</i> meaning changes, <i>instruments</i> standing for documents like checque, agreement etc., <i>bilateral contracts, representations, warranties, conditions and premises, notified, breach, legally bound authorized representative, facsimile</i> for copy, <i>recalibrate, clearance certificate, turn key basis, premature termination</i> for	21

cancellation, *arbitration proceedings, in accordance with, reimbursable* for expenses.

Figure 1
Cases Weighted by Technical Terms



In addition to this, there are enough examples of collocations in the sample legal text. These collocations consist of bi-, tri- and multi-nominal pairs and phrases. These expressions are formal and titled as legal terms. The examples from the sample material are:

Table 4.3
Frequency Distribution of Collocations in LHCJ

Instances	Frequency
Tax Year	3
Risk analysis	1
Taxpayers	3
Narrow down	1
Selection process	1
Total	9

Table 4.4
Frequency Distribution of Collocations in SCJ

Instances	Frequency
Mentioned above	1
Herein below	1
Full disclosure	1
Took the examination	1
Unfair means	1
Course of arguments	1
Total	6

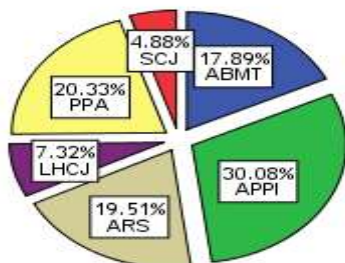
Table 4.5
Frequency Distribution of Collocations in ARS

Instances	Frequency
<i>registered offices</i>	2
<i>basic telephony</i>	2
<i>internet services</i>	5
<i>Dial up</i>	3
<i>Revenue sharing</i>	7
<i>Make payment</i>	2
<i>Mutually agreed</i>	1
<i>Revise the tariff/ revised tariff</i>	2
Total	24

Table 4.6
Frequency Distribution of Collocations in PPA

Instances	Frequency
<i>public limited Company</i>	2
<i>installed and tested</i>	1
<i>feeder breaker</i>	1
<i>electrical output</i>	1
<i>radial feeder</i>	1
<i>breaker panel</i>	1
<i>mal-functions</i>	2
<i>reliability and safety</i>	2
<i>power supply</i>	3
<i>maintenance schedule</i>	1
<i>load shedding</i>	1
<i>break down</i>	1
<i>switch on</i>	1
<i>power off-take</i>	1
<i>up-gradation</i>	6
Total	25

Figure 2
Cases Weighted by Collocations



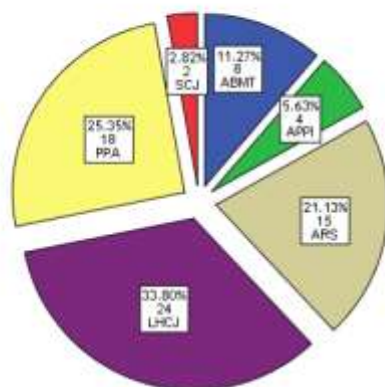
There is a vivid use of the words of foreign origin. These words have their roots usually in French and Latin languages.

Table 4.7

Frequency Distribution of “Words of Foreign Origin” in Legal Documents.

Document	Words	Origin	Frequency
LHCJ	<i>Impugned</i>	From anglo-French “empugner	2
	<i>Alleviate</i>	Late Latin “alleviates”	1
	<i>vires</i>	Latin word	1
	<i>audit</i>	From Latin “auditus”	20
SCJ	<i>Appended</i>	Latin “appendere”	1
	<i>Forged</i>	From Latin “fabrica”	1
PPA	<i>Assigns</i>	From Latin “assignare”	4
	<i>Tariff</i>	Italian “tariff”	2
	<i>Optimum</i>	Latin word	2
	<i>Indexed</i>	Latin “indic-, index	1
	<i>Facsimile</i>	Latin “Fac simile”	6
	<i>Indemnify</i>	Latin “indemnis”	2
	<i>Toto</i>	Latin adjective	1
ARS	<i>Inter alia</i>	Latin	1
	<i>Covenants</i>	From Latin “covenire”	1
	<i>Invoice</i>	From middle French “envois”	1
	<i>Waiver</i>	From Anglo French “weyver”	1
	<i>Force Majeure</i>	French word	6
	<i>Accrued</i>	From Anglo French	1
	<i>Indemnification</i>	Latin “indemnis”	2
	<i>Null and void</i>	Latin expression	1
	<i>Inure</i>	Spanish word	1

Figure 3
Cases Weighted by Foreign Words



Idioms and proverbs have also been identified in the sample. *Set aside, carried out, narrow down, takes place, arrived at* (LHCJ); *come to light, need be, in order to* (SCJ); *set out, come into effect, from time to time, set forth, null and void, abide by* (ARS); *from time to time* has been used thrice, *entered into, shut down, break down, switch on, paid back, take-and-pay basis* (used twice), *turn key basis, in good faith, setting out* (PPA) are the idiomatic expressions found in the documents under study.

Table 4.8

Frequency Distribution of “Idioms and Proverbs” in Legal Documents

Documents	Frequency
LHCJ	5
SCJ	3
ARS	6
PPA	14
Total	28

Compound nouns/words are another notable lexical feature of these sample legal texts. The following examples of compound words are found; *Judgment sheet, Schedule-A, selection process, guidelines, Tax Year, print media, risk analysis upload, taxpayers, learned counsel* (LHCJ); *primary basis, Provincial Assembly, General Elections, to-date* (SCJ); *Power Purchaser, Generation License, Back-up, Metering Point, Metering System, feeder breaker, breaker panel, bilateral, metering panel, mal-functions, take-and-pay basis, Power supply, interconnection, outgoing, metering devices, control room, meter reading, due date, non-payment, metering room, shut down, load shedding, off-take, up-gradation, mark-up, three-month, mal-operation, earmarked, one-half, forty-eight, break down* (PPA); *successors-in-interest, IP-cloud, internet services, non-performance, re-enactment, non-availability, force majeure* (ARS). Apart from the above examples, the archaic words are also compound words (see table 7).

The identified compound words mentioned above have the following frequency distribution in the sample documents.

Table 4.9
Frequency Distribution of “Compound Words” in Legal Documents

Documents	Frequency	(%)
LHCJ	18	11.11
SCJ	4	2.47
PPA	108	66.67
ARS	17	10.49
Total	162	100

5-Findings, discussion and conclusion

Archaic words have also been found in the sample legal documents, though there is none in LHCJ. As the data shows (see table 10), archaism is heavily found in ARS and PPA. On the other hand, it is rarely traced in ABMT and APPI. This difference may imply that the element of archaism in legal writings is losing its impact to make the text readable and comprehensible for the layman as well.

The sample legal texts are equally loaded with *technical terms and jargons*. Their frequency (see table 11) suggests the intensity of their complex meaning for general public. Another notable element of these legal terms is that these terms comprise of usually compound words. Therefore, a reader should be vigilant of the nature of the compound words because the meaning of a compound word is different from that of its components. For example *held liable* in SCJ means “*proved guilty*” and this meaning is different from that of its components i.e. held means caught and liable means responsible. Therefore, knowledge of technical vocabulary of legal domain would improve the readability of a common man.

Collocations found in the legal documents can be another source of intricate meaning of the text especially for EFL users. About the complex nature of collocations, Farrokh (2012, p.55) says, “One of the most problematic areas for foreign language learning is collocation. It is often seen as arbitrary and overwhelming, a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to the attainment of native like fluency.” ABMT and APPI are showing higher frequency of collocations. (see table 16 and 17). Therefore, the appropriate understanding of these collocations may improve the comprehension of the legal documents for Pakistani students of Law and lawyers.

Words with foreign origin were also found in the sample legal documents. However, the low frequency of foreign words was noted in ABMT and APPI which are international legal agreements (see table 18). The frequency of these foreign words in the sample legal documents also suggests that this foreign expression seem to come to the legal text quite naturally without any unconscious effort.

These foreign words can be the source of intricacy in understanding the text of foreign language for the users of EFL as the very foreign words are twice away from their foreign language practice. An EFL teacher should take this matter into account while designing an ESP course or conducting a lesson in the class. The law students should be made acquainted with the usage of

these Latin and French words in legal text. Similarly, a n educated layman with a little effort on theses foreign words may improve his/her comprehension of the legal documents.

Idioms and proverbs are set expressions which are formed in a certain social context. Therefore, An EFL learner needs to understand the social and cultural context of the proverbial and idiomatic expressions of the target language. Because of their illocutionary force, they are well placed in a legal text. Therefore, a considerable understanding of the legal idioms and proverbs may develop the comprehension level of a legal document for an EFL user. Zarei and Rahimi (2012) comment in their book, “On the other hand, teaching and learning idioms is one of the most difficult areas in second language acquisition because most of them have an arbitrary nature.” In other words, an effective teaching methodology with particular focus on idioms and phrases may improve the reading comprehension level of EFL learners and users.

PPA is having the highest frequency of *Compound words* (see table 22). There are mainly compound nouns and compound adjectives. Due to their complex nature, they may hinder reading comprehension of an EFL user.

The syntactic and semantic complexity of compounding itself makes nominal compounds linguistically “denser,” as it were, than most simplices. Not only do most compounds contain more syllables than simplices, the interactions between those syllables are far more complex than for simplices. The individual syllables interact as they do in simplices, of course, but compounds contain an additional layer of complexity involving the relationship between constituents (Secord,2007).

The best way for an educated layman to understand the legal text is to know the meanings of certain English affixes and their function. An ESL/ESP teacher may design effective lessons to improve reading and writing skills in his/her learners while focusing on formation and meaning of compound words in English language.

Use of *binomials* in written text is another linguistic hallmark in legal documents. APPI, PPA and ARS are showing the frequency of binomials in double figure (see table 23). These binomials were making different parts of the speech including verb, noun, adverbs, adjectives and prepositions as well. These binomials are based on certain coordinating relationship and to understand the meaning and function of these binomials, one has to identify and understand their mutual binding force. This constitutional relationship, as the table 23 reveals, can be either synonymous or antonymous. Sometimes these binomials are so fixed and unchangeable, that they become difficult to be learnt by a non-native speaker (Hudson,1998). He further asserts about the complex nature of fixed collocations, “There is always the problem of idiomaticity, or ‘sounding right’, which involves making choices beyond those offered by the lexicon and the grammar.” The knowledge of collocations is also important for the practicing lawyers and ESL users to make a better use and for understanding of binomials in legal documents.

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