My discussion of linguistic shifters in this paper has been inspired by and drawn from the work of Anna Lisa Crone, specifically from her book entitled *The Daring of Derzhavin: The Moral and Aesthetic Independence of the Poet in Russia*. In this work, Professor Crone acknowledges the common assertion that Derzhavin revolutionized Russian classical verse through the mixing of “high” and “low” style vocabulary that broke with the rigid lexical demarcations of the day. However, what makes her analysis different, in my view, is how she analyzes the manner in which that mixing was accomplished and how it was done so successfully. Her discussion of the various uses and nuances of the word *вельможа* which Ozhegov defines as a “знатный и богатый сановник” (a distinguished and wealthy high official/grandee) is a case in point. The meaning of this word in the poem of the same name dedicated to P.A. Rumjancev (1794) completely changed depending on to whom it referred. Vel’mozha can be interpreted as a “metalliterary or metalinguistic statement of Derzhavin’s language policy in odes. [It demonstrates his] principles and attitudes towards lexical usage,” in that “Words [function] as clothes and [the] poet [works] as tailor or word weaver...” She continues to explain that “Derzhavin introduced a new linguistic strategy or theory of style ...of ‘high’ and ‘low’ stylistic levels as dependent on the inner essence of the referent, effectively rendering stylistic level a shifter... Derzhavin’s new theory proclaims lexemes value-free, morally neutral.”

I would like to demonstrate that the word “mirza” which was borrowed from the Persian and Arabic languages and deployed in two eighteenth-century odes, “Felitsa” (1782) and “A Mirza’s Vision” (1783) also function as movable metaphors or linguistic shifters. Previous scholarship has discussed the Oriental settings, characters, and language of these odes as simple literary conventions or as Aesopian devices; that is, coded language employed to criticize social foibles. Crone believed that the so-called Oriental behavior exhibited in “Felitsa” could have been a reflection of Derzhavin’s personal life and a legacy of his Tatar heritage. But I will show that an analysis of the flexible use of Eastern-inspired lexicon in verse provides a window through which we can understand a more general principle: namely, that in the Western imagination, popular imagery that has shaped our notions of Oriental peoples and places are sometimes semantically unstable. They range anywhere from the malevolent Muslims deposited in Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* all the way to the opposite end of the spectrum: to the dreamlike, exotic, and erotic atmosphere of Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh*. If the Orient can be depicted in such a contradictory manner, often employing the same terminology, then it necessarily follows

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3 Ibid, 53–54.
5 Crone, *Daring of Derzhavin*, 130.
that much of the palaver used to define it contains virtually no independent, inherent information; it can only convey provisional definitions that are completely dependent on a particular referent or context. Derzhavin’s Orientalist oeuvre also spans a wide semantic spectrum, each definitional category informing different philosophical messages and taking on the nuances of various personalities. Before I continue however, it will be necessary to briefly explain the concept of linguistic shifters.

According to the linguist Otto Jespersen, shifters are words “whose meaning differs according to the situation...” 6 Roman Jakobson unpacked the concept further; he maintained that it is a linguistic category in which the code and the message overlap. As he stated, “shifters are distinguished from all other constituents of their linguistic code solely by their compulsory reference to the given message.” 7 He also stated that shifters are comprised of indices, or, as he put it, to the word’s “existential relation to the object it represents.” 8 By “existential relationship,” Jakobson was drawing from the work of Emile Benveniste and his notions of the phenomenological relationship between the subject and the utterance, between the addresser and the personal pronoun that the addresser employs. It is only “through language,” Benveniste claims that ‘man constitutes himself as a subject [and] establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality which is that of the being.” 9 Referring to pronouns as shifters, he explains that there is “no concept of ‘I’ that incorporates all the ‘I’s’ that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all the speakers, in the sense that there is a concept of ‘tree’ to which all the individual uses of tree refer. The ‘I’ then, does not denominate any lexical entity.” 10

Jakobson maintained that in addition to being constituted of indices shifters are also made up of symbols, emblematizing an object or an essence. So, any shifter is a fluid relationship between word and subject; it also represents, however briefly, the subject itself. Although they seem to be freely variant lexical categories, Jakobson claimed that “every shifter possess its own meaning.” 11 For example, the personal pronouns “I” and “you” are both symbols (that is, stand for a specific person) and indices (meaning that there is some existential relationship between utterance and object). In effect, shifters create both an ephemeral relationship and representation simultaneously.

Turning to the word in question, the original Persian and Arabic meanings of the word “mirza” largely span positive registers: doctor, scholar, philosopher, poet, nobleman, or knight. They can convey the qualities of an inquisitive, conscientious person who occupies a position of power. Persian language scholar Francis Joseph Steinglass defined the word as follows:

Mirza (for mir-za), A Persian title; when it is put after a proper name it usually means “prince”, as in Ibrahim mirza, Prince Ibrahim; but when it appears before, it means a gentleman, an educated

8 Benveniste cited in Jakobson, 388.
10 Ibid, 226.
11 Jakobson, 388.
In many European and Russian cultural contexts, however, this word assumed either neutral or nefarious meanings, depending on to whom it referred. In D.N. Ushakov’s *Explanatory Dictionary*, for example, a *Murza* is simply “Название мелких татарских дворян” (a name for minor Tatar nobility).\textsuperscript{13} V.I. Dahl’s famous dictionary has multiple entries for the word:

> Кто мурзится, говорит о ребенке, упрямится, дурит. Татарский князек, наследственный старшина; нашими законами не предоставлено им особых прав, а местами слово это обратилось в бранное: татарин, бусурман. Мурзиншка, жена мурзы. Мурзинский, к нему относящийся. Мурзиться, гневаться, копье мурзамецкое, татарское, восточное.

[One who acts like a Mirza, said of a child who is stubborn, obstinate. A Tatar prince, a hereditary minor chieftain, not granted special rights according to our laws. At times the word is applied as an expletive: a Tatar, Bursurman. A Mirza princess, the wife of a Mirza prince. [As a verb it means] to become murza-like, to become angry, to become enragéd; a Mirza, Tatar, Oriental spear.\textsuperscript{14}]

But under Derzhavin’s pen, this word gained multifaceted nuances, which denoted many semantic registers, including the original Persian etymological meaning I mentioned above. I argue that the word “mirza” like the pronoun “I” or “you” may be interpreted as neutral, a kind of lexical vessel that is filled with meaning when it is applied to a specific person. In English, one may speak of an alter ego, which in Russian literally translates to “my second ‘I,’” (моё второе я).\textsuperscript{15} The possessive pronoun (мой) and the ordinal numeral (второе) are marked, as a noun, for the I’s neuter gender. Standing alone, the pronoun is therefore without real character or texture. Thus “I” is only filled out, so to speak, when it stands for a specific person, with whom some existential relationship between object and word has been struck. The same principle, I claim, obtains in the case of the word “mirza” as it evolved in Derzhavin’s poetry.

The inspiration for his first ode to Catherine II, entitled “To the Wise Princess Felitsa of the Kirghiz-Kazakh Horde, Written by a Certain Murza, Long a Resident of Moscow, but Now Living in St. Petersburg Because of His Affairs” (1782) was drawn from the empress’s own Oriental fairy tale, “The Story of Tsarevich Khlor,” which she wrote for her grandson, the future emperor Alexander I. In it, she employed typically pernicious Mirzas who function as some of the tale’s villains. For instance, the hero, Prince Khlor, on his journey to find the rose without thorns (a quest for virtue), encounters “Murza Bryuzga” (Prince Grouch/Irascible) who is easily angered (an allusion to the verbal form of the noun mentioned earlier in Dahl’s dictionary), and

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“Murza Lintai” (Prince Lazybones) who basks in stock Oriental luxury. The gatherings at Murza Lintai’s palace feature music, servants, smoking, drinking, gluttony, napping, carnal pleasures, and generally predictable Oriental decadence, all transpiring while reclining on soft Persian rugs. In a 1793 English translation of the tale, the editor noted that, “[the] description of Murza Lintai accords so much with the manners of some of the Russian nobility that it is allowable to suppose her Majesty took the picture from some one of them.”\(^\text{16}\) Lest we be tempted to accuse this eighteenth-century English publicist of Western chauvinism, it is well worth bearing in mind that his supposition was precisely true. For instance, Murza Bryuzga, the husband of Felitsa (or Catherine herself) in the fairy tale could have possibly been modeled on her real husband Peter III. Derzhavin simply took his cue from Catherine in his own descriptions of powerful court functionaries in the ode itself. The word Mirza when coupled with certain personages at court became semantically saturated with the destructive vices of those under authorial scrutiny.

By placing himself within the traditionally protective cocoon of a panegyrist’s humility, whose task was to laud the sovereign, Derzhavin then allowed himself a free hand to make cutting critiques like a typically honest Oriental observer of, in this case, the Russian social scene. This was an element of Derzhavin’s odes that Catherine heartily approved in that there was much she and Derzhavin found wrong with court and country, not least of which was the stereotypical Oriental behavior of those in responsible positions of power. In addition to lambasting many courtiers for their destructive vices, resulting in what Derzhavin believed to have been lack of imperial efficiency, the narrator also played the role of an aspiring practitioner of virtue, a fallen philosopher/poet moralist. In effect, it is a variation on the usual Russian definition of murza; his scholarly position functions as the slightly altered ego, the second “I” to the corrupt and debased courtiers. In the following stanzas, Derzhavin describes General Grigory Potyomkin’s love of horse racing, Count Pyotr Panin’s obsession with hunting, and the courtier Semyon Naryshkin’s delight in parties and music.\(^\text{17}\) All of these men were close advisors to the empress and had much power at court. Although he employs the first person pronoun throughout this ode, it was well known in high circles to whom certain lines of it referred. In this way, the poet hid one first-person pronoun just behind another first-person “I.” In other words, the addressees/receivers of the message are superficially masked behind the addressee/sender. But as we shall see presently, the transposition of two definitions of the word (the murza-I as lethargic yet redeemable, another murza-I as flawed and unredeemable) are subtly differentiated in that the personalities in the ode lend themselves to various versions of the mirza theme. I should add, too, that the empress immediately understood the differences and even copied out and sent specific stanzas to their respectively unwitting dedicatees as a joke and mild reprimand.\(^\text{18}\) In this way, she picked up and unwound the threads where Derzhavin dared not unloosen them. Catherine separated the poet’s “murza-I” from the debauched “murza-I” of her powerful advisers.

Или великолепным цугом
В карете английской, златой,


\(^\text{18}\) Crone, The Daring of Derzhavin, 133.
С собакой, шутом, или другом,
Или с красавицей какой
Я под качелями гуляю;
В шинки пить меду заезжаю;
Или, как то наскучит мне,
по слонности моей к премене,
Имея шапку набекрене,
Лечу на резвом бегуне.

Или музыкой и певцами,
Органом и вольнной вдруг,
Или кулачными бойцами
и пляской веселю мой дух;
Или, о всех делах заботу
Оставя, езжу на охоту
И забавляюсь лаем псов;
Или над Невскими брегами
Я тешусь по ночам рогами
И греблей удалых гребцов.\textsuperscript{19}

[Or in a gilded English carriage,
By truly splendid tandem drawn
With hound, companion, or a jester,
Or with some beauty – better yet-
I go off riding to the Swings;
I stop at taverns for some spirits
Or, if this too becomes a bore -
My nature does incline to changes -
I set my cap at a jaunty angle
And fly atop a sportive steed.]

[Or bring refreshment to my spirit
With music, singers and with dance,
Accompanied by pipes and organ,
Or pleasure find in boxing bouts;
Or, putting to a side all worries,
I go off to the woods for hunting
And take delight in mastiff's barks;
Or by the banks of the Neva
Enjoy the sound of horns on evenings
And agile oarsmen's rowing skill ...]\textsuperscript{20}

Derzhavin's right to criticize stems from the fact that his poetic persona was little different from those he held up to moral scrutiny; the right to point out their faults was based


upon his courage to confess his own vices. But very public admissions of guilt excluded him from the ranks of courtly hypocrites who ensconced themselves in the trappings of imperial stateliness, but whose habits, Derzhavin felt, fell below their station. His murza, like the others, was highly flawed, but unlike them, he was scathingly honest with himself, and almost contrite:

Таков, Фелица, я развратен!
Но на меня весь свет похож.
Кто сколько мудростью ни знатен,
Но всякий человек есть ложь.
Не ходим света мы путями,
Бежим разврата за мечтами.
Между лентяем и брюзгой,
Между щеголем и пороком
Нашел кто разве ненароком.
Путь добродетели прямой.\(^{21}\)

[You see, Felitsa, my debauchery!
But all of the world resembles me.
Someone may be renowned for learning,
Yet every person is a lie.
We travel not by paths of lightness
But chase instead sweet dreams of pleasures.
'Twixt Indolent and Choleric,
'Twixt sinfulness and vain delusion,
Has anyone save by mere chance found
The direct path to righteousness?\(^{22}\)]

The indolent and choleric in this stanza are directly drawn from the names of the two Murzas (Lintai and Bryuzga) of Catherine’s fairy tale. It is important to note here that Catherine and Derzhavin may have taken the image of such mirza/courtiers from Voltaire’s popular Oriental tale, *Zadig*\(^{23}\) and Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*.\(^{24}\) In the ode, the poet reestablishes Catherine’s earlier negative semantic range of the word by conjoining it to specific people, not to generally negative Oriental personality traits as the empress did in her fairy tale.

In addition to honesty, the narrator possessed yet another virtue, which slightly raised him above the common, lazy, imbibing herd. This was the seed from which other notions grew regarding the proper social role of a good murza in the Persian/Arabic sense of the word: here the murza writes poetry, but not just any poetry; he writes civic minded verse guided by love for sovereign and country. Unlike others at court who occupied grander positions, his preoccupation with writing partially redeemed him from the occasional sins to which he fell prey. He therefore combined the usual Russian definitions of murza (powerful, debauched,  

\(^{21}\) Derzhavin, “Felitsa,” Mashkov Library.

\(^{22}\) Derzhavin, “Ode to the Wise Princess Felitsa,” 274.


wealthy) with some of the original Persian meanings of it: (scholar, poet, philosopher). Murza, as Derzhavin applies it to himself, then gains this hybrid meaning, which he does not expound upon directly, but rather indirectly describes through Catherine II's approval of the art of writing:

Ты здраво о заслугах мыслишь,
Достойным воздаешь ты честь;
Пророком ты того не числишь,
Кто только рифмы может плесть,
А что сия ума забава -
Калифов добрых честь и слава.
Снисходишь ты на лирный лад:
Поэзия тебе любезна,
Приятна, сладостна, полезна,
Как летом вкусный лимонад.  

[You judge of merits reasonably,
And honor to the worthy give;
You do not rank among the prophets
Who can do naught but spin out rhymes;
But as this fair mind's entertainment
Brings honor and glory to good caliphs,
You do indulge the lyric strain;
Poetic art is pleasant to you,
Agreeable, and sweet and useful
Like summer's tasty lemonade.]  

The superlative human specimen on whom all Murzas must model themselves is, in this ode, Catherine II herself, the “Wise Princess Felitsa of the Kirghiz-Kazakh Horde,” the country’s “good caliph.” The enumeration of the empress’s simple virtues in this, as in other odes to her, was not only inspired by Derzhavin’s sincere belief that she possessed them. Philosophical notions of good governance and human virtue that he folded into her odic portraits were also likely drawn from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract. Derzhavin first became intimately acquainted with Rousseau’s work sometime in the late 1770s as a member of the literary and philosophical salon called the L’vov circle, named after the poet Nikolai L’vov. Among the works the group studied was Rousseau’s Discourse on the Arts and Sciences. The French philosopher claimed that an “opulent and voluptuous nation,” that had not been “preserved from the contagion of useless knowledge” has very little in the way of virtue. He ranked simplicity and diligent work as the main features of not only good character but also that of an

exemplary culture. He included among those nations whose simplicity made them virtuous the Persians, Scythians, ancient Germans, and the Romans.\textsuperscript{29} Derzhavin, despite the sophistication of Catherine II’s education and intellectual interests, constructed an image of unadorned Oriental modesty and homely concern for the nation, a person always eager to know the true state of the realm. In the “Felitsa” ode, the typical mirza stands in stark contrast to the ideal sovereign who he wants to emulate:

Мурзам твоим не подражая,
Pочасту ходишь ты пешком,
И пища самая простая
Бывает за твоим столом,
Не дорожа твоим покоеем,
Читаешь, пишешь пред налоем
И всем из твоего пера
Блаженство смертным проливаешь,
Подобно в карты не играешь,
Как я, от утра до утра.\textsuperscript{30}

[Not following your murzas’ custom,
You often go about on foot,
And only have the simplest dishes
Permitted in your dining room.
Not valuing your leisure hours,
You read and write before a lecturn,
And grant a true felicity
Unto all mortals by your writings.
Nor do you have a gambling passion,
Like me who plays from morn ’til morn.]\textsuperscript{31}

Derzhavin not only speaks of the potential social usefulness of the poet, but in this stanza, celebrated Catherine’s willingness to listen to the truth:

Слух идет о твоих поступках,
Что ты нимало не горда
Любезна и делах и в шутках,
Приятна в дружбе и тверда
Что ты в напастях равнодушна,
А в славе так великодушно,
Что отреклась и мудрой слить.
Еще же говорят неложно,
Что будто завсегда возможно
Тебе и правду говорить.\textsuperscript{32}

[Of your behavior hearsay has it
That you are not the least bit proud;]

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{30} Derzhavin, “Felitsa,” Mashkov Library.  
\textsuperscript{31} Derzhavin, “Ode to the Wise Princess Felitsa,” 270.  
\textsuperscript{32} Derzhavin, “Felitsa,” Mashkov Library.
Vision.

and the semantic relationship was struck between it, and the word became emblematic of and a semiotic relationship was struck between it, which is the first duty of the itinerant Mirza moralist, a stock Eastern character whose definition Derzhavin shifted to the then contemporary idealized Russian thinker/philosopher/poet. The poet's duty was not simply to write pleasant, flattering verse for the sake of the ruler’s vanity; nor was it solely intended to be regime-enhancing propaganda; a preoccupation with form was important, but civic-minded content was equally imperative. In other words, aesthetic dulce had to convey a moral utile. The responsible ruler was one who heeded the poet's conscientious council for the common good and healthy longevity of the empire's subjects. The writer must therefore be the voice of the government's conscience because of his unique critical distance and education, which he could press into service for sound council. The word became emblematic of and a semantic relationship was struck between it and the model poet; that is, when it was applied to Derzhavin himself, in the poem “A Mirza’s Vision.”

Unlike Felitsa, the mirza/courtiers fall somewhat short of their ideal, proper role. Being self-interested and debauched, they do not conscientiously fulfill their duties as advisers or functionaries, nor do they avail themselves of the sovereign’s model accessibility. Here the word Mirza functions as both index and symbol for noblemen courtiers and bureaucrats. Having conjoined mirza to Potyomkin, Panin, and Naryshkin among others, it was rendered negative. It therefore took on the meanings of a lack of civic zeal, a collective preoccupation with pleasure at the expense of work, and a shirking of imperial responsibilities. As I mentioned above, the template for this was likely taken from Catherine II’s, Voltaire’s, and Montesquieu’s Oriental tales.

On the other hand, according to V.N. Kubacheva, depictions of the councilor/mirza as they were elaborated from the traditional definition of the word in various Persian and Arabic histories and tales was to tell the sovereign the truth about the social conditions of the realm. Kubacheva further maintains that by the 1770s, in addition to the French versions of Eastern tales, many original Oriental stories had been translated into Russian and became quite popular among the reading public. Writers could then borrow from them and work out those ideological messages that conformed to their own views and it possible that Derzhavin did so as well. For instance, the poet may have taken the notion of the idealized mirza/monarch relationship he found in the tales of Harun al-Rashid, the celebrated fifth caliph of Baghdad, in the Thousand and One Arabian Nights. His meditations on this theme thus indirectly included Arabic philosophical assertions about the duties of both monarch and poet/philosopher that he later fully developed in the ode “A Mirza’s Vision.”

It is the collecting of accurate information and the propagating of good advice based on it, which is the first duty of the itinerant Mirza moralist, a stock Eastern character whose definition Derzhavin shifted to the then contemporary idealized Russian thinker/philosopher/poet. The poet's duty was not simply to write pleasant, flattering verse for the sake of the ruler’s vanity; nor was it solely intended to be regime-enhancing propaganda; a preoccupation with form was important, but civic-minded content was equally imperative. In other words, aesthetic dulce had to convey a moral utile. The responsible ruler was one who heeded the poet's conscientious council for the common good and healthy longevity of the empire's subjects. The writer must therefore be the voice of the government's conscience because of his unique critical distance and education, which he could press into service for sound council. The word became emblematic of and a semantic relationship was struck between it and the model poet; that is, when it was applied to Derzhavin himself, in the poem “A Mirza’s Vision.”

34 V.N. Kubacheva, “‘Vostochnaya povest’ v russkoï literature XVIII-nachala XIX veka.” 310.
“A Mirza’s Vision,” is a kind of sequel to the “Felitsa ode. In it, the wise princess appears to the poet in a dream. Catherine tells the writer that goodness can really only be found in the poet’s genuine obligations to the state, chief among them being that he has the duty to dispense with flattery and tell the truth, even if it reflects poorly on the ruler. As Anna Lisa Crone maintains, this was really Derzhavin’s own ideological viewpoint and he simply put the ideas he had been thinking about for years into her mouth. 36 I claim that this conferred a certain monarchial legitimacy on his own opinion of the civic role of the artist, the unofficial office of poet/advisor. Moreover, it is a position that the empress would have found very difficult to repudiate publicly. As a student of Enlightenment philosophy she rhetorically subscribed to the concepts of tolerance and fairness; during her reign she gave special emphasis to the fact that these would be the pillars of her government. Derzhavin’s clever odic ventriloquism effectively called her bluff. It also gave him license to develop the honesty-in-humility topos in future works that perhaps other poets were not permitted to do. Furthermore, in this ode the addressee/receiver of the message is absent. Despite the magical descent of the empress from the heavens amidst lightening and thunder straight into the artist’s imagining, the poet is not speaking to his muse, but voicing his own notions on behalf of his muse. He is here insisting on what he thinks a monarch should say to a poet in the enumerating of his duties thereby also subtly defining the responsibility of the monarch in relation to poetry.

You think yourself happy
When you play on the lyre,
And merely sing praises to the Tsars.
Tremble, you unhappy murza!
And hear the terrible truths,
That passionate poets
Hardly believe in on earth;...

Poetry is not silly nonsense
But the highest gift of the gods
Then these gifts must be turned over

to honor and to teaching others
To follow the correct path,
Not to flattery and the mortal
Praise of men.]

In essence, he is speaking to and admonishing a new self, an evolved “I.” The word “murza” when it shifts to his enlightened poetic persona, assumes an entirely different definition than it did in the earlier ode, representing a movement from profligate dilettante poet who can distinguish between vice and virtue to completely uncorrupted philosopher/poet. This definition grew from ideas that had been germinating since Derzhavin’s youth, tepidly expressed in “Felitsa” and only fully fleshed out in this ode.

Flattery for the sake of self-interested material gain, he believed, resulted in a cumulatively negative on the social order. Therefore, as I noted earlier, and based on such tales as those of Harun al-Rashid and the ideal mirza/adviser/caliph relationship, the ideal political arrangement was the establishment of an open channel of communication between uncorrupted councilor and a ruler not hamstrung by vanity.

As the word “murza” was moved to one or another personality, it assumed the characteristics of the person in question, establishing an ephemeral emblem and relationship between lexeme and object. Given the multitude of contradictory meanings of it drawn from various cultural contexts, the word lent itself to flexible use. In “Felitsa,” the “murza-і” is an indolent lover of creature comforts and expensive distractions. But he is also self-critical, recognizes the Good, wants to be a virtuous person and a useful member of society in his capacity as poet/philosopher. When the word is placed next to the addresses, the “murza-you,” it assumes all the negative traits, but none of the positive aspects of the poet’s “I.” Derzhavin Murza, who is at a loss as to what he should do to reconcile his own multiple “I”s” makes an almost plaintive request of his “good caliph”: Где ж добродетель обитает?/Где роза без

38 Ibid.
шипов растет? 39 (Where on earth dwells a virtuous man? Where grows the rose without thorns?) The answer comes in the poem “A Mirza’s Vision,” in which his “second I” became a new referent and context.


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