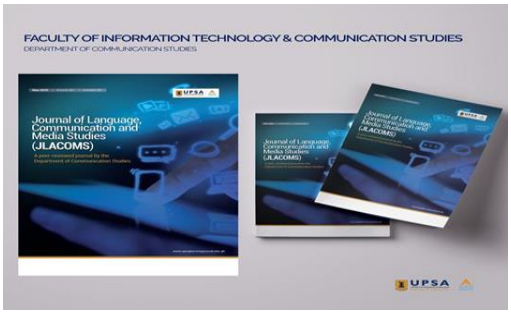

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Distinguishing Polysemy and Homonymy: Addressing Marginal Cases in Lexical Semantics

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ABSTRACT

The two main linguistic concepts of polysemy and homonymy function as core principles in lexical semantics yet create ongoing academic disputes because both concepts involve multiple meanings that exist within one linguistic form. The theoretical framework suggests that related meanings should be separated from unrelated meanings yet the actual implementation of this framework encounters challenges through various intermediate cases. There are various works on the concepts of polysemy and homonymy in general but few have used evidence from African languages, especially Ghanaian languages. This paper investigates polysemy and homonymy by examining linguistic evidence from English and selected African languages which include Akan, Ga, Hausa, Dagbani, and Ewe. The paper examines how various methods established the two phenomena through processes that included etymology assessment, semantic relation determination, lexicographic methods, and structural linguistic evaluation. The paper argues that scholars should understand the boundary between polysemy and homonymy as a spectrum which exists between two extreme points based on existing research. The study presents a theoretical framework which explains how multilingual languages in particular affect semantic research and lexicographic work and language documentation.

Keywords: *Polysemy; Homonymy; Lexical Semantics, African Languages; lexicographic*

1. Introduction

Linguistics has maintained its focus on studying how languages express meaning throughout its history while researchers especially in lexical semantics have investigated this aspect of language. The most difficult problem in the field of Semantics centers on establishing which linguistic phenomena should be classified as polysemy and which should be classified as homonymy. The two linguistic phenomena demonstrate this characteristic because they use a single linguistic element to express different meanings yet their meanings remain unrelated to each other. A single lexical item can express multiple semantic connections according to polysemy whereas homonymy describes a situation where two meanings can be found for a word that sounds alike but shares different definitions (Saeed, 2003). According to Bozorova (2025), polysemy represents a single lexical unit whose various meanings are semantically interrelated and often arise through metaphorical or metonymic extensions. He added that homonymy, in contrast, denotes distinct lexical items that coincidentally share the same phonological or orthographic form but differ entirely in origin and conceptual content.

Bozorova (2025:1) defines polysemy as "a single lexical item that systematically manifests several semantically related senses." He added that these related senses typically emerge through mechanisms such as metaphorical extension, metonymy, functional shift, or pragmatic narrowing/widening. Examples can be found in the following English words:

head = the anatomical upper part of a human or animal (e.g., He injured his head),

head = the leader of an organization (e.g., the head of department),

head = the top or foremost part of an entity (e.g., the head of the table).

On the other hand, Bozorova (2025 :1) defines homonymy, as "a situation in which two (or more) lexemes coincide accidentally in form (phonological and/or orthographic) but are etymologically and conceptually unrelated." The classic examples include bank (financial institution) vs. bank (river edge) and bat (flying mammal) vs. bat (sports implement).

There is no doubt that difference between polysemy and homonymy also has crucial possible ramifications for computational linguistics, in particular for Word Sense Disambiguation (WSD), (Ide and Wilks,2006). Ide and Wilks (2006) claim that the focus of WSD should be on modeling

homonymous sense distinctions, which are easy to make and provide most benefit. The distinction between polysemy and homonymy becomes difficult to identify because both concepts remain undefined according to their current boundaries. The collection of meanings that belong to one word cannot be clearly organized into distinct categories (Palmer, 1981). The process of word meaning development becomes more difficult when people need to understand how meanings evolved throughout history or when people lose knowledge about which meanings existed in earlier times.

The present study discusses lexical semantic theory while using polysemy and homonymy conceptual differences as its basis and cognitive and usage-based linguistics developments as its foundation. Traditional semantic theory, as articulated by Lyons (1995) and Palmer (1981), provides the foundational assumption that lexical meaning is structured and systematically organized within the mental lexicon. The approach creates a framework to define meaning through the formation of stable meaning categories that enable researchers to differentiate between synonymy and antonymy, and polysemy and homonymy.

This study uses cognitive semantics, which represents a comprehensive theoretical framework. The understanding of meaning through this perspective sees it as a variable process that develops from how people use language. Researchers see polysemy as a system of related meanings which builds around one central meaning from which further meanings develop through metaphor and metonymy, (Nunberg and Zaenen, 1992; Nunberg 1995, Pustejovsky, 1995 : Sadat, 2026). These researchers are predominantly theoretical in nature and they question the conditions under which polysemy arises, especially the state of polysemy in the semantic lexicon, disambiguation mechanisms in the syntax-semantics interface, and subcategories of polysemy. The structure of radial categories establishes connections between meanings instead of treating them as completely separate items.

The research uses corpus linguistics and distributional semantics to develop its study design because these two fields show how context affects the development of word meanings. The distributional approach shows that related words share common meanings which appear in similar situations. The two meanings that share similar contexts belong to polysemy because they exist together in particular contexts. Homonymy occurs when two meanings appear in different contexts.

The study defines polysemy and homonymy as two points on a spectrum which people must evaluate between the two points. The research treats semantic relatedness as a continuum that extends from strong semantic connections to total absence of semantic association. The continuum model enables researchers to study border cases which traditional methods cannot classify through established classification methods.

There are various research works (Kipper et. al 2000; Cruse, 2004; Ruppenhofer, 2006) on the concepts of polysemy and homonymy in general but few have used evidence from African languages, especially Ghanaian languages. The research paper investigates multiple obstacles that create difficulties when researchers try to separate polysemy from homonymy. The research utilizes cross-linguistic data to study how researchers identify and categorize ambiguous situations while assessing theoretical and practical methods that have been developed until now.

2. Literature Review

Fundamental aspects of meaning in language have been established through the study of polysemy and homonymy in lexical semantics from its initial development. Early structural approaches emphasized formal taxonomy and the behavior of lexical items within a synchronic-ally described system (Palmer, 1981; Lyons, 1995). It is worth noting that historical linguistics shows that polysemy frequently arises via motivated semantic extension while homonymy typically has etymological roots in lexical convergence or borrowing (Cruse, 2011; Geeraerts, 2010).

The literature describes polysemy as the situation in which a single lexical item develops multiple meanings that maintain a connection to each other (Agyekum, 2005; Thakur 1999. Agyekum, 2005) that enables words to carry two or more meanings which people connect through their cultural and historical and conceptual understanding. Thakur (1999) shows that people develop polysemous meanings through metaphorical extension because it mirrors their cognitive processes which enable them to use language.

The cognitive semantic methods help researchers understand how polysemous meanings get organized through their conceptual structure, (Kipper et. al 2000). According to this perspective, meanings exist as interconnected networks that center around a central prototype (Thakur, 1999). Body-part terms such as head foot and tongue show a common tendency to develop abstract

meanings because people use these terms to describe physical body parts (Thakur, 1999). The process of extending meanings follows regular patterns between languages which results from the cognitive nature that humans use to create polysemous associations.

The field of lexical semantics has shifted towards usage-based and empirical research methods as its main focus since the mid-2010s. Researchers now analyze authentic language use through corpus linguistics which serves as their primary research tool. Polysemous meanings group themselves into specific usage patterns according to corpus-based studies but homonymous meanings appear in separate situations which do not cross into each other. The empirical method establishes an objective standard which researchers use to identify meanings that share similarities with particular meanings (Lyons, 1995).

Ravin and Leacock (2000) used quantitative approaches to study meaning because distributional semantics together with computational linguistics developed these techniques (Saeed, 2003). The techniques enable researchers to calculate how similar two-word meanings are by studying how frequently words appear together which helps them understand the connections between different word meanings. The techniques help researchers determine how closely word meanings connect with one another thus demonstrating that word meanings do not exist as strictly defined boundaries between polysemy and homonymy (Saeed, 2003).

Homonymy describes the presence of two different meanings which exist both in phonological and orthographic form according to its standard definition. Ravin and Leacock (2000) describe homonyms as etymologically distinct words that happen to share the same form while Saeed (2003) emphasizes the absence of semantic connection between their meanings. Homonymy presents fewer theoretical challenges because its meanings reveal distinct differences. Cruse (2000) states that researchers recognize homonymy cases which demonstrate full semantic independence between their component meanings.

Historiographical studies become difficult when speakers identify some relation between historical meanings while historical meaning relationships between words stay ambiguously defined. Lyons (1995) describes two types of homonymy absolute homonymy and partial homonymy which depend on the actual formal and grammatical similarities that exist between two lexical items. The distinction requires researchers to adopt more detailed methods for categorizing lexical items.

Researchers can see how applied professionals deal with these phenomena through their investigation of lexicographic usage. Modern dictionaries depend on corpus data to combine related meanings into a single entry when dealing with polysemy and to create separate entries for unrelated meanings through their implementation of homonymy. Lexicographers face difficulties between their decision-making process and the need to achieve precise outcome assessment. Palmer (1981) notes that the criteria used to differentiate between polysemy and homonymy display inconsistency because semantic analysis involves complex elements.

Research shows that polysemy and homonymy exist between two extreme points of their semantic relationship. Speaker intuition acts as the main factor which determines the distinction between polysemy and homonymy according to Palmer (1981) and Saeed (2003). Studies (Saeed, 2003; Palmer, 1981) indicate that people see semantic relationships between words as gradually developing instead of existing as either present or absent. Words display three levels of relatedness which range from strong polysemy connections to weak indirect relationships to complete separation as seen in homonymy. The continuum model serves as an essential tool for cross-linguistic studies because it shows the different ways cultural and linguistic factors determine how people define and organize semantic relationships (Thakur, 1999). The framework enables researchers to study unusual cases which need researchers to show how word meanings exist in real life.

3. Polysemy: Cross-Linguistic Evidence

Polysemy exists in various languages because it shows how people think and how cultures create new meanings , (Palmer, 1981; Saeed 2003). The English term foot shows how one word can create distinct yet connected meanings because it describes a body part and the base of an object and a measurement unit. The French word ***souris*** shows how technological advancement creates new meanings when people use the term to describe both the animal and the computer device (Bennett, 2002).

African languages exhibit patterns which show similarity to those found in other regions. The Akan word ***kɔnko*** functions as a term for both a container and a measurement unit while the Hausa word ***ciki*** describes the stomach and pregnancy and the concept of "inside." The Dagbani word ***zuɣu*** uses the term "head" to describe "surface" and "leader" through a mapping system which associates

physical structures with social ranking systems. The Ewe word ***ga*** demonstrates how cultural background determines which meanings people associate with money and time and a metal bell.

The Akan word ***sika*** ('money'/'gold') shows how polysemy operates through metonymic extension. The connection between gold and money shows how historical and cultural practices evolve through time because people consider gold as a form of money. The examples show how people create multiple meanings through their cognitive process which establishes a system of understanding.

4. Homonymy: Cross-Linguistic Evidence

Languages create homonymy through two processes which occur when two words end up looking the same by chance. The Akan word ***sa*** means "to fetch" or "to dance" while the Ga word ***la*** means "blood" or "to sing." The Hausa word ***dama*** has two meanings which are "opportunity" and "right side." The meanings lack any connection to each other because they don't share any common underlying ideas.

The examples show that homonymy defines itself through two different meanings which exist in a single word because its sounds or writing system create identical forms. Homonymy involves two words which share sound or spelling but lack any shared meaning connection between them while polysemy creates connections between words based on their shared meaning (Bozorova, 2025).

5. Marginal Cases and Analytical Challenges

Despite the clarity of prototypical cases, certain lexical items resist straightforward classification. Bozorova (2025) argues that the English word **bank** provides a well-known example. While bank as a financial institution and bank as the edge of a river are etymologically unrelated and thus represent homonymy, expressions such as blood bank introduce a semantic link based on the concept of storage, suggesting polysemy within a subset of meanings.

Similarly, highly productive lexical items such as head exhibit extensive semantic extension across multiple domains, including anatomy, hierarchy, and spatial orientation. Although these meanings are broadly related, the degree of relatedness varies, making it difficult to determine whether they constitute a single polysemous network or multiple distinct entries (Palmer, 1981). As Cruse (2000) argues, such marginal cases represent the central challenge in distinguishing polysemy from

homonymy. They reveal the limitations of rigid classification systems and highlight the need for flexible, multi-dimensional approaches to semantic analysis.

6. Methodology

The study uses qualitative methods to create descriptive research which enables researchers to compare their findings through lexical semantic analysis. The paper investigates how languages establish meaning connections and assesses the methods used to differentiate between polysemy and homonymy based on its analysis of meaning relationships between languages. The research method suits the study because the examined phenomena require both conceptual and interpretive understanding.

The research obtains its data from various sources to create a comprehensive evaluation which verifies language patterns across different languages. The research first obtains primary linguistic data through native speaker competence assessment which includes introspective analysis and native speaker competence assessment of Akan, Ga, Hausa ,Dagbani ,Ewe English and French. The languages were chosen because they provide a comprehensive range of language structures and their semantic patterns which are linked to their cultural background. It uses secondary sources which include fundamental lexical semantics research and dictionary materials to study how meanings are typically classified in the field of language meaning analysis. The analysis uses usage-based data which combines corpus linguistics principles to assess how words are used in actual communication. This process needs both semantic extension and patterns of usage in different situations to be understood.

The research team used purposive sampling as their method to identify lexical items which demonstrate the main phenomena being investigated. The sample includes items that clearly exemplify polysemy those that represent unambiguous cases of homonymy and those that fall into borderline or ambiguous categories such as **bank** and **head**. The research focuses on African languages which contain culturally embedded lexical items because these items display extensive context-based semantic extensions that fulfill the main research objectives.

The research uses a multi-criteria analytical framework which combines core insights from traditional semantic theory with recent usage-based approaches. The lexical item assessment

process evaluates each item based on multiple connected evaluation criteria. The analysis focuses on semantic relatedness which determines if a word has related meanings through both conceptual and metaphorical links. The etymological study examines whether the meanings originated from a shared historical background.

The paper investigates how meanings distribute themselves based on two factors which determine whether meanings share usage spaces or have specific distinct usage areas. The paper evaluates how lexicographic representation works by determining if dictionary entries organize meanings under one entry or separate them into multiple entries. It uses structural and linguistic diagnostics which include coordination and substitution tests to discover potential ambiguity but these methods only serve as extra support rather than conclusive evidence. The study identifies how closely related lexical items exhibit predictable behavioral patterns through their semantic extension patterns.

7. Data Analysis

The analysis shows how a three-level analytical model solves the problem of identifying polysemy versus homonymy in complex situations that occur at their most difficult boundaries. The first level contains cases which require clear classification because the existing evidence strongly confirms either polysemy or homonymy. Lexical items which show strong conceptual connections between their meanings and their predicted semantic extensions and their shared usage situations get classified as polysemous. The meanings of homonymous items maintain total separation because they exist in separate contexts while their different meanings share no historical ties or conceptual links, (Palmer, 1981)

The second level contains cases which exist between two different categories because their distinction needs better identification. The meanings show weak relations which develop through historical links which people no longer see. The usage contexts create partial relationships which generate important differences between them. The system needs more than two categories because these situations require advanced examination methods to identify their characteristics.

The third level represents an indeterminate zone, in which the available criteria yield conflicting or inconclusive results. The classification system needs multiple elements for its operation because no single element shows the needed impact. The cases need assessment through either judgment or established lexicographic practices. The framework shows its application through the lexical item bank (Bozorova, 2025). The study identifies different sources for the two meanings of **bank** because etymological analysis shows their historical origins stem from separate historical sources. The two elements show complete separation because their different usage contexts do not create any space for overlapping. The term **blood** bank creates a new financial term which expands the original storage meaning, establishing its relation with the financial term based on the concept of storage. The presence of these two patterns creates a marginal position for bank, which shows how a layered analytical method helps to solve the problem. Table 1 below shows the cross linguistic data.

Table 1: Cross Linguistic Data

Language	Word	Meaning 1	Meaning 2	Meaning 3
English	Foot	Part of the leg	Base of an object	Unit of length
French	Souris	Mouse (animal)	Computer mouse	—
Akan	kɔnko	Container	Unit of measurement	—
Hausa	ciki	Stomach	Pregnancy	Inside
Dagbani	zuɣu	Head (body part)	Surface/top	Leader
Ewe	ga	Money	Time	Metal bell

8. Methodological Approaches to Marginal Cases

The analysis of marginal cases further reveals that no single methodological criterion is sufficient for distinguishing polysemy from homonymy. Instead, a combination of complementary approaches is required. The first approach to lexicographic practice shows how dictionaries organize meanings by using one entry for related meanings while creating separate entries for unrelated meanings. The method shows inconsistent results because it depends on executive decisions instead of standard measurement systems. Etymological analysis creates knowledge

about historical meaning connections between words but because of missing evidence researchers cannot establish certain evidence.

The study uses semantic relatedness as its main analytical method because its perception depends on different speakers and their respective situations (Bozorova, 2025). The study analyzes how words develop meanings through usage-based research which reveals whether meanings appear in specific patterns or in different contexts. The regular extension patterns lead to a polysemous interpretation, while the irregular extension patterns result in a homonymous interpretation.

Polysemous analysis needs core meaning identification, but this process becomes difficult because core meaning identification proves to be a challenging task. Linguistic diagnostics use coordination and substitution tests to show ambiguity existence, yet these tests do not confirm which category should be assigned, (Pustejovsky, 1995). The existence of synonymy and antonymy relationships provides evidence because shared antonyms indicate polysemy while unique antonyms demonstrate homonymy. The study shows that semantic relationships require flexible analytical frameworks because of their complicated nature and their dependency on specific situations.

9. Results and Discussion

The cross-linguistic data analysis shows three main patterns which distinguish between polysemy and homonymy. First, the clear cases of polysemy show strong semantic relatedness with predictable patterns which extend from this relationship ((Palmer, 1981; Saeed 2003). The clear cases of homonymy show complete semantic unrelatedness with their distinct usage domains. The third category contains uncertain cases because evidence shows both conflicting findings and insufficient evidence to establish classification. The evidence indicates that polysemy and homonymy exist as two distinct categories which actually exist along a continuum that depends on specific contexts. The data show that polysemy exists as a systematic phenomenon which follows specific semantic patterns instead of being a random occurrence, (Cruse, 2011; Geeraerts, 2010).

The linguistic studies show that polysemous words in various languages exhibit three specific processes which include metaphorical extension and metonymic shift and functional extension. The English word foot extends from a body part to denote the base of an object The Akan word ***sika*** shows a metonymic shift from 'gold' to 'money' The Akan word ***kɔnko*** illustrates functional extension because it refers to both a container and a unit of measurement. The Dagbani word ***zuɣu*** extends to meanings which include head and top and leader because people associate physical structure with social hierarchy. The French word ***souris*** shows how innovation in technology creates new meanings which extend from the animal to the computer device. The patterns show that polysemy exists because people share cognitive processes which different cultural contexts and situations create. Cruse (2011) added that similar extensions which occur in different languages that belong to different typological families show that polysemy occurs through systematic patterns that exist across all languages.

The two homonymous examples that this research investigated display distinct characteristics from each other. The meanings of the Akan ***sa*** term which means fetch and dance and the Ga ***la*** t which means blood and sing do not have any identifiable relationship between their meanings according to our analysis. The meanings exist in different contexts while they lack any shared metaphorical or functional or conceptual ties. The results support the theory that homonymy originates from chance similarities in word form which result from accidental patterns instead of semantic evolution processes (Cruse, 2011; Geeraerts, 2010).

. The absence of overlap in meaning and usage renders these cases relatively straightforward and uncontroversial in classification. The analysis of marginal cases demonstrates the most valuable findings while investigating lexical items like bank and head. The cases demonstrate that binary classification cannot handle all cases because their semantic relationships between terms create complex relationships. The word **bank** presents conflicting evidence: The meanings financial institution and river edge have different origins and they operate in different usage fields which should indicate homonymy but blood bank creates a conceptual link through storage which shows that the word has more than one meaning. Head exhibits broad semantic expansion which includes anatomy and spatial orientation and social hierarchy.

The related meanings of these terms exist across a vital relationship spectrum which complicates the determination process for their membership in one polysemous network or multiple separate lexical entries. The observations illustrate how traditional methods face their main obstacle because no single standard can address all situations especially those which exist at the boundaries between established criteria. The multi-criteria analytical framework which this study introduced successfully handles the challenges which it was designed to address. The subjective nature of semantic relatedness renders it useful as a criterion because its value is based on personal opinion while etymological analysis delivers important historical information but cannot always provide definitive results for contemporary understanding. The contextual distribution system which usage-based perspectives inform creates strong evidence because it successfully identifies homonymy through patterns of usage which show no matching usage between cases. Saeed (2003) said the existing classifications of lexicographic representation determine how entries become classified yet dictionary entries which depend on interpretive judgment create ongoing classification problems because they introduce new ambiguities.

The three-level analytical model which includes clear and intermediate and indeterminate categories creates a flexible classification system which enables diverse categorization while avoiding the problems that arise from binary recognition systems (Nunberg and Zaenen, 1992; Nunberg, 1995). This method becomes essential in situations where meanings exist as partly related elements or where opposing evidence types lead to different interpretations of the situation. The study results provide vital consequences for both lexical semantics and the broader field of linguistic theory. The research results validate the continuum model because semantic relatedness exists as a continuous spectrum which connects polysemy and homonymy as distinct points along the continuum.

Semantic meaning derives from usage together with context which functions as the primary factor which determines meaning according to the findings of the study (Saeed, 2003). The study shows that native speaker judgments create value to analysis yet their evaluation needs backing from concrete evidence and contextual knowledge. Cross-linguistic semantic extension patterns operate as consistent elements which indicate that cognitive mechanisms exist as foundational systems

which govern how meanings evolve and structure themselves throughout different languages. The research findings have practical value because they influence how lexicographers and language professionals develop their language descriptions. The dictionary classifications serve as analytical tools which help to grasp meaning but they do not define meaning because they present editorial decisions together with theoretical assumptions (Palmer, 1981). Lexicographers should use both usage evidence and etymological data for establishing sense divisions between terms. The semantic relationships existing in marginal cases need better representation methods which use flexible or hybrid models that show how semantic relationships progress between categories. African languages face particular challenges because their lexical items which carry cultural significance contain extensive context-dependent semantic extensions that traditional lexicographic frameworks fail to recognize.

The results show that polysemy exists as a structured system whose cognitive basis leads to its development while homonymy originates from formal word relationships which appear to be random (Nunberg and Zaenen, 1992; Nunberg, 1995; Pustejovsky, 1995). The case of marginal cases proves that the meaning of lexical terms contains complex elements which require classification systems to handle this complexity. The study shows that semantic analysis needs a multidimensional framework which connects theoretical and historical and usage-based language data to measure how meaning transitions between different points within the language.

10. Conclusion

The study investigated how polysemy and homonymy differ by showing both complete examples and instances that create difficulties for identification. The investigation conclusively shows that although polysemy and homonymy may display formal similarity at the surface level, they are fundamentally distinct in their semantic structure, cognitive organization, and historical development (Bozorova, 2025). The study argues that polysemy constitutes an internally coherent linguistic process in which an individual lexical unit germinates multiple conceptually interrelated senses through mechanisms of metaphorical extension, semantic broadening, and functional transfer. The study found that the concept pf polysemy and homonymy exemplifies the language's

capacity to project concrete spatial experience onto higher cognitive and communicative domains.

Theoretical definitions function as effective starting points because actual language data in the world requires complex categorization methods. The analysis shows that polysemy and homonymy need multiple criteria to establish their boundaries (Palmer, 198). The combination of lexicographic and etymological and semantic methods serves as the necessary approach to handle this situation. The distinction continues to have elements which depend on individual interpretation. The research paper argues that polysemy and homonymy exist as two points on a continuous spectrum. The comprehension of this continuum enables better understanding of word meanings which develops better in situations with multiple languages and different language systems.

In this paper, we have discussed the problem of identifying empirically two different kinds of word sense ambiguity, namely homonymy and polysemy. In order to contextualize the discussions, data from African languages were used for the discussions. This is to avoid sparse data problems inherent in corpus work on sense distributions. We first classify the basic ambiguities between the polysemous words and homonymous words. We therefore encourage that future researchers should expand the scope of the languages involved in this paper. This will broaden the discussions of these two meaning relations relations that exit between polysemy and homonym.

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