Integrating *Rakugo* and *Kobanashi* in Japanese Language Classes at Different Levels

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ABSTRACT

This is a report of a six-year-long, on-going project to integrate *rakugo* and *kobanashi* in Japanese language classes at different levels in a summer intensive language program. The project involves students performing short stories before an audience. Five examples of integrating *rakugo* and *kobanashi* in language classes at four levels are described. Samples of post-project student feedback are included in the appendices.

1. Introduction

Rakugo is a Japanese traditional performing art (Brau 2008, Morioka and Sasaki 1990). A solo performer wearing a *kimono* sits throughout his performance in the formal sitting position on a three-by-three-foot cushion called a *zabuton*. Using only *sensu* (a fan) and *tenugui* (a Japanese-style towel), he skillfully tells different types of stories. Most stories are fifteen to twenty minutes long, but some stories are over one hour. The present form of *rakugo* was established in the nineteenth century though its roots can be traced back to storytellers of the sixteenth century. Many stories, called *kokkei banashi*, are comedic, but there are other types of stories, such as dramatic stories (*ninjō banashi*) and ghost stories (*kaidan banashi*). All of these stories end with a punch line called *ochi* (or *sage*) (Yamamoto 2001). Since *rakugo* is a form of verbal entertainment, it can be beneficial for language learning. Its potential as a language-learning tool, however, has yet to be fully explored. The purpose of this article is to describe attempts to integrate *rakugo* in a Japanese language program and evaluate the results.

In addition to *rakugo*, what is called *kobanashi* was also utilized. *Kobanashi* are short jokes that performers tell to warm up the audience before launching the main story of *rakugo*. They can be as short as two lines. The following is an example.

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Patient: Doctor, this is my first surgery. I am worried.
Doctor: Don't be worried. This is my first time, too.

Compared to kabuki, nō, and *bunraku* that are well represented as Japanese traditional performing arts, *rakugo* is not well known, and is unlikely to be introduced in an introductory Japanese culture course. As for pedagogical applications of *rakugo,* there are only a few studies that discuss student performance of *rakugo*. Nittono (2009) reported on a fifth-year level Japanese language course that was specifically targeted to have the students learn about *rakugo* and practice and perform it in front of an audience. The course culminated with American students performing an entire *koten rakugo* (traditional stories) at the end of the term after studying various aspects of the art. Based on the student feedback she received after the term, she concluded that the students enjoyed performing *rakugo,* and that the experience helped them build confidence in their ability to speak Japanese. Ishizuka (2006) reported on an attempt to integrate *rakugo* in an intensive summer Japanese language program held in Korea for Korean students. In addition to having his students study existing *rakugo* stories, he had them create their own short stories as well.

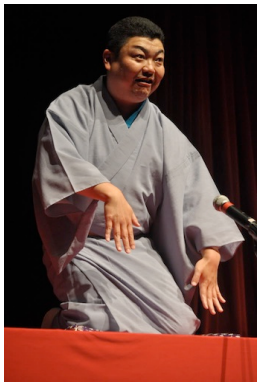
Pedagogical applications of *kobanashi*, on the other hand, have not been reported in the previous literature (Hatasa and Kubota 2009). Since *kobanashi* are much shorter than *rakugo*, they are more accessible to students at different proficiency levels, including first-year students. Since *kobanashi* contains the same essential features as *rakugo,* we have decided to integrate both *rakugo* and *kobanashi* in Japanese language instruction.

2. The *Rakugo* and *Kobanashi* Projects

Below is an outline of the *rakugo* and *kobanashi* projects at the Japanese School of Middlebury College. The school runs an intensive summer program in a total immersion environment. Once students enter the school and sign the language pledge, they are allowed only to use the target language for the duration of the program. The school conducts various co-curricular activities to promote language use throughout the session, including an athletic meet (*undōkai*), movies, club activities, sports, lectures by experts, and a talent show (*gakugeikai*).

In the summer of 2006, two professional *rakugo* performers, Yanagiya Sankyō and Ryūtei Saryū, visited the school for a week. They were invited to bring a highly accomplished level of a traditional art to which few students had previous exposure. The visit by the professionals quickly became a highlight of the program. They visited a class at all five language levels, and gave demonstrations and performances. At the end of their stay, they made a semi-formal stage performance, which was accompanied by English subtitles to help lower-level students appreciate the art. (English subtitles are allowed as an exception to the language pledge on such occasions.) Their visit included a lecture on *rakugo* and *yose* (*rakugo* theatre) to enhance student experience. Although the student evaluation of the *rakugo* week was very high that year, the level of integration of *rakugo* into language instruction was still low. In addition, a majority of the instructors, who were Japanese native speakers, had little knowledge of *rakugo* and had never seen a live performance. In order to introduce these instructors to *rakugo*, the senior member of the team, Yanagiya Sankyō, gave a special performance for them. His performance of *Shibahama*, a dramatic story of a fishmonger and his wife, made a strong impact on the instructors, which resulted in a higher level of classroom integration of *rakugo* in subsequent years (Hatasa 2010).

Yanagiya Sankyō



Ryūtei Saryū

With the financial assistance of the Toshiba International Foundation, the school was able to invite the same professionals back for three consecutive summers from 2007–2009. In 2007, a *rakugo* club was added to the school's co-curricular activities. The purpose of the club was to learn how to perform *kobanashi* (hereafter referred to as "the *kobanashi* activity"). Approximately ten students from different levels joined the club, which

met once a week for two weeks before the professionals arrived. (All co-curricular activities met once a week for one hour each.) They had two additional hours of practice with the professionals and held a rehearsal for the final performance. On the big night of *rakugo* by the professionals, all of the members were given a chance to get up on the stage to perform warm-up acts prior to the main performance by the professionals. This addition brought the program a new perspective in the integration of *rakugo* and *kobanashi* in language instruction.

Over the next three years, as instructors gained substantial knowledge of *rakugo*, they began to devise more creative ways in which to integrate *rakugo* and the *rakugo* professionals into classroom activities. The following section describes the *rakugo* and *kobanashi* activities both in the classroom and in public performance.

3. The *kobanashi* Activity

The *kobanashi* activity is conducted as a co-curricular activity as part of the class. It proceeds roughly as follows: 1. selection of a story; 2. modification and memorization; 3. practice; and 4. performance.

3.1. Selection of a Story

There are numerous websites that contain a wide selection of *kobanashi*, which students can browse to look for stories that strike them as interesting. They were instructed to use on-line vocabulary help such as rikai.com to look up unfamiliar words. There are also books containing *kobanashi* and jokes (Hayasaka 2006, 2009, Negishisanpeidō 2008, Yonehara 2005), which were made available from the instructor. We also created a list of selected *kobanashi* for students to choose from.

The selection process has proven to be a good exercise in reading, as students try to understand the *ochi* (punch line) of many *kobanashi*. Some punch lines are difficult to understand. There are various reasons for this difficulty. Some are due to insufficient background cultural information, but many challenges are linguistic, as *ochi* in *kobanashi* often use puns that require substantial vocabulary knowledge. Instructors guide students toward *kobanashi* with *ochi* that derive their humor from the story itself without the use of a pun, because these kinds of stories have a universal appeal. (The previously mentioned *kobanashi* about the patient and doctor is a good example.)

3.2. Modification of Text and Memorization

Once a *kobanashi* is selected, it may be necessary, depending on the proficiency level of the student, to modify the original text, such as to delete unnecessary information. The amount of the modification varies, but the story is generally better shortened to the extent possible. It makes *kobanashi* more effective and easier to memorize. Once the text is set, students must memorize all of the lines until they can deliver the *kobanashi* smoothly.

Advanced students sometimes take this process of memorization lightly, since *kobanashi* are short enough for them to tell without memorizing verbatim. However, they soon realize that any changes in wording or an addition of inappropriate pauses and fillers significantly weaken the effectiveness of their *kobanashi*. Sometimes the performances of lower-level students who have memorized the lines faithfully are more successful than those by upper level students who have not. This is an encouraging aspect of *kobanashi* performance for students at lower levels, for they can gain confidence by outperforming those in the upper level courses.

3.3. Practice

Students practice *kobanashi* to ensure smooth delivery. First, they work on their pronunciation and intonation by reading the lines aloud and then memorizing. As they become more comfortable with each line, they are instructed to tell the story slowly and loudly. Then, they work toward more dramatic delivery by acting out different characters and accentuating the characteristics of each through various body movements and facial expressions. It is sometimes difficult for students to overcome their sense of embarrassment or stage fright. The simple advice to shy students is to speak as loudly and slowly as possible. Once they are able to do that, their performance becomes much more lively and more effective. Often, collaborative learning takes place during this stage, with students making comments and offering suggestions to one another. At the Middlebury Japanese School, the professional *rakugo* performers provide the students with concrete advice. Since that is not possible at other institutions, a website has been developed and is continually being improved to provide video footage of the professionals working with the

students and to assist language instructors design their activities. (See section 5 for details of the website.)

3.4. Performance

An opportunity for performance is very important for students to earn a sense of accomplishment. If possible, it is recommended to set up a performance venue where the audience includes outsiders, in particular, Japanese native speakers such as exchange students and people in the community. The applause of such an audience will make the students feel proud and increase their level of confidence and motivation.

4. What Students Learn and Experience through the *Kobanashi* Activity

Below are the summaries of the observations made by the author regarding the *kobanashi* activity over the last six summers. First, students began to realize the importance of pronunciation, as we emphasized in our training that, without correctly pronounced lines, particularly the keywords, the audience would not understand the humor in such short jokes as *kobanashi*. Second, the *kobanashi* practice itself generated ample opportunities for the students to practice speaking Japanese, since the entire group of students were actively engaged in making suggestions for different ideas and better wording to the instructor and among themselves in order to make their own and other's *kobanashi* performance more effective. Third, as for cultural learning, students gained insight into a traditional performing art of Japan by experiencing different facets of and learning details about the proper way of performing *kobanashi*. For example, they learned how to bow properly in a formal sitting position. They also learned about *kōza-gaeshi*, which is the ritual of flipping the cushion at the end of each performance. It is a regular practice of the Japanese traditional *yose* theatre, and it symbolizes cleansing of the stage to receive the next performer.

Finally, the *kobanashi* activity also proved effective in helping some of the students overcome stage fright and build confidence in themselves. Shy students showed anxiety and were hesitant to perform *kobanashi* loudly enough at first. They gathered their courage, however, and joined the *rakugo* club, perceiving the performance as a challenge to themselves. As they gradually gained confidence, the quality of their performances improved. In the last six years, none of the members left the club before performing on the stage. Many of the students who had been very shy in

the beginning commented afterwards that the *kobanashi* activity helped them gain self-confidence.

5. Development of a Website

In order to promote the *kobanashi* activity in the Japanese language classroom, especially in the absence of professional performers, a web site has been developed by the author. (http://tell.fll.purdue.edu/hatasa/rakugo/rakugobystudents.html), though the site is constantly evolving as new materials are being added. It currently contains links with depositories of *kobanashi* to help students find the stories they want to perform. It also has video footage to show how to correctly sit on a cushion and flip it for the next performer. Other video clips contain demonstrations of *shigusa* (gestures) used in *rakugo* by Yanagiya Sankyō and Ryūtei Saryū. Their model performances of several *kobanashi* are also posted.

The main part of this web site is a collection of student performances, including video clips of students practicing and professionals giving advice. Scenes from practice are of particular importance for instructors who are not familiar with *rakugo,* but want to try out *kobanashi* activities. Practice scenes were filmed both in early and late stages so that viewers can see students' progress. *Kobanashi* stories are grouped into three levels according to length and difficulty, so that students at different proficiency levels can choose appropriate ones to perform.

Kobanashi video clips give students a concrete image of what the final performance looks like and how much their performances can improve. More importantly, the clips make the *kobanashi* activity more accessible by giving students a sense of security with a visual guide to refer to when preparing their own performances.

6. Integration of *Rakugo* into Language Classes

The *kobanashi* activity that began in 2007 was a part of the co-curricular activities, and it progressed smoothly from the beginning. An integration of *rakugo* into classes, however, took a few summers before it became creative and interesting. The arrangements were simple at the beginning. The instructors invited professional *rakugo* performers to perform a story in class and had students ask questions of them. Students enjoyed the class, particularly the live performance by the professionals, but there was not much more than that at the time.

As the instructors gained more knowledge about *rakugo* and became more familiar with the professional *rakugo* storytellers, they began to make more specific requests to them. For example, instructors searched for a story on the basis of the ease of its understanding and asked the performer if the selected story was included in his repertoire. In another example, instructors asked the professional performer to make different *rakugo* style gestures according to students' requests. Both of these examples illustrate instructors' heightened interest in making greater use of *rakugo* in their classrooms.

The following are five examples of pedagogical applications of *rakugo* devised by instructors and put into practice during the week of the professionals' visit. They are selected from classroom activities conducted in 2009 and 2010 and are organized by the name of the *rakugo* story used. The first three examples are from the third- and fourth-year Japanese classes, one is from second year, and the last one is from first year. On average, the instructors spent three to four hours of class time on *rakugo* during the *rakugo* week featuring the visit by professional performers.

6.1 Examples from Third- and Fourth-Year Levels

6.1.1 *Hatsutenjin* at Third-Year Level

The objective of the *Hatsutenjin* activity is for students to be able to enjoy and appreciate *rakugo*. *Hatsutenjin* (Going to Shops at the *Tenjin* Festival) is a story about the relationship between a father and his young son. As the father gets ready to go to the festival at the local *Tenjin* shrine, his son comes home and asks the father to take him along. The father first declines the son's request, because the son always wants him to buy things for him at the shops around the shrine. The son promises to behave and the father agrees to take him along. Once the son sees various shops at the shrine, he starts asking the father to buy him candies and dumplings. After buying a few treats, the father ends up buying a kite and starts flying it himself. The son asks the father to let him fly it, but the father refuses. As the final punch line, the son remarks, "I should not have brought my father along."

This story contains many conversational exchanges between the father and the son that proceed at a lively pace. It also contains many visual elements that are very enjoyable, in particular, the representation of how the son pesters the father to buy treats. Students read a synopsis

of the story written by the instructor after they received instruction on some vocabulary items, particularly those that signify Japanese cultural practices and elements, e.g. *en'nichi*, *kappa*, *dango*, *anko*. Visual aids were used extensively to enhance student comprehension of such items.

At the end of the class, students were asked to think of how the story would end after the father takes over control of the kite-flying. This was done to reinforce the basic understanding of the story. Then, the actual ending was given to the students. One may think that revealing the *ochi* before the students hear the entire story might make hearing the story uninteresting. Our past experience has proven this not to be the case. For students, being able to understand the story including the *ochi* is an extremely positive experience. In fact, many *rakugo* fans already know how a story ends, yet, they keep coming back to enjoy the performer's particular storytelling style. The students were able to enjoy the *rakugo* as a performance just as do regular fans because they did not have to be engrossed in following the plot line. (See Appendix A for a sample reaction of a student.) *Hatsutenjin* is the right kind of story for this, because the manner in which the *rakugo* storyteller depicts the father and the son largely determines the quality of the performance. The entire instruction of this *rakugo* story took three class periods, including one class with the professional performer.

6.1.2 *Akubi-Shinan* at Fourth-Year Level

In *Akubi-Shinan* (Learning How to Yawn), a man goes to a private lesson to learn the proper way to yawn while his friend joins as an observer. His lesson does not go well. As his friend watches the lesson, he becomes bored and yawns. The instructor sees his yawning and praises him by saying "Your friend has a natural talent in yawning."

In our class students read a *manga* version of this story (Taka 2008) without the last frames that contain the original *ochi* (punch line). Students are then given exercises to narrate the story. Being able to organize ideas in paragraphs rather than sentences is one of the aims of this level. Words that are necessary for paragraphs are introduced, such as *sorede* 'and (so),' *sate* 'now,' *tokoroga* 'but,' *suruto* 'whereupon,' *tōtō* 'finally,' *sono toki* 'then.' Lastly, the students are given an assignment to finish the story with their own *ochi*. Examples of endings that students created are: 1. the man sneezes instead of yawning. The instructor says "lessons for sneezing are given next door"; 2. the man and his friend go

fishing the next day. The man becomes bored and yawns. His friend says "Why couldn't you do that yesterday?" After the students presented different endings to the class, they watched a professional performance of the original story live. Since they had done enough preparatory work to make the comprehension of the story easy, they were able to follow the plot and looked forward to hearing how the original story would end. More importantly, they were able to genuinely enjoy the performance. This was evident in the letters of appreciation that the students wrote to the performer afterwards. (See Appendix B)

6.1.3 *Tengu-Sabaki* at Third-Year Level

At the beginning of *Tengu-Sabaki* (*Tengu*'s Judgment), a man is taking a nap. Looking at the man, his wife sees that he is having a dream. She wakes him up and asks him to describe the dream he was having. The husband insists he was not having a dream; thus, he cannot describe it. The wife becomes angry and they end up fighting. A next-door neighbor comes in to calm them down. After the wife is gone, he asks the husband to describe the dream secretly. The husband again replies he cannot describe what he did not see. They end up fighting. Then, the landlord steps in to calm them down. The story repeats the same routine a few more times. Lastly, a *tengu* (powerful fairy from a mountain) asks him to describe his dream secretly. When he is turned down, the *tengu* becomes angry and tries to choke the man to death. He screams and wakes up. He then sees his wife looking at him with a concerned face. She asks, "What dream did you have?"

Students first read a summary of the story without the ending. Then they were instructed to work in pairs and come up with their own endings. The endings they created included the following: 1. the man remembers the dream as he is choked by the *tengu*. The dream is about being choked by a *tengu*. He tells it and is saved; 2. the man dies and goes to heaven. Since there are no dreams in heaven, he lives peacefully. One pair actually came up with the same *ochi* as the original one.

In all of the three examples of the third- and fourth-year levels, instructors first kept the ending of the story from the students. This turned out to be a successful strategy to keep them interested in the stories. Since every *rakugo* story ends with an *ochi*, it is a good material for this strategy.

With *Akubi-shinan* and *Tengu-sabaki*, students rewrote the story in

narrative form with their own ending. Since *rakugo* stories consist mainly of conversational exchanges, narratives are a relatively small portion. Therefore, the students had to write their narrative by making their own interpretation of the story based on the conversational exchanges. This activity aimed at improving students' skills in understanding the pragmatics of the situation from conversational exchanges and expressing ideas in cohesive paragraphs.

6.2. Sample Activity Using *Hatsutenjin* at Second-Year Level

Hatsutenjin (Going to Shops at the *Tenjin* Festival) was used at the second-year level, as well as at third year (the content is in section 6.1.1). This was an attempt to find out if second-year Japanese students could enjoy a complete *rakugo* story. The flow of instruction is described below. First, the instructor introduced essential vocabulary appearing in the story, and students read the introductory part of the story together in class. Then, they were grouped into pairs, and each pair was given several illustrations depicting the scenes from the story in a random order. The students guessed the possible plot of the story and reordered the illustrations. After the students read the text version of the entire *rakugo* story, they checked the order of the illustrations to see if it matched the story. A set of comprehension questions were provided to reinforce their understanding. After these preparatory steps, they listened to a live performance of *Hatsutenjin* without any help. As students' feedback indicates, their reactions were mostly positive (see Appendix C).

6.3 Sample Activity from First-Year Level

Instructors of the first-year level used short sections of *rakugo*, rather than showing full-length *rakugo*, because students would not be able to understand long stories. At this level, instructors created activities that took advantage of the visual aspects of *rakugo*. When the professional visited the class, he was asked to demonstrate several actions in *rakugo* style, which students identified in Japanese, such as eating noodles, running, walking, and drinking sake. Students were also instructed to identify who was talking, e.g. man, woman, young person, or older person. This activity was an excellent way to introduce students to the visual aspects of *rakugo* in a manageable way. At the same time, it made beginning students feel that they were a part of the project. During this

activity, many short segments of video footage of gestures in *rakugo* by Ryūtei Saryū were recorded, and they are now available at the above-mentioned web site http://tell.fll.purdue.edu/hatasa/rakugo/rakugobystudents.html.

7. Conclusion

The activities described above show how *rakugo* can be integrated into various levels of language instruction. It can make the classroom environment fun and interesting and the language learning experience more enjoyable as well. Many students learning Japanese state that *manga*, *anime*, and video games are the reasons why they became interested in Japan and in Japanese. Pulvers (2006 and 2010) introduced the term MASK, which stands for "*manga-anime-sushi-karaoke*," to capture the recent popularity of J-pop. The students at the Japanese School at Middlebury College are no exceptions. They are by and large products of the MASK phenomenon. One of the missions of the program is to take them beyond MASK by introducing them to different facets of Japanese culture. *Rakugo* has emerged as a means to accomplish this.

In 2006, *rakugo* was chosen because the author was familiar with this art form and he had a personal connection with Master Yanagiya Sankyō (Hatasa 2010). At the beginning, inviting a professional performer to the Japanese School neither seemed possible nor financially feasible. However, with the financial assistance from organizations such as the Japan Foundation, Toshiba International Foundation, and NEAC, we were able to realize our dream of inviting professional performers. In contrast to kabuki, nō, and *bunraku*, which involve multiple performers and many staff members, *rakugo* only requires one person and it does not require an extensive stage preparation. Thus, the cost can be kept relatively low.

Masters Yanagiya Sankyō and Ryūtei Saryū kindly shared professional performances of the highest level with our students. When they came to the Japanese School for the first time in 2006, regardless of their linguistic ability, students were able to feel and appreciate the quality of the performances. The two professionals taught us the importance of *honmono* ("the real stuff"). The first encounter of something new is bound to have a strong impact on students and leave a long- lasting image and memory in their minds. The *kobanashi* activity makes it possible to turn *rakugo* from traditional spectator culture to

participatory culture, something many students can try, like tea ceremony and flower arrangement. Even some first-year students joined the *rakugo* club and successfully performed a *kobanashi* on the stage and gained self-confidence in their Japanese language potential. In addition, students acquired a practical skill of making other people laugh in a nonnative language. For a learner of a foreign language, telling jokes successfully to native speakers is a very satisfying experience.

After six years of *rakugo* activities, some former students inform us that they attend the *yose* theatre when they visit Tokyo. This probably would not have happened if they had not been exposed to *rakugo* previously. We will continue to develop the web site so that more instructors of Japanese can make use of it.

Appendix A
Sample Reaction on *Hatsutenjin* (Third-Year Level)

さん喬師匠が食べるジェスチャーを見たら、おなかが空いてしまいました。

それから、さん喬師匠の子供としての声とようすは本当の子供みたいだったし、父親とむすこがあそぶジェスチャーもたのしかったから、うれしくなって、たくさん笑いました。さん喬師匠のおかげでらくごのきょうみを持ちはじめました。

Appendix B
Sample Unedited Letters to the Performers (Fourth-Year Level)

1．私は今日本語を習っていますが、日本語はまだまだです。でもさん喬師匠のパフォーマンスが分かりました。授業で師匠はあくび指南をして下さいました。私はびっくりしました。練習なさらないで、すばらしいパフォーマンスをなさいました。きょうみぶかい表現や様々な声が面白かったです。

2．師匠の『お菊の皿』のパフォーマンスが大好きです。天気は暑かったんですが、幽霊の寒さを少しだけ感じていました。

３．･･･とくに、ジェスチャーのパーフォマンス［パフォーマンス］から、日本人についてたくさん習いました。

４．江戸弁でなさったので、私はこの噺が分かりにくいと思いましたが、師匠の話し方は気持ちがこもっているのでよく伝わりました。この噺と師匠のパフォマンス［パフォーマンス］はぜったいに忘れません。かぞくの大切さを教えて下さって本当にありがとうございます。

５．聞いていたとき私の子供の時を思い出しました。子供の時友達と話を作って話したものです。さん喬師匠の話を聞きながら話をする大切さについて考えました。さん喬師匠の話を聞きながら自分で話をもとにしたイメージを作らなければなりませんでした。今インターネットとテレビの世代だから話をあまりしません。だから私達はイマジネーションをあまり使いません。とてもざんねんだと思います。イマジネーションを使う大切さについて思い出させられて［思い出させて］くださってありがとうございました。

Appendix C
Sample Opinions of the Second-Year Students

1. Excellent performances and these activities are imperative since they are a part of Japanese culture.

2. Being able to experience attending *rakugo* performance was truly wonderful. Thank you for having the performers come.

3. I liked how these activities were worked into classroom learning, although stories were hard to understand.

4. Fantastic. Probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience and have these experts so close at hand.

5. Chance to observe a less widely known aspect of Japanese culture.

6. Totally new to me and very interesting.

7. Very fun and interesting. Definitely bring them back each year.

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