

Principles for Identifying Arabic Rhetorical Devices with the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

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From The Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

Introduction

This page defines the principles governing the identification of rhetorical devices with the [Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#) and the [Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy](#). Whereas the [Design Principles of the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#) explain the organisational architecture of the [Encyclopedia](#), this document defines the analytical method by which rhetorical devices are identified.

These identification principles operationalise the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), which distinguishes four analytically distinct steps of a rhetorical action:

1. **Communicator Intent** - the [communicative purpose](#) that the [communicator](#) seeks to realise in the [addressee](#), where such an intention exists.
2. **Linguistic Operation** – an identifiable linguistic action which results in the establishment or activation of the Cognitive Relationship.
3. **Cognitive Relationship** – one or more shared understandings established or activated between the [communicator](#) and the [addressee](#) when the [addressee](#) perceives the Linguistic Operation that has been performed, and which is capable of producing Communicative Enhancement.
4. **Cognitive Relationship** – one or more communicatively relevant relationships established or activated for the [addressee](#) between concepts, meanings, expressions, sounds, structures, assumptions, or other elements of the discourse through perception of the Linguistic Operation, and which are capable of producing Communicative Enhancement.

Step 1 may initiate the process but is not always present or identifiable. Steps 2–4 form an ordered analytical sequence in which the Linguistic Operation establishes or activates a Cognitive Relationship, through which a Communicative Enhancement may arise.

The principles below operationalise the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#) and the [Design Principles](#) into a practical method for identifying rhetorical devices in discourse. The identification principles ensure that rhetorical identification is linguistic operation-based, structurally precise, context-sensitive, and reproducible. They culminate in [Principle 6](#), a universal framework for identifying rhetorical power across all three domains of Arabic rhetoric.

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Principle 1: Analysis of Observable Features, Not Authorial Intent

Rhetorical device identification is based on identifiable linguistic operations, the Cognitive Relationships they establish or activate, and possible Communicative Enhancements, not on speculation about the [communicator's](#) psychological intentions or mental states during composition.

Relevance theory demonstrates that the [communicator's](#) cognitive context during composition may differ significantly from the [addressee's](#) interpretive context. Claims about what an author intended or wanted to achieve are therefore methodologically problematic.

Rhetorical analysis should therefore focus on:

- **Linguistic Operation** - the identifiable linguistic action performed in the discourse.
- **Cognitive Relationship** - the communicatively relevant relationship established or activated for the [addressee](#) through the Linguistic Operation.
- **Communicative Enhancement** - the enhancement of one or more [communicative effects](#) that may arise in the [addressee](#) through the Cognitive Relationship.

In the sentence "He is like a lion in battle" (*huwa kal-asad fi al-ma'raka*), the linguistic operation of semantic similarity ([Simile](#)), its context of valorisation, and the possible enhancement of the impression of courage may be identified analytically. However, it is not possible to know whether the author intended to glorify or intended to emphasise bravery unless independent evidence establishes such an intention.

Classical Arabic rhetoricians focused on observable textual features and their effects on audiences, not on psychological speculation about poets' or speakers' internal states. This principle maintains that methodological grounding in observable phenomena.

Principle 2: Linguistic Operation-First Identification

Rhetorical device identification is based primarily on the identifiable Linguistic Operation utilised: the syntactic, lexical, semantic, phonetic, or pragmatic operation occurring in the discourse. It is not based on the [communicator's](#) intent, the Cognitive Relationship established or activated for the [addressee](#), or the Communicative Enhancement that may arise in the [addressee](#).

Typical linguistic operations include:

- Deletion
- Substitution
- Repetition
- Contrast
- Transfer of meaning
- Reordering
- Phonetic patterning

These linguistic operations may contribute to Communicative Enhancements such as emphasis, intensification, glorification, or irony. However, such effects are not classificatory criteria due to their variability between [addressees](#).

Consider the sentence: "He is like a lion in battle" (*huwa kal-asad fi al-ma'raka*). The Linguistic Operation is explicit comparison: the human is compared with a lion. This establishes or activates a Cognitive Relationship of similarity between them. The device is therefore classified as [Simile](#), as classification is based on the Linguistic Operation rather than on a particular communicative effect such as praise or glorification.

In the [Design Principles](#), this emphasis on linguistic operations is reflected in [Principle 2: The Encyclopedia Uses a Linguistic Operation-First Approach to Rhetorical Analysis](#). A separate page describes common [Rhetorical Relationships](#).

Principle 3: Rhetorical Device Centrality Governs Classification

Where multiple candidate rhetorical device analyses overlap in their explanation of the same linguistic transformation, classification is based on the device that most comprehensively explains the primary Linguistic Operation.

The sentence "He is like a lion in battle" (*huwa kal-asad fi al-ma'raka*) could arguably have elements of [Indefiniteness](#), [Use of Pronoun in Place of Noun](#), and [Ellipsis](#), as there is an overlap in the scope of each device. However, the similarity between lion and human fully explains the rhetorical force of the sentence, because it represents the central linguistic operation. This sentence is therefore identified as a [Simile](#), placing it more centrally within the scope of that device.

Similarly, the Qur'anic expression "[Ask the town](#)" (*wa-s'al al-qarya*) (Q12:82) could potentially be analysed under [BREVITY: Brevity](#) because the wording is shortened relative to the fuller expression "ask the people of the town." However, the primary linguistic operation is the transfer of meaning from the place ("town") to its inhabitants through a relational association. The rhetorical brevity arises as an effect of this semantic transfer, rather than constituting the central linguistic operation itself. This expression is therefore identified more centrally as [TRANSFR: Relational Transfer](#), in accordance with the principle that classification follows the linguistic operation which most comprehensively explains the rhetorical transformation.

Principle 4: Multiple Linguistic Operations May Co-Occur

Rhetorical device identification recognises that multiple independent Linguistic Operations may occur simultaneously within the same linguistic expression. In accordance with the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), each independently identifiable Linguistic Operation constitutes a separate co-occurring rhetorical action.

The sentence "He is like a lion - a brave lion - in battle" (*huwa kal-asad - asadun shujā'un- fi al-ma'raka*) contains a [Simile](#), but also a [Repetition](#) of "lion" (*asad*) which may contribute to intensification. Thus, multiple independent Linguistic Operations, and therefore multiple co-occurring rhetorical actions, are present within the same sentence.

In accordance with [Principle 3](#), it would not be correct to identify both [Metaphor](#) and other devices related to semantic transformations where these constitute competing analyses of the same primary Linguistic Operation. However, it would be correct to identify both [Metaphor](#) and [Repetition](#) where each constitutes an independent Linguistic Operation.

While [Principle 3](#) governs which device most comprehensively explains a single primary Linguistic Operation where candidate analyses overlap, Principle 4 governs when distinct Linguistic Operations may be co-identified because they constitute separate rhetorical actions.

This principle reflects [Design Principle 3: The Encyclopedia Views Rhetorical Devices As Atomic Units](#), allowing independent Linguistic Operations to be identified separately when they occur together within the same discourse.

Compound Devices

Similarly, some rhetorical configurations are [compound](#) in nature: structured co-occurrences of two or more independent devices. Classical rhetoric sometimes assigns such configurations their own labels, such as [Parallel Antithesis](#) (*Muqābala*). However, within the Encyclopedia's [atomic taxonomy](#) they are treated as compound entities composed of identifiable and independent constituent devices.

When a compound configuration is identified, each of its constituent devices should be identified separately. For example, [Parallel Antithesis](#) should be annotated as both [Antithesis](#) and [Parallelism](#).

Principle 5: Rhetorical Device Identification Allows Diagnostic Flexibility

The [Encyclopedia](#)'s taxonomy is intentionally calibrated for strict definitions of rhetorical devices on the basis of [linguistic operation](#). However, it is recognised that in practice, one linguistic expression may allow more than one plausible analytical interpretation. This differs from [Principle 4](#), which concerns multiple independent linguistic operations co-occurring; Principle 5 instead concerns alternative analyses of the same expression.

Firstly, the context, genre, register, and discourse situation must be considered when determining which rhetorical device most comprehensively explains the Linguistic Operation. The sentence "He is like a lion in battle" (*huwa kal-asad fi al-ma'raka*) is a [Simile](#) in a context of praise and valorisation. However, in a context of mockery, the expression may instead be analysed under [SERIOUS: Humour Through Which Seriousness is Intended](#) if the primary observable linguistic operation is judged to be pragmatic inversion rather than semantic transfer.

Secondly, some expressions allow more than one plausible linguistic operation to be identified due to overlap in structural interpretations. For example, "The government has announced new laws" may be analysed as either:

- an [Agent relationship within Predicative Transfer](#), or
- a [Whole-to-part relationship within Associative Transfer](#).

In such cases, the annotator should record the diagnostic decision and its reasoning, ensuring transparency and consistency in analysis.

Principle 6: A Universal Framework Can Identify Rhetorical Power

Despite the multitude of Arabic rhetorical devices, rhetorical actions may be analysed through the common architecture established by the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#). The Model distinguishes four analytically distinct steps: Communicator Intent, Linguistic Operation, Cognitive Relationship, and Communicative Enhancement. Communicator Intent may initiate a rhetorical action but is not always present or identifiable, and is therefore excluded from direct analysis in accordance with [Principle 1](#). The remaining steps form the principal analytical sequence through which rhetorical action may be evaluated.

For identification purposes, the Linguistic Operation is considered from two complementary angles: positive identification of the operation itself and a substitution test examining whether a neutral alternative is available. Cognitive Relationship and Communicative Enhancement are then evaluated through contextual and effect-based evidence. This produces a four-step identification framework which can be used to evaluate the presence of rhetorical power generally, and rhetorical devices more specifically.

The relationship between the four steps of the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#) and the [four-step identification framework](#) is shown below:

Model for Rhetorical Action step	Identification consequence
Communicator Intent	Excluded from direct analysis (Principle 1)
Linguistic Operation	Evaluated in Step 1 ("Identification of a hallmark linguistic operation") and Step 2 ("Substitution with non-rhetoric equivalent")
Cognitive Relationship	Evaluated in Step 3 ("Identification of positive contextual indicators of rhetorical usage")
Communicative Enhancement	Evaluated in Step 4 ("Evidence of possible Communicative Enhancement")

A Universal Framework for Identifying Arabic Rhetorical Devices

Direct link for sharing & citation: DOI [10.64393/balagha.universal.framework](https://doi.org/10.64393/balagha.universal.framework) [↗](#)

A [lexical item](#) may be evaluated for the presence of a rhetorical device using a framework consisting of four dimensions of evidence. This framework is universally applicable across all three domains of Arabic rhetoric: [Sentence Construction & Syntactical Stylistics](#) (*'ilm al-ma'ānī*), [Figurative Speech](#) (*'ilm al-bayān*), and [Linguistic Embellishments](#) (*'ilm al-baḍf*).

The framework does not produce a definitive binary conclusion because rhetorical status is not an intrinsic property of a [lexical item](#), but depends upon its operation within a particular communicative context. In accordance with the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), Communicator Intent is not required for rhetorical action to occur and cannot ordinarily be established reliably from linguistic evidence alone. It is therefore excluded from direct analysis. The four dimensions instead evaluate evidence relating to the Linguistic Operation, the Cognitive Relationship established or activated through that operation, and the possible Communicative Enhancement arising through that relationship. The analyst considers each dimension in a step-wise manner to arrive at a reasoned judgment. No single step is determinative, and the evaluative weighting of each step will vary depending on the nature of the device being examined.

Furthermore, the scope of the framework is to guide a decision about whether a rhetorical device is present or not within a [lexical item](#). It is not a universal algorithm to positively identify a specific rhetorical device out of the catalogue of approximately 100 rhetorical devices in the [Encyclopedia](#). The analyst must consult the rhetorical device-specific pages which state the precise Linguistic Operations, possible Communicative Enhancements, and detection criteria for each device.

Step 1: Identification of a hallmark Linguistic Operation

"Does the [lexical item](#) exhibit the defining characteristic Linguistic Operation of one of the three domains of Arabic rhetoric?"

- In [Sentence Construction & Syntactical Stylistics](#) (*'ilm al-ma'ānī*), the hallmark Linguistic Operation is **pragmatic deviation** — the expression is deployed contrary to the default expectation of the context (*ikhrāj al-kalām 'alā khilāf muqtaḍā al-ẓāhir*).
- In [Figurative Speech](#) (*'ilm al-bayān*), the hallmark Linguistic Operation is a **meaning gap** - the expression is non-literal, saying one thing to mean another.
- In [Linguistic Embellishments](#) (*'ilm al-baḍī'*), the predominant hallmark Linguistic Operation is deliberate **formal patterning** — the expression carries phonetic, lexical, or structural pattern beyond what neutral communication would require.

The presence of a strong hallmark Linguistic Operation is a positive indicator of rhetorical action. Its absence weighs against a rhetorical analysis, although for some devices this step may carry less diagnostic weight than others.

Step 2: Substitution with non-rhetoric equivalent

"Can the [lexical item](#) be replaced by a neutral, non-rhetorical alternative without losing its core meaning?"

- If yes, this suggests that the [lexical item](#) is performing a Linguistic Operation beyond what would be required by a neutral expression, which supports the possibility of rhetorical action.
- If no neutral alternative exists, the [lexical item](#) may be normalised or frozen, and may have lost its rhetorical use.

Step 3: Identification of positive contextual indicators of rhetorical usage

"Does anything in the wider context support the Cognitive Relationship required for a rhetorical reading?"

This includes the pragmatic context (the communicative purpose or social situation), the rhetorical register of the surrounding text, explicit linguistic markers flagging non-literal or heightened usage, and tonal or stylistic signals in the wider discourse. Such contextual evidence may support the identification of a communicatively relevant Cognitive Relationship established or activated for the [addressee](#) through the Linguistic Operation.

The nature of this relationship will depend upon the device. For semantic or conceptual devices, contextual evidence may support an inferred or recognised relationship between meanings, concepts, or assumptions. For formal devices, it may support the rhetorical significance of a perceived recurrence, equivalence, contrast, correspondence, or patterning between sounds, expressions, or structures. Mere incidental regularity does not by itself provide positive evidence of rhetorical usage.

- If there are positive contextual signals, this strengthens the case for rhetorical usage.
- If there are none, this is a neutral finding — the absence of explicit signals does not rule out rhetorical function.

Step 4: Evidence of possible Communicative Enhancement

"Can a specific Communicative Enhancement be identified?"

- If the expression plausibly contributes to the enhancement of a [communicative effect](#) in the [addressee](#) (such as surprise, warmth, fear, humour, clarity, emphasis, memorability, or persuasion) beyond what a neutral expression would produce, this supports the case for rhetorical status.
- If no such Communicative Enhancement can be identified, this weighs against the expression being rhetorical in this specific context.

Applications

Two applications of these identification principles illustrate their utility.

Four-Step Test for Lexicalised Expressions

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The universal framework can be applied to more specific determinations, such as whether a figurative expression is functioning as a rhetorical device in a given context. Every language uses "dead", "lexicalised", or "fossilised" words or expressions that once had a rhetorical meaning but are now so commonplace that their rhetorical force may no longer be salient. These are sometimes known as "conceptualised metaphors". For example in English, the expression "Let's grab a bite to eat" contains 3 non-literal components:

1. "grab" - to mean taking something quickly or forcibly,
2. "a bite" - to mean a small meal, and
3. The whole expression superficially relates to a meal, but its overall communicative meaning may concern a shared meeting, conversation, or discussion in the context of a brief meal.

However, while there are structural elements of figurative speech in this expression, its conventionalisation may mean that these elements no longer function rhetorically in a particular context. The analytical challenge is therefore to determine whether the expression is functioning as a rhetorical action for the [addressee](#), rather than to infer whether the [communicator](#) consciously intended a rhetorical effect.

To address this issue, the [Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#) has developed a four-step process for cases where rhetorical status is doubtful, to determine whether such an expression should be identified as rhetorical in a given context. This heuristic framework does not produce a definitive conclusion. Instead, it guides analysis across four dimensions of evidence. The

framework does not produce a definitive conclusion. Instead, it guides analysis across four dimensions of evidence. The analyst weighs these considerations together to arrive at a reasoned judgment about whether an expression is functioning rhetorically in a given context.

Further reading

See the following blog post for more about the importance of identifying lexicalised expressions: [I chuckle internally whenever I hear the word "sunbathe"](#) [↗](#) (25 November 2025)

Step 1: Identification of non-literality, the hallmark Linguistic Operation of figurative speech

"Is the expression non-literal?"

- If the expression is non-literal - or a literal interpretation is unlikely, improbable, or impossible - this is a positive indicator that the expression may be functioning rhetorically.
- If the expression has only a literal interpretation, and a non-literal interpretation is unlikely, improbable, or impossible, this weighs strongly against a rhetorical analysis.

Using the same example, "a bite" is non-literal because it is unlikely that literally "one bite" is the intended meaning.

Step 2: Substitution test with non-rhetorical equivalent

"Assuming the expression is non-literal, can it be replaced by a neutral, literal alternative without losing meaning?"

- If the same meaning *can* be expressed in a literal way, this suggests that the expression is performing a Linguistic Operation beyond what would be required by a neutral alternative, which supports the possibility of rhetorical action.
- If it *cannot* be said in any other way, then it is likely to be a normalised or frozen expression which has lost rhetorical force.

"A bite to eat" can be substituted with "a small meal" or "a snack" or "lunch" or "a sandwich", which raises the possibility that it *is* functioning rhetorically.

Step 3: Identification of positive contextual indicators of rhetorical usage

"Does anything in the wider context of the expression support the Cognitive Relationship required for a rhetorical reading?"

This can include the pragmatic context (the communicative purpose or social situation), the rhetorical register of the surrounding text, explicit linguistic markers that flag non-literal usage, or tonal or stylistic signals in the wider discourse. Such contextual evidence may support the identification of the communicatively relevant Cognitive Relationship established or activated for the [addressee](#) through the Linguistic Operation.

- If there *are* positive contextual indicators, this strengthens the case for rhetorical usage.
- If there are *none*, this does not rule out rhetorical usage.

In the context of wishing to minimise the imposition, "a bite" may help indicate the casualness of the request to the recipient.

Step 4: Evidence of possible Communicative Enhancement

"Can a specific Communicative Enhancement be identified?"

- If the expression plausibly contributes to the enhancement of a [communicative effect](#) in the [addressee](#) (such as surprise, anger, warmth, fear, clarity, emphasis, memorability, or persuasion) beyond what would be expected from a neutral expression, this supports the possibility that the expression is functioning rhetorically.
- If no such Communicative Enhancement can be identified, this weighs against the expression functioning rhetorically in this specific context.

The "bite to eat" expression reduces the apparent significance of the meal, so it is conceivable that it contributes to a Communicative Enhancement by making the invitation appear more casual or less imposing. While Communicative Enhancement is not a classification criterion between rhetorical devices, some possible enhancement of communicative effect is required for rhetorical status in the first place.

Worked example: Simile Identification

The universal framework can be extended to assess whether a specific [lexical item](#) could be functioning rhetorically. The following worked example illustrates the utility of the universal framework in identifying the presence of a rhetorical device. However, identification of the rhetorical device specifically as [Simile](#) requires a further device-specific step of analysis.

Constructed Example

الطالب أسد.

The student is a lion.

Explanation

The student is compared with a lion.

Step 1: Identification of non-literality, the hallmark Linguistic Operation of figurative speech

Q: "Is the expression non-literal?"

A: Yes, because a student cannot literally be a lion.

Step 2: Substitution with non-rhetoric equivalent

Q: "Assuming the expression is non-literal, can it be replaced by a neutral, literal alternative without losing meaning?"

A: Yes. The expression could be replaced with a more neutral description such as "The student is enthusiastic", "The student is energetic", or "The student is eager to learn". The availability of such alternatives supports the possibility that the original expression is performing a rhetorical Linguistic Operation.

Step 3: Identification of positive contextual indicators of rhetorical usage

Q: "Does anything in the wider context of the expression support the Cognitive Relationship required for a rhetorical reading?"

A: If the statement was made in a context of praise for the student, this would support a Cognitive Relationship in which the lion is understood as representing qualities such as strength, courage, or vigour. This would provide a positive contextual indicator of rhetorical usage.

Step 4: Evidence of possible Communicative Enhancement

Q: "Can a specific Communicative Enhancement be identified?"

A: Yes. In the context of praise for the student, the comparison with a lion may contribute to the enhancement of communicative effects such as emphasis, admiration, or a heightened impression of the student's strength or vigour.

Taking each of the four steps into account, the statement would likely be positively identified as a rhetorical statement.

Specific Device Identification

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The universal framework may also be used to evaluate whether a specific candidate rhetorical device is present. In this application, the analyst begins with a candidate device page and applies the four steps using the device-specific information already provided on that page.

Universal framework step	Device-page input
Step 1: Hallmark Linguistic Operation	Use the device's Definition, Linguistic Operation, and Recognition sections to determine whether the candidate lexical item exhibits the defining Linguistic Operation of the device. • If it does, this supports identification of the candidate lexical item as an instance of the device. • If it does not, identification of the device is unlikely.
Step 2: Substitution test	Ask whether the candidate lexical item can be replaced by a neutral, non-rhetorical alternative while preserving its core meaning. • If yes, this supports the possibility that the lexical item is performing a rhetorically significant Linguistic Operation rather than functioning as a neutral expression. • If no, this weighs against the lexical item functioning rhetorically in this context.
Step 3: Contextual indicators	Examine the surrounding discourse, genre, register, and communicative situation to determine whether they support the Cognitive Relationship required for the candidate device to function rhetorically. • If they do, this provides contextual support for identification of the device. • If they do not, this weighs against identification of the device in this context.
Step 4: Possible Communicative Enhancement	Use the device-specific information on possible communicative effects to determine whether a plausible Communicative Enhancement can be identified. • If one or more plausible Communicative Enhancements can be identified, this provides supporting evidence for identification of the device. • The communicative effects documented on individual rhetorical device pages are not exhaustive. They are illustrative effects identified in the sources reviewed for that device, and other plausible Communicative Enhancements may arise in particular communicative contexts. Annotators should therefore exercise reasoned judgement in identifying contextually plausible Communicative Enhancements and are not restricted to those explicitly documented on the device page. • If no plausible Communicative Enhancement can be identified, this weighs against identification of the device.

The universal framework can therefore be used with the device-specific information to aid in the recognition of specific

Summary

Together with the organisational framework defined in the [Design Principles](#), these principles for identifying rhetorical devices establish a structured, Linguistic Operation-first methodology for the identification of Arabic rhetorical devices in any type of discourse. The principles build progressively from the identification of Linguistic Operations, through classification and the recognition of co-occurring or alternative analyses, culminating in Principle 6: a universal framework applicable across all three domains of Arabic rhetoric.

This framework is grounded in the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), in which an identifiable Linguistic Operation establishes or activates a Cognitive Relationship through which a Communicative Enhancement may arise. For practical identification, the framework evaluates this process through four dimensions of evidence: identification of a hallmark Linguistic Operation, substitution with a non-rhetorical equivalent, contextual evidence supporting the Cognitive Relationship, and evidence of possible Communicative Enhancement.

The framework also retains the working hypothesis that each domain has a defining hallmark move: pragmatic deviation in [Sentence Construction & Syntactical Stylistics](#) (*'ilm al-ma'ānī*), the meaning gap in [Figurative Speech](#) (*'ilm al-bayān*), and deliberate formal patterning in [Linguistic Embellishments](#) (*'ilm al-badī'*). It also reflects the fact that rhetorical status is always a reasoned judgment, not a mechanical determination.

Page History

- 2026-06-06 - [Reordered](#) the principles into a more logical sequence, and expanded Principle 6 with the universal framework and worked example.
- 2026-04-23 - [Renamed and expanded Principle 4](#) to include overlapping linguistic operations resulting in differences in device identification. The [original version](#) considered only differences in contexts causing differences in device identification.
- 2026-02-14 - Page created: [Principles for Identifying Arabic Rhetorical Devices with the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#).

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